

Shooting the messenger: an analysis of incivility towards Greta Thunberg in *Reddit* user comments.

Word count: 3,300/3,000



Durham
University

Final project

submitted to Durham University

Faculty of Liberal Arts

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the module

PROGRAMMING FOR STUDENT OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES (LIBA2011)

May 2023

Introduction

On 20 August 2018, climate activist Greta Thunberg was photographed standing outside of the Swedish Riksdag holding a placard that read “*SKOLSTREJK FÖR KLIMATET*” (Rampton 2021). Six months after Thunberg – then fifteen – started her “school strike for climate” mission, the Swedish eco-warrior had become a global phenomenon (The Local 2019). Today, the teen maverick is considered one of the most influential figures of the battle against climate change (Belam 2019). Thunberg has addressed the United Nations, published four books and amassed just shy of fifteen million followers on Instagram (Instagram 2023).

Despite Thunberg fighting for perhaps the worthiest of causes: the betterment of planet Earth; her critics have sought to defame her; often, ruthlessly so. On social media, Thunberg has been called a “freakishly influential kid,” a “climate Barbie” with “with many mental health disorders,” and “deeply disturbed” (Park et al. 2021, 6; Nevett 2019).

This paper aims to analyse Thunberg’s reception on the social media giant, *Reddit*. In doing so, it hopes to further understanding of why online communication harbours incivility and whether this should be confronted by policy-makers. This paper aims to buttress the 2021 study of 3,300 user comments on *YouTube* videos about Greta Thunberg conducted by Park, Liu and Kaye. (Park et al. 2021). This paper quantitatively and qualitatively analyses 26,579 user comments on the five most-upvoted *Reddit* posts that contain the key words “Greta Thunberg.”

This paper finds that ableist, ageist and sexist rhetoric is abundant in *Reddit* user comments about Greta Thunberg; concluding that ageist rhetoric is the most prevalent. Further, it finds that uncivil discourse – commonly name-calling and casting aspersions – is often a case of shooting the messenger. Users revel in taunting and ridiculing the Thunberg, all the while ignoring the momentous issue the activist speaks for: climate change. In recognising the limitations of its quantitative analysis, this paper also finds that user comments showed many incidences of civil, discursive conversation between commenting users. These referred to both Thunberg herself, her views and government action. This paper advises caution vis-à-vis the prospect of regulators curtailing users’ freedom of speech on social media, although it recognises the need for punitive measures against discrimination such as ageism, which has become prevalent in society (Hehir 2007, 8).

Literature review

There is a body of research that suggests social media can influence collective action. For example, social media was front and centre shaping the political discourse of the Arab Spring. According to Howard et al., revolutionary conversations on social media frequently preceded the major insurgencies across Middle East and North Africa (Blagojević & Šćekić, 2021). Moreover, protest networks used online chatrooms to

orchestrate the London G20 Summit demonstration the year after the Global Financial Crisis (Bennett & Segerberg 2011, 770).

This research speaks to the power of social media to galvanise a populace when frustrated sentiments coalesce with incendiary political issues. Therefore, public attitudes towards the divisive issue of climate change will likely interact with its presentation and discussion on social media. Park et al. contend that this process occurs on *YouTube* (Park et al. 2021, 2).

Today, the microblogging platform *Reddit* hosts fifty-seven million daily users. There are currently thirteen billion live posts and comments on the site. With its usership increasing by 44% since last year, *Reddit* is becoming an increasingly prevalent social medium (Reddit 2023). Accordingly, using *Reddit* to analyse user comments seems an appropriate avenue for discussing how climate change and Greta Thunberg are perceived by online forums and spoken about in conversation.

Civil versus uncivil discourse

This paper echoes the analysis of Park et al. in its attempt to contextualise the corpus of *Reddit* user comments within the discursive concepts of civil and uncivil discourse. In using incivility as an analytical touchstone, this paper seeks to quantify and qualify the language, rhetoric and tones of *Reddit* user comments pertaining to Thunberg.

Park et al. posit that civil discourse is the bedrock of liberal democratic society; it speaks to “the fundamental tone and practice of democracy” (Park et al. 2021, 2-4; Herbst 2010, 3). However, the authors contend that the digital landscape of today is saturated with incivility. For example, the rhetorical infrastructure of social media “is marked by hatred and antipathy” (Chen et al., 2019; Sobieraj & Berry, 2011).

Comparatively, deliberation is defined as “careful thought or talk about a subject before a decision is made,” whereby a solution “acceptable to all who have a stake in an issue” can be acquired (Cambridge Dictionary 2023; Chen et al. 2021, 2-3; Habermas, 1989). Deliberation requires openness of mind and hinges on logic and reasoning instead of powers or coercion (Burkhalter et al., 2002; Breiner, 1993; Delli Carpini et al., 2004).

Deliberation is thwarted by its antithesis, incivility (Barber 2010). Incivility constitutes the use of language or tones that are offensive and disrespectful (Coe et al., 2014; Warner & Hirschberg, 2012). Stereotyping is a typical display of incivility. Stereotyping denies argumentation – the application of logic and reasoning – through choosing to personally attack the bearing of an opinion. Papacharissi argues that incivility

constitutes behaviour patterns “that threaten democracy” and “deny people [their] freedoms” (Papacharissi 2004, 267).

Thunberg in the media

Thunberg is a lightning rod for criticism from online personalities and political commentators. This reality came to global attention when Andrew Tate jibed at Thunberg last December. Tate, a rising, machismo-lauding icon of the far-right, tweeted at Thunberg a picture of his Bugatti, requesting that she provide her email address so that he could “send a complete list of [his] car collection and their respective enormous emissions” (Denkinson 2022; Twitter 2022). Tate’s tweet has since been viewed 203 million times and liked by 231,000 users (Twitter 2023).

Often, efforts to make a mockery of the Swedish environmentalist follow a more toxic narrative than Tate chose to. Michael Knowles, a conservative political commentator, said during an appearance on *Fox News* that if the climate movement was “about science it would be led by scientists rather than by politicians and a mentally ill Swedish child who is being exploited by her parents” (North 2020, para 211). Knowles’ rhetoric encapsulates some of the main tropes used to derail the legitimacy of Thunberg’s stance on climate change.

Ableism

Knowles alludes to Thunberg as some “mentally ill Swedish child.” Thunberg has Asperger’s syndrome, a form of autism spectrum disorder that can hamper one’s ability to understand social situations (Nationwide Children’s 2023). Importantly, people with Asperger’s never experience consequential problems with their language development, are not intellectually impaired and do not have a “mental illness” (Ibid.; Corbyn 2023).

Casting aspersions on Thunberg for her condition is an example of ableism. Wolfbring contends that ableism “reflects a preference for species-typical normative abilities,” which perpetuates a stereotype that people diagnosed with disability are intrinsically “less-able” or “impaired” (Wolfbring 2008, 252-253). It seems apt to assess the presence of ableism on *Reddit*. Accordingly, this paper asks:

RQ1. Is ableism prevalent and, if so, what function does it serve in user comments about Thunberg on *Reddit*?

Ageism

In his *Fox News* appearance, Knowles’ called Thunberg a “child.” Here, Knowles’ language is vestigial of ageism – a concept coined by Robert Butler in 1969 to recognise the “prejudice by one age group toward other age groups” (Butler 1969, 243). In November 2021, the comments Jeremy Clarkson shared with

Sunday Times' readers about Thunberg were more explicitly ageist. The broadcaster wrote that Thunberg, eighteen at the time, was an "annoying little bucket of ego" in need of a "smacked bottom" (Clarkson 2021).

By not conforming to the archaic standards of social status once rigidly applied to age, Thunberg's outspoken opinions are null – say her detractors (Shand-Baptiste, 2019). Park et al. found that ageism was prevalent in *YouTube* comments, citing smears such as: "Damn, kiddo. You need more breastfeeding" (Park et al. 2021, 7). Aware of the prevalence of ageism on other digital platforms, this paper asks:

RQ2. Is ageism prevalent and, if so, what function does it serve in user comments about Thunberg on *Reddit*?

Sexism

Harassment has long constrained women's ability to occupy public spaces; to comfortably speak out and be visible in the workplace or in public (Sobieraj 2017). This aversion to female opportunity and the oppression of femaleness are examples of sexism. In this context, sexism is the umbrella term for the subordination of or the dominance over women because of their gender (Glick & Fiske 2011).

Sobieraj affirms that this "gender-based resistance now extends into digital arenas" (Sobieraj 2017, 1700). Sobieraj's 2017 study – emphatically titled: "Bitch, slut, skank, cunt: patterned resistance to women's visibility in digital spaces" – found that digital sexists were aggressive; that stereotypes of the feminine were used to undermine women's contributions; and that physical differences, such as strength, were dragged to the fore in digital exchanges (Ibid., 1704-1707). The author implores that more attention must be allocated to "the democratic costs of [online] gender-based harassment" in addition to the personal ones (Ibid., 1709).

When in the spotlight of politics, female bloggers regularly experience abusive comments, as well as "stalking, trolls, rape threats, death threats and unpleasant offline encounters," according to a 2017 study by Eckert (Eckert 2017, 1282). Comparably, Greta Thunberg is engaging in a political discourse and one of the most incendiary: climate change. Consequently, the final research question of this paper is:

RQ2. Is sexism prevalent and, if so, what function does it serve in user comments about Thunberg on *Reddit*?

Methodology

Sample

The size of *Reddit* is vast and sampling the entire *Reddit* corpus would be a logistical non-starter. Accordingly, this study's sample was based upon popular engagement. It sampled post submissions that used the key words "Greta Thunberg," selecting the five submissions with the greatest number of user

interactions. The five posts were published between 2019 and 2023. Three are posted by the “r/worldnews” subreddit and two by “r/pics.” All refer to climate change and Greta Thunberg.

Figure 1: Reddit user comments sample

Post	Subreddit	Date	Total Interactions	Total Comments	Total Comments Analysed
a.	r/pics	01/17/23	138,000	8,200	4,327
b.	r/worldnews	18/09/19	117,000	7,200	5,826
c.	r/worldnews	04/02/21	103,000	6,600	4,778
d.	r/pics	28/08/19	100,000	9,300	5,578
e.	r/worldnews	23/09/19	91,100	13,200	6,070

The sample was accessed and analysed using *Reddit’s* Application Programming Interface (API) and Python programming. *Reddit’s* nested comment structure is rather nebulous. Applying the Python Reddit API Wrapper (PRAW) rendered the analysis of the comments more accessible and efficient than a manual application of the API. The top-level comment forest – the classification of initial comments that are then replied to – were (mostly) accessed and pulled from the site. This wrapper functioning was numerically limited meaning the top-level comments are also mixed with replies. It was assumed that top-level comments would be the most representative of popular opinion. The total comments collated was 26,579.

Qualitative content analysis:

The qualitative analysis was characterised by the subjective interpretation of the comment data (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1278). This process consisted of finding examples of incivility and their illustration of ageism, sexism or ableism so to answer the research questions. Due to time constraints, all the comments were not qualitatively analysed.

Quantitative content analysis:

The comment data from each submission post was run through a programme that counted the frequency of individual words. The hundred most used words were plotted on a bar chart – excluding stopwords. It was assumed that quantitative analysis may offer insight into the volume or generality of incivility.

Sentiment analysis:

The aggregate sentiment of each post's comments was calculated using VADER – Valence Aware Dictionary and Sentiment Reasoner. The aggregate – or “compound” – score of sentiment intensity ranges between -1 (most negative) and +1 (most positive). It was assumed this analysis could approximate the general tone of the user comments and holistically quantify them.

Findings

Qualitative analysis:

RQ1 / Ableism

Reddit users repeatedly jibed at Thunberg's mental state. Many took cheap shots at her Asperger's syndrome: “go home you spastic moron”; “too bad Greta has that retarded down syndrome looking face”; “she's a politically hyped retard.”

Often, users framed Thunberg as mentally incapacitated. Thunberg's autism spectrum disorder – one that is not a mental illness – was seldom applied in a deliberative manner. Rather, it was brandished as an insult. For example, the comment, “she's an environmental alarmist. And it's no coincidence that she's autistic,” implies that Asperger's syndrome begets intellectual incompetence; and that this correlation is axiomatic somehow.

The fallacy that Asperger's causes intellectual impairment was a common troll. Avoiding the application of logic and reasoning, trolls preferred discrediting the climate activist for her mental constitution over debating her arguments. Treating Asperger's syndrome in this way – as a badge of stupidity – makes it easier to present Thunberg's opinions as void. By extension, it allows her critics to dismiss her theses under the assumption that they are unreliable and confused.

RQ2 / Sexism

Sexist diction was abundant across the five submissions' user comments. “Bitch,” the quintessence of sexist name-calling, was a common slur: “stupid corrupt bitch!”; “get clapped bitch”; “she's a mouthy little bitch.” The analysis finds that sexist labels were seldom employed to rebut Thunberg's ideas – at least not in any logical sense. The last example above, reflects a traditional feature of sexist ideology; that women should be silenced because the feminine point of view is not one of authority (Byerly & Ross, 2008). Further, this notion of male superiority was often more explicit. For instance, one user jeered: “we got a drama queen here boys.” A tribal quality can be found here. The user constructs a dichotomy between the level-headed, male consortium – “we” and “boys” – and the petulant, sulking Thunberg – “drama queen.”

Considering that Thunberg was sixteen at the time of three of the submissions, the sexual taunts take on a particularly gross significance. Some crass remarks included: “someone start banging this chick already, then she’ll be taking about nothing but the D” and “she kinda got a booty on her, damn.” Not only are these emphatic examples of sexist rhetoric – sexualising and objectifying women – they again communicate users’ insistent refusal to acknowledge Thunberg’s intentions. In these cases, it seems that the comments section is more the fulcrum of cheap gags than rational debate.

In addition, sexism was accentuated by vulgar overtones. The use of profanity reinforced the incivility of the discourse – if it can be called that – and produced a mob-like atmosphere. The shameless taunting of Thunberg certainly distracts from the immediacy of climate change. To many, it was preferable to shoot the messenger than confront the news she heralded.

RQ3 / Ageism

Many *Reddit* users took umbrage with Thunberg’s age. This was the case across all five posts. One user thundered: “NO MORE MONEY FOR THE BABY GIRL AND THE KIDS ARE GOING TO HAVE A LOT OF HOMEWORK!” This comment encapsulates the assumptions that numerous users shared about Thunberg’s age: that Thunberg is too young to speak up, should be in school and is a puppet for her parents.

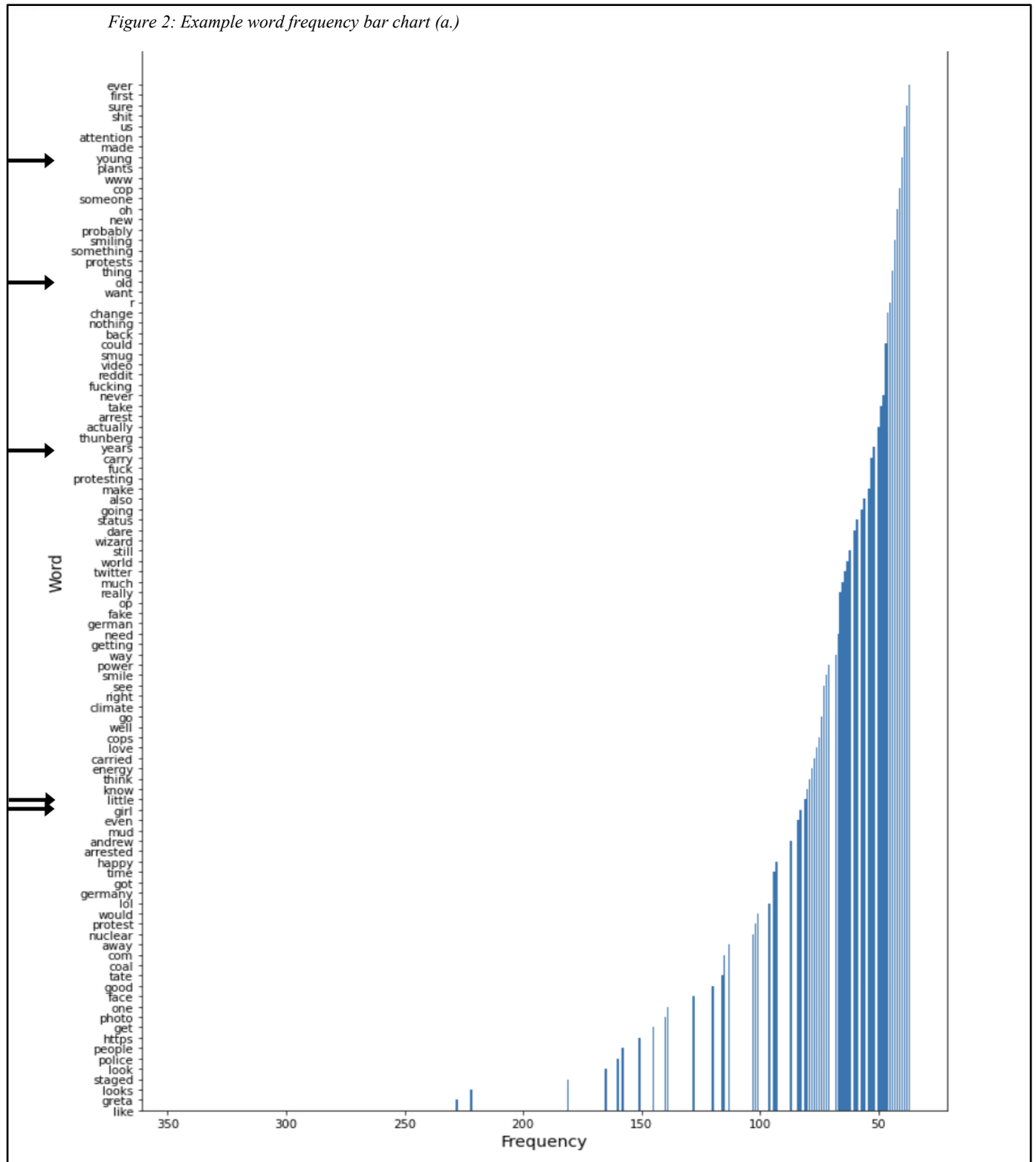
Some instances were plainly patronising: “she’s so itty bitty”; “I’m 12 and I understand the earth and how the world works better than everyone so listen to me waaaaa waaaaa listen to me!” Users fallaciously conflated age with expertise. They mockingly suggested that Thunberg is an immature child only pretending to be an adult and by extension cannot have an opinion on climate change. Indeed, climate change is an issue effecting everyone; perhaps, the younger generations the most.

Quantitative analysis:

The analysis found that in the top one-hundred most frequently used words in the user comments of all five submission posts were the words “girl” and “young.” Furthermore, the analysis found that “years” or “year” and “old” appeared in the top one-hundred list of four out of five submissions. In addition, “kid” or “kids,” “little,” “16,” “child” featured two of five, whereas “school” and “parents” featured only once.

The analysis suggests that ageist attitudes were the most prevalent of all forms of incivility. *Figure 2* displays the most frequent words of a post made on 17 January 2023. Indeed, “greta” was the second most frequent non-stopword; however, “girl” appeared more frequently than “thunberg,” despite Thunberg being twenty years old as of January 3rd.

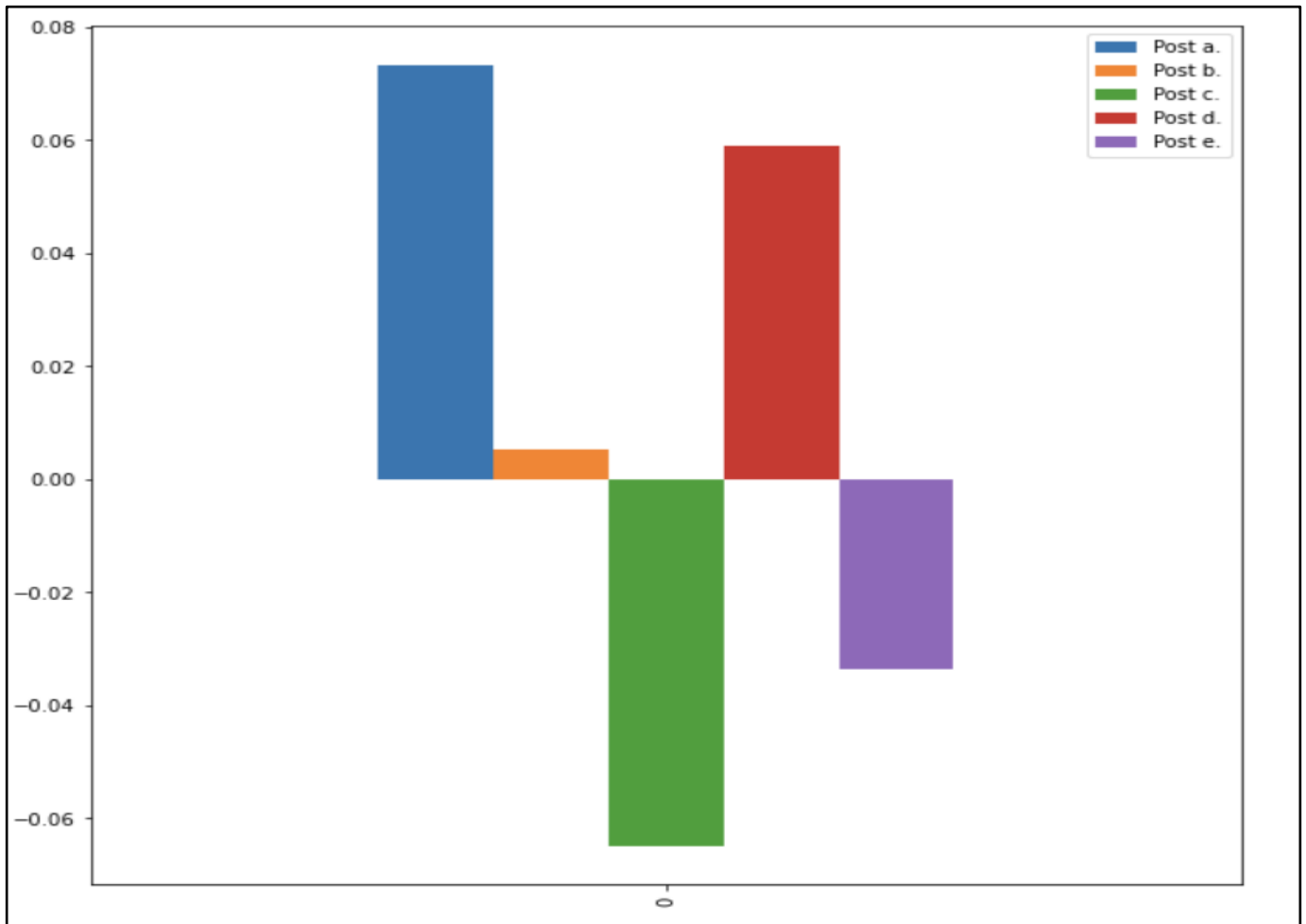
Figure 2: Example word frequency bar chart (a.)



Sentiment analysis:

The sentiment analysis shows a variance in the sentiment intensity across the five submission posts. Posts a. and b. showed a positive trend. Contrastingly, posts c. and e. showed a negative trend in sentiment, whereas post b. was near neutral.

Figure 3: User comments compound sentiment intensity.



Discussion

Scrutinising individual user comments qualitatively is a very informative analytical approach, but a time-consuming one. Reading an overtly sexist or ableist remark in written words is a considerably more impactful and arousing experience than idly observing a chart about sentiment scores. However, viewed in isolation, an individual user comment has limited generalisability. At a macro-level, the collection and analysis of more data corresponds to a more a comprehensive view of the discourse; by extension, the statistical analysis of the entire 26,579 corpus elevates the findings to a more holistic level.

The aggregate view provided by the compound sentiment analysis is an illuminating addition to this paper's research. Importantly, it reveals that incidences of incivility should not be interpreted in isolation. The VADER results highlight that user comments can be overwhelmingly positive. It is evident that commenting can be a way for users to express their gratitude and support for Thunberg and her activism. One user rejoiced: "who better to take such criticism and do something so awe-inspiring as a 16-year-old with Asperger's. There's so many avenues of how this is impressive."

It should be noted that the above example exposes a limitation with the programming model that calculated the frequency of individual words as a means of quantifying the presence of incivility. The model did not account for clusters or phrases of words, only individual words. Ignoring the collocates of key words decontextualises them. In this specific comment, Thunberg was called a “16-year-old with Asperger’s.” This was an expression of commendation, a recognition of the activist’s bravery and precocious nature. However, this paper’s application of the programming model would have lumped the label “16” into the ableist bracket, which would be false. This would apply to many other comments such as: “I support Greta, the young people are stepping up when the elders are failing”; “I believe [in] this young woman. And I hope that she inspires kids and all.”

The synergy of qualitative, quantitative and sentiment analysis reconciles the issue to some degree. Zooming in through a qualitative lens necessarily contextualises these examples. If the words “young” and “kid” were presumed to solely represent an ageist attack – as would be the case through quantitative modelling – the findings would be superficial.

Moreover, amidst the stereotyping, there were many incidences of civil, discursive conversation between commenting users. These referred to both Thunberg herself, her actions and government action. Post c. contained extensive threads debating the direction of India’s incumbent Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and his alleged preference for the business elite over rural farmers (Nitasha 2017, 523). Thunberg’s tweet, offering support of protesting farmers, was the subject of post c. (Ellis-Petersen 2021). It is important to remember that social media can be a platform for constructive, albeit terse, debate.

Conclusion

This point of tension between constructive uses and abuse of social media is likely the locus of greatest consequence for future policy-makers. *Reddit* is anarchic. It, like other social media platforms, is a free-for-all and has limited regulation (Antony & Thomas, 2010; Milliken et al., 2008; Tech Desk, 2020). This paper has demonstrated how the discourse on social media can approximate both a springboard for sharing ideas and a soapbox for spreading hate speech through its synergy of qualitative, quantitative and sentiment analysis.

It is challenging to say whether more stringent regulation of *Reddit* is the solution. To be sure, any form of discrimination should not be tolerated and the necessary steps to implement more rigorous mechanisms for confronting its ever-presence online should be taken. However, Park et al.’s point that “coarse and aggressive conversation might trigger robust” debate is a fair one (Park et al. 2021, 3). Any decision to sacrifice users’ freedoms on the altar of ‘civility’ should not be taken lightly.

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