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Perceptions of Active Social Media Adults' Mental Health After Participating Online With Uncivil Political Discourse With Out-Group Members

Bridgette Eastman
Walden University

Walden University

College of Allied Health

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Bridgette Eastman

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Abstract

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by

Bridgette Eastman

MS, Walden University, 2014

MS, Walden University, 2012

BS, University of Minnesota, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Online incivility that occurs in the comment sections of social media sites has become increasingly prevalent. Much of this incivility occurs in the context of political debate. Previous research has indicated that heated political debates online can lead to increased levels of emotional distress and that individuals have the capacity to become addicted to a variety of activities that take place on the internet. Using the theoretical lens of the social identity model of individuation effects, this study explored the impact of online political incivility on the mental health of individuals who engage in this type of behavior. This study also explored whether individuals who engage in this type of behavior find the behavior to be compulsive in nature. A generic qualitative approach was used in this study. Thirteen participants were recruited via fliers on social media sites and via Facebook advertising. Participants answered a series of semistructured interview questions regarding their experiences of engaging in online political uncivil debates. Interviews were conducted via email, video chat, or telephone. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants reported anger as well as symptoms similar to symptoms of addiction and mental illness as identified in the DSM 5 This study was designed to provide an improved understanding of how this behavior impacts the mental health of those who engage in it, and whether this behavior is compulsive or addictive in nature. This information could promote positive social change by helping clinical psychologists better understand this behavior in order to provide improved treatment for their patients.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

As the internet and social media have become more prevalent in society, individuals are spending increasing amounts of time on social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others (Cepeda et al., 2018). SNSs allow individuals to participate in a variety of activities, but many individuals are utilizing these sites for purposes other than reconnecting with old friends and sharing vacation photos. Discussion of politics on social media has become more commonplace in recent years, and these conversations are becoming increasingly heated in nature (Cheng et al., 2017). Since the 2016 election, Americans have been reporting higher levels of stress related to politics and political news, and higher levels of consumption of political news (American Psychological Association, 2017; Cepdea et al., 2018). Many individuals consume political news via SNSs (Cepeda et al., 2018). When news outlets post stories on their SNSs, individuals who read these stories have the ability to comment on them. These comments frequently include uncivil discourse and personal attacks on other commenters.

Online incivility has been known by many names (*flaming*, *trolling*, *cyberaggression*, etc.), but for the purposes of this study, this behavior will be referred to as *uncivil political discourse*. Uncivil political discourse is defined as abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, inciteful of violence, and discriminatory, and it is often aimed at people based on personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideological identity, physical condition, gender, and/or age (Bernstein et al., 2017;

DeCook, 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Frischlich, 2019; Gervais, 2015; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Massimo et al., 2018; Popan et al., 2019; Salminen, 2020; Stella et al., 2018). Uncivil political discourse that occurs in the comments sections of articles posted on SNSs has led to psychological distress amongst those who participate in this behavior and those who observe this behavior (Duggan, 2017).

The following pages include a background description of the literature and identify gaps in the existing literature. A problem statement includes the research problems and the relevance and significance of the research problem to the discipline of clinical psychology. The purpose of the study, along with the research paradigms, the intent of the study, and the research questions, is detailed. A brief overview of a theoretical orientation is outlined, including how the theory relates to the current study and the research questions.

Background

Almost half of all Americans have reported being harassed online, and more than half consider online cyberaggression to be a serious problem (Duggan, 2017). By 2017, nearly 30% of Facebook users reported having been victims of online incivility (Duggan, 2017), indicating that uncivil political discourse has become increasingly common on SNSs (Cheng et al., 2017). Uncivil political discourse on SNSs has been studied by several authors and has been associated with psychological distress (Chavez et al., 2019; Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Hisam et al., 2017; March, 2019; Trevisan, 2020).

Consumption of political news has also been demonstrated to be associated with psychological distress, particularly since the U.S. 2016 election (Cepeda et al., 2018).

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2017) has been studying the impact of politics on mental health and has found that Americans are becoming increasingly stressed by political news and elections. The APA was able to attribute at least some of this stress to frequent consumption of news on social media.

Problematic internet use (PIU) has been studied since the 1990s (Kitazawa et al., 2018). Technological addiction, in and of itself, has proven difficult to study (Musetti et al., 2018; Pies, 2009); this has been at least partially due to the wide variety of technological addictions that have become prevalent over the last several decades (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Musetti et al., 2016). Online gaming, online gambling, problematic social media use, compulsive online shopping, and pornography addiction encompass a wide variety of different behaviors, making it difficult to pin down diagnostic criteria for technological addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Researchers have proposed that internet addiction disorder (IAD) be included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Musetti et al., 2016).

Even though diagnostic criteria have not been established for IAD, this behavior has been linked to symptoms of mental illness and functional deficits (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Munno et al., 2017). Problematic social media use specifically has been linked to poor general well-being and poor mental health outcomes (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). *Nomophobia*, the fear of being without one's mobile device, is one form of technological addiction that has been proposed as a clinical diagnosis for upcoming editions of the DSM, and it has been argued that smartphone addiction is akin to substance use addiction and is a public health crisis (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Addiction and mental health symptoms are often linked (Ayandele et al., 2020; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Vanucci, 2017). Research indicates that numerous individuals with mental health symptoms use substances to assist in managing these symptoms, which often leads to addiction (Adams et al., 2021). It is well documented that problematic technological use spans a wide variety of behaviors (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Musetti et al., 2016), but participation in uncivil political discourse on SNSs has not been studied as a potential form of problematic technological use.

This study expands the knowledge in the field by addressing gaps in the literature regarding how uncivil political discourse on SNSs impacts mental health and whether this type of behavior is addictive/compulsive. Problematic technological use has long been tied to mental health symptoms and addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). There is evidence that uncivil political discourse on SNSs causes stress (Duggan, 2017). In recent years, particularly since the 2016 U.S. presidential election, politics have been causing increased stress amongst Americans (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020; Anderson & Auxier, 2020). Patients have been discussing stress about the current political climate in therapy (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). This study may assist clinical psychologists in better understanding how this type of behavior impacts their patients' mental health and daily functioning.

Problem Statement

Americans are becoming increasingly stressed by the current political climate and have expressed concerns for the future of the nation (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020). Political tensions run high in a nation that often sees itself as divided. Much of this division

becomes apparent in the comments sections of social media websites (Cheng et al., 2017; Salminen et al., 2020). The comments sections of political news stories are often filled with uncivil political discourse aimed at other commenters who are perceived to be of the opposing political party (Duggan, 2017). The majority of individuals who engage in these conversations have reported that these conversations are tiresome, are frustrating, and often lead nowhere (Duggan, 2017). Moreover, uncivil political discourse has been linked to increased stress levels (Chavez et al., 2019). Individuals who participate in this type of behavior often experience anxiety, anger, and fatigue (APA, 2017), stress and depression (Hisam et al., 2017), and suicidal ideation (Sinclair et al., 2020).

Since the 2016 election, stress related to politics has become so significant that an increasing number of Americans are discussing their stress related to politics in the therapist's office (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). Many individuals have reported an increase in mental health symptoms since the 2016 election and have linked this change in symptoms to the current political climate (APA, 2020; Anderson & Auxier, 2020; Cepeda et al., 2018). Americans have also reported that the uncivil political discourse that they have witnessed and/or participated in online has been a source of stress and mental health symptoms (Chavez et al., 2019).

Perhaps compounding the problem, many Americans are reporting checking the news frequently and compulsively (Cepeda et al., 2018). These individuals have reported that reading political news often causes anxiety and distress (Cepeda et al., 2018). Americans are also reporting checking SNSs more frequently in the last few years and are using SNSs as a source for news (Cepeda et al., 2018).

Research regarding internet and technological addiction has been well established for decades (Kitazawa et al., 2018). More recently, research has focused on the addictive properties of SNSs (Guedes et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Munno et al., 2017). Nomophobia, the fear of being without one's mobile device, has been gaining traction in the literature for the last several years (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Munno et al., 2017). Individuals who become addicted to SNSs are more likely to experience mental health symptoms (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Keles et al., 2019).

There is quite a bit of research examining how the current political climate in the United States has resulted in stress and mental health symptoms (Cepeda et al., 2018). There is also research connecting social media use to addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Uncivil political discourse on SNSs has also been well studied (Vilanova et al., 2017). This research addresses the gaps in the literature regarding how mental health is impacted by participating in uncivil political discourse and whether this behavior can be considered to be an addiction or compulsion.

Research conducted over the last several years has revealed that individuals are becoming increasingly stressed by politics (APA, 2020; Andersen & Auxier, 2020; Cepeda et al., 2018) and are becoming more likely to argue with others about politics on SNSs (Cheng et al., 2017; Salminen et al., 2020). Recent research has also uncovered that, when it comes to SNSs, it is possible for individuals to develop symptoms similar to symptoms of addictive disorders (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Keles et al., 2019). Both uncivil political discourse and PIU have been linked to mental health symptoms. More psychotherapists are reporting that Americans are becoming so stressed about politics

that they are discussing political issues more and more frequently in therapy sessions (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). Clinical psychologists could benefit from knowing more about how these interactions are impacting mental health and if their patients are experiencing addictive symptoms related to participating in uncivil political discourse.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the impact of uncivil political behavior on individuals' mental health, and to explore whether this behavior is addictive or compulsive for individuals who participate in it. Participants were asked to complete surveys via email, phone, or video chat regarding their experiences participating in uncivil political discourse on SNSs.

Research Questions

RQ1: What are the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating online in uncivil political discourse with out-group members?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of active social media adults with potential addictive or compulsive behaviors after participating online in uncivil discourse with out-group members?

Theoretical Framework

The social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE) posits that individuals construct their personal identities based on their different group memberships (Vilanova et al., 2017). All people belong to a myriad of groups, including those based on their identities (e.g., gender, race, religion, political affiliation). When an individual is a

member of a group, they are considered to be part of an "in-group" (Gould & Howson, 2019). Anyone who is not a member of the in-group is therefore a member of the "out-group." Deindividuation occurs when individuals in groups shed some sense of their individual identity and allow group characteristics to override well-established individual characteristics (Gould & Howson, 2019). Deindividuation leads to a sense of anonymity, which can loosen inhibitions and cause behaviors that an individual might not participate in on their own, including behaviors that violate social norms (Vilanova et al., 2017).

The SIDE model originated from theories of individuation, other social identity theories, and studies of crowd behavior (Gould & Howson, 2019; Vilanova et al., 2017). Early crowd research indicated that much of crowd behavior could be explained by the anonymity of belonging to a crowd, and that crowds can be highly suggestible and more vulnerable to contagion (Gould & Howson, 2019). As individuals become immersed in a group, deindividuation occurs (Gould & Howson, 2019). The SIDE model differentiates from other deindividuation theories, as this model takes into account individual personalities in relationship to group behavior. If group behavior is the result of a combination of individual personalities, the behavior becomes normative, rather than antinormative (Vilanova et al., 2017).

The SIDE model has been used to explain why individuals participate in uncivil political discourse in computer-mediated communication (CMC) more frequently than they participate in uncivil face-to-face (FTF) communication (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017). It is relatively easy to identify political in-group and out-group members on a comments thread on SNSs (Lupton et al., 2020). This allows individuals to

identify strongly with their in-group, in this case their political in-group, and deindividuate, resulting in the shedding of personal norms for group norms (Rains et al., 2017). These group norms often include derogatory comments aimed at the perceived out-group (Rains et al., 2017). A more detailed explanation of SIDE, deindividuation theories, and social identity theory will be outlined in Chapter 2.

The SIDE model explains how deindividuation can occur in political in-groups taking place in conversations on SNSs (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017). It also explains how these conversations can become aggressive (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017). Deindividuated behavior is often emotion driven, resulting in impulsive, irrational, and intense behaviors (Gould & Howson, 2019). Mental health symptoms are often emotion driven as well and can frequently be interpreted as impulsive, intense, and irrational (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Deindividuated behaviors have been referred to as "hyper-responsive" (Gould & Howson, 2019). The compulsory need to check one's phone every time it dings could also be referred to as "hyper-responsive" (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Rodriguez-Garicia et al., 2020). It seems plausible that this hyper-responsive checking is compulsory or addictive in nature, as other use of technology has been found to be addictive (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Deindividuation leads to viewing out-group members as "the other," allowing individuals to participate in uncivil discourse (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017). It is not known how deindividuation impacts mental health. This study uses the SIDE model to explore whether this deindividuation that takes place during uncivil online political discourse impacts participants' mental health and whether this type of behavior

is compulsive or addictive in nature. This qualitative study utilized structured interview questions answered by email or phone by asking participants for their experiences of participating in uncivil political discourse on SNSs and how this behavior had impacted their mental health and whether they felt compelled to continue to participate in this behavior, even if it continued to cause them stress or exacerbate mental health symptoms.

Nature of the Study

This study utilized a thematic qualitative approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A qualitative approach was chosen because it allowed me to gain a more in-depth understanding of individuals' unique experiences of engaging in this type of behavior (Levitt, 2020a). Thirteen participants who identified that they engaged in uncivil political discourse on SNSs were recruited to engage in email, video chat, and phone interviews. Qualitative data were gathered and analyzed to determine whether participants were reporting an increase in mental health symptoms while engaging in this type of behavior, as well as to determine whether individuals were experiencing addictive symptoms that were spurring them to continue this behavior.

Definitions

Computer-mediated communication (CMC): Communication that takes place via computers, including smartphones, tablets, and so forth (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017).

Face-to-face (FTF) communication: Communication that takes place in person, face to face, between two or more individuals (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al., 2017).

Internet addiction disorder (IAD): A term used to describe potential symptoms of disordered internet use (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Lanconi et al., 2017). Various authors have proposed symptoms that might be used to diagnose IAD. Many professionals view IAD as a pathological disorder that should be included in the DSM-5 (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Lanconi et al., 2017).

Nomophobia: Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines nomophobia (no mobile phone phobia) as the fear of being without use of a working mobile phone, noting that this word surfaced as early as 2008 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Nomophobia has also been defined as the fear of feeling disconnected from the digital world (Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2019).

Problematic internet use (PIU): Excessive internet use that has a negative impact on day-to-day functioning (Kitazawa et al., 2018).

Uncivil: Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines the word "uncivil" in three ways: as not civilized, as lacking in courtesy, and as not conducive to civic harmony and welfare (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Uncivil political discourse: Uncivil political discourse is defined as abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, inciteful of violence, discriminatory, and it is often aimed at people based on personal characteristics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ideological identity, physical condition, gender, age, and so forth (Bernstein et al., 2017; DeCook, 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Frischlich, 2019; Gervais, 2015; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Massimo et al., 2018; Popan et al., 2019; Salminen, 2020; Stella et al., 2018).

Assumptions

It was assumed that participants participated in online uncivil political discourse. It was also assumed that participants were honest in their answers, and that they had participated in uncivil online political discourse. It was assumed that participants were honest about their answers regarding their current and past mental health symptoms as well as their addictive symptoms regarding participating in online uncivil political discourse.

Scope and Delimitations

Many theoretical orientations were explored when considering how best to research this problem. Nomophobia (Campbell, 2020), gratifications theory (Sun et al., 2020), systems justifications theory (Agadullina et al., 2021), and ideological identity theory (Devine, 2014) were all reviewed and rejected. Nomophobia was rejected as a potential theoretical orientation as it was deemed to be more similar to a clinical diagnosis than to a theory (Campbell, 2020). Gratifications theory has been used to study why individuals participate in social media but does not account for the uncivil political discourse that takes place on social media (Sun et al., 2020). Systems justification theory explains why some individuals may find it to be appropriate to engage in uncivil behavior with out-groups; this theory is more focused on how individuals who are perceived as "less than" deserve what they get in life, rather than explaining why individuals treat members of out-groups in an uncivil manner (Agadullina et al., 2021). Ideological identity theory (Devine, 2014) was rejected, as not enough studies were found to support this theory. The SIDE model was chosen because it has roots in social identity theory and

deindividuation theories. The SIDE model explains how one's political ideological identity can lead to deindividuation and uncivil political discourse.

Participants were at least 18 years of age. Participants were not otherwise included or excluded on the basis of political ideological orientation, race, gender, sexual orientation, class, cultural background, and/or ethnicity. Individuals who did not have their own personal social media accounts were excluded from this study. Individuals who did not engage in online political discourse were excluded as well. Individuals who could not read at a fifth-grade level were excluded. Individuals known to me were excluded as well, in order to prevent any biases.

I used the data gathered in this study to assess participants' perceptions and experiences of participating in online uncivil political discourse. Participants were asked questions regarding how this behavior impacts their mental health, and whether this behavior is compulsive or addictive in nature. Saturation was achieved by 13 participants; a small number of participants may limit transferability. Transferability was increased by explaining the context of the research regarding the lived experiences of the participants (Levitt, 2020a).

Limitations

This study had several limitations, including the small number of participants, thus limiting transferability (Levitt, 2020a). As stated above, transferability was improved by explaining the context of the research (Levitt, 2020a). Another potential limitation was relying on the self-report of the participants, as the nature of the interview questions, particularly those regarding mental health and addiction, is often considered to

be personal. Participants may have felt reluctant to answer these questions. Participants were provided with an explanation regarding the confidentiality of the data and how the data were stored. As this was a qualitative study, data interpretation may have been susceptible to my bias. One way to combat this involved ensuring that the research questions were developed based on criteria identified in previous research and creating questions regarding mental health symptoms and addiction based on DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) criteria.

Significance

This research provides information about the mental health of individuals who participate in online uncivil political discourse. Participants were asked questions regarding whether they were experiencing an increase in mental health symptoms due to their participation in this type of behavior and if they were experiencing addictive symptoms regarding his type of behavior. Understanding participants' experiences of engaging online uncivil political discourse will be beneficial to clinical psychologists, as there is evidence that the current political climate is already creating psychological distress that is presenting itself in the therapist's office (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018).

This research may also be of assistance to individuals who participate in this type of behavior. Understanding the potential consequences of this type of behavior may help people make more informed decisions regarding whether they want to participate in this behavior. It may also assist individuals who already participate in this behavior to be

more aware of how they may be impacted so they can make informed decisions about their own mental health care.

Political stress has been demonstrated to have a negative impact on Americans' mental health (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020; Cepeda et al., 2018). This stress and stark political divide are reflected in the comments sections of SNSs (Cheng et al., 2017). This study may impact social change by improving understanding of the communication between political out-groups, which could provide some insight into ways to alter this communication so that it can become more effective in the future.

Summary

Uncivil online political discourse can create stress for those who participate in this behavior (Duggan, 2017). More and more Americans are citing political tensions as a source of stress in their daily lives (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020). Americans are increasingly consuming political news on SNSs, which has also led to increased stress (Cepeda et al., 2018). Gaining insight into this behavior and its consequences could be beneficial to those engaged in those types of behaviors and to those who treat mental health and addictive disorders.

Previous research has identified that engaging in uncivil online political discourse can lead to increased stress and that most individuals find these interactions to be futile (Duggan, 2017). Meanwhile, daily life in the United States has become more dependent on technology, and some Americans' consumption of technology could be referred to as problematic (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Musetti et al., 2016). Researchers have yet to

explore whether this type of behavior can be referred to as problematic consumption and how this behavior impacts participants' mental health.

The SIDE model explains how political in-groups can behave in uncivil ways toward each other (Vilanova et al., 2017). In this qualitative study, I utilized the SIDE model to examine the behaviors between political out-groups during uncivil online political discourse and the psychological impact these behaviors have on participants' mental health. Data were collected via questionnaires sent through email correspondence and were analyzed for participants' reports of their mental health when participating in this behavior.

The following pages contain a detailed literature review synthesizing the previous research related to the current study. Chapter 2 will include a review of the SIDE model and its origins in deindividuation and social identity theories. Discussions of the history of uncivil political discourse, the relationship between politics and mental health, the impact of uncivil political discourse on its victims, and the connections between social media, addiction, and mental health are included as well.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Abusive exchanges found in the comments section of social media pages are becoming more frequent (Bernstein et al., 2017; Erjavic, 2014; Salminen et al., 2020). Flaming, swearing, personal attacks (Bernstein et al., 2017), cyberbullying, trolling, online firestorms, rapid discharges (large quantities of negative, highly emotional posts), abuse, insulting, intimidating, harassing speech, calls for violence, and discrimination directed against people based on characteristics such as race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, physical condition, disability, sexual orientation, and political conviction have been studied by numerous researchers (Bernstein et al., 2017; DeCook, 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Erjavic, 2014; Frischlich, 2019; Gervais, 2015; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Popan et al., 2019; Stella et al., 2018; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Gervais & Krol, 1992; 2015; Massimo, et al., 2018; Popan et al., 2019; Salminen, 2020; Stella et al., 2018). This behavior has been identified by several names, including *trolling* (Bernstein et al., 2017; DeCook, 2020), *flaming* (Krol, 1992), *online toxicity* (Salminen et al., 2020), *inflammatory content* (Massimo et al., 2018), *dark participation* (Frischlich et al., 2019), *online incivility* (Gervais, 2015; Popan et al., 2019), and *partisan provocation* (Hasell & Weeks, 2016). For the purposes of this study, this type of behavior was referred to as *uncivil discourse*. Online uncivil political discourse occurs when this type of behavior takes place during online political conversations. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating online with uncivil political discourse with out-group members.

Cyberharassment, including uncivil political discourse, is fairly prevalent. Roughly four in 10 Americans report having been harassed online (Duggan, 2017). Sixty-two percent of Americans consider cyberaggression to be a major problem (Duggan, 2017). Nearly one in five Americans has been exposed to potentially dangerous cyberaggression, including physical threats, harassment over a prolonged period of time, stalking, and sexual harassment (Duggan, 2017). The overwhelming majority of cyberaggression takes place on SNSs. The vast majority of these attacks on SNSs take place in the comments sections (Duggan, 2017).

The Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 4,248 American adults from January 9, 2017 to January 23, 2017 (Duggan, 2017), and the researcher found that 41% of participants had been victims of cyberaggression and that 66% had witnessed others be the victims of these behaviors online. The researcher further uncovered that the majority of these instances could be classified as nuisances including uncivil behavior. However, 18% of participants had experienced more significant cyberaggression including long-term cyberharassment, physical threats, sexual harassment, and stalking. Fourteen percent reported having been harassed for their political viewpoints, and 8% reported having been harassed for their gender (Duggan, 2017).

Real-world consequences can occur for individuals who have experienced cyberaggression online (Duggan, 2017). Duggan (2017) found that 27% percent of participants reported having been victims of online uncivility. The most commonly cited consequences were mental or emotional distress, reputational damage, or fear for one's personal safety (Duggan, 2017). Participants reported experiencing negative

consequences from experiencing online uncivil behavior, even if they had not engaged in or been the target of this type of behavior (Duggan, 2017). Participants reported that they sometimes felt unsafe about posting on threads where others had been confronted with uncivil political discourse, and witnessing online uncivil behavior can cause people to feel anxious about experiencing retribution regarding what they have posted (Duggan, 2017).

Several authors have identified mental health symptoms related to uncivil political discourse on SNSs (Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Hassell & Weeks, 2016; Lau et al., 2016; Trevisan, 2020). SNSs have been found to be related to several types of addictive behaviors (Guedes et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Munno et al., 2017). Research suggests that there is evidence that internet addiction in the form of social media addiction can lead to impairment of functioning in those who exhibit these types of behaviors (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), and research also suggests that social media use can lead to mental health symptoms (Vanucci, 2017). There is a large body of evidence connecting mental health symptoms to addictive behaviors (Ayandele et al., 2020; Enez Darcin et al., 2016; Hawi & Samaha, 2017). The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating online with uncivil political discourse with out-group members. The following pages include reviews of the literature search strategy, the theoretical foundation, the history of uncivil political discourse in social media, and discussions about the relationships amongst uncivil political discourse, mental health, politics, social media, and PIU.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search for this study was conducted via Walden University's online library. Databases searched included Academic Search Complete, APA, PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycExtra, APA PsycInfo, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Political Science Complete, SOCINDEX with full text, and Thoreau. Search words/phrases included *SIDE*, *nomophobia*, *politic* and social media*, *politic* and mental health*, *addiction and social media*, *addiction and mental health*, *mental health and social media*, *uncivil political discourse and social media*, *social identity theory*, *deindividuation*, and *self-categorization theory*. The search was focused on gathering information about how uncivil political discourse on social media impacts mental health and whether engaging in uncivil political discourse on social media is a compulsion or addiction. The search was also focused on SIDE and the theoretical approaches and models used in the development of SIDE. Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies were reviewed to ensure that a comprehensive review of the literature was completed.

Theoretical Foundation

Deindividuation refers to the phenomena that occur when an individual loses some sense of their individual identity and adopts the characteristics of their in-group (Gould & Howson, 2019). This allows individuals to ignore societal norms and conventions due to a minimized sense of individual responsibility. Being a member of the in-group leads to a sense of anonymity. When deindividuation occurs, people stop thinking of themselves as individuals and believe that others start seeing them as part of a

crowd, rather than as individuals (Gould & Howson, 2019). The person feels anonymous because they have shed their own identity (Gould & Howson, 2019). Antinormative behavior can often follow (Vilanova et al., 2017). Individuals behave differently in groups than they do when they are alone. When individuals do not see themselves as unique from others, this can loosen inhibitions and elicit behaviors that might violate social norms, including violent behaviors (Vilanova et al., 2017).

Theories of deindividuation have been studied for decades and emerged from studies of crowd behavior (Gould & Howson, 2019; Le Bon, 1995; Vilanova et al., 2017). In 1895, Gustave Le Bon posited that crowds have the ability to impact the psychology of individuals and can lead people to develop a "crowd mind." Le Bon considered crowd mind to be primal and homogenous. Le Bon believed that crowd behavior could be explained by the anonymity of being a part of a crowd, suggestibility, and contagion (Gould & Howson, 2019). Deindividuation has been used to explain historical occurrences such as the rise of the Nazi Party and anti-immigrant movements as well extenuating circumstances for murder charges (Vilanova et al., 2017).

The term *deindividuation* was developed by Festinger et al. in 1952 (Festinger, et al., 1952; Gould & Howson, 2019; Vilanova et al., 2017). This term was coined to refer to the phenomenon in which individuals become completely immersed into a group. Festinger et al. suggested that deindividuation can occur in any size gathering, ranging from small groups to large crowds. Festinger et al. hypothesized that deindividuation may be attractive as it allows people to satisfy needs that they are not typically able to satisfy due to inhibitions.

Other circumstances that can lead to deindividuation include anonymity, loss of individual responsibility, arousal, sensory overload, unstructured situations (Zimbardo, 1969), and the use of mind-altering substances (Postmes & Spears, 1998b). Individuals are more likely to use substances when they are in crowds (Vilanova et al., 2017). Crowds are considered to be unstructured social situations, and because of this, crowds are able to form their own norms (Vilanova et al., 2017). This leads individuals to deindividuate and ignore conventional norms and follow newly developing group norms (Gould & Howson, 2019). The new norms of the crowd are referred to as *emergent norms*. It has been argued that when crowds form, members of the crowd typically share the same purpose in being there, indicating that implicit norms may already be established (Gould & Howson, 2019).

Zimbardo (1969) demonstrated how quickly deindividuation could occur in his now-infamous Stanford Prison Experiment. Zimbardo recruited participants to simulate a real-life prison by randomly assigning the roles of guards and prisoners to study the development of norms, roles, and social expectations in a simulated prison. The simulation became so real that the guards became abusive to prisoners and the study had to be concluded after only 6 days. Zimbardo was also the first to suggest that deindividuation could lead to prosocial behavior as well as antisocial behavior (Zimbardo, 1969). Zimbardo described deindividuated behavior as emotional, impulsive, self-reinforcing, irrational, intense, hyper-responsive, and lacking discriminative stimuli control.

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects

Social Identity Theory

Tajfel and Turner (1979) developed SIDE by using concepts from social identity theory and self-categorization theory. Social identity theory suggests that individuals construct their own identities based on their group memberships (Vilanova, 2017). Group memberships may include political identity, gender identity, racial identity, or any other type of social identity. An *in-group* is defined as a group of people that people feel they belong to, whereas an *out-group* consists of individuals not in the group who have some relevant difference to the in-group (Carr et al., 2013). According to social identity theory, when in groups, individuals are likely to see themselves as members of their in-group and those who oppose them as members of an out-group (Carr et al., 2013). This leads to deindividuation as their group sociological identity becomes more salient than their own individual identities (Vilanova et al., 2017). Political ideological association has been studied as a social identity by several authors (Guilbeault et al., 2018; Hass et al., 2019; Langley, 2018; Mason, 2018).

Self-Categorization Theory

Self-categorization theory (SCT) proposes that group polarization occurs within specific social contexts as conformity to a polarized norm that distinguishes one's in-group in contrast to an out-group (Han & Yzer, 2020; Hogg et al., 1990; Turner, 1985). Polarization occurs depending upon the comparative contexts of the out-group that is being confronted (Turner & Davidson, 1990). SCT maintains that how an individual

behaves in a group is determined by the interaction between their individual mental processes and their group identities.

According to SCT, polarization occurs in a three-step process: group identity salience, exaggeration of group norms, and assimilation into group norms (Han & Yzer, 2020). Salient group membership causes individuals to think of themselves as group members, particularly during intergroup conflict. Stereotypical group norms are often exaggerated during intergroup conflict. Media exposure to partisan conflict has been found to lead to increased polarization on contentious issues (Han & Yzer, 2020).

Lee (2005) argued that low social presence on CMC leads to deindividuation because feelings of guilt, embarrassment, empathy, and fears of social retribution and rejection are reduced, while antinormative, unrestrained, and uninhibited behaviors are more salient. Posters' attention becomes focused on composing and responding to verbal messages, and less focused on the idea that individual people are behind those messages. Lee and Spears (1991) developed SIDE to explain the phenomenon that occurs when one's personal identity is cast aside in favor of a group identity. When deindividuation causes group identities to become more salient than personal identities, individuals become more likely to behave more aggressively during CMC than in FTF communication.

SIDE diverges from other deindividuation theories, as it allows for consideration of individual personalities in relationship to group behavior (Lee & Spears, 1991). If individual personalities are the result of the combination of groups that individuals belong to, the behavior displayed while participating in the group is no longer

antinormative (Vilanova et al., 2017). When intergroup conflict from out-group members occurs, individuals are likely to deindividuate and adhere to group norms.

Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects in Computer-Mediated Communication

SIDE has been applied to the study of CMC to better understand why individuals behave differently in CMC than they do in FTF communication (Carr et al., 2013; Vilanova et al., 2017). SIDE has been used specifically to explain uncivil behavior in CMC (Vilanova et al., 2017). Uncivil behavior during political conversations on the internet can be explained using the SIDE model (Rains et al., 2017). When participating in political conversation on social media, individuals find their political ideological identity to be more salient than other identities (Devine, 2014). Early research focused on studying whether anonymity was the reason why so many individuals felt comfortable taking part in uncivil online political discourse (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, more recent research indicates that individuals take part in this behavior on social media, where they are not anonymous and their commenting can be easily seen by friends, family, and colleagues (Erjavic, 2014).

The aim of the current research was to examine whether the uncivil behavior that takes place during political conversations on social media can lead to increased mental health symptoms and whether this behavior can be defined as a compulsion or addiction. The SIDE model has been used for many years to study CMC (Carr et al., 2013 Postmes et al., 1998a; Postmes & Spears, 2002; ; Rösner & Kramer, 2016; Yun et al., 2013), and it has also been used for many years to study in-group and out-group behavior (Lea et al.,

2001; Reicher et al., 1998; Spears et al., 2002). Political groups are well defined and perceived to be very polarized (Lupton et al., 2020). It is easy for individuals to identify in-group and out-group members during CMC (Lupton et al., 2020). This allows people to deindividuate, and their group identities become more salient than their individual identities (Gould & Howson, 2019). In addition, CMC can provide anonymity, which increases the likelihood of deindividuation and antinormative behavior (Gould & Howson, 2019). During CMC on social media sites, group polarization can quickly occur, leading to deindividuation and antinormative behavior resulting in uncivil political discourse (Rains et al., 2017). The SIDE model explains why uncivil political discourse occurs on social media sites.

Critiques of Deindividuation Theories

Critics of deindividuation theories have argued that anonymity does not always lead to deindividuation (Gould & Howson, 2019). It has also been difficult to find ways to empirically measure deindividuation (Gould & Howson, 2019). Zimbardo's experiment has been criticized for using unethical methods and because of the psychological turmoil experienced by the participants (Gould & Howson, 2019).

Relevance to the Current Study

Zimbardo (1969) described deindividuated behavior as emotional, impulsive, irrational, intense, and hyper-responsive. The uncivil behavior that takes place between political out-group members on social media sites could also be described as emotional, impulsive, irrational, intense, and hyper-responsive. The words "emotional, impulsive, irrational, intense, and hyper-responsive" can be used to describe symptoms of mental

health disorders and addiction disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The aim of the present study was to explore the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating in online uncivil political discourse with out-group members. The current research built upon the existing literature by exploring whether deindividuated behavior can lead to psychological distress and compulsive/addictive behaviors.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

SNSs are quickly becoming some of the most popular places to discuss politics (Duggan & Smith, 2016). However, this also means that SNSs are becoming one of the most popular places to engage in uncivil political discourse. Facebook is the most widely used social media site with 62% of American adults reporting they have a Facebook account. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 4,579 adults that were randomly selected to participate via mail or email (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Survey data were collected from July 12, 2016-August 8, 2016. The researchers found 94% of adult Facebook users witnessed at least some political content on their feeds and nearly half have "friends" in their online communities whose political beliefs differ from their own. Some of the adults surveyed reported enjoying the heated political discussions that take place online. However, the majority of adults (approximately two-thirds) found these discussions to be tiresome and annoying. Political social media interactions with individuals of opposing views were stressful and frustrating for 59% of respondents. Approximately half of participants believed that political discourse on SNSs were angrier (49%), less respectful (53%), and less civil (49%) than FTF political discourse.

Most social network users attempt to avoid engaging in argumentative political discourse when they see it, 83% of respondents indicated that they try to ignore it when their friends post political content that they found to be offensive, and only 8% report engaging in political discourse on social media (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Some social media users have taken it a step further and changed their settings so they see fewer posts they find to be offensive (31% of participants) and 27% of participants have blocked someone for posting political content they found to be offensive. Even so, online incivility in the comments section has been increasing over time and this behavior is commonly observed in online public discussions including social media (Cheng, et al., 2017).

The History of Uncivil Political Discourse in Social Media

Differences in opinion are considered commonplace between people of opposing political ideologies (Mendez, 2017). Research has shown that "conservatives" prefer to conserve culture and leave things the way they are perceived to have always been. Liberals prefer to see progress and change (Mendez, 2017). Individuals high in conservativism are more likely to possess the following personality traits: expressions of power, distinctions with out-groups, conscientiousness, authority, purity, favor less complexity, favor order, structure, closure, tradition, conformity, stability, and opposition to change. Individuals high in liberalism tend to possess the following traits: expressions of warmth, universal community, equality, minimization of harm, empathy, tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, flexibility and variability, new experiences and sensations,

unconventional self-expression, and novelty (Mendez, 2017). These differences are often at the heart of political debate. But how does ideological debate turn into hate speech?

Merriam-Webster defines the word "uncivil" in three ways; as not civilized, as lacking in courtesy, and as not conducive to civic harmony and welfare (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Uncivil online discourse has been studied for decades (Dsilva et al., 1998). With the advent of social media, uncivil online political discourse made its way into social media and researchers have noted that uncivil political discourse has been observed to take place online during conversations that occur in the comments sections of a variety of social media posts (DeCook, 2020; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Gervais, 2015; Popan et al., 2019; Stella et al., 2018). Social media sites, including Facebook have become fertile grounds for uncivil political discourse (Del Vicario et al., Gervais, 2015; Hasell & Weeks, 2016; 2016; Stella et al., 2018).

Uncivil political discourse has also been referred to as online incivility (Gervais, 2015; Popan et al., 2019), inflammatory content (Stella et al., 2018), trolling (DeCook, 2020; Salminen et al., 2020), dark participation (Frischlich et al., 2019) and online toxicity (Salminen et al., 2020). Although this phenomenon may go by several names, there is an overall consensus on the definition of this behavior (Salminen, et al., 2020). Uncivil online discourse can be defined as hateful communication that may lead an individual to end the conversation (Erjavic, 2014). This behavior may include any of the following: cyberbullying, trolling, online firestorms, negative highly emotional posts aimed at attacking others, and hate speech (Erjavic, 2014). This rhetoric is often deemed as racist, sexist, heterosexist, transphobic, ableist, xenophobic, and ageist (Erjavic, 2014).

This uncivil discourse is also often aimed at those who are perceived to adhere to a different political ideology (Erjavic, 2014). The hate speech that takes place during uncivil online discourse can include content that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, inciteful of violence, and discriminatory (Erjavic, 2014). Political disinformation is even more likely to create feelings of anger and anxiety and lead to uncivil behavior from individuals who identify as both republican and democrat (Barfar, 2019).

In the months leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential election, 55% of American adults reported they are "worn out" by political posts and discussions on social media (Anderson & Auxier, 2020). This reflected an 18-point increase since the months leading up to the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Only 15-20% reported they like seeing these posts and ads on social media. In addition, 70% reported it was "frustrating" and "stressful" to talk about politics on social media when the person they are speaking with disagrees with their viewpoints. This has increased from 59% in 2016. Seventy-two percent of respondents reported these conversations do not typically lead to finding common ground with others from the opposing side (Anderson & Auxier, 2020).

However, some highly politically engaged social network users state they enjoy engaging in political discourse on social media (Duggan & Smith, 2016). Highly politically engaged users are defined as participants who are registered to vote, who say they always or almost always vote in elections, and have volunteered or contributed money to political campaigns, parties, or groups in the last year. Approximately one in five highly politically engaged social media users indicate that they either comment,

discuss, or post about political issues. Of individuals who post their own political content, 33% stated they are more likely to respond to a political post that contains information with opposing viewpoints.

Political participation is often emotionally charged (Hassell & Weeks, 2016). Political discussion often can create tension and inspire emotional reactions (Hassell & Weeks, 2016; Huddy, et al., 2015). Political behavior such as voting, volunteering, and donating money to campaigns has been linked to emotional reactivity tied to political affiliation (Huddy et al., 2015; Weeks, 2015). Depression, anxiety (Weeks, 2015), anger, and enthusiasm (Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Huddy, et al., 2015; Weeks & March, 2017) have all been linked to political events.

Contemporary sources of news may increase negative feelings about members of opposing political parties (Hassell & Weeks, 2016). Proattitudinal partisan online news is often associated with increased anger directed at the opposing party's candidate and partisan news media often purposefully attempt to elicit strong emotions from viewers (Hassell & Weeks, 2016). These behaviors have been observed in digital media as well (Hassell & Weeks, 2016).

Topics about politics tend to arouse more uncivil discourse than non-political topics (Salminen et al., 2020). Hmielowski et al. (2014) argued that taking part in online political discussions exposes individuals to uncivil behavior. This, in turn, makes uncivil political discourse appear to be socially accepted. This ultimately leads to an increase in uncivil political discourse. Hmielowski et al. (2014) determined there was evidence of a positive relationship between discussing politics online and intending to engage in uncivil

behavior. They also found a positive relationship between discussing politics online and belief that uncivil behavior is acceptable.

Cheng et al. (2017) asserted that although many authors have argued that individuals who engage in uncivil online discourse have innate antisocial tendencies; research has demonstrated that people can be influenced by their environment to act aggressively, and this type of behavior is not necessarily indicative of antisocial traits. Negative mood and the presence of others were shown to increase the likelihood of incivility in online comments (Cheng et al., 2017). Emotions have also been found to impact the way one interprets uncivil political discourse (DeCook, 2020; Popan et al., 2019). As conversations become more uncivil in nature, participants are more likely to perceive opposing views as being irrational; and even rational arguments can be deemed irrational when they are uncivil in nature (DeCook, 2020; Popan et al., 2019).

At least one author has concluded that not everyone reads uncivil comments with the intent to argue with individuals who are not like-minded (Erjavic, 2014). There is evidence that some individuals read uncivil comments to seek guidance about different topics. These individuals want to learn more about others' opinions, rather than argue their own.

Many authors have used the SIDE model to study uncivil CMC and have found that when members align with their in-group they tend to lose their sense of personal identity and adopt the group's identity (Carr et al., 2013; Rösner & Kramer, 2016; Postmes et al., 1998a; Postmes & Spears, 2002; Yun et al., 2013). As noted above, this process is referred to as deindividuation (Gould & Howson, 2019). Once deindividuation

occurs, it is much easier for people to engage in uncivil discourse with those who can be identified as members of an out-group (Devine, 2014; Gould & Howson, 2019; Vilanova et al., 2017). It is not difficult for those reading the comments sections on social media sites to determine which commenters are members of their in-groups and out-groups (Lupton et al., 2020). After deindividuation and group membership identification occurs, individuals feel empowered to behave in an uncivil manner toward the out-group, who is often perceived as a threat (Gould & Howson, 2019).

Politics and Mental Health

According to the APA and others, strong emotions are not only linked to politics (Hasell & Weeks, 2016), but they are also linked to mental health symptoms (APA, 2017, 2019; 2020, Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis et. al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017, Hisam et al., 2017; Roche & Jacobson, 2019; Trevisan, 2020). Many mental health disorders are often characterized by experiencing overwhelming and sometimes out of control emotions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It has been posited by some authors that inability to control emotions while reading politically charged statements could result uncivil political discourse (Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Huddy et al., 2015).

The APA and others have investigated the link between increased mental health symptoms and politics, particularly since the 2016 US presidential election (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020; Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis et. al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017, Hisam et al., 2017; Roche & Jacobson, 2019; Trevisan, 2020). OCD (Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis et al., 2018), anxiety (Brown &

Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Tresvian, 2020), depression

(Brown & Keller, 2018; Lau et al., 2016; Trevisan, 2020) have all been linked to the

current political climate. Additionally, psychotherapists are reporting an increase in

patients' discussion of post-election stress after the 2016 election (McCarthy & Sacks,

2019) and politics has become a focus of psychotherapy (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018;

Solomonov & Barber, 2018).

According to a survey conducted by the APA, by 2017 Americans were reporting

a new stressor for them, the future of the nation (APA, 2017). After the 2016 U.S.

presidential election Americans were more likely to report anxiety, anger, and fatigue

than they had been in the past decade (APA, 2017). Subsequent surveys revealed that

Americans were becoming more stressed by the news and upcoming elections (APA,

2017). By 2020 Americans identified COVID-19, the government response to corona

virus, and civil unrest as significant sources of stress (APA 2020). In 2017 95% of

Americans reported checking the news regularly, with 82% of Americans stating that

checked the news at least once a day. The APA attributed at least some of American's

stress to their frequent checking of the news on social media (APA, 2017). In 2020 a

large portion of Americans (72%) reported that American was at its lowest point they can

remember (APA, 2020), which had increased from 59% in 2017 (APA, 2017). This

included individuals who had lived through WWII, Vietnam, the Cuban Missile Crisis,

and September 11 (APA, 2017).

Youth have been impacted by the 2016 U.S. presidential election as well

(DeJonckheere et al., 2018). Eighty-six percent were emotionally impacted pre-election,

71% post-election, and 63% four months post-election. Twenty percent were physically affected pre-election and 19% post-election. The most common emotional symptoms reported were stress and anxiety. Some participants reported feeling "tired," "drained," and "nauseous." One participant reported sleeplessness, another reported difficulty concentrating which was impacting their schoolwork. Feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear persisted following the election (DeJonckheere et al., 2018).

Uncivil Political Discourse Can Be Psychologically Detrimental to Its Victims

Uncivil political discourse is very prevalent (DeCook, 2020; Del Vicario, et al, 2016; Gervais, 2015; Popan et al., 2019; Stella et al., 2018). This common phenomenon may be psychologically detrimental to its victims (Duggan, 2017). The negative uncivil political discourse exchanged during these conversations can have negative results for recipients. Victims of these uncivil attacks reported higher levels of everyday stress than participants who had not been victims of this type of behavior (Duggan, 2017). Politically active social media users report higher levels of stress and depression (Hisam et al., 2017). Extremely uncivil political discourse has been linked to psychopathy, bipolar personality, direct sadism, and vicarious sadism (March, 2019).

The heated exchanges that take place during these online political conversations can have psychologically detrimental effects for those who participate in these conversations, and for those that witness them (Duggan, 2017). Some authors have argued that individuals who perpetuate uncivil political discourse may exhibit signs of mental illness including psychopathy and antisocial traits (Craker & March, 2016; March, 2019; Sest & March, 2017). Victims of this type of behavior can experience mental

health symptoms including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Sinclair et al., 2012). Uncivil political discourse can be particularly detrimental to individuals it targets, particularly when considering issues like race, and can elicit feelings of anger, hurt, anxiety, and distress (Chavez et al., 2019).

Since the 2016 American presidential election, individuals have been obsessively checking the news and social media sites more frequently than before (Cepeda et al., 2018). Politics can lead to anxiety and consuming social media regarding politics can make this anxiety worse (Cepeda et al., 2018). Anxiety has increased in LGBTQ+ communities after the 2016 election (Brown & Keller, 2018). Interactions about politics on Facebook has been linked to mental health symptoms (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Trevisan, 2020) and stress (Hisam, et al., 2017). Uncivil political discourse has been linked to relapses of depression and anxiety (Trevisan, 2020). Some individuals have identified these conversations as traumatic (Trevisan, 2020).

Social Media, Addiction, and Mental Health

Neither the World Health Organization (WHO) nor the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition (DSM 5) has officially recognized technological addictions as diagnosable disorders (Munno et al., 2017; Musett et al., 2016). However, problematic technological use has been studied for decades and PIU has been studied since the 1990s (Young, 1998). Other types of technological addictions have garnered attention from researchers including cyber sexual addiction (internet porn or adult chat rooms), cyber relationship addiction (cyber affairs or using online relationships to replace real-life friends and family), net compulsions (gambling or shopping), information

overload (compulsive database searches), internet gaming addiction, (Musetti et al., 2016), social media addiction (Guedes et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), and Facebook addiction (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Although not it is not technically a diagnosable disorder at this time, internet gaming disorder has been listed in the DSM 5 under "conditions for further study" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

It has been suggested that technological addictions are so diverse that it is challenging to develop diagnostic criteria for these disorders (Musetti et al., 2016; Pies, 2009). Questions arise regarding whether separate diagnostic criteria could be necessary for every type of addiction, as behaviors vary across problematic online gaming, problematic online gambling, problematic social media use, etc. (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Proposed diagnostic criteria for internet addiction disorder (IAD) includes preoccupation with the internet, mood modification, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, unsuccessful attempts to control use, continued excessive internet use despite negative psychosocial problems, loss of interest in other hobbies or sources of entertainment, use of internet to escape or improve mood, deception of problematic use when interacting with others, relapse, habitual use, unintentional use, and compulsive use that reflects in functional deficits (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Lanconi et al., 2017). Pathological social media use has been differently labeled by researchers as "problematic", "addictive", or "compulsive" and has been conceptualized using numerous theoretical frameworks (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). This has resulted in challenges in identifying specific symptoms that are indicative of social media addiction (Frost & Rickwood, 2017).

As of yet, no established diagnostic criteria or reliable assessment tool with sound psychometric properties has yet been established to assess accurately for problematic social media use (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Even so, treatment modalities are being developed to treat internet use disorders (Brown et al., 2021; Du et al., 2010; Schimmenti et al., 2017). Therapeutic interventions that have been studied to treat internet addiction include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (Du et al., 2010; Wölfling et al., 2019), cognitive behavioral therapy for internet addiction (CBT-IA) (Kimberly, 2011; Young, 2013), positive psychology (Khazaei et al., 2017), mindfulness techniques (Li et al., 2018), acupuncture (Wang et al., 2019) and psychopharmacological interventions including bupropion (Bae, 2018; Nam et al., 2017), and escitalopram (Nam et al., 2017), Some authors have argued that a combination of psychopharmacological and cognitive behavioral approaches are the most effective at treating IAD (Goslar et al., 2020).

PIU has been linked to symptoms of mental illness and functional deficits (Munno et al., 2017) as well as relationship difficulties (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). Addictive use of Facebook predicted poor general well-being and mental health outcomes in a greater degree than general use (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Problematic and pathological internet use in adolescents is related to increased symptoms of psychosis, low self-esteem, low aspiration, an unhappy childhood, and impaired social and scholastic performance (Munno, 2017). PIU has also been linked to depression, anxiety, psychological distress (Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Keles et al., 2019) and ADHD, (Andreassen et al., 2016; Chaelin et al., 2017; Hussain & Griffiths, 2018; Ra et al., 2018).

Problematic social media use in adults has been linked to social anxiety (Baltaci, 2019; Enez Darcin, et al., 2016; Frost & Rickwood, 2017); increased anxiety, including maintaining or exacerbating existing anxiety (Andreassen et al., 2016; Frost & Rickwood, 2017), brooding and fear of missing out (Frost & Rickwood, 2017), depression (Andreassen et al., 2016; Ayandele, 2020; Chen et al., 2019; Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Hussain & Griffiths, 2018; Lanconi et al., 2017; Yoon, 2019), negative body image and disordered eating (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Kamal & Kamal, 2018), loneliness (Baltaci, 2019; Enez Darcin et al., 2016), psychosis (Paik & Kim, 2014), insomnia (Alimoradi et al., 2019) and OCD (Andreassen et al., 2016; Hussain & Griffiths, 2018). Excessive Facebook use has been linked to increased symptoms of several disorders including bipolar disorder, major depressive disorder, persistent depressive disorder, narcissistic personality disorder, antisocial personality disorder, compulsive disorders, histrionic personality disorder, and schizoid personality disorder (Rosen et al., 2013).

Social comparison, brooding, rumination, and appearance comparison on Facebook were common amongst individuals with problematic use (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). PIU has been associated with increased suicidality and exacerbated symptoms of borderline personality disorder (Chen et al., 2019). PIU positively correlated with Cluster B and Cluster C personality traits, non-adaptive coping strategies, and immature and autistic fantasy defenses (Laconi et al., 2017). IAD has been linked to problematic substance use (Golpe et al., 2017; Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Use of multiple SNSs has been linked to increased depression and anxiety (Primack, et al., 2016).

Nomophobia

Merriam Webster's dictionary defines nomophobia (no mobile phone phobia) as the fear of being without use of a working mobile phone and that this word surfaced as early as 2008 (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The term was officially coined during a YouGov study in the United Kingdom in 2010 (Mertz, 2013). Nomophobia has also been defined as the fear of feeling disconnected from the digital world (Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2019). Nomophobia is believed to be similar to internet addiction (Campbell, 2020). Potential diagnostic criteria for inclusion of nomophobia in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) 5 include: regular and time-consuming use, feelings of anxiety when the phone is not available (also referred to as "ringxiety"), constant availability, preference for mobile communication over FTF communication, and financial problems as a consequence of use (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Ringxiety has been linked to repeatedly checking one's phone for messages and hearing phantom ring tones (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017).

Nomophobia research is still in the exploratory stages (Rodriguez-Gonzales et al., 2020) and focuses on the anxiety individuals experience when they do not have their cell phones and to what degree are people dependent upon their cell phones (Campbell, 2020). Four main causes of nomophobia have been identified: fear of not being able to communicate with others, fear or not being able to connect, fear of not being able to have immediate access to desired information, and fear of the stress related to not having one's mobile device (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Nomophobia can have negative psychological and physiological impacts including personality disorders, mental health issues, and physical health issues (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). Nomophobia impacts functioning in school and social interactions (Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2020). It has been proposed that smart phone addiction is as dangerous as addiction to substances and should be viewed as a public health problem and is worthy of inclusion in the DSM (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Rodriguez-Garcia et al., 2020).

More and more Americans are identifying politics as a source of stress (APA, 2020). Research has shown that the political atmosphere has an impact on mental health symptoms (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020; Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis, et. al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017, Hisam et al., 2017; Roche & Jacobson, 2019; Trevisan, 2020). Social networking sites, like Facebook, are becoming increasingly popular and increasingly political (Duggan, 2017). Heated exchanges in the comments section of social media sites are often more insulting and degrading than comments expressed in FTF settings (Vilanova et al., 2017). According to the SIDE model, deindividuation causes individual identities to become less salient than group identities, this can result in antinormative behavior from groups. Deindividuation can result in aggressive behaviors aimed at out-groups (Vilanova et al., 2017). Uncivil political discourse on social media is likely a result of deindividuation (Vilanova et al., 2017).

Problematic technological use including the use of smart phones and social media has clear ties to addictive behaviors (Campbell, 2020; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Rodriguez-

Garcia et al., 2020) and mental health issues (Andreassen et al., 2016; Chaelin et al.,

2017; Chen et al., 2019; Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Hussain &

Griffiths, 2018); Keles et al., 2019; Laconi et al., 2017). Online uncivil political discourse

has also been linked to psychological distress (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020; Brown & Keller,

2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis et. al., 2018; DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017,

Hisam et al., 2017; Roche & Jacobson, 2019; Trevisan, 2020). The SIDE model has been

used by numerous researchers to explain why uncivil behavior occurs during online

political discourse (Carr et al., 2013; Rösner & Kramer, 2016; Postmes et al., 1998a;

Postmes & Spears, 2002; Yun et al., 2013). However, little is known about how uncivil

political discourse caused by deindividuation impacts mental health. There is evidence

that smart phone use is addictive (Campbell, 2020) and that SNSs like Facebook are

addictive (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). It is not known whether engaging in uncivil political

discourse is a compulsive/addictive behavior.

Summary and Conclusions

There is evidenced that social media and internet use can be addictive in nature

(Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). There is also evidence that political discourse and consumption

of political news has been linked to an increase in mental health symptoms (APA, 2017,

2019, 2020; Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Davis, et. al., 2018;

DeJonckheere et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017, Hisam et al., 2017; Roche & Jacobson, 2019;

Trevisan, 2020). Individuals who are harassed or attacked while engaging in political

discourse have also reported an increase in stress (Duggan, 2017). In addition, there is

evidence that people who engage in uncivil political discourse feel freer to do so due to

individuation effects (Carr et al., 2013; Rösner & Kramer, 2016; Postmes et al., 1998a; Postmes & Spears, 2002; Yun et al., 2013).

The aim of this study was to explore how individuals' mental health is impacted by engaging in uncivil political discourse on social media; and to explore whether engaging in this type of behavior is addictive or compulsive. Expanding on previous research, the findings of this study confirm that many individuals who participate in this type of behavior experience both physiological and psychological symptoms associated with mental health disorders. The findings of this study also confirm that many individuals who participate in this type of behavior experience symptoms of addictive disorders.

Chapter 3 will detail the qualitative methods that were used to study these phenomena. Participants answered interview questions via email, phone, and video chat based up on their preference. Interview questions were aimed at asking for detailed accounts of their participation in uncivil online political discourse on social media. Participants were asked about potential mental health symptoms and whether this behavior has exacerbated these symptoms. Participants were also asked questions to assess whether this behavior is compulsive or addictive.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Political discourse on social media has become more heated in recent years (Cheng et al., 2017). Comments made by individuals on political news stories have become increasingly derisive and often include personal attacks aimed at other commenters (Cheng et al., 2017). Individuals who read political news on SNSs have reported increased amounts of stress due to consumption of political news (APA, 2017; Cepdea et al., 2018). The present study used a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating in online uncivil political discourse with out-group members.

In the following pages, I will describe the research methodology that was used in the study. This will include a discussion of the research design and rationale and a discussion of my role as the researcher. The methodology section will identify the population and justify the sampling strategy, discuss participant criteria, identify the number of participants, identify specific procedures for recruiting participants, and describe the relationship between saturation and sample size. Data collection sources will be identified. The basis for the development of interview questions will be discussed. The data analysis plan will be described, issues of trustworthiness will be discussed, and procedures used to ensure adherence to ethical guidelines will be outlined.

Research Design and Rationale

This section will address the research design and rationale. This study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating online in uncivil political discourse with out-group members?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of active social media adults with potential addictive or compulsive behaviors after participating online in uncivil discourse with out-group members?

This study utilized a basic qualitative approach, specifically, a generic qualitative approach (Percy et al., 2015). Qualitative research has a longstanding history in the field of psychology, although much of this research remained unpublished due to researchers' skepticism of qualitative methods (Levitt, 2020c). Over the past 50 years, systematic procedures for completing qualitative research have been implemented, which has increased researchers' confidence in this type of methodology (Levitt, 2020c). Unlike quantitative methodologies, qualitative research does not use numbers to measure variables when studying human behavior (Levitt, 2020c). Qualitative methods utilize verbal descriptions of phenomena, which allows for the researcher to explore complex and ambiguous data in a way that quantitative methods cannot (Levitt, 2020c). The aim of this study was to explore the perceptions of individuals who engage in online uncivil political discourse. A qualitative approach is appropriate for exploring individuals' perceptions in the context of a specific time and place, as well as exploring perceptions regarding interpersonal dynamics and cultural influences relative to the particular phenomenon being studied (Levitt, 2020c).

Generic qualitative research is appropriate when other methods of qualitative inquiry are not suitable (Percy et al., 2015). A generic qualitative approach is warranted

when the researcher wants to know what participants actually think about the issue being studied (Percy et al., 2015). When a researcher is using a generic qualitative approach, data collection is geared toward finding participants' reports about their thoughts about phenomena that exist outside of themselves (Percy et al., 2015). Generic qualitative approaches often use semistructured interviews and thematic analysis to gather and analyze data (Percy et al., 2015).

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher was to gather the experiences of individuals who participated in uncivil online political discourse. I gathered participants' self-reports of how this behavior impacted their mental health and whether participants engaged in this behavior in a compulsive manner. Participants were recruited using a purposeful sampling strategy; specifically, snowball sampling was used (Bastani et al., 2021; Creswell, 2013). None of the participants were known to me; this assisted in reducing researcher bias. I kept a research diary in order to reduce researcher bias and to assist in accurate and thorough data collection (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Participants shared their private experiences during the interviews. Great care was taken to ensure that participants' interviews remained confidential.

Methodology

The following paragraphs will outline the qualitative methodology that was used in the study. The following sections will review participant selection; sampling; strategies; documentation; procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection; and the data analysis plan.

Participant Selection

This purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of individuals who engage in uncivil online political discourse. The criteria for identifying participants were based on whether potential participants engaged in this type of behavior. Participants were required to have a fifth-grade reading level (see Appendix A). This information was gained by participant self-report.

Sampling Strategies

As stated above, purposeful sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was used to identify potential participants for the study (Creswell, 2013). Purposeful sampling is frequently used in qualitative research and occurs when a researcher purposefully selects individuals because they are familiar with the phenomenon being studied and can inform the research (Creswell, 2013). When snowballing is used during purposeful sampling, participants knowledgeable about the phenomenon refer the researcher to other participants known to be knowledgeable about the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Saturation is the most widely used strategy to determine sample size in qualitative research (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Saturation in qualitative research is the criterion on which researchers decide when to discontinue collecting data (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Saturation occurs when no additional data can be found by continuing data collection because data have become redundant (Creswell, 2013; Saunders et al., 2018; Vasileiou et al., 2018). It is determined that saturation has been achieved when additional interviews yield no new codes or themes (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Using snowball sampling ensured that enough participants were located to achieve

saturation (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Saturation was achieved after 13 participants (Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Documentation/Researcher-Developed Instruments

Semistructured interviews were conducted via email, phone, and video chat (Creswell, 2013; Kallio et al., 2016; Percy et al., 2015; Vasileiou et al., 2018). Semistructured interviews are one of the most common ways for gathering data in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016). Semistructured interviews allow for reciprocity between the researcher and participants and allow for follow-ups, prompts, and probes, which results in rich, in-depth data gathering (Kallio et al., 2016). Semistructured interview guides are developed by identifying whether this type of data collection is appropriate for the study at hand, retrieving and using previous knowledge, formulating the preliminary semistructured interview guide and pilot testing it if necessary, and presenting the complete semistructured interview guide (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide for this study consisted of nine questions. See Appendix A for a review of the semistructured interview questions.

A semistructured interview was appropriate for this study because the research questions were aimed at uncovering the lived perceptions of participants who engaged in online uncivil political discourse and allowed for follow-up questions and probes so that these data could be gathered effectively (Kallio et al., 2016). An exhaustive literature review was conducted to retrieve and use previous knowledge about the phenomenon, as this knowledge was necessary to provide a conceptual basis for the interview questions (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was created based upon this knowledge (Kallio

et al., 2016). This assisted in establishing content validity. Content validity was also established by having the dissertation committee review the interview guide.

The semistructured interview questions assessed participants' perceptions of their own mental health symptoms and addictive behaviors in relationship to their engagement in online uncivil political discourse. The interview included questions about participants' mental health history, including questions about potential symptoms of mental health disorders and addictive disorders; how long these symptoms had been present; how much time was spent engaging in online uncivil political discourse; and participants' motivations for engaging in this behavior. Content validity of this instrument was assessed by the dissertation committee and other Walden University faculty as appropriate. Questions regarding mental health symptoms and symptoms of addiction were developed using DSM-5 criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Participants were recruited from Facebook (see Appendix B) via flyers and paid ads. Prior to recruiting participants from Facebook groups, I contacted the moderator to receive permission to post the flyer on their page. Facebook groups containing members of Walden's learning community were targeted. When permission was granted, I posted flyers on the group's page asking for participants. Participants who responded to the flyer or ad were contacted via email and Messenger to determine if they met criteria for the study. Participants were asked to sign a consent form before they received the interview questions.

Data collection occurred daily until saturation occurred. Data collection took approximately 3 months. Data were recorded either via email and/or via digital recording.

Data Analysis Plan

The data were related to the research questions, as the data collected were aimed at answering questions about adults' mental health and compulsive/addictive behaviors in relationship to participating in uncivil online political discourse. When necessary, data were transcribed using REV transcribing software (Rev, 2021). The software's publisher reports that the software has a 99% accuracy rate (Rev, 2021). Transcriptions were checked by me to ensure accuracy and were emailed to participants so that they could check their accuracy and offer feedback (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). All participants confirmed that their transcribed data were correct.

Email correspondence and transcribed correspondence were coded using thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2008). Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, and report patterns/themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Braun and Clarke (2008) outlined six steps for thematic analysis, which I followed:

1. I familiarized myself with the data through transcription (when needed) and reading and re-reading data, making note of emerging themes.

2. I then began to generate initial codes by coding notable features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set and collecting data relevant to emerging codes.

3. After gathering and collating codes, I began searching for themes and gathered all data relevant to potential themes.

4. I then reviewed the themes to see if the themes worked in relationship to the codes that were identified. I then generated a thematic map of the analysis.

5. I then continued to define and name themes, using ongoing analysis to refine specifics of themes and gain an understanding of the overall story the themes were revealing.

6. I then produced a report, using this as an opportunity to analyze the data one final time. A scholarly report of the analysis was then produced.

Data were hand coded (Creswell, 2013). Data are often hand coded when the data require human interpretation and computer analysis would not be appropriate (Creswell, 2013). Hand coding allowed me to become more familiar with the data and better able to observe emerging themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2008). Discrepant cases were analyzed to determine if they added valuable data to the study (Creswell, 2013). Discrepant cases that were not used in the study have been documented in the methodology section as to why the data were not used (Creswell, 2013).

<div align="center">**Issues of Trustworthiness**</div>

The following sections will outline how trustworthiness was achieved in this study. These sections address trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is communicated to the reader by identifying the rationale for procedures used during a study, and that these procedures were appropriate to assess the research questions at hand (Levitt, 2020b). Trustworthiness was addressed in this study in

numerous ways. Reflexivity is the process in which a researcher continually reflects upon the research process in order to avoid biases and improve credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity was used to increase trustworthiness in this study. I kept a research diary to improve reflexivity (Levitt, 2020b).

Credibility

In qualitative research, credibility is referred to as the amount of confidence a researcher can have in the findings from the study (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was one way in which credibility was established in this research. Member checking occurred by having the transcribed data emailed back to recipients for feedback (Levitt, 2020b). Recipients had the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and provide feedback on necessary changes. Saturation and reflexivity were used to ensure credibility as well. The research was reviewed by my Walden University dissertation committee when appropriate.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of a study can be transferred to other populations in other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Purposeful sampling strategies are effective at ensuring transferability (Bastani et al., 2021). Snowball sampling is a type of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013). Thick description of the participants, data, and outcomes can also help ensure transferability (Creswell, 2013). Transferability is essential to informing further research (Creswell, 2013).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability of findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was increased as I coded the data and identified underlying themes (Basant et al., 2021). Dependability was also ensured by keeping audit trails by documenting and cross-checking my notes, recordings, transcriptions, and email correspondence.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which other researchers could confirm a study's findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). As mentioned above, reflexivity is an effective way to improve confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity was maintained by keeping a research journal (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Maintaining audit trails, as outlined above, was also beneficial for achieving confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

All research was obtained following the Walden University Institutional Review Board's (IRB) ethical guidelines, as well as state and local guidelines. Data collection did not begin until IRB approval was attained. Walden University's IRB guidelines were strictly adhered to ensure that ethical standards were in place. The IRB approval number is 05-10-22-0145101.

Every effort was made to ensure participants' confidentiality. Addiction and mental health symptoms can be sensitive and private in nature, therefore, ensuring participant confidentiality is of the utmost importance. In accordance with IRB

guidelines, participants gave informed consent prior to participating in research. Participants were fully debriefed upon participation in the study and were given access to mental health crisis numbers and addiction crisis numbers including Nation Alliance on Mental Illness's (NAMI) and Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services' (SAMHSA) national hotlines.

Treatment of Human Participants

Participants were recruited via a flier that was distributed on Facebook and LinkedIn. Participants were also recruited via a Facebook ad. The name of the researcher, the title of the dissertation and the purpose of the study were provided to participants prior to them partaking in the study. A Google voice cell phone number was used for safety reasons. A consent form was emailed to participants prior to their semistructured interviews, to ensure informed consent. The consent form outlined that participation was voluntary, that participants were able to drop out of the study at any time without penalty, participants' right to confidentiality, and their right to understand how the research data will be used.

Treatment of Data

All participant information including demographic information, contact information, and responses to study questions will remain confidential. Research data will be preserved for future purposes. Participant identification numbers will be preserved. Participant information will be shared only with the committee. As in accordance with the American Psychological Association's (2007) standards, all study

information will be kept for seven years and then destroyed by permanently deleting the files. Data will be kept on a password protected USB drive.

Threats to Validity

Threats to validity will be minimized by having the committee review the instrument and data from the participants. Participants were allowed to review their transcripts to ensure accuracy and reduce threats to validity. There are minimum risks involved to participants in this study. Participants did not report any undue stress from participating in this study, but were given the SAMHSA national helpline 1-800-622-HELP and the NAMI helpline 1-800-950-6264.

Summary

Chapter 3 included a review of the generic qualitative approach that was used to analyze data. The generic qualitative approach was used to gain an understanding of potential mental health and addictive consequences to engaging in uncivil online political discourse. I explained the research design, the role of the researcher, and the methodology used. Some of the semistructured interviews were transcribed using REV software (REV, 2021). After transcription, hand-coding was used to identify themes in the data.

Chapter 3 reviewed in detail the research design and rationale, the research tradition, participant selection, sampling strategies, researcher developed instruments, procedures for recruitment, data analysis plan, trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, confirmability, treatment of human participants, treatment of data, and threats to validity. Chapter 4 will include the setting, demographics, data analysis, results and summary.

Chapter 5 will include an interpretation of findings, limitations, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 4: Results

Political discourse on SNSs is becoming increasingly uncivil (Mendez, 2017).
Researchers have reported a connection between engaging in uncivil political discourse
and an increase in mental health symptoms and addictive/compulsive behaviors (APA,
2017, 2019, 2020). The SIDE model can help researchers understand why individuals
engage in uncivil behaviors when engaging with perceived out-groups (Turner & Turner,
1979; Vilanova, 2017). Research has not explored the lived perceptions of the individuals
who engage in this type of behavior and how they view the impact of this behavior on
their own mental health, and whether they feel this behavior is compulsory in nature. The
purpose of this study was to explore how participants perceived this behavior to impact
their mental health and whether they found the behavior to be compulsory.

Two research questions were used to gather the data: What are the perceptions of
active social media adults' mental health after participating online in uncivil political
discourse with out-group members? What are the perceptions of active social media
adults with potential addictive or compulsive behaviors after participating online in
uncivil discourse with out-group members? Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis
was used to analyze the data that were collected. Datawere collected using semistructured
interviews via email, phone, or video chat. Nine overall themes were identified; three of
the themes had subthemes.

In this chapter, I present the results of this generic qualitative study. The chapter
includes a description of the research setting, participant demographics, data collection
and data analysis procedures that were outlined in Chapter 3 and how they were utilized

during data collection. Chapter 4 concludes with descriptions of evidence of trustworthiness, results, and a summary.

Research Setting

Participants in this study completed semistructured interviews via email, phone, or video chat. Care was taken to maintain confidentiality when conducting phone and video chat interviews. I was alone in a room behind a closed door with a white noise machine running. Three participants engaged in video chat, three participated via phone interviews, and the remaining seven chose to participate via email. Each participant was asked to remain in a confidential setting during the interview. There were no organizations that had any influence on the participants or the research study results.

Demographics

Participants in this study were not asked about any demographic information; however, eight out of 13 participants did volunteer some of their demographic information during their interviews. Two participants identified as liberal. One participant reported being Persian and having worked in defense and having worked in the south. Two other participants identified their occupations, including a participant who reported working for a sheriff's office and one who was employed as a mental health therapist. One participant identified living in the south, one reported living on the west coast, one reported living in Indiana, and another reported living in Alaska. One participant reported having a degree in political science; two participants reported having a PhD.

Data Collection

Thirteen participants completed semistructured interviews for this study. As stated above, seven participated via email, three via telephone, and three via video-chat. I used a Google voice number when calling participants and used this feature to record the phone calls for transcription. Video chats were completed via my private Zoom account. Email correspondence was conducted via my Walden student email account. Two phone calls and one video chat were transcribed using REV software (REV, 2021); all other transcriptions were completed by me. Email responses were approximately one to three pages in length; phone calls and video chats ranged from approximately 25–45 minutes. Each participant completed their interview in a single session. All video chat and phone participants were sent a transcription of their interview via email, and all confirmed that the transcriptions were correct.

I encountered some obstacles in recruiting participants. I shared the recruitment flyer on my own personal Facebook and LinkedIn pages but did not receive participants that way. I shared the flyer on two Walden group Facebook pages, one aimed at psychology students, and one aimed at doctoral students, and recruited two participants that way. While I used these methods, 9 months passed before any participants were recruited. At this time, I began to look for alternative recruitment techniques. I researched the possibility of running a paid Facebook ad to recruit participants. After I determined this method to be established and effective, a Facebook ad was created to recruit participants (Kosinski et al., 2015). Forty-five individuals sent messages via Facebook Messenger inquiring about the study. Of these, 11 individuals followed through with

participation. After I placed the ad, participation recruitment was completed in 12 days. Participants received a $5 Amazon gift card.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). I followed the steps of thematic analysis to identify codes within the data, which were used to identify categories and eventually themes. Participants were identified as P1–P13 to ensure confidentiality during the data analysis process. After interviews were completed and transcribed, member checking was done to ensure accuracy. I became familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. I then began hand coding the data by identifying similarities within the transcriptions as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A codebook was developed on Microsoft Word to track the codes. These codes were then examined to identify categories and then themes within the codes.

In the initial review of the data, 612 codes were identified. These codes were then cross-referenced between questions and were merged to identify 87 codes. As I reviewed these codes, 20 categories emerged. These categories were further reduced to eight themes and 13 subthemes. There were no discrepant cases in the data analysis.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This section outlines the following: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

In qualitative research credibility is defined as the amount of confidence a researcher can have in their findings (Creswell, 2013). Member checking was used in this study to increase credibility. Transcripts were emailed to participants so they could review them for accuracy. Twelve of the 13 participants responded to these emails, confirming the transcripts were accurate. Reviewing data and finding similarities within the data improved credibility. Saturation, reflexivity, and reviewing transcriptions improved credibility as well. The research was reviewed by my Walden University dissertation committee.

Transferability

Transferability is defined as the degree to which the results of a study can be transferred to other populations in other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Purposeful sampling strategies have been identified as effective at ensuring transferability (Bastani et al., 2021). Snowball sampling is a type of purposeful sampling. Thick description of the participants, data, and outcomes helped ensure transferability (Creswell, 2013). The results of this study may be applicable to other populations. The behaviors and symptoms reported by the participants in this study may be experienced by others who argue on social media about topics that are not related to politics. The experiences reported by participants in this study may be similar to the experiences individuals have when debating politics in person. In-depth descriptions of the study's methodology and the participants' experiences with the phenomenon increased transferability.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to the stability of findings over time (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was increased as I coded the data and identified underlying themes. Keeping audit trails by documenting and cross-checking the research journal notes, recordings, transcriptions, and email correspondences with participants also helped increase dependability. The research journal documented my thought processes that were involved in determining codes, categories, and themes. Using previous research to ensure that the research questions were related to the phenomenon being studied improved dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree to which other researchers could confirm a study's findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Reflexivity is an effective way to improve confirmability (Creswell, 2013; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To improve confirmability, I kept a research journal and maintained audit trails, as outlined above. Confirmability was ensured by allowing participants to provide detailed information about their experiences with the phenomenon. Asking clarifying and probing questions to ensure accuracy of my interpretation of the participants' answers improved confirmability. Participants were ensured confidentiality, and I did not provide my own perceptions or opinions about the topic during interviews to allow participants to share their experiences without being influenced by my potential biases.

Results

From the two research questions, eight themes and a total of 13 subthemes

emerged. The 13 participants were asked nine questions regarding their motivation for

engaging in online uncivil political discourse, including what inspired them to participate

in these conversations, whether they believed this type of behavior can be beneficial, and

whether they intentionally sought out opportunities to engage in uncivil debates. The

interview questions regarding motivation were designed to address both Research

Questions 1 and 2, as they provided insight into whether individuals felt emotionally

compelled to participate in debates and whether this behavior is compulsory. The

participants were also asked questions regarding specific mental health symptoms,

including whether they experienced heightened emotions and physiological symptoms

while engaging in these debates, in order to address research question 1. Participants

were asked whether they spent more time than intended engaging in this behavior, the

frequency and duration of the behavior, and whether they had unsuccessfully tried to cut

back on the behavior to address research question 2.

Theme 1: Participants Reported Engaging in Uncivil Political Discourse as a Way to Help Others

The majority of participants (11) reported engaging in uncivil political discourse

as a way to benefit others (see Table 1). Three subthemes were identified from this

theme: providing others with knowledge, helping others via advocacy (fighting for social

justice, providing a voice for those who are less fortunate, and the belief that there are

individuals who read the comments but do not participate in the debate that could benefit

from the information that the participants were sharing. P6 shared that there were

increasingly political views that "I can't agree with, and I believe it has negative impacts

on people." P8 reported that they picked topics they believed "can service people well in

politics and social media."

Table 1

Engaging in Discourse as a Way to Help Others

Theme 1 Subtheme 1A, 1B, & 1C	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Participants believe they are helping others when engaging in debates (Theme 1)	11	85%
Participants believe they are providing others with knowledge when debating (Subtheme 1A)	4	31%
Participants believed they were advocating for others by debating (Subtheme 1B)	6	46%
Participants believed they were influencing others who were reading the comments but not debating (Subtheme 1C)	4	31%

Note. $N = 13$. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Subtheme 1A: Providing Others With Knowledge

Four participants (P10, P11, P1, P4) believed that by debating with the out-group

on social media, they provided others with knowledge. P10 shared that they were

motivated to engage in these debates because they "want to give something back" and

that they were providing information. P11 reported that they were motivated by the

question "Could I reach somebody on the opposite side who is a stranger?" P11 also

discussed providing knowledge and factual information. P1 reported that they participated in uncivil political discourse to "offer a new perspective." P4 also shared that they felt they were helping others by providing a new perspective. P8 reported that they felt annoyed when people said things that were erroneous and felt compelled to provide correct information. P11 discussed a debate in which they described research methodology and statistics to a debate partner.

Subtheme 1B: Helping Others via Advocacy, Fighting for Social Justice, Providing a Voice for Those Who Are Less Fortunate

Six participants (P2, P7, P4, P6, P8, P13) believed that their participation in uncivil online political discourse could provide a way for them to advocate for others. P2 shared that they were "passionate about specific topics. Playing devil's advocate. Arguing for social change. Social justice issues. Gender issues. People being treated unfairly. Universal health care." P7 reported that they were "passionate about society and human beings," and later identified as "a social change agent, I'm a problem solver for my community." P7 also discussed being a voice for those in poverty who might not have internet access and might not be able to speak for themselves. P4 reported, "I feel like I am generally helping humanity when I can find ways that people might be hurting other people and give perspective on them." P6 shared that they were more likely to debate when they believed the out-group's views had "negative impacts on people." P13 also reported that they sought out debating only when they believed social injustice was occurring.

Subtheme 1C: Many Participants Had the Belief That Others Who Were Reading the Comments but Not Participating in the Debate Could Benefit by Learning From the Information They Were Sharing

Four participants discussed the belief that others' reading the debates could benefit from the information they are sharing. P1 shared that uncivil online debates on social media "serves as an opportunity to change the perspective of onlookers." P11 stated that even when the person you are talking to "doesn't get it, other people who are just kind of lurking and reading through will get it." P11 later commented, "you could see that with the engagement of people liking or laughing at the comment." P3 reported they believe others reading the comments may feel "motivated" and/or "incensed" to behave in particular ways after reading debates. P4 shared, "I think other people can learn from reading your political discourse. Even if it is uncivil."

P4 went on to later state,

There's been studies showing that when you read the comments between others that's when you're most likely to change your opinion. Not when directly contradicting. Because we have a bias to support our own opinion more when challenged with that opinion. But given the opportunity to read two parties interactions we're able to make judgments with less emotion.

Theme 2: Participants Reported Mental Health Symptoms During and After Debating

All but one participant reported heightened emotions during and/or after participating in online uncivil political discourse. Of those experiencing heightened

emotions only one reported that these emotions have no impact on the debate or any other aspect of their life. Two subthemes were identified under this theme; participants reported experiencing both heightened emotions and physiological symptoms during and after engaging in debates (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2

Participants Reported Heightened Emotions During Debates

Theme 2 Subtheme 2A	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Participants reported experiencing heightened emotions during debates (Theme 1)	12	92%
Anger (Subtheme 2A)	9	69%
Frustration (Subtheme 2A)	5	38%
Disbelief/confusion/amazement (Subtheme 2A)	5	38%
Anxiety/worry (Subtheme 2A)	4	31%
Sadness/sorrow (Subtheme 2A)	2	15%
Stress (Subtheme 2A)	2	15%
Passion (Subtheme 2A)	5	38%
Excitement (Subtheme 2A)	4	31%
Happiness/joy (Subtheme 2A)	2	15%

Note. $N = 13$. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Table 3

Participants Reported Experiencing Physical Symptoms During and After Debates

Theme 2 Subtheme 2B	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Experienced physical symptoms (Theme 2)	9	69%
Sleep difficulties (Subtheme 2B)	8	62%
Increased heart rate (Subtheme 2B)	5	38%
Chest tightening (Subtheme 2B)	2	15%
Jaw tightening (Subtheme 2B)	2	15%

Note. $N = 13$. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Subtheme2A: Participants Reported Experiencing Heightened Emotions During and After Debating

Twelve participants reported noticing heightened emotions during debates (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13). Participants reported both pleasant and unpleasant emotions related to debating. The most frequently reported emotion was anger (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13). Participants reported other unpleasant emotions including: frustration (P2, P9, P10, P11, P12), disbelief/confusion/amazement (P3, P5, P9, P11, P12), worry/anxiety (P3, P5, P8, P11, P12), sadness/sorrow (P6, P11), stress (P3, P4), (P1), guilt (P3), pain (P11), aggravation (P3), embarrassment (P3), upset (P3), and feeling drained (P11). Participants reported the following pleasant emotions: passion (P2, P3, P5, P7, P13), excitement (P3, P6, P11, P12), happiness/joy/content (P8, P11),

humor (P1), creativity (P1), and ambition (P1). P3 reported feeling excitement and aggravation and feeling "unnerved at times." P11 commented, "it's painful to watch."

Participants reported negative impacts of heightened emotions. P4 reported that emotions can lead them to not approach topics "in a kind way." P4 also shared that when they feel emotional their engagement is of a lower quality. P5 commented, "when it's all based on emotions you really don't get anywhere, you don't learn anything new."

P3 shared that their heightened emotions can last from minutes to days after the debate. P5 reported that their emotions last about 24 hours after beginning their engagement in the debate. P8 reported their emotions surrounding the debate last for about half an hour. P12 reported that their emotions surrounding the debate can linger for hours and can motivate then to want to go back and add additional comments. P12 also reported these emotions can "negatively color my mood." P13 shared that their anger can last for about a day.

Two participants (P2, P11) reported that even though they were experiencing heightened emotions during debates, they felt they were able to regulate these emotions and the emotions did not have any negative impact on them. P11 reported that their heightened emotions often continue after a debate, but they use coping skills to manage them, and they do not have a profound impact on day-to-day life. Two participants reported no difficulty regulating their emotions during debates (P7, P9). P7 reported they try to provide others with education and makes it a point to be logical rather than emotional during debates.

Some participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7) reported emotions can sometimes lead to choosing whether to continue engaging in or disengaging in the debate. P3 reported they disengage when they feel "it isn't healthy," but won't disengage "if it's not too upsetting." P4 reported disengaging when they notice they are emotional and "using up too much time." P7 reported sometimes engaging longer than intended when discussing topics they are passionate about. P5 reported, "the anger and anxiety that I feel motivates me to keep returning to the conversation…" P6 shared that, "emotions inspire me to continue for sure, it makes me feel the duty to express my opinions." P8 reported whether emotions conclude the debate for them depends on the emotion, sorrow may make them withdraw from the debate and anger may inspire them to continue the debate. P9 reported it depends on different circumstances regarding whether their emotion influencing ongoing debate, it depends on the information or the topic. P11 reported that their emotions can drive choosing to engage or disengage in the debate. P11 also stated "you gotta one-up them and then it just becomes unproductive and it's draining." P12 reported that heightened emotions might make them continue to engage. P13 stated that their anger sometimes causes them to engage and sometimes causes them to disengage.

Subtheme 2B: Participants Reported Experiencing Physiological Symptoms During and After Debating

Nine participants reported experiencing physiological symptoms during debating that are in align with DSM 5 physiological symptomology of anxiety, panic, depression, and trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The most commonly reported symptom was difficulty sleeping, with a total of eight participants experiencing this issue

to some extent. Five participants discussed an increase in heart rate, two mentioned feeling tightness in their chests, and two talked about tightness in the jaw.

P2 indicated they experienced increased heart rate during debates and that "this can be a sign that things are not going well and it's time to disengage." P3 reported difficulty sleeping after debates as well as a racing heart, and tight feeling in their chest, and a cold sweat. P4 reported sleep difficulties and increased heart rate after engaging in debates. P5 reported experiencing a racing heart and tightening in the jaw, as well as difficulty sleeping due to being distracted by thoughts of the debate. P8 reported feeling shaky, having difficulty sitting still, and sleep difficulties. P9 reported "rarely" experiencing sleep difficulties regarding debates during the pandemic. P11 reported having had sleep difficulties regarding debates "a couple of times" during the pandemic, but it's not the norm. P11 reported other physiological symptoms including a "fight or flight response" kicking in, which they attributed to feeling disrespected. They reported feeling physically activated in their feet and spine. They also reported a tight chest and heat rising to their head. P12 reported sleep difficulties after engaging in debates. P12 reported jaw clenching and increased heart rate. P13 reported experiencing sleep difficulties, difficulty breathing, and migraines.

Theme 3: Participants Reported Addictive Symptoms

Many participants reported symptoms that are similar to symptoms of addiction and substance use that are outlined in the DSM 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Participants reported symptoms of engaging in this behavior for longer periods of time than intended, unsuccessful efforts to cut down on this type of behavior,

experiencing a desire (craving) to engage in this behavior, engagement in debates interfering with day-to-day functioning, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms. Five subthemes were identified within this theme.

Table 4

Participants Reported Experiencing Addictive Symptoms During and After Debates

Theme 3 Subtheme 3A, 3B, 3C, & 3D	Number (*n* = 13)	Percentage
Intentionally seeking out debates (Subtheme 3A)	5	38%
Being distracted by thoughts about debates (Subtheme 3A)	8	62%
Engaging in debates longer than intended (Subtheme 3A)	10	78%
Difficulty cutting back/reducing behavior (Subtheme 3A)	5	38%

Note. N = 13. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Subtheme 3A: Some Participants Intentionally Seek out Opportunities to Engage in Uncivil Political Discourse Online

Five participants identified that they intentionally seek out opportunities for debates at least occasionally (P1, P5, P8, P12, P13), while others report not seeking out these debates (P2, P3, P6, P7, P9). P5 reported they seek out comments about trending topics. P3 reported they do not seek out debates but feel motivated to engage when something "needs clarity or attention." P4 reported they used to seek out debates when they were younger, but now they try to avoid it. P10 reported they had intentionally sought out debates when they were younger but now "I pick and choose." P11 reported

seeking out debates during the pandemic but not anymore. P12 believes their motivation for seeking out debates might be boredom. P13 stated they seek out debates "only when I know for a fact social injustice is occurring."

Subtheme 3B: Participants Reported Feeling Distracted by Thoughts About Debates

Over half of the participants identified feeling distracted by thoughts about debates when not debating (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7, P8, P11, P13). P2 reported that even though they could become distracted they believed they were using effective coping strategies to manage distractions. P3 reported difficulty concentrating, P4 reported emotions can cause them to "obsess over a topic" and being upset with themselves over "wasted time." P5 reported being distracted by thoughts about an argument and what they could say in response. P7 reported they sometimes step away from a debate and then return because they need time to process it. P11 reported "sometimes" being distracted by thoughts about the debate. P13 reported ongoing distraction after engaging in debates. P1 reported that "almost never" find themselves distracted by thoughts of the debates. P9 reported "rarely" being distracted by thoughts of the debates. P6 and P12 reported feeling distracted but the distractions have not impacted day to day functioning.

P8 stated they become distracted by thoughts of the debate:

I always think if there is something I could have done better, something I could have changed, maybe something to improve myself or my behavior. I have had trouble falling asleep after some debates, I tend to get lost in thoughts, not always but it does happen.

Subtheme 3C: Participants Reported Engaging in Debates Longer Than Intended

Ten participants reported engaging in this behavior for longer than intended. P2 shared that this occurs "sometimes" and particularly regarding issues they are passionate about. P3 reported they "sometimes" engage in this behavior for longer than they intended stating that if the topic was "upsetting" they may engage for longer than they had wished. They reported if they are feeling "upset" or "personally invested" they continue to participate. P7 shared they "sometimes" engage longer than intended when they want to "prove my point" about something they are passionate about. P1 shared that this occurs "too often", stating, "these kinds of conversations rarely have an organic end so they keep going until one person abandons them." P6 reported when someone replies to them that they can't agree with they will go "forth and back, more time spent than I expected." P8 stated that "once a argument develops, adrenaline starts pumping, and you feel like you cannot back down, so I have spent more time than I should really needed to on a lot of the discussions I've had." P11 stated there have been a couple of occasions where they felt compelled to return to the conversation even though they had steadfastly decided not to do so, they attributed this to being emotionally triggered and if they feel the conversation might be fruitful. P12 stated, "I have spent too much time and I'm like, oh wow. Saturday and I just spent two hours doing this and what do I actually get from it? Not a lot." P13 reported returning to the debate after telling themselves they would stop.

P5 shared they spend more time then intended engaging in this behavior,

ALLTHE TIME! I say ok, I am done, no matter what, I am NOT going to engage

anymore with this conversation. Then within an hour, I have to go and check to

see if anyone else has commented or liked or shared my comments.

Subtheme 3D: Participants Reported Difficulty Cutting Back and/or Disengaging in Uncivil Political Discourse

Some participants reported they had difficulty disengaging from this behavior. P3

reported they will re-engage if they deem it is "needed." P5 shared, "I have tried to cut

back on social media, but so far it hasn't worked. I keep looking for things to read and

engage in." P6 also reported attempts to discontinue this behavior but continues coming

back later. P10 reported they "sometimes" have difficulty disengaging and have had

difficulty cutting back on this behavior. P12 reported returning to the conversation after

deciding they were through with it.

Other participants were able to report successfully cutting back on this behavior

over time. P4 shared, "This is something that I have been working on for years. When I

was younger I would get into heated debate and I would feel very stressed out afterwards.

As I've gotten older, I get into less and less debates that are emotionally charged." P9

reported having some success cutting back because they are posting less politically based

items on their page. P12 reported they used to engage in uncivil political discourse on

social media daily but have cut back to a couple of times per week. P12 also shared that

they would be concerned about falling back into the habit of doing it daily again. P1

reported they had never attempted to cut back on this type of behavior and "cuts back

only when limited by social media platform." P8 also reported they have not tried to cut back on this behavior.

Subtheme 3E: Duration and Frequency of Debates

The frequency and duration of participants' engagement in uncivil political discourse online varied greatly. Four participants reporting engaging in this behavior more than once per week, four participants reported engaging in this behavior weekly, 2 participants reported engaging in this behavior once or twice a month, 1 participant reported 2-4 times per month, 1 participant reported monthly, and once participant reported engaging in this behavior daily. Three participants reported the frequency of their engagement "varied." Six participants reported having reduced this behavior. The actual amount of time spent participating in debates varied greatly as well. Five participants reported spending 1-2 hours engaging in this behavior. One participant reported spending hours if they are passionate about the subject. Another participant reported spending 2-3 hours at a time engaging in debates. Other participants reported spending only a few minutes, 15-20 minutes, and 30 minutes. Three participants did not discuss the duration of their debates.

Theme 4: Participants Reported Witnessing Perceived Inaccuracies From Other Commenters, Disagreement With Other Commenters, and Spreading Truth Inspires Them to Debate

Table 5

Participants Reported Feeling Motivated to Debate When Witnessing Perceived Inaccuracies

Theme 4	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Motivated by witnessing perceived inaccuracies	8	62%

Note. $N = 13$. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Over half of participants discussed feeling motivated to participate in uncivil online political debates was motivated by witnessing what they perceived to be inaccuracies in others' arguments. P1 shared they often engage in uncivil political discourse on social media in order to "point out a contradiction." P13 stated they are inspired to engage in these conversations when they view them to be "one-sided." P3 reported "I see comment that may be biased or untrue and that will get me going." P8 reported they are more likely to engage when they see a comment that is ill-informed and stated, "Sometimes I have, in politics, I have anger at people who refuse to believe facts even if they are put right in front of them." P11 reported that they become engaged in debates when they see "things that are blatantly wrong," and try to find the flaw in the logic and engage from there. P11 also commented that the underlying inaccuracy in a lot of debates is emotionally charged.

P5 reported,

I want to know what the other side is thinking. One of the most engaging

topics/comments is one where there is blatant falsehood. Or if something is so

egregious or unbelievable that I will take a deep dive into the subject, researching

whether or not its true or false.

P5 reported that spreading truth and seeing "views I can't agree with," inspires

them to debate uncivil political discourse online. P6 reported they are inspired to debate

when they see, "More and more political views I can't agree with," and argues for the

truth and when they cannot agree with their discourse partner. P8 shared, "I have an

undergrad degree in political science and all of a sudden everybody is a political science

expert." P9 reported having argued with others due to disinformation, particularly

regarding the insurrection. P9 also reported being distressed by "the amount of false

information people believe."

P10 stated,

Just something that's blatantly a lie. That's so outrageous to have to step in and

say I think you're wrong about this. Because it bothers me..I'm more about the

truth. Put the truth out there if it's good or bad.

P10 also shared,

I just didn't figure it was that may people that were so blatantly dumb and

ignorant and didn't want to know the truth. If a person someone tells me

something and corrects me on it I thank them because I want to learn. I don't want

to turn my thought process off. I want to if you can tell me something that's going

to help me I want to know the truth. But other people turn and go the other way

on that.

Theme 5: Participants Reported Feeling That Uncivil Debates Could Have Both

Positive and Negative Outcomes

Three subthemes were identified under this theme. Ten participants reported that

uncivil discourse could be both beneficial and problematic. Two participants reported that

this type of behavior is never beneficial, and one participant discussed only the benefits

of these debates.

Table 6

Participants Believed That Uncivil Debates Could Have Positive and Negative Outcomes

Theme 5	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Debates can have both positive and negative outcomes (Subtheme 5A)	10	77%
Debates are never beneficial (Subtheme 5B)	2	15%
Debates are always beneficial (Subtheme 5C)	1	8%

Note. N = 13. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Subtheme5A: Online Uncivil Debates on Social Media Can Be Beneficial

P5 reported enjoying the research aspect of debates and that they had learned new

things from this research; including that they were not always correct in their initial

beliefs about a topic. P3 reported that they found engaging in uncivil political discourse

on social media to be interesting. P1 stated they believe uncivil political discourse can be

beneficial because, "light is the best disinfectant and the search for truth is its own reward." P8 reported sometimes connecting with someone on good news politically. P10 reported debates can be helpful if people want to learn things, but not if all they want to do is argue. P11 reported enjoying the research aspect of debating and that "it's also really nice when we come to common ground." P12 reported they enjoy debating and engaging with others. Five participants (P4, P5, P10, P11, P12) reported they like to get others' viewpoints when engaging in debates. P6 observed that people can be very straightforward in expressing their views during these debates. P11 observed that the "format of the internet actually helps with that because you can just walk away."

Subtheme 5B: Online Uncivil Debates on Social Media Are Not Beneficial

P9 reported that uncivil debates cannot be beneficial because they destroy friendships. P13 reported debates are never beneficial because they "could lead to violence."

Subtheme 5C: Online Uncivil Debates on Social Media May or May Not Be Beneficial

P2 reported that these debates are not usually beneficial and often become "negative when it's uncivil." P2 did state that "If you are having a conversation with someone who is listening and the conversation is productive, then it might be beneficial." P3 shared that these debates can "sometimes" be beneficial for those reading the comments more so than those who are participating in the debate. P3 attributed this belief to the idea that those participating in the debate may be experiencing stress and anxiety due to their participation, whereas bystanders may be "motivated or incensed" by what they are seeing. P3 also shared that they believe these debates are often not beneficial

"because it upsets people." P5 reported that they believe debates can be beneficial, as they can stay informed about what the other side is focusing on and if it's relevant to them. They also believed debates can aid in learning. P6 stated that "people should be calm with courtesy, but it's a way to express people's mind openly indeed." P12 reported enjoying "good debates" and finds the discourse to be interesting. P12 also stated that "I think all political discourse can be beneficial," they went on to state," the lack of civility is probably not good, but I think all of it has some value."

P8 shared,

I am a firm believer that it may help in some ways and be unhelpful in others. For example, if I were to be uncivil trying to get my ideas across to a person whom did not agree with my ideas he/she/they would probably think less of me, however it would let me stand my ground. There are less benefits to it in the sense that you look uncivilized, however I think standing your ground is an important notion, especially in discourse.

Participants reported that civil conversations can be difficult to find and that many people who debate have no interest in changing their minds. P5 shared that civil conversations "are rare nowadays," and that there is "whataboutism" and "dog whistles" on both sides. P8 stated, "…hopefully in the future there will be a time when there is no need of such arguments, unfortunately I cannot see it any time soon." P12 noted they were hopeful that one day there would be more of a "middle ground" when it comes to political debates. P12 observed that many people seem to engage in this type of behavior with the intent of arguing, not because they have a vested interest in the issue at hand. "I

found out over time too that there are some people that the only reason they say things is to get people angry and then they engage." P12 reported that incivility seems to attract more people than civility. P10 observed, "I've come to the conclusion that you can't change anyone's opinion that doesn't want to be changed," and also stated, "what I do like is when I'm going back and forth with someone and I give them a counterpoint that's so true you have no comeback for that."

P8 observed,

I've learned in my discourse experiences that many people will likely not change their opinions and will argue till they drop, but the are people who are not understanding in terms of discussions. Throughout all of my discussions people can change, and while it is rare it has happened. But also people can be very intense, very scary, that's why I think decorum is such an important factor when choosing to speak with someone. And while discourse can be scary, sometimes it is still better to stand your ground.

Theme 6: Participants Reported Relational Issues Regarding Debates

Participants reported that engaging in debates had impacted relationships; and some participants reported preferring to engage in these debates with strangers. Some participants reported experiencing negative and sometimes frightening interactions.

Table 7

Participants Reported Relational Issues Regarding Debates

Theme 6	Number (*n* = 13)	Percentage
Debates impact relationships	4	31%
Has blocked or deleted debate partners	4	31%

Note. N = 13. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

P8 reported arguing with family members online and experiencing sorrow when being unable to reach people during debates, particularly family members. P9 reported that they believe that uncivil debates "destroys friendships. I've seen it happen, or acquaintances maybe it would be more." P11 reported preferring to debate with strangers rather than friends because of the impact these debates can have on interpersonal relationships. They also reported debating with strangers enables them to "filter" who they speak with and gives them more of an opportunity to "engage in a healthy and meaningful dialogue." P12 stated they feel more comfortable having these debates with strangers than with friends or family, stating that these types of conversations can go "bad" and damage relationships.

Four participants (P3, P5, P4, P9) reported blocking and/or deleting debate partners. Four participants identified experiencing and/or witnessing harassment taking place during debates. P3 reported feeling amazement when "you are just disagreeing with someone and they begin to target you or your family." P5 reported experiencing name calling and insults and feeling personally attacked. P4 also reported feeling personally

attacked. P8 reported witnessing derogatory and slanderous attacks, and that debates can be "very intense" and "very scary." P9 reported having received "nasty" messages on Facebook dating for identifying as a democrat.

Theme 7: Ongoing Engagement in Debates Is Often Emotion Driven, but Specific Topics, the Behavior of Others, and Having Passion About the Topic and Situations Can Also Lead to Ongoing Engagement or Disengagement

Table 8

Debates Are Often Emotion Driven but Specific Topics and the Behavior of Others Play a Role in Ongoing Engagement

Theme 7	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Emotion driven	5	38%
Others' behavior	5	38%
Specific topics	8	62%

Note. N=13. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

Five participants identified that being passionate about a topic motivates them to participate in a debate, and some also reported that being passionate keeps them in the debate and/or returning to the debate. Other participants reported their experience of interacting with others influences whether they stay in the debate. P4 reported that they are more likely to continue to engage when they find the person they are speaking with "has empathy and might have a mindset change now or later or if it's an attack against me." P1 stated, "Even in uncivil discourse online, it pays to maintain civility. Witnessing anger from another person signals that I am winning." P1 also commented, "Managing one's emotions is an attribute of adulthood. Those who cannot self-soothe either have the

emotional development of children or ae suffering from a mental illness." P11 stated

some people can be engaged with and have a civil debate where as others can be,

"outright volatile, or know-it-alls, or they want to make a point whether the point is right

nor not. Those are the kind of people you just don't engage with."

P8 shared,

There are a few factors, one of them I would say is my stamina at the moment, if

I've had a long day I'm less likely to continue with a conversation, another is

news on that day, so if the news on that day corresponds more to my opinion I'm

more likely to continue the conversation. Another factor I think is a person's

decorum, behavior is everything, and a picture speaks a thousand words, and

when you talk with certain people you can tell how they might behave leading to

either a shorter or longer conversation.

P9 reported they engage in debates when others post something inflammatory on

their page.

Participants reported a number of topics that inspired them to engage in debates.

P6 reported being inspired by biblical topics. P2 reported arguing for social change,

social justice issues, people being treated unfairly, homelessness, gender issues, human

rights vs politics, and universal healthcare were topics that inspired them to engage in

these debates. P7 also reported numerous topics that inspired them to engage in debates

including food taxes, poverty, older values, gas prices, luxury taxes, mental illness,

domestic violence, and addiction. P4 reported debating about illegal immigrants. P5

reported debating about the pandemic and election. P8 stated thy are drawn into topics of

"big ordeals" including refugee crises, tornado after-effects, and politics, because "they

can impact one's life greatly." P9 reported topics that draw them in are the insurrection,

Trump, and "really derogatory comments about Biden." P11 reported engaging in debates

about the pandemic, racism, masks, and Trump. P12 reported engaging in debates

surrounding topics like Taiwan and China and the pandemic.

Theme 8: Participants Reported Both Engaging in Debates Due to Emotional and

Intellectual Stimulation

Table 9

Participants Reported Engaging in Debates Due to Emotional and Intellectual

Stimulation

Theme #8	Number ($n = 13$)	Percentage
Prefer emotionally stimulating	1	15%
Prefer intellectually stimulating	5	38%
Prefer both intellectually and emotionally stimulating	8	62%

Note. N=13. Some participants' responses fell under multiple themes.

One participant reported they prefer to engage in emotional debates (P3), four

participants reported they prefer to engage in intellectually stimulating debates (P5, P6,

P13, P9) and eight participants reported they prefer to engage in debates that are both

emotionally and intellectually stimulating (P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12). P3

reported, "I respond more to emotionally stimulating conversations because I am more

passionate about them." P5 stated, "I prefer intellectually stimulating. When its all based on emotions you really don't get anywhere, you don't learn anything new."

Summary

Eight themes and 13 subthemes were identified in the research. Findings detailed the lived experiences of individuals who participated in online uncivil political discourse. Participants reported symptoms similar to symptoms of addiction and mental illness as identified in the DSM 5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Every participant reported experiencing emotions while debating. Twelve participants discussed heightened emotions, with the most frequently occurring emotion being anger. Participants reported being emotion-driven during and after debates. Participants had observed that emotions can get in the way of quality debates. Emotions often drove the decision whether to continue to engage in debates and could motivate participants to choose either to engage or disengage based on their emotional reactions. Emotional reactions frequently resulted in physiological symptoms for participants, the most frequent being loss of sleep. In addition to sleep disturbance, participants experienced a variety of physiological symptoms including chest discomfort, a tightened jaw and others.

Participants reported symptoms of addictive disorders including seeking opportunities to engage in this type of behavior, engaging in this behavior for longer periods of time than intended, unsuccessful efforts to cut down on this type of behavior, experiencing a desire (craving) to engage in this behavior, engagement in debates interfering with day-to-day functioning, tolerance, and withdrawal symptoms. Participants discussed the amount of time they spent engaging in this type of behavior

and many participants were frustrated with themselves after spending what they considered to be excessive time engaged in this behavior. Participants often felt distracted by thoughts of debates when not debating and felt compelled to return to this behavior, even when they had promised themselves they would not.

The majority of participants found online uncivil debates on social media to have both positive and negative impacts. Many individuals found these debates to be intellectually stimulating and reported enjoying researching their arguments before making them. Others found the experience to be "interesting" and identified they sometimes learn from others while debating and like learning the viewpoints of others. Some participants reported they enjoy debating for the sake of debating. Two participants did not believe this behavior could ever be beneficial, stating they could lead to loss of relationships and even violence. Participants reported the negative impacts of these debates could include unpleasant emotions, feeling frustrated when they were unable to change their debate partners' minds, and observing that some individuals engage in debates for the sake of argument and not because they are advocating for a particular issue.

The vast majority of participants reported feeling motivated to participate in this behavior as a way to help others. Many participants believed they were providing information to others. Participants reported fighting for social justice issues and advocating for those who are less fortunate. Participants also discussed that they believed they had a positive impact on individuals who were reading the comments but who did not engage in the debates themselves. The majority of participants reported they enjoy

engaging in debates that are both emotionally and intellectually stimulating. One participant reported preferring emotional debates and a handful reported preferring debating intellectually stimulating topics. Many participants reported feeling compelled to debate when they believed others' comments were inaccurate and they wanted to provide accurate information. Participants reported feeling emotionally driven to engage or disengage in debates and that specific topics that they were interested in or passionate about can keep them in debates. Some participants felt motivated to continue debating when they felt they were winning the debate or changing others' minds.

Some participants reported preferring to engage in uncivil online political debates because they did not want to have these conversations with friends and family. Two participants (P11, P12) reported debating these issues with others in their lives could lead to relationship issues, making it easier to have these conversations with strangers. Some participants (P3, P5, P4, P9) had blocked or deleted debate partners and some had experienced what they perceived to be personal attacks and had experienced derogatory remarks. One participant (P3) reported that debates can be "intense" and "scary."

In chapter 4 I reviewed the research results including the research setting, demographics of participants, and the data collection and data analysis methods. Evidence of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, and confirmability were discussed. The results of the study including eight themes and 13 subthemes were revealed and a summary was provided. Chapter 5 will include interpretations of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how participating in uncivil political discourse may impact mental health and whether the behavior may be addictive and/or compulsive in nature based on the perceptions of adults who engage in this behavior. Previous research has established links between social media use, mental health symptoms, and addiction (Campbell, 2020; Frost & Rickwood, 2017). Previous research has also shown links between mental health symptoms and consumption of politics (APA, 2020). Previous research has not explored how social media users perceive their mental health and addictive/compulsive symptoms. Data were collected via email, telephone, and video chat. The generic qualitative approach was used to gather and analyze the data.

Results gathered from the 13 semistructured interviews revealed eight themes and 13 subthemes. These themes and subthemes demonstrated that a majority of participants reported experiencing heightened emotions, increased physiological symptoms, and increased compulsive symptoms as a result of taking part in uncivil political debates on social media. A majority of participants also reported that they engaged in this behavior so that they might be helpful to others in a variety of ways. They also felt compelled to engage in this behavior when they felt that false information was being stated. Participants reported being motivated by both intellectual and emotional debates, although five participants had a strong preference for either emotional or intellectual debates. Participants reported emotional engagement as a precursor of engaging or disengaging in debates. Emotions surrounding particular topics increased engagement in

debates overall. Participants tended to report that there were both positive and negative aspects of engaging in debates. Some participants reported preferring to engage in political debates online with strangers because they were concerned about damaging their relationships if they have these debates with people they knew. Participants reported witnessing and experiencing derogatory remarks and personal attacks during debates, and some participants had blocked or deleted debate partners.

Interpretation of Findings

Chapter 2 detailed research findings related to the impact that uncivil political discourse has on mental health symptoms and compulsive/addictive tendencies (APA, 2020, Brown & Keller, 2018; Guedes et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Munno et al., 2017) and the gap in research regarding how adults who engage in this behavior perceive the impact on their mental health and compulsive symptoms. The findings of this study confirmed that engaging in uncivil political discourse on social media can lead to an increase in mental health symptoms and can lead to addictive/compulsive behaviors.

Participants Who Engage in Uncivil Political Discourse on Social Networking Sites Believe They Are Helping Others

The initial finding of this study was that participants described being motivated to engage in uncivil political discourse on social media because they believed they were benefitting others in some way. Ten participants (P2, P7, P4, P6, P8, P13, P10, P11, P1, P4) reported that they did not expect to change the minds of their debate partners, but they did hope that people reading the comments who were not engaged in the debate would benefit from new information. There is evidence for this idea in the literature.

Erjavic (2014) stated that there is evidence that some individuals read uncivil comments to better understand others' opinions. Previous research has also found that the majority of individuals who participate in this behavior (72%) do not believe that these conversations lead to finding common ground (Anderson & Auxier, 2020).

One finding of this study that is not present in the existing literature is that individuals can engage in these debates with the intent of helping others through social justice reform, advocacy, and/or fighting for marginalized groups. Six participants reported being motivated to engage in debates for advocacy of others (P2, P7, P4, P6, P8, P13). In fact, the opposite is true; there is extensive research that refers to this behavior as problematic (Bernstein et al., 2017; DeCook, 2020, Duggan, 2017; Salminen et al., 2020) and even antisocial in nature (Craker & March, 2016; March, 2019; Sest & March, 2017). Another finding that is not prevalent in the literature is that individuals who participate in this behavior often feel that they are spreading knowledge to the benefit of others (P10, P11, P1, P4).

Engagement in Uncivil Political Discourse on Social Networking Sites Can Lead to Mental Health Symptoms

Studies have reported a link between mental health symptoms and numerous types of internet use (Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017; Hassell & Weeks, 2016; Lau et al., 2016; Trevisan, 2020; Vanucci, 2017). Previous literature has revealed that individuals participating in uncivil political discourse online experience heightened emotions while engaging in this behavior, including depression; anxiety (Weeks, 2015); anger; enthusiasm (Hasell & Weeks, 2016; Huddy et al., 2015; Weeks &

March, 2017); feelings of stress, anxiety, and fear (DeJonckheere, et al., 2018); anger,
hurt, and distress (Chavez et al., 2019); and trauma (Trevisan, 2020). The overwhelming
majority of participants in this study reported heightened emotions during and sometimes
after debates (P1, P2, P3, P4, P4, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13). The most commonly
reported emotion was anger. Participants also reported anxiety, sadness, fear, hurt,
distress, passion, joy, and excitement.

Findings in this study determined that individuals may experience physiological
symptoms that are commonly found in mental health disorders while engaging in debates
(P2, P3, P4, P5, P8, P9, P11, P12, P13). The most commonly reported symptoms were
sleep difficulties, racing heart, chest tightening, and jaw tightening. In my review of
previous literature, I found one study that reported one participant who experienced
sleeplessness regarding concerns about politics (DeJonckheere et al., 2018) and one study
that found that participants reported insomnia regarding PIU (Alimoradi et al., 2019), but
I did not find any literature that addressed physiological symptoms related to uncivil
online political discourse on social media. The findings of this study suggest that
experiencing physiological symptoms in conjunction with this behavior may be fairly
prevalent, as it was reported by nine participants.

**Engagement in Uncivil Political Discourse on Social Networking Sites Can Lead to
Addictive and Compulsive Symptoms**

Proposed diagnostic criteria for IAD include preoccupation with the internet,
mood modification, withdrawal symptoms, tolerance, unsuccessful attempts to control
use, continued excessive internet use despite negative psychosocial problems, loss of

interest in other hobbies or sources of entertainment, use of internet to escape or improve mood, deception of problematic use when interacting with others, relapse, habitual use, unintentional use, and compulsive use that reflects in functional (Frost & Rickwood, 2017; Lanconi et al., 2017) and relational deficits (Hawi & Samaha, 2017). DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) symptoms of addictive disorders include preoccupation with thoughts of use, withdrawal symptoms, using larger amounts of longer periods of time, persistent desire or unsuccessful efforts to cut down or control use, a great deal of time spent in activities necessary to participate in or recover from use, a craving or strong desire for use, failure to fulfill major role obligations, continued use despite interpersonal difficulties that have occurred from use, giving up important activities, continued use despite knowing it is negatively impacting functioning, use in situations that are physically hazardous, continued use despite knowledge of having persistent or recurring physical or psychological symptoms due to use, and tolerance. PIU has been labeled as "addictive" or "compulsive" by researchers (Frost & Rickwood, 2017) and has been linked to depression, anxiety, psychological distress (Hawi & Samaha, 2017; Keles et al., 2019) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Andreassen et al., 2016). Studies have also indicated that technology use, including smartphone use, can lead to addictive symptoms (Guedes et al., 2016; Kuss & Griffiths, 2017; Munno et al., 2017).

Five participants (P1, P5, P8, P12, P13) in this study reported intentionally seeking out this behavior, which may be similar to the craving or strong desire that often occurs in addiction. Participants also reported being distracted by thoughts of continued

use and having difficulty concentrating (P2, P3, P4, P, P7, P8, P11, P13). This may be related to preoccupation with thoughts of use. Participants reported psychological and physiological symptoms during and after debating but continued to engage in this behavior. A few participants (P8, P9, P11, P12, P3, P5, P4) reported continued engagement in this behavior despite relational difficulties that had occurred as a result of the behavior. Numerous participants (P2, P3, P7, P1, P6, P8, P11, P5, P12, P13) reported a desire or unsuccessful attempts to cut back on this behavior and spending more time engaging in this behavior than intended. Previous research has explored the potential of different types of internet use becoming addictive, but the addictive potential for debating uncivil political discourse online has not been studied. Based on the findings in this study, it seems plausible that this type of behavior could indeed be addictive.

Participants Feel Compelled to Engage in Debates When They Perceive Inaccuracies in Others' Posts

Many participants (P1, P13, P3 P8, P11, P5, P6, P10) reported that they engaged in this behavior when they saw something online that they perceived to be factually inaccurate. Participants reported feeling the need to explain the truth to others who did not appear to understand it or who had been exposed to disinformation. Barfar (2019) found that political disinformation is likely to create feelings of anger and anxiety and can lead to uncivil behavior from individuals of various political leanings. Duggan (2017) found that individuals are more likely to respond to posts that contain information with political viewpoints they oppose. Cheng et al. (2017) and Salminen et al. (2020) found

that individuals are becoming increasingly likely to argue with others about politics on SNSs.

Uncivil Discourse Can Be Both Beneficial and Not Beneficial

Duggan and Smith (2016) found that some of their participants enjoyed engaging in uncivil political discourse on social media. Participants (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P11, P12, P13) in the current study reported experiencing pleasant emotions while participating in debates, including passion, excitement, and happiness. Nine participants (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13) in the current study also reported having positive experiences during debates. Positive experiences included debates being "exciting" and "interesting" and enjoying the research involved in the debate, as well as enjoying learning new things from others and from their own research. One participant (P11) reported changing a debate partner's mind and that this could bring joy.

All participants with the exception of P9 discussed the negative impact of debates, including unpleasant emotions that are associated with this behavior. According to Chavez et al. (2019), uncivil political discourse can elicit feelings of anger, hurt, anxiety, and distress (Chavez et al., 2019). Participants (P5, P8, P10, P12) also mentioned the belief that uncivil political discourse typically does not change anyone's mind; this belief has been noted in previous literature (Anderson & Auxier, 2020). One participant (P9) reported that debates can ruin relationships, and another stated that debates could lead to violence (P13). Uncivil online political discourse has led to violence at times (Erjavic, 2014).

Emotions, Specific Topics, and the Behavior of Others Have a Significant Impact on Uncivil Political Discourse on Social Networking Sites

Many participants (P3, P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12) reported that continued engagement or disengagement in uncivil political discourse on SNSs is often emotion driven. This finding is prevalent in the literature. Many studies have identified heightened emotions as motivation to engage or disengage in political debates (Erjavic, 2014; Hassell & Weeks, 2016; Huddy et al., 2015). Participants (P2, P3, P5, P7, P13) in this study discussed that specific topics that they felt passionate about kept them engaged in debates. This finding is also present in the literature (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020). Findings of this study indicate that individuals sometimes choose to continue to engage in debates based on the behavior of their debate partners (P1, P4, P8, P9, P11); this finding has not been found in previous research.

Uncivil Discourse Can Impact Relationships, and Some Participants Reported Unpleasant and Frightening Interactions

Four participants (P3, P5, P8, P9) in this study reported experiencing harassment, feeling personally attacked, and witnessing and/or experiencing derogatory remarks from others. This has been established in previous literature (Duggan, 2017). The hate speech that takes place during uncivil online discourse can include content that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing, inciteful of violence, and discriminatory (Erjavic, 2014). Previous research has established that individuals who experience this type of behavior can also experience mental health symptoms as a result, including anxiety and depression (Sinclair et al., 2012). Some participants reported blocking or deleting debate

partners (P3, P5, P9, P4), which has also been established by previous research (Cheng, et al., 2017).

Some participants in this study indicated that debating with others can have a negative impact on relationships (P8, P9, P11, P12). This had led them to participate in uncivil political discourse with strangers in order to preserve relationships with friends and family. One participant (P9) stated that these types of debates can destroy relationships.

Individuals Are Drawn Into Both Intellectual and Emotional Debates

Most of the participants indicated that they enjoyed both the intellectual and emotional side of debating (P1, P2, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12), but many indicated that the emotions experienced during debating kept them engaged (P2, P3, P4, P5, P7). One participant (P3) identified that they only engaged in debates due to emotional stimuli, and a few others reported engaging only due to intellectual stimuli (P5, P6, P13, P9). Overall, the majority of participants identified being drawn into debates by emotions (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12). This has been established in previous literature (Brown & Keller, 2018; Cepeda et al., 2018; Duggan, 2017, Hassell & Weeks, 2016; Lau et al., 2016; Trevisan, 2020; Vanucci, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Individuals behave differently in groups than they do when they are alone (Vilanova et al., 2017). Deindividuation is the phenomenon that occurs when an individual loses some of their sense of individual identity as they adopt characteristics of their in-group in the context of being in a crowd (Gould & Howson, 2019). Crowds often

develop their own norms, and this can cause inhibitions to be loosened, which may result in behavior that violates traditional social norms, including verbal and physical aggression (Vilanova et al., 2017). According to SCT, group polarization can occur within social contexts when one can distinguish one's out-group from their in-group (Han & Yzer, 2020; Hogg, et al., 1990; Turner, 1985). Political ideology has been identified as social identity by many authors (Guilbeault et al., 2018; Hass et al., 2019; Langley, 2018; Mason, 2018), and political ideology can be easily recognized during political debates (Lupton et al., 2020).

According to SCT, polarization occurs in a three-step process: group identity salience, exaggeration of group norms, and assimilation into group norms (Han & Yzer, 2020). Group membership becomes particularly salient during intergroup conflict (Gould & Howson, 2019). After deindividuation and group membership identification occur, individuals feel empowered to behave in an uncivil manner toward the out-group, which is often perceived as a threat (Gould & Howson, 2019). Some participants (P2, P7, P4, P6, P8, P13) discussed being motivated to engage in debates when they believed their debate partners were endorsing ideas or beliefs that were harmful to others, suggesting they may have perceived a threat in reading their debate partners' comments.

As stated above, theories of deindividuation state that individuals are more likely to behave in antinormative ways when they believe they are interacting with an out-group (Gould & Howson, 2019). Although participants did not use the term "out-group," one referred to their debate partners as "dumb" (P10) or uninformed (P8, P9). One participant (P11) discussed reaching someone "on the opposite side." One participant (P5) referred

to "both sides." Other participants (P11, P3) specifically referenced liberalism versus conservativism. Some participants (P2, P7, P4, P6, P8, P13) reported advocating for a group they had identified with in the past or present. These are indicators that participants believed themselves to be part of an established group during debates.

Zimbardo (1969) described deindividuated behavior as emotional, impulsive, irrational, intense, and hyper-responsive. Nearly every participant (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11. P12, P13) reported experiencing heightened emotions. Many reported impulsive and hyper-responsive behavior (P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12, P13). Participants commented that they wanted to influence readers in addition to debaters (P1, P3, P4, P11). Two (P5, P11) participants mentioned gaining enjoyment from others liking, commenting on, or sharing their comments. This also indicates that they perceived a crowd was participating in this activity.

Festinger et al. (1952) hypothesized that deindividuation may be attractive as it allows people to satisfy needs they are not typically able to satisfy due to inhibitions. Research has found that individuals feel less inhibited during CMC vs FTF communication (Rains et al., 2017; Vilanova et al. 2017). Two participants (P11, P12) indicated that they felt uncomfortable discussing these topics with people they know personally and prefer to discuss them with strangers as they feel they can speak more freely. This indicates that participants are aware that their behavior during debates may be upsetting to others and impact relationships; suggesting they are aware that their behavior is antinormative.

Participants in this study made comments suggesting that they were aware that they were a part of a group and that they were experiencing conflict with an out-group. Participants also reported hyper-responsive heightened emotions and feeling less inhibited when talking to strangers. In addition, participants reported feeling less inhibited during these interactions than they did when communicating with people they know. Taken together, these factors make it apparent that participants likely perceived their debate partners to be part of an out-group and may have been experiencing deindividuation while participating in debates; suggesting that this study's findings are in alignment with previous research on theories of deindividuation and CMC.

Limitations of the Study

This study provided in-depth insight into the lived experiences of individuals who participate in uncivil political discourse on SNSs. This study did have several limitations. There were only 13 participants, which limits transferability. It is possible that this topic is so specific results may not transfer to other populations. It is possible that the experiences of individuals in this study are similar to those who debate politics FTF or to individuals who debate other topics online. As this study was focused on the participants' perceptions of the phenomenon, this information was trusted at face value and it is assumed that the participants were being honest about their experiences, but this cannot be guaranteed. As demographic information was not obtained, it cannot be assumed that these results will be generalizable to specific populations. As this was a qualitative study, data interpretation may be susceptible to my bias as the researcher. This study contained questions about symptoms of mental illness and addiction. These topics are sensitive in

nature and can carry a societal stigma. Participants may have been reluctant to answer these types of questions honestly.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived perceptions of adults who participate in uncivil political discourse on SNSs and to better understand whether they may be experiencing mental health and/or addictive symptoms. Previous research has linked mental health symptoms to both political stress and PIU to the emotional symptoms of mental health disorders. Previous research has not explored the physiological symptoms related to mental health disorders individuals experience as a result of this behavior. The findings of this study suggest that physiological symptoms may be fairly common when engaging in this behavior and it is recommended that future research explore the prevalence of this phenomenon. As this behavior can generate symptoms related to mental health disorders, it may be worth exploring whether this behavior may be a diagnosable disorder.

Previous research has linked PIU with addictive symptoms. Previous research has not explored whether engaging in uncivil political debates on SNSs is addictive or compulsive in nature. The findings of this study suggest that this behavior can become addictive. Again, it is recommended that future research explore this issue more in-depth to assess potential symptomology to determine if this phenomenon may be a diagnosable disorder.

Overall, most of the participants in this study reported wanting to benefit others through this behavior. Participants discussed wanting to advocate for others, spread

knowledge, and fight for social justice. Participants also reported that the behavior of their debate partners helped predict whether they would engage or disengage from this behavior. These types of motivations for engaging in uncivil discourse on SNSs has not been explored in the literature. Participants also reported being highly motivated by emotions to participate in this behavior. While this has been touched on in previous literature, this phenomenon may warrant further study. In order to better understand this type of behavior it is important to better understand the motivations of this behavior. It is recommended that future studies explore this area more in-depth.

As the sample size of this study was small, it is also recommended that future research use larger sample sizes to determine if the results of this study are generalizable to different populations.

Implications

Uncivil political discourse on SNSs is becoming more prevalent (Cepeda et al., 2018). The findings of this study suggest that this type of behavior can lead to mental health and addictive symptoms that can impact functioning. It is important that clinical psychologists better understand this behavior in order to identify appropriate treatments for individuals who are experiencing these symptoms. Clinical psychologists need to be more cognizant of this type of behavior so they are able to recognize these symptoms in their patients. Previous research has identified that patients are discussing psychological distress more frequently in therapy (Coren, 2018; Ruth, 2018; Solomonov & Barber, 2018). Stress regarding the political climate has been increasing over the past several years (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020). It is important that clinical psychologists are aware of

this phenomenon so it may be addressed with their patients. If clinical psychologists become more cognizant of this behavior and its impact on their patients clinical psychologists could impact social change by assisting their patients in learning how to regulate the emotional and physiological symptoms that can occur when engaging in this behavior. Clinical psychologists may be able to assist their clients in finding healthier ways to engage in this behavior thereby impacting social change, one patient at a time. In addition, if patients can find healthier ways to engage in this behavior, it is possible these online discussions may become healthier in nature, creating broader social change.

The findings of this study may benefit individuals who participate in this type of behavior. Understanding the potential risks to engaging in this type of behavior may assist individuals in making more informed choices regarding whether they want to continue to engage in this behavior. It may also help individuals who participate in this behavior to identify when they might want to seek professional help for their mental health and/or addictive symptoms. Similarly to what is noted above, on the individual level this knowledge could impact social change as patients are able to reduce their symptoms by disengaging or by finding healthier ways to engage, in addition to these patients potentially role modeling healthier engagement during these conversations potentially impacting others who engage in this behavior but do not seek therapy.

Identifying how and when group polarization occurs between political out-groups may benefit researchers in better understanding how to mediate this polarization. Understanding the communication breakdown that occurs during these conversations may increase the likelihood of finding ways to improve communication between out-

groups. This could result in improved mental health for individuals who enjoy discussing politics online, in addition to promoting social change via improving communication with out-groups and potentially reducing the political polarization that occurs during these discussions.

Conclusion

Using the generic qualitative approach, I explored the perceptions of 13 participants' experiences with online uncivil political discourse. The participants discussed their experiences with this phenomenon. The findings of this study supported previous research on the relationship between mental health symptoms and political stress (APA, 2017. 2019, 2020), mental health symptoms and PIU (Munno, 2017), and the potential addictive properties of social media (Frost & Rickwood, 2017). The findings of this study determined that the majority of participants experienced symptoms of mental health and/or addictive disorders when engaging in this behavior. Although the connection between increased emotionality and political debates had been identified in previous research (Duggan, 2017), the physiological symptoms and addictive symptoms that occur as a result of this behavior had not been explored. This study also provided new information about what motivates people to engage in this type of behavior.

It is essential to better understand the phenomenon of uncivil political discourse on SNSs. Political polarization has become very concerning to many Americans (APA, 2017, 2019, 2020) and this behavior has become very prevalent online (Cepeda et al., 2018). Understanding this behavior and how it impacts individuals who engage in it can benefit clinical psychologists and their patients in the therapy office. Understanding ways

to improve communication between out-groups to reduce polarization would benefit

social change as a whole.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. What inspires you to engage in political debates on social media? What types of topics or comments draw you into the conversation? Do you have a preference for discussing topics that are emotionally stimulating or intellectually stimulating?

2. Do you believe online uncivil political discourse can be beneficial in anyway? Why or why not?

3. When engaging in this behavior, do you experience heightened emotions? If so, what emotions are you experiencing (sadness, happiness, anger, anxiety, etc.) and how long do these feelings typically last? What role do these emotions play in engaging in uncivil political discourse online? (Example: does anger inspire you to continue engaging, or to disengage?)

4. Have you ever intentionally sought out opportunities to engage in this type of behavior?

5. While engaging in these debates, have you ever found yourself distracted by thoughts about the debate? Have you ever had difficulty falling asleep after engaging in these debates?

6. Have you ever noticed physical changes in yourself while participating in these debates (clenching fists/jaw, accelerated heart rate, pacing, difficulty sitting still, shaking, etc.)?

7. Do you ever spend more time than intended engaging in this type of behavior? For example, have you ever decided to stop engaging in a discussion, yet find

yourself going back to it anyway? What factors influence whether or not you continue to participate in the discussion?

8. How frequently (weekly, daily, hourly, etc.) do you engage in this behavior and how long on average do you continue to engage in a single conversation (minutes, hours, days, etc.)? Have you ever tried to cut back or discontinue this behavior, but found yourself engaging in it again?

9. What stands out to you regarding your experiences with uncivil online political discourse?

Appendix B: Recruitment Flier

Are you frustrated by political debates on social media?

Exploring the perceptions of active social media adults' mental health after participating online with uncivil political discourse with outgroup members

Volunteers aged 18 years or older are needed to participate in a study regarding their experiences in participating in verbally hostile online political debates on social media.

Your participation in the study may help psychologists better understand how this behavior impacts psychological well-being and mental health. This may lead to future research regarding diagnosis and treatment.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked a series of interview questions so that you can share information with the researcher regarding your experiences participating in verbally hostile online political debates on social media.

If at any point you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to not answer any question(s) or may simply leave the study. Any responses will be collected under a fictitious name or alias so that no one will know who you are other than the researcher. Participants will not receive any payment or reimbursement for time spent taking part in the study.

Location
- Email, video chat, and telephone. Completion of interview questions may take 60-90 minutes.

Are you eligible?
- Must be 18 or older.
- Must participate in verbally hostile online political debates on social media.

Not sure if you're eligible? Call or email:
- Researcher: Bridgette Eastman at Bridgette.eastman@waldenu.edu or 218-
- Or study supervisor Dr. Ethel Perry, PhD at ethel.pe

Contact Bridgette Eastman at ████████████ for more information.

Study conducted for completion of a dissertation under
Walden University