INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 15, Issue 10, (2025) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Who Makes the Workplace Uncivil? Exploring Perpetrators of Academic Incivility among Lecturers in Private Universities in Malaysia

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DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i10/26775

Published Date: 16 October 2025

Abstract

This study explores the perpetrators of workplace incivility among lecturers in private universities in Malaysia, aiming to identify the primary instigators and understand how organisational factors contribute to the occurrence of such behaviours. While workplace incivility has been widely studied in Western contexts, there is limited research in Asian higher education, particularly regarding the roles of students, peers, faculty administrators, and superiors. Guided by Andersson and Pearson's Spiraling Theory of Incivility, findings from semi-structured interviews with 10 participants from selected private universities reveal that superiors are the primary source of incivility, followed by students, peers, and faculty administrators. The study shows that, unlike Western models, incivility in this context is often one-directional and tolerated due to hierarchical norms, collectivist values, and conflict avoidance. Theoretically, the study extends the Spiraling Theory by demonstrating that cultural and structural constraints can interrupt the expected reciprocal spiral of incivility. Practically, it highlights the need for clear anti-incivility policies, culturally sensitive leadership training, and institutional accountability measures to address all sources of incivility.

Keywords: Workplace Incivility, Perpetrators, Private Universities, Spiraling Theory, Lecturers

Introduction

Workplace incivility is a modern form of mistreatment increasingly evident across organisations globally, with significant implications for both employees and organisations. Although defined as low-intensity behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm that violates norms of mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Fritz, 2009; Ghosh, 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2016), it is often dismissed as a minor issue. Yet, such behaviour is frequently disregarded by employers and can seriously affect professional relationships within organisations (Cortina et al., 2017). In most cases, employees who experience workplace

incivility will experience increased stress, anxiety, depression, and reduced self-esteem, while organisations may face decreased productivity, low job satisfaction, diminished organizational commitment, and higher turnover (Ghosh, 2017; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Nazir, 2016; Tricahyadinata et al., 2020; Trudel, 2009). Incivility within the workplace can be experienced, witnessed, or instigated, with cultural factors influencing what is considered uncivil across different societies (Ghosh, 2017; Schilpzand et al., 2016). For instance, in healthcare, incivility among nurses and medical professionals has been linked to increased stress, burnout, and compromised patient care (Shanta & Eliason, 2014; Thupayagale-Tshweneagae et al., 2020; Vink & Adejumo, 2015). Similarly, in the hospitality industry, incivility contributes to emotional exhaustion, reduced service quality, and high employee turnover (Arasli et al., 2018; Moon & Hur, 2018; Wang & Chen, 2020).

Workplace incivility has been observed across various sectors, such as healthcare (Shanta & Eliason, 2014; Thupayagale-Tshweneagae et al., 2020; Vink & Adejumo, 2015) and the hospitality industry (Arasli et al., 2018; Moon & Hur, 2018; Wang & Chen, 2020), where its damaging effects on employee well-being, performance, and service quality are well-documented. However, research exploring workplace incivility within academic settings, particularly in higher education, remains limited (Doshy, 2014). This lack of attention is concerning, as lecturers face mounting pressures in balancing teaching, research, and administrative duties, making them equally vulnerable to uncivil behaviours in their work environments (Clark et al., 2013; Rawlins, 2017). The academic environment plays a crucial role in shaping knowledge creation, innovation, and student development; therefore, incivility among lecturers can undermine collaboration, morale, and overall organisational performance. Understanding the sources and nature of academic incivility is thus essential not only for improving lecturers' well-being but also for sustaining a productive and respectful academic culture. Given the scarcity of studies focusing on who perpetrates such behaviours, this study addresses a critical gap by exploring the sources of incivility among lecturers in private universities in Malaysia. Insights from this research will be valuable for academic leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers in developing effective preventive strategies, enhancing organisational harmony, and promoting a more inclusive and supportive higher education environment.

Problem Statement

Though workplace incivility is a low-intensity deviant behaviour that violates norms of respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), it has become a persistent challenge within higher education in Malaysia. Perpetrators of such behaviours frequently escape accountability by exploiting organisational loopholes and engaging in manipulative tactics (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). Lecturers in private universities face demanding workloads, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction, conditions that expose them to more experience of incivility (Abas et al., 2020; Koon & Pun, 2018; Zakaria et al., 2015). Despite its prevalence, most existing studies conceptualise incivility as an interpersonal issue, focusing primarily on its consequences or coping mechanisms (Erdem & Koçyiğit, 2019; Salimzadeh et al., 2021). Limited attention has been given to understanding *who* perpetrates incivility, *why* they engage in such behaviours, and *how* organisational structures enable their actions. Structural power imbalances, weak governance, and ineffective policy enforcement often permit superiors, colleagues, or administrators to act without repercussions, reinforcing a culture of disrespect (Alramadan & Zhang, 2022; Awai et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). Moreover, power can

be misused to label dissenting voices as "uncivil," thereby silencing individuals of lower status (Demsky, 2019). This suggests that incivility should not be viewed merely as an interpersonal conflict but as a structural issue rooted in organisational hierarchies and governance. Despite the growing prevalence of incivility, empirical studies have largely concentrated on public universities or on student-related contexts, such as nursing education (Clark, 2008; Kadar et al., 2015; Lee & Jensen, 2014; Nicholson et al., 2014). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how and why incivility occurs in private universities in Malaysia, where competitive environments, unclear governance structures, and limited organisational oversight may contribute to such behaviours. Furthermore, most studies on workplace incivility originate from Western contexts, while research in Asia remains limited (Arshad & Ismail, 2016). Cultural norms significantly influence perceptions of civility, with varying boundaries across societies (Ghosh, 2017). Although workplace incivility has drawn increasing attention globally due to its high organisational costs estimated at $14,000 per employee annually (Porath & Pearson, 2010), its nature, perpetrators, and structural enablers remain underexplored in private universities in Malaysia. Therefore, this study aims to identify who contributes to workplace incivility by examining the sources, motivations, and structural conditions that enable such behaviours among lecturers in private universities in Malaysia.

Significance of the Study

Understanding the perpetrators of academic incivility carries significant implications for both theory and practice, particularly in the context of private universities where organisational hierarchies and cultural norms may encourage such behaviours. From a theoretical perspective, this study enriches the body of knowledge on workplace incivility by shifting the analytical focus from the experiences of victims to the behaviours, motivations, and contextual factors that drive perpetrators. By identifying who instigates incivility and why, the study advances Andersson and Pearson's (1999) Spiraling Theory of Incivility through its application to private universities in Malaysia, characterised by hierarchical and collectivist structures. This theoretical extension is valuable for scholars seeking to examine incivility within relational and organisational contexts, especially in non-Western or culturally diverse academic environments. Practically, the study benefits multiple stakeholders in higher education. For university leaders, HR practitioners, and policymakers, identifying sources and patterns of perpetration offers evidence-based insights for developing effective governance, ethical codes, and leadership training programs that promote respect and accountability. The findings can help universities strengthen policy enforcement, enhance organisational culture, and design targeted interventions that address root causes rather than symptoms of incivility. Ultimately, the study contributes to creating safer, more inclusive, and respectful academic environments, particularly within private universities in Malaysia.

Purpose of the Study

This study aims to identify and explore the main perpetrators of workplace incivility against lecturers in private Malaysian universities, focusing on lecturers' lived experiences. By uncovering patterns of behaviour and contextual factors, the study seeks to inform policies and HRD strategies to foster a respectful academic environment.

Literature Review

Understanding Workplace and Academic Incivility

Academic incivility has emerged as a persistent issue in higher education, affecting lecturers, students, and staff due to unwritten rules surrounding promotion, tenure, and workload distribution (Al-Asfour, 2023). It happens in various forms, including student-to-lecturer, lecturer-to-student, student-to-student, and lecturer-to-lecturer interactions (Rawlins, 2017; Wright & Hill, 2015), often involving disrespectful behaviours that cause psychological, physiological, and physical harm (Clark et al., 2013). Among lecturers, horizontal and lateral incivility are prevalent, occurring either across hierarchical levels or among peers (Marchiondo et al., 2010; Marlow & Burgess, 2013; Sheridan-Leos, 2008; Woelfle & Mccaffrey, 2007). Students' incivility ranges from simple annoyances to intimidation, classroom terrorism, and even threats of violence (Feldmann, 2001), with common examples including mobile phone use during class, plagiarism, tardiness, unpreparedness, and verbal or physical aggression (Alberts et al., 2010; C. Clark, 2008; Leiter et al., 2015; Segrist et al., 2018). Among lecturers, uncivil acts may include gossiping, dismissing colleagues' contributions, ignoring responsibilities, or challenging others in demeaning ways (Clark & Cynthia, 2013). With the rise of online education, incivility has also extended into virtual spaces, manifesting as cyberbullying through emails, social media posts, and defamatory online comments (Daniloff, 2009; Hopkins et al., 2017; Jones & Scott, 2012). Approximately 40–50% of lecturers have reported experiencing incivility from colleagues or administrators, contributing to attrition and dissatisfaction (Clark & Cynthia, 2013). The competitive, hierarchical nature in the academic setting is driven by pressures to publish, teach, and secure recognition, and fosters environments where power differentials and resource competition to incivility (Cleary, 2013; V. Koon, 2017; Peters, 2014; Pitt & Mewburn, 2016). In Malaysia, high lecturer turnover rates in private universities (18%) highlight the urgent need to understand and address these issues (Ramasamy & Abbudullah, 2020). Given the limited research on academic incivility in Malaysian contexts, this study emphasises the importance of promoting a respectful and supportive work culture, recognising that lecturers are vital to shaping competent graduates and contributing to national development (Abas et al., 2020; Hidayah & Marinah, 2018).

Incivility in Private Universities in Malaysia

The rapid expansion of higher education in Malaysia shows the importance of examining workplace incivility, particularly within private universities. From a single university in 1957, the country's higher education landscape has grown to include 48 universities, 10 foreign branch campuses, 33 university colleges, and 345 colleges by 2020 (Da Wan, 2022). This growth reflects the increasing demand for tertiary education (Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2017) but has also resulted in more complex and diverse organisational environments where issues such as workplace incivility are likely to arise. This study focuses on private universities rather than public universities due to differences in governance and working conditions. Public universities are more directly overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education, operating under standardized policies related to funding, promotions, and performance evaluation (Sidhu & Kaur, 2011). In contrast, private universities function with greater autonomy but often under less transparent governance structures, which can lead to inconsistencies in promotion criteria, recognition practices, and workload distribution. Such governance gaps may foster dissatisfaction, conflict, and tension, creating fertile ground for uncivil behaviours to emerge (Al-Asfour, 2023; Wright & Hill, 2015). Moreover, turnover rates in private universities are considerably higher, averaging around 18% annually (Ramasamy & Abbudullah, 2020),

highlighting the urgency of addressing workplace issues that may contribute to disengagement and attrition. Incivility in these universities is frequently linked to unwritten rules surrounding promotion, tenure, and recognition, as well as hierarchical relationships among students, supervisors, administrators, and lecturers. These factors often exacerbate stress, dissatisfaction, and feelings of marginalisation, as institutional culture strongly influences lecturers' well-being and morale (Abas et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, research on workplace incivility within private universities in Malaysia remains scarce (Hidayah & Marinah, 2018), leaving significant gaps in understanding how such behaviours affect lecturers' professional experiences and career development. The hierarchical and competitive nature of higher education, combined with cultural expectations, can contribute to the impact of uncivil behaviours (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). In private universities in Malaysia, the cultural context is shaped by collectivist values and hierarchical leadership, emphasising workplace harmony. While these norms may promote cohesion, they can also discourage confrontation, allowing subtle uncivil behaviours to persist and reinforcing power imbalances. Incivility in higher education can originate from multiple sources, including superiors, peers, and students. Despite its prevalence, limited research has explored who the main perpetrators of incivility are in Malaysian private universities, leaving gaps in understanding patterns, sources, and contextual factors. If left unaddressed, incivility can lead to burnout, absenteeism, reduced teaching quality, and turnover, thereby negatively affecting both lecturers and institutional outcomes (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Understanding this context is therefore critical for developing effective interventions and policies that foster a respectful and productive academic work environment.

The Spiraling Theory of Incivility

The Spiraling Theory of Incivility, introduced by Andersson and Pearson (1999), offers a valuable insight for understanding how subtle, ambiguous acts of disrespect can escalate into persistent conflict within workplace environments. The theory proposes that incivility typically begins with a seemingly minor act such as a dismissive remark, sarcastic tone, or deliberate exclusion that evokes feelings of offence or devaluation in the recipient. When the recipient interprets the act as intentional and responds, whether through retaliation, passive resistance, or withdrawal, a spiral of incivility is set in motion. This spiral unfolds through several interconnected stages: (1) *triggering an incident* where the beginning of uncivil behaviour occurs, (2) *emotional reactions* where the recipient experiences anger, hurt, or disrespect, (3) *reciprocal response* when the target retaliation of disengages, (4) *escalation*, the interactions grow more intense, spreading beyond the original individuals involved and (5) normalisation is when the experience of incivility becomes embedded in the workplace culture. While the theory initially conceptualised incivility as reciprocal in nature, later extensions acknowledge that structural and organisational silence can alter this reciprocity (Pearson et al., 2000). In hierarchically structured settings, such as universities, subordinates often suppress their responses due to fear of retaliation or reputational damage, allowing perpetrators in positions of authority to act without consequences. Unequal power relationships result in what has been termed a "one-sided spiral" of incivility, where the behaviour persists unchallenged.

Perpetrators of Incivility in Academic Contexts

Most incivility studies focus on victims, with limited attention to the individuals or structures that enable such behaviour. Research indicates that perpetrators often occupy positions of

authority, using power and status to dominate others (Cortina et al., 2017). In academic settings, immediate supervisors such as heads of departments or academic leaders may act uncivilly by overburdening subordinates, disregarding input, or withholding opportunities for recognition (Porath & Pearson, 2013). Peers of lecturers can also be perpetrators, driven by professional rivalry, jealousy, or perceived inequities in recognition and rewards. Competition for publications, promotions, and teaching allocations can foster overt incivility, which includes exclusion, gossip, or passive resistance (Murray, 2020). Additionally, faculty administrators and management personnel may contribute to the incivility spiral through bureaucratic insensitivity, issuing abrupt emails, enforcing unrealistic deadlines, or displaying condescending attitudes toward academic staff (Lewis, 2004; Vickers, 2006). Such administrative incivility reflects systemic issues within the university's organisational culture rather than individual personality alone. In Malaysia, where workplace hierarchies are deeply ingrained, incivility may also stem from cultural factors. High power distance discourages open confrontation, while collectivist norms emphasize harmony and avoidance of conflict. Consequently, lecturers often choose silence over reporting or retaliation, allowing perpetrators, especially those in authority, to act without accountability.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how lecturers in private universities in Malaysia perceive and experience the perpetrators of academic incivility. The qualitative approach is particularly suitable for studying the subtle, complex, and context-dependent nature of incivility, allowing for a deeper understanding of how organisational power and culture shape lecturers' experiences. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and observations, involving a purposively selected group of lecturers who have directly encountered or witnessed uncivil behaviour perpetrated by colleagues, superiors, or students. Open-ended interview questions encouraged participants to share detailed and reflective narratives, enabling the exploration of the underlying motives, behaviours, and structural conditions that allow incivility to occur. Consistent with Creswell's (2013) view, qualitative research is well-suited for studying social phenomena within their natural settings, where participants' subjective meanings can be interpreted within context. This study employs a qualitative case study approach, which, as Merriam (2009) emphasises, allows for an in-depth investigation of complex human experiences that are often hidden or normalised in organisational life. Given the interpretive nature of this research, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, ensuring sensitivity to context, reflexivity, and ethical integrity throughout the process (Creswell, 2003**).** The study adopted purposive and snowball sampling to recruit lecturers with firsthand experience of incivility, ensuring that the data collected were rich, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2002). Through the integration of interview and observational data, this methodological design provides an understanding of how incivility emerges, escalates, and is sustained within academic settings, thereby contributing to an in-depth understanding of its perpetrators and the organisational structures that enable such behaviour.

Sampling

The study involved ten lecturers from selected private universities in Malaysia to explore their perceptions and lived experiences of individuals who perpetrate workplace incivility within academic settings. This focus enabled an in-depth understanding of how lecturers interpret and respond to uncivil behaviours initiated by colleagues, superiors, or students. Purposive

sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience or observations of incivility, ensuring the relevance and richness of the data collected (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling further assisted in identifying additional lecturers who met the inclusion criteria (Merriam, 2009; Naderifar et al., 2017). The final sample size was guided by the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), and data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, when no new insights emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Collection

To investigate how workplace incivility is perpetrated and perceived within private university settings, this study recruited ten lecturers from selected private universities in Malaysia. Participants were required to have a minimum of three years of service in a private university to ensure sufficient familiarity with the institutional environment and academic culture. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, each lasting between 40 to 60 minutes, providing space for participants to share reflective accounts of their encounters with or observations of incivility. The participants represented diverse academic backgrounds and tenures, as outlined in Table 1: two had 16 years of experience, one had 20 years, two had 17 years, one had 25 years, two had 12 years, one had 15 years, and one had 9 years. The sample also reflected Malaysia's multicultural academic context, comprising four Indian, two Chinese, one Punjabi, and three Malay lecturers. This diversity in professional experience and ethnicity contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of how perpetrators of incivility are perceived across different academic and cultural settings in private universities.

Table 1
Participants' Profile

Participant	Age (years)	Education Background	Position	Work experiences (years)	Gender	Race
P1	43	PhD	Senior Lecturer	12	Female	Indian
P2	49	PhD	Senior Lecturer	17	Female	Indian
P3	48	Master's	Senior Lecturer	16	Male	Chinese
P4	40	Master's	Non-Senior Lecturer	10	Female	Punjabi
P5	43	Master's	Senior Lecturer	15	Female	Indian
P6	52	Master's	Non-Senior Lecturer	18	Female	Eurasian
P7	34	PhD	Non-Senior Lecturer	6	Male	Malay
P8	39	PhD	Senior Lecturer	8	Female	Malay
P9	33	PhD	Non-Senior Lecturer	7	Female	Malay
P10	41	Master's	Non-Senior Lecturer	12	Female	Indian

Data Analysis

This study employed detailed semi-structured interviews to explore lecturers' perceptions and experiences of perpetrators of workplace incivility in private universities. The semi-structured format allowed participants to share reflections on how incivility is enacted, who tends to perpetrate it, and how such behaviours are interpreted within academic settings.

This approach facilitated the collection of rich and personalised insights into the outward behaviours and underlying attitudes of those who instigate incivility (Patton, 2002), as well as the participants' cognitive and emotional responses to these experiences (Merriam, 2001). Follow-up probing questions were used during interviews to clarify meanings, deepen understanding, and reduce the likelihood of misinterpretation. The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method well-suited to identifying recurring patterns and categories within qualitative data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). The analysis followed an inductive approach, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data while remaining aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Andersson and Pearson's (1999) Spiraling Theory of Incivility. This framework provided ideas to interpret how minor acts of disrespect by perpetrators may escalate into broader patterns of aggression or silence in academic environments. The analysis followed the six steps proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2000): familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This process ensured that the coding and interpretation accurately reflected participants' insights into the behaviours, motivations, and power dynamics of perpetrators within private universities.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted to enhance credibility, whereby participants were invited to review their interview transcripts and confirm the accuracy of interpretations, ensuring that their views on the perpetrators of incivility were represented authentically (Merriam, 2009). Detailed documentation and systematic coding procedures were maintained throughout the analysis to enhance dependability and allow for transparent audit trails. Reflexivity was actively practiced, with the researcher acknowledging personal assumptions and maintaining an open stance toward participants' perspectives to prevent bias in interpreting sensitive issues such as power misuse or subtle forms of disrespect. Transferability was achieved by providing rich, contextual descriptions of academic life within Malaysian private universities, allowing readers to assess the relevance of findings in comparable higher education settings (Merriam, 2002). These steps ensured that the analysis provided a robust, evidence-based understanding of how workplace incivility is perpetrated and sustained within private universities in Malaysia.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout this qualitative study to ensure the protection, dignity, and confidentiality of all participants. Ethical integrity was maintained at every stage of the research process, including participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and reporting (Creswell, 2013). Given the sensitive nature of investigating perpetrators of workplace incivility, special attention was paid to safeguarding participants' anonymity and psychological comfort. The study followed the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association, emphasising informed consent, voluntary participation, and confidentiality. All participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any stage without consequence, and the measures taken to protect their privacy. Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at Universiti Putra Malaysia. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms (P1 to P10) were used, and any identifying details about individuals, universities, or incidents were omitted from the final report. Interviews were conducted only after

participants had reviewed the study information sheet and provided written informed consent. These ethical safeguards ensured that the exploration of incivility and its perpetrators was conducted with transparency, respect, and professional responsibility.

Findings

This study explored the perpetrators of academic incivility among lecturers in selected private universities in Malaysia. The findings revealed that incivility originated from four main sources: students, peers, superiors, and faculty administrators (Figure 1). These perpetrators exhibited behaviours that disrupted interpersonal relationships, undermined academic professionalism, and affected lecturers' emotional well-being and job satisfaction. Table 2 shows the findings from this study. The following sections present examples of these perpetrators and the nature of their actions based on participants lived experiences.

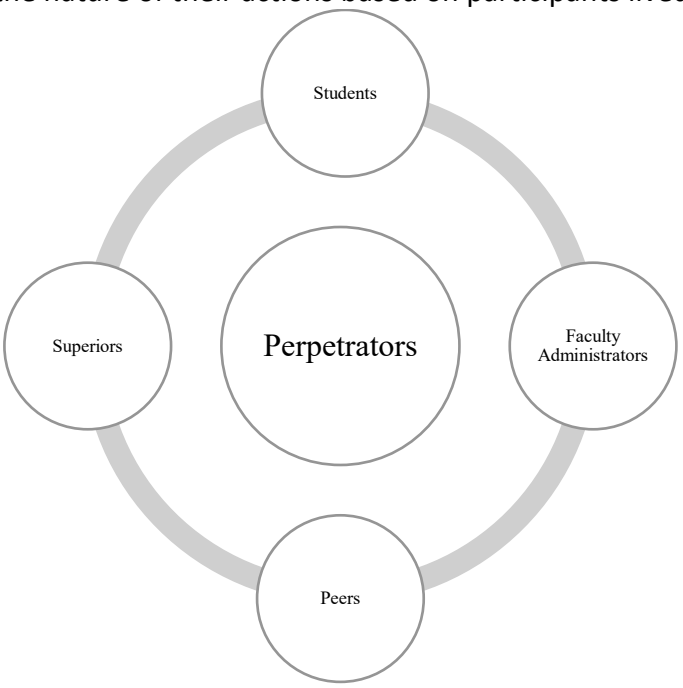

Figure 1: Perpetrators of Workplace Incivility in an Academic Setting

Students as Perpetrators

All 10 participants in this study mentioned that students are one of the main perpetrators of workplace incivility towards lecturers, displaying a range of disrespectful and disruptive behaviours (Table 2) both inside and outside the classroom. Some lecturers reported instances of disruptive behaviour, such as students engaging in romantic acts during lessons despite repeated warnings, which distracted both the lecturer and the rest of the class. Others described being aggressively challenged by students, including one lecturer who was shouted at by a student demanding to leave the class for a smoke break, demonstrating blatant disrespect and aggression. In addition, lecturers experienced rudeness and entitlement in digital communication, where students would send casual and demanding messages through WhatsApp or Microsoft Teams, expecting immediate responses at all hours, especially near examinations. This form of constant digital intrusion reflected a lack of professional boundaries and respect.

In this study, some students exhibited a strong consumerist attitude, believing that lecturers were paid to serve them and thus did not deserve respect, reinforcing a transactional view of

education. Berger (2000) notes that students believe they are in the best position to know what they want and to decide whether the education they are getting is relevant and worthwhile. Students who belong to this consumerist mentality believe they are entitled to something in exchange for the fees that they pay for their education (Berger, 2000). Perceived themselves as customers, students, and parents could put pressure on lecturers to grant their requests and demands, and they might hold them accountable for an unsatisfactory grade (Knepp, 2012b). Part of this consumerism is also when students view higher education as just a place for them to get a degree and not a place for them to get the required education or learn and gain experience.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and smartphones further facilitate misconduct through screenshots, video recordings, and real-time communication (Best & Shelley, 2018; Ramoshaba, 2025). Social media contributes to forms of classroom incivility that disrupt the learning environment (Clark & Springer, 2007). Several lecturers also noted that students used social media platforms to express grievance or shame to lecturers publicly,(Table 2) which not only undermined professional reputation but also highlighted the generational shift in how students manage dissatisfaction. Collectively, these behaviours illustrate how students' incivility can manifest through verbal aggression, digital disrespect, and a sense of entitlement that erodes the academic environment and the lecturer–student relationship.

Peers or Colleagues as Preparators

6 participants indicated that peers or colleagues as perpetrators. Peers refer to fellow lecturers who engage in behaviours that undermine interpersonal relationships and professional collaboration. This includes professional disregard**,** such as jealousy toward other colleagues' success, (Table 2) withholding support, or ignoring emails, as well as disrespectful personal conduct, including rudeness in communication or body shaming. Some participants described situations where colleagues deliberately withheld information or distorted facts to hinder their progress, often driven by envy or fear of being outperformed. Such behaviours, though often subtle, negatively affected lecturers' emotional well-being and motivation, with some considering leaving their institutions in search of a more respectful and supportive work environment. Most employees reported the most incidents of uncivil behaviour from their supervisors, followed by peers and subordinates (Abas & Otto, 2016). Nevertheless, in this study, peer incivility appeared to be less prevalent in private universities, as many lecturers reported only occasional or minor instances of such behaviours.

Faculty Administrators and Perpetrators

Within private universities, structural power relations appear in incivility from multiple directions, including faculty administrators and superiors. Faculty-to-faculty interactions are often rated as particularly harmful, with reported behaviours such as setting colleagues up for failure, issuing disparaging remarks, and engaging in personal attacks or threats (Clark et al., 2013). Faculty administrators were identified as perpetrators of workplace incivility, particularly through imposing unrealistic deadlines and demonstrating authoritative practices that disregarded lecturers' professional autonomy (Table 2). For instance, some administrators demanded early completion of marking within an unreasonably short time frame, disrupting lecturers' planned schedules and creating unnecessary stress. Participants reported that such expectations were often justified as fulfilling students' requests, yet they

placed an unfair burden on academic staff. In addition, authoritative practices manifested as rudeness, lack of respect, and disregard for organizational protocols, such as failing to use proper salutations or acknowledge the lecturers' positions. These behaviours conveyed a lack of professional courtesy and eroded trust, contributing to an environment where lecturers felt undervalued and unsupported by the administrative staff.

Superior as Perpetrators

Superiors as perpetrators refer to immediate leaders such as Heads of School, Program or Academic Leaders, or Deans who misuse their positional authority, creating incivility for lecturers. Examples include misuse of authority, such as targeting or harassing staff, sometimes exploiting personal circumstances to intimidate or manipulate them; bias and favoritism, where superiors grant preferential treatment to some staff while obstructing or ignoring others in matters of training, promotions, or resource allocation; lack of trust and empathy, including unreasonable expectations, forcing staff to work under difficult conditions without consideration for personal circumstances, and constant monitoring that fosters an unhealthy, distrustful work environment; and student-centric decision-making, (Table 2) where student complaints are prioritized over lecturers' concerns, adding further inequity and stress. Student-centric refers to a situation in private universities where students are given more power and priority than lecturers. Interviews from all ten participants revealed that management tends to support and trust students more than lecturers, and when issues occur, lecturers are often blamed first instead of students. This creates an imbalance that undermines lecturers' authority and contributes to feelings of unfairness and incivility in the workplace.

In addition, instigators are those who provoke uncivil behaviour toward co-workers who play a significant role in perpetuating workplace incivility. Instigators may act intentionally or unintentionally, and they are often of higher status than their targets. Their actions are frequently overlooked due to strong performance records, making their incivility less visible (Pearson et al., 2000). They possess advanced interpersonal skills, enabling them to maintain positive appearances with superiors while engaging in demeaning behaviours, such as belittling lower-level employees, disrespecting peers behind their backs, or expressing annoyance toward anyone who challenges them (Pearson & Porath, 2005). Research indicates that instigators of workplace incivility are three times more likely to have higher status and power than the target and are more than twice as likely to be male (Pearson et al., 2000; Zurbrügg & Miner, 2016). These behaviours reinforce hierarchical power dynamics and contribute to a pervasive culture of incivility in academic settings.

Table 2
Findings and Quotes from this Study

Perpetrator Category	Examples of Uncivil Behaviour	Illustrative Quotes from Participants
Students	Disruptive behaviour in class	*Ahh okay, let me explain what happened is when I teach this module so she actually coupled up with this international… international boy and every time they will sit together they will romance together in the class so when… "laughs" So when I already warn them already tell them this is the classroom and we have 100 over students here and everyone needs to look at you and you are really distracting the class. You are not allowed… Even it's disturbing me because I cannot concentrate, I cannot talk to the students… I cannot deliver my lecture correctly, so there is a 1 or 2 time I chased them out from the class, I tell them if you are… after warn them for several times, I asked them OK leave the class because I cannot continue. Class will be continuously doing or showing the… the romance scene in the class*
	Challenging lecturers aggressively	*I had a student who yelled and shouted at me when I told him that I needed to take attendance, and …. I was teaching in an International School, I told the student just hold on for five minutes because I needed the principal who was supposed to come in and give them some kind of…. Well, I do not know was it a… a feedback or give them some instructions on the next agenda. So, this boy, he stood up, he yelled at me, and he said that I'm a smoker. I need to smoke. He really yelled at me. So, I was taken aback and looked at him and I said of course, as a human being, I wanted to punch his face. I wanted to tell him things that, you know, you remember for the rest of his life. But my profession stopped me there. But the very next moment class went on as usual. I called him out as usual to answer questions. It did not disturb me. Because it… it reflects your attitude, not my attitude. So yeah…*
	Sending rude or demanding messages	*This is not the way how our students are communicating to lecturers… but the how the student are communicating to us… hey, miss can you do this for me? Hey, miss, I have done this part, can you check… Hey, miss, I have submitted this pat can you check. From students currently, now we are all attached to teams and WhatsApp, so I do have WhatsApp groups with them for easier communication, but they tend to misuse it la. Because they will harass you. They will continuously keep on texting you, especially when*

		it's final, exam day and night. They will continuously text you and ensure that you reply. No doubt I will tell them this is just a mode of communication until certain weeks, I'll help you. But, towards the final you I, I don't want to brief anything and confuse anyone. But they will start just texting and texting until you reply. It can be on Teams or WhatsApp; it'll be just flooded with messages
	Consumerist Attitude	*Why should I respect my lecturers? Because they are my lecturer, they are paid to do their work. So why should I, like greet them? And I don't need to do that because I have equal rights in whatever I'm doing and so on.*
	Posting disrespectful comments on social media	*Uh, we have come across my student actually expose their dissatisfaction very openly using the social media platform to shame… some.. whatever bad experience that they've had or to speak bad about certain people or certain parties….And so so… I... I... I personally have not heard what you've written about me, but where the institution that I worked for, or maybe people that I know of, they have actually shamed. I don't know what's the term they use and social media shaming them in social media and so on. So again, like I told you, the generation. OK, the generation influenced and they have got too many platform to just voice out what they want to.*
Peers	Professional Disregard (Jealousy towards colleagues' success, Lack of Peer Support, Ignoring emails)	*Oh, I forgot to mention about this peers that I went through also there was one some of my peers I'm not sure sometimes they… They distort like they they do not really give me sufficient information because either they dislike me go climbing up the ladder, or either they are just they just don't want me to, you know, work well. I'm not sure…But uh, but yes, it it does. Did happen in in the verge of, they just don't want to see me overriding them that's all.*
	Disrespectful personal Conduct (rudeness in communication, body shaming	*Most of the time I feel like leaving. Because, I'm not happy with the environment, I'm not happy with the environments, not because of their organisations. Organisations, is another part. But, for, for this uncivilization yes. This is one of the factors. One of the factors that make me feel like I, I'm, I'm, I'm planning to leave because of I want to get a, a better culture, a better environment which is can value people or accordingly to what they deserve to right instead of body shaming, incivility or whatever.*
Faculty Administrators	Imposing Unrealistic Deadlines	*In two days', time you said you have to finish your marking. And one thing is about the early*

		marking. And I believe that, early marking shouldn't be done in any universities, right? Just because you want to because you want to, to what, to, to make students and to just to fulfill what student wish for, and then you put the that that burden to your, to your lecturers. And I believe that this is should. This is not, not the right way la. alright for early marking because early markings around is all but something that we are not predicted to be happen, isn't it?... We, we cannot somehow, we know, the marking will be about one month, three weeks, but suddenly receive notice, okay. For this student we, we want you to do an early marking by in two days in three days. What is this? We do have our own time. We know, we have, we already planned when to do our marking and so on, but this is really, not right la, from admin.
	Authoritative Practice	*Besides that, like from administrator's OK admin staff. I also have experience whereby you know, normally in academic institution or in higher learning institutions we respect lecturers. So, we expect the admin staffs or the administrators to have some: form of respect towards the lecturers. And I I've gone through situations or scenarios where when you ask the administrators, they're quite rude to you. They don't know who they are talking to and, they don't follow protocols or salutations, when they sent emails, and so I… I find it a bit uncivilized alright when you actually deal with people within your organisation and you have to know what are the ranks and names which comes along with it and in terms of superior*
Superiors	Misuse of Authority	*Let me share that. That this is also from my previous institution where the superior who actually hold the position as a dean has been sexually harassed many female colleagues during his position or using his position as dean. He will try to target the people who are actually went through the divorce or maybe the single… he tried to approach them so whenever they're not agree with them then he will start to find out the way to torture them. Yeah, and there is some situation we have seen that the married couple tried to have affair with him due to this reason because they don't want to go through.*
	Bias Superiors	*They are not helping staff out in most cases, especially if the staff is not favourable to them. Because my another colleague went to ask for a for a for an allocation for a training, she got it immediately. Oh, but to me they they query a lot*

		and they say it's irrelevant and whereas it was just about… the… the… the training was about 300 ringgit. What's so big deal going for 300 ringgit? There's no allocation, they said. University is not doing well, there's no allocation for store for this kind of thing. So, the other the Vice Chancellor and the HR director support him so she gets the senior lecturer position. But when I asked why I did not get, they refused to give me an answer. So, I confronted three of them and I bang the table and I asked them. I said I need an answer. So, they gave me one stupid answer saying that, uh, uh, because I did not write the application letter properly.
	Lack of Trust and Empathy	*I mean I, I don't have motivation to work in this kind of organisation because one of my colleagues was like, even though she was pregnant, she was forced to work. There was no consideration that she's near to her due date and there was no consideration on that, so nobody really bothers about those kind of thing and even they check if they if your superior doesn't like you or superior plays favoritism, they will monitor you. They will, they basically don't will not have any form of trust, so you just feel the environment is totally unhealthy. You are being observed, you are not… Nobody trusts you even… even if you…you know, tell the truth and what happened is at the end of the day, there's no trust on both parties. There's no reciprocal trust on each other really because the…. the management create the scenario of such, so nobody is actually engaged with their work or with the organisation.*
	Student Centric	*For them, students is always right. Umm. Even any complaints come in, they will first confirm the student and they will try to support them first and then only the lecturer comes in. So, it all depends. There'll be one or two individuals who need who actually listen to the lecturers. I think so because if they don't support the students, they won't get enough intake. That's what I feel.*

Discussion

This study reveals that workplace incivility in private universities in Malaysia extends beyond individual misconduct and is linked to organisational structures, leadership practices, and shifting power dynamics. Although workplace incivility is defined as a low-intensity deviant behaviour that violates norms of respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999), the findings indicate it has become a persistent issue in higher education. Students have emerged as notable sources of incivility towards lecturers through verbal aggression, disruptive behaviour, and disrespectful digital communication. Such actions are reinforced by a consumerist mindset in

which students view themselves as customers entitled to academic success in return for tuition fees (Berger, 2000; Knepp, 2012), undermining lecturer authority and professionalism. The growing cultural and demographic diversity of students further shapes varying expectations and behaviours, as many are unaccustomed to the courtesies expected in university settings (Knepp, 2012). These dynamics collectively diminish civility within the academic setting, underscoring the need for universities to promote respectful and inclusive learning environments. Peer incivility was also observed, though to a lesser extent. Participants described instances of professional jealousy, exclusion, and lack of support. Some lecturers experienced colleagues withholding information or ignoring communication to gain a competitive edge. While such behaviours may appear minor, they damage teamwork and morale. Like previous studies (Abas & Otto, 2016), these results show that private university environments, often driven by individual performance metrics, can encourage competition over collaboration, indirectly promoting incivility among peers. In addition, faculty administrators were identified as contributors to incivility through their administrative decisions and communication styles. Lecturers reported unrealistic deadlines, rigid procedures, and disrespectful interactions from administrative staff. These incidents reflect structural incivility, where organisational processes and managerial priorities indirectly harm staff well-being. Pressure to satisfy students' demands or meet organisational targets often leads administrators to disregard lecturers' autonomy and workload balance. Such findings support Clark et al. (2013), who note that excessive administrative control and lack of professional courtesy contribute to a culture of incivility in higher education. The study further highlights superiors including deans, heads of schools, and programme leaders, as major perpetrators of workplace incivility. Participants reported bias, favouritism, lack of empathy, and misuse of authority. Some superiors were said to exploit their position to intimidate or exclude certain staff, while others prioritised student complaints over lecturers' perspectives. This student-centric approach creates an environment where lecturers' voices are undervalued, leading to frustration and emotional exhaustion. These findings support previous work by Awai et al. (2021) and Zhang (2021), which emphasises that ineffective policy enforcement and power imbalances enable incivility from superiors to persist without consequences. Taken together, these findings suggest that workplace incivility in private universities is a systemic issue rooted in organisational structures rather than isolated interpersonal conflicts. Hierarchical power, weak governance, and poor policy enforcement allow disrespectful behaviour to continue unchallenged. The absence of clear mechanisms for reporting and addressing incivility further discourages lecturers from speaking up. This supports Demsky's (2019) view that power can be used to label dissenting voices as "uncivil," silencing individuals of lower status and protecting those in authority. From a management perspective, these findings highlight the need for stronger organisational governance and leadership accountability in private universities. Policies addressing incivility should go beyond interpersonal communication and include clear procedures for reporting, investigating, and resolving incidents. Training programmes that promote authentic and ethical leadership can also help superiors manage conflict constructively and model civil behaviour. Furthermore, universities should balance student-centred approaches with respect for academic professionalism to ensure fairness and protect lecturers' dignity.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the Spiraling Theory of Incivility by examining the sources of incivility within private universities in Malaysia. Andersson and Pearson's theory suggests that incivility

escalates through reciprocal interactions; however, this study reveals that incivility often originates from multiple perpetrators, superiors, students, peers, and faculty administrators and does not always provoke immediate retaliation. Superiors were identified as the primary instigators, with students emerging as the second-largest source, followed by peers and administrators. The findings demonstrate that incivility can be one-directional, influenced by hierarchical structures, cultural norms of respect for authority, and institutional practices that inadvertently tolerate or reinforce uncivil behaviour. By highlighting these contextual factors, the study extends the Spiraling Theory, showing that incivility dynamics are shaped not only by interpersonal exchanges but also by structural and cultural constraints.

Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, the findings emphasise the urgent need for private universities to address incivility through targeted interventions. Policies must explicitly identify and manage all potential sources of incivility, including superiors, peers, administrators, and students. Leadership training should focus on ethical, respectful, and culturally sensitive management practices, while student orientation and codes of conduct should promote civility and professional communication. Additionally, universities should establish transparent reporting mechanisms and accountability structures to reduce tolerance of uncivil behaviours. By addressing incivility at its sources and aligning interventions with both hierarchical and cultural realities, universities can foster a more respectful and psychologically safe academic environment.

Conclusion

This study identifies the main perpetrators of workplace incivility against lecturers in private universities in Malaysia, showing that superiors and students are the most significant contributors. Students display uncivil behaviour through classroom disruptions, aggressive challenges, excessive messaging, consumerist attitudes, and social media shaming, often undermining academic authority. Peers engage in professional disregard, lack of support, and personal disrespect, while faculty administrators impose unrealistic deadlines and adhere to bureaucratic management practices. Superiors misuse authority, demonstrate bias, show limited trust and empathy, and prioritise student interests over lecturers' well-being, creating a climate of favouritism and emotional strain. Overall, workplace incivility is subtle yet pervasive, amplified by hierarchical structures, cultural norms of deference, and market-driven pressures in private universities. Lecturers cope through avoidance, informal support, or contemplation of resignation, highlighting the emotional and professional toll. The findings underscore the urgent need for formal anti-incivility policies, communication and conflict management training, and mental health support. Future studies could undertake comparative research across countries to examine how cultural norms, organisational structures, and leadership practices influence workplace incivility in higher education. Such comparisons could help identify effective strategies and good practices from international contexts that promote civility, respect, and well-being among lecturers.

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