

Exploring Cyber Incivility Characteristics Among Malaysian Employees in Service Industry

Ida Rosnita Ismail

UKM-Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor Institute of HRMO, Hamburg University of Technology, Germany
Corresponding Author Email: idarosnita@ukm.edu.my

Farah Aishah binti Kamaruddin

UKM-Graduate School of Business, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor

Rosmah Mat Isa

Faculty of Economics and Management, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi, Selangor

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Abstract

Information and communication technology is facilitating the ability of employees to communicate and collaborate on digital platforms that are readily available and efficient. Although digital technology offers many advantages to users, it can also result in cyber incivility. The objective of this study is to investigate the comprehension of the attributes of cyber incivility experienced by employees in Malaysia. The study employs a qualitative methodology and involves semi-structured interviews. The data for this study were gathered from a sample of 20 individuals employed in the service industry. The results suggest that the WhatsApp platform is commonly utilized for work-related purposes in addition to email. Moreover, Malaysian employees utilize video conferencing platforms and in-organization messaging tools such as Slack and Telegram for communication purposes. The study also discovered that cyber incivility manifests both actively and passively within organizations. While a majority of the employees were able to distinguish cyber incivility from other cyber misbehaviour, they also described distinct attributes of cyber incivility, which differed slightly from the cyber incivility indicators established in other research. These features were partly shaped by cultural factors typified by collectivism, low uncertainty avoidance, acceptance of high power distance, and an inclination to be compliant.

Keywords: Active Cyber Incivility, Passive Incivility, Digital Platform, Information and Communication Technology, Qualitative

Introduction

The result of innovation and technological development has caused digital communication to be widely used in business. Organizations use digital communication to empower employees to connect with each other more effectively and efficiently as well as to disseminate and exchange information with customers more easily and quickly. Although digital communication dates back to the introduction of the telephone in 1849, it has now expanded in the form of email, wearable technology, and augmented reality (Rogers, 2019). Seel (2022) further coins the concept of digital universe when referring the global adoption of digital communication.

In Malaysia, digital communication is central to achieving the aspirations of a technology-driven high-income country. Various efforts and initiatives were introduced by the government to organizations through the Malaysian Digital Economy Action Plan (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). However, the advancement of digital technology does not eliminate workplace misbehavior such as cyber incivility. For example, past studies found that digital communication that was wrongly used led to cyber bullying Rosli et al (2021), cyber stalking Hamin and Rosli (2017), and cyber aggression (Fitriana et al., 2020). These high-intensity negative behaviours have been discussed widely by past researchers compared to the low-intensity negative behaviours. Nonetheless, the low-intensity negative behavior such as cyber incivility was found to have a significant impact on organizations and employees (e.g., McCarthy et al., 2020; Williams, 2020; Xiao et al., 2023).

Moreover, the Hays Asia Salary Guides Survey (2024) found that Malaysian employees increasingly prioritize a good work-life balance and a good fit with managers and colleagues over salary to stay at their current organization. However, cyber incivility could degrade employees' ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance and disrupt their overall performance. For example, Park and Haun (2018) found that cyber incivility leads to insomnia and job withdrawal. Similarly, Yuan et al (2020); Zhou et al (2022) found that employees who experienced passive cyber incivility ruminate over the instigator's intentions, as it is ambiguous in terms of harm, thus disrupting their sleep health and effort to complete work-related goals. Given the detrimental effects of cyber incivility, it is important to reduce its occurrence as employees shift towards a more positive and harmonious working environment, thereby enhancing employee well-being, satisfaction, and retention.

Cyber incivility is defined as communicative behaviour that is impolite, insensitive, disrespectful, and violates the norms of mutual respect at the workplace through computer or other digital platforms such as e-mail, WhatsApp, and Telegram that occur directly or indirectly (Aljawarneh et al., 2020; De Gagne et al., 2016; Kamaruddin et al., 2021; Lim and Teo, 2009). Previous studies have found that cyber incivility negatively affected employees. For example, employees who experienced cyber incivility tend to collect and intendedly hide information from co-workers or top management (Aljawarneh et al., 2020); had low job satisfaction, displayed the tendency to misbehave at the workplace, and intended to quit their jobs Lim and Teo (2009); and had low performance (McCarthy et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). From the emotional aspect, past studies found that these employees experienced emotional instability Park et al (2015), depression Kim et al (2020) and emotional exhaustion (Kim et al., 2020; Xiao et al., 2023). Cyber incivility also has ripple effects on employees' personal lives. Park et al (2015) found that cyber incivility increases both affective and physical distress on

the day it took place and this affective and physical distress continued until the next day. In addition, Park and Haun (2018) found that cyber incivility experienced by employees at the end of weekdays could affect their domestic partners, which resulted in both to avoid works in the following week.

In terms of context, previous studies on cyber incivility have mostly studied in Western countries e.g. Niven et al (2022); McCarthy et al (2020) since Lim and Teo (2009) introduced the concept of cyber incivility nearly two decades ago. It also has attracted researchers from other countries such as Jordan Aljarwaneh et al (2022), Turkiye Mert et al (2023), Indonesia Febriana and Fajrianti (2019), South Korea Kim et al (2020) and China Xiao et al (2023) to investigate this negative work behavior. In Malaysia, cyber incivility study has not been fully explored. However, Kamaruddin et al (2021) found that cyber incivility occurs among employees in Malaysia with majority of them reporting having experienced cyber incivility than instigating it.

Interestingly, Kamaruddin et al (2021) also found that several respondents who were interviewed mentioned that cyber incivility is not a wrong doing, rather it is considered as a norm. Their responses were based on items taken from the adaptation of Lim and Teo's measurement scale (2009) by (Krishnan, 2016). The results reported by Kamaruddin et al (2021) suggested that the concept of cyber incivility must be revisited from the perspective of Malaysian employees. In other words, the concept introduced by Lim and Teo (2001) has been generally accepted, but the characteristics of cyber incivility defined by the Malaysian employees are different from the original ones. Thus, the objective of this study is to explore the Malaysian employees' understanding of cyber incivility characteristics.

This study has several contributions. First, it contributes to the expansion of theoretical knowledge about cyber incivility in the workplace. Most studies use the concept pioneered by (Lim and Teo, 2009). However, the present study shows that there are variations in the understanding of the concept among Malaysian employees. Second, cyber incivility characteristics identified in this study show that the perspective formation of cyber incivility among Malaysian employees is influenced by socio-cultural factors. Hence, it suggests that it is not possible to adopt the original concept fully. Third, the characteristics of cyber incivility identified in this study can also be used as guidelines for future researchers in building more accurate measurement items to measure cyber incivility in the workplace. In addition, the results of this study can assist the management, especially human resource practitioners in Malaysian workplaces, to formulate appropriate action plan to overcome cyber incivility at the workplace.

The next section will discuss the concept of cyber incivility, its characteristics and cultural influences based on previous studies. It is followed by the methodology and results of the study. Finally, this study presents discussion, implications, and suggestions as well as conclusions.

Literature Review

Cyber Incivility and Types

Incivility in the workplace can occur either in physical interactions or on information and communication technology platforms. Workplace incivility that includes rude and impolite behavior through information and communication technologies such as e-mail, instant

messaging, text messaging, and video conferencing is known as cyber incivility (Giumetti et al., 2012). Cyber incivility is different from other forms of cyber deviance such as cyber harassment, cyber bullying, and cyber aggression (Hershcovis, 2011; Weatherbee and Kelloway, 2006; Whitty and Carr, 2006). While cyber harassment has a high intensity and is intentional, cyberbullying is intentional, repetitive cyber harassment that targets vulnerable individuals (Hershcovis, 2011; Whitty and Carr, 2006). These two forms of cyber deviance are different from cyber incivility because the latter is not necessarily intentional or repeated. As for cyber attack, it is defined as a communication attack between two or more people where an individual in the communication attacks another person and causes harm through information and communication technology (Weatherbee and Kelloway, 2006).

Even if the incivility is low in intensity, employees who feel victimized may retaliate by engaging in uncivil behavior. For example, employees who experience incivility at work will have less respect for other employees, and further cause more aggressive behavior and create a work environment surrounded by mistrust (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Although the effect of incivility that occurs online is expected, its ambiguous presence is more complex than face-to-face incivility. It is because the receiver has the potential to misinterpret emotions in text messages as a result of the absence of a person's tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language (McCarthy, 2016). Additionally, employees may also misinterpret unanswered digital communication queries or when the recipient takes a long time to provide feedback as a way for the recipient to show anger or resentment (McCarthy, 2016). Unlike face-to-face interactions, the carbon copy capabilities of e-mails further complicated the problem. According to Giumetti et al (2013), a carbon-copied e-mail sent to another employee's supervisor as a way to emphasize the importance of an issue is considered a trigger for cyber incivility. When this situation occurs, individual employees will tend to ponder or read rude e-mails repeatedly to understand the meaning, the causes, and the consequences before responding to the e-mail (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Lim and Teo (2009) put forward an operational definition of cyber incivility as behavior carried out via e-mail by supervisors against employees that is considered to violate the norm of mutual respect. These researchers listed 14 impolite behaviors performed via email as the items to measure cyber incivility. These items include saying something offensive via e-mail, inserting sarcastic or mean comments between paragraphs, sending e-mails in a disrespectful or rude tone, using capital letters, not replying to e-mails, and using e-mail when face-to-face interactions are more appropriate. These items are further classified into two forms, namely active and passive cyber incivility.

Active cyber incivility refers to the act of communicating via e-mail, or other online channels that are directly and openly targeted at the victim, such as inserting sarcastic comments, demeaning others, and saying something hurtful (Febriana and Fajrianti, 2022; Lim and Teo, 2009). It also includes the use of all capital letters when writing e-mails (Yuan et al., 2020). In this case, the message is understood as speaking loudly or shouting, expressing anger, and exhorting. There are also behaviors that occur more subtly and are not obvious to a person. Among the examples of this behavior are ignoring received e-mails, reading received e-mails but not replying to the e-mails, and replying to e-mails with a single word (Febriana and Fajrianti, 2022; Yuan et al., 2020). McCarthy (2016) also explained that the use of emojis in digital communication reflects a passive-aggressive attitude, while covert copying can be

interpreted as gossiping or spreading rumours. Examples of this behavior are known as passive cyber incivility (Lim and Teo, 2009).

Between the two types of cyber incivility, active cyber incivility is more frequently reported to occur than passive cyber incivility (Lim and Teo, 2009). This frequent occurrence is attributed to the use of text-based electronic channels where there is no tone or visual aids such as body language and eye contact; use of inappropriate words; and font type, size, and color that give different perceptions of intent or information to the recipient when reading the message (Williams, 2020). Therefore, active cyber incivility is more likely to occur when employees interact through digital mediums. However, passive cyber incivility still needs to be addressed because it can affect employees, too. For example, Yuan et al (2020) reported that passive cyber incivility led to an insomnia effect on employees due to failure to clearly evaluate the act, which caused them to think about it at night.

Cyber Incivility and Culture

Culture plays an important role because it influences social norms and individual behavior to distinguish whether an action is appropriate or not (Isa et al., 2019). In studying and understanding workplace culture, the framework that is often used is the national culture framework introduced by Hofstede (Soares et al., 2007). This framework, which contains five cultural dimensions (i.e., individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and long-term orientation), is suitable for understanding the communication patterns of a society (Hofstede, 2015).

Individualism is a cultural dimension that refers to how people values themselves and their organizations (Hofstede, 2001). Individuals who have a high value of individualism place a high importance on personal rights, freedom and equality in relationships, equal power, and practice a "do it yourself" attitude compared to individuals who have a low value of individualism (Hofstede, 1991). Although Zawawi (2009) found that there are Malays who are individualistic, Malaysian society in general is a collectivist society Hofstede (2015) that is more concerned with groups. Ghazali et al (2017) explained that Malaysian society is collectivist because they consider it as an exchange for membership and loyalty to the group. Based on these arguments, it can be assumed that employees in Malaysia pay attention to workplace harmony. Therefore, they are less likely to perceive cyber incivility in the workplace as a negative behavior.

Masculinity, which refers to the nature of society based on social gender, is the second dimension suggested by (Hofstede, 2001). A masculine society is seen as a society that cares about the acquisition of wealth, achievement, success, and assertiveness, while a feminine society cares about quality, lifestyle, and cares for others (Ghazali et al., 2017). According to Hofstede (2015), Malaysia has a masculine and feminine index at a score of 50-50. Therefore, the characteristics of Malaysian society cannot be defined as masculine or feminine (Ghazali et al., 2017). However, Isa et al (2019) explained that the Southeast Asian cultural system is bilateral, which emphasizes women having the same role and social position as men. The notion of equal position among male and female employees does not rule out the existence of disrespectful behavior because it depends on the gender composition of employees Miner et al (2012); Schilpzand et al (2016) in a specific job sector (Chaudhary et al., 2022). Thus, the masculine-feminine cultural dimension may not influence the perception of cyber incivility

among employees in Malaysia but the perception of this negative behavior may be influenced by their gender and job sector.

Uncertainty avoidance is the third dimension in Hofstede's cultural framework. It refers to the acceptance of individuals to face uncertainty or ambiguity without feeling threatened, and able to avoid the situation (Hofstede, 1993). People who have low uncertainty avoidance have a more relaxed attitude, are ready to face uncertainty, less aggressive, and more daring to take risks in life, while people who have higher uncertainty avoidance care about life security, and are easily anxious and depressed (Ghazali et al., 2017). According to Hofstede (2015), Malaysia has a low uncertainty avoidance index. This score explains that employees in Malaysia may be more open to accepting small behaviors, such as cyber incivility, that occur in their daily work.

The next cultural dimension is power distance. It is defined as the acceptance of power inequality and authority in a society (Hofstede, 1993). When the power distance is large in a society, it assumes that there is a hidden conflict between those in power and those without power; there is a lot of dependence on the center; and people in power are often unreachable. On the contrary, a society with a small power distance is characterized by agreement and trust between those in power and the powerless; granting equal rights at all levels of society; everyone feels the sense of security because they feel less threatened; and authorities are easy to contact (Hofstede, 1980). Previous studies have found that the relationship between this dimension and incivility in the workplace is significant Chaudhary et al (2022); Moon and Sanchez-Rodriguez (2021), which means that individuals with less power are the targets of incivility of individuals with high power. Since Malaysia is a country with high power distance Hofstede (1980); Kwan et al (2020), employees in Malaysia may accept cyber incivility as something to be expected, especially when it is done by someone with a higher status in the organization.

Long-term orientation is the last cultural dimension in Hofstede's cultural framework. It refers to the cultivation of future reward-oriented values such as perseverance and thrift (Hofstede, 1993). However, if a society cultivates noble values that focus on the needs of the present, such as respecting tradition, preserving face, and fulfilling social obligations, it shows that the society has a short-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). The study of Isa et al (2019) found that the Malay community in general maintains traditions, is sensitive to other people's feelings with the choice of words and actions. Thus, employees in Malaysia, especially Malays, may think that disrespectful cyber behavior is an affront to hereditary traditions. Thus, they tend to refer to small negative behaviors that occur through digital channels as cyber incivility.

Hofstede et al (2010) later extended Hofstede's original framework of culture by including another dimension, which is indulgence. It is the dimension that allows society to find life satisfaction compared to the control over human desire to enjoy a pleasurable life (Hofstede, 2011). Among the characteristics of indulgence is placing importance on friendship, having less moral discipline, and exhibiting a positive attitude (Hofstede et al., 2010). A study by Chudnovskaya and O'Hara (2022) found significant differences in communication patterns between Danish expatriates working in Russia and Russian colleagues due to indulgence. Although there are still no studies related to the culture of indulgence in the context of cyber incivility, Viotti et al (2018) found that the frequency of workplace incivility among nurses in

the United States compared to nurses in Italy is due to indulgence. Because Malaysia is categorized as a country which society tends to comply and focus on short-term needs (Hofstede et al., 2010), cyber incivility is expected to occur but employees can still tolerate it. This cultural dimension can influence their perspective on cyber incivility.

Although Hofstede's framework explains that the behavior of the people of a country is influenced by national culture, the results of a study by Kaasa and Minkov (2020) on 18 countries show that national culture is increasingly converging. It shows that the national culture of each country is becoming similar. Among the factors that make this possible is faster access to the Internet and the sophistication of social networking sites (Barnett, 2011; Ünver, 2018), which allows a community to learn and adapt the culture of other communities. Therefore, the perspective of cyber incivility among employees in Malaysia can also be influenced by this cultural convergence factor.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research method to answer the main research question that requires the researcher to uncover and understand the characteristics of cyber incivility experienced or instigated in the workplace. This method allows the researchers to obtain qualitative data containing spoken or written words obtained from participants (Auerbach and Louise (2003), which subsequently helps the researcher to describe the problem and form a deep understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2012; Silverman, 2013). Data were collected via face-to-face and online semi-structured interviews. Although Malaysia has moved to an endemic phase that allows data collection to be conducted face-to-face, some participants were still comfortable being interviewed online using Zoom or Google Meet. Participants who opted the face-to-face method chose a location outside the office that gave them a sense of comfort and calm to be interviewed. Only a few of the participants chose to be interviewed in the meeting room where they worked. This interview involved 15 female and five male participants who work in the service sector such as the banking industry, information technology, security, utilities, health, cosmetic health, hospitality, and education. Study participants were selected based on two criteria: they were full-time employees, and they communicated and interacted with supervisors, managers, senior management, other employees or customers via e-mail, social media, video conferencing platforms or other virtual channels. Table 1 shows the background of the study participants.

The data collection took six months, from April to September 2022. Each interview session with study participants took 30 to 45 minutes. Interview data was recorded with the participants' prior consent and field notes were taken. Interview questions were developed based on past literature and research gaps to be studied. Among the questions asked are (1) What channels are often used to communicate when you are on duty? (2) Can you describe cyber incivility that occurs in your workplace? and (3) What makes you think the act is considered cyber incivility in the workplace?

Table 1

Profile of Participants

No.	Sex	Age (Years)	Race	Position	Tenure (Years)
P1	Female	29	Malay	Administrative Assistant (Publication)	4
P2	Female	25	Malay	Financial Officer	1
P3	Female	28	Malay	Perfusionist	1
P4	Female	32	Malay	Software Engineer	4
P5	Female	32	Malay	Underwriting Executive	2
P6	Female	44	Malay	Assistant Superintendent	17
P7	Male	32	Malay	Officer	2
P8	Female	32	Malay	Supervisor	3
P9	Female	26	Malay	Administrative Assistant	1
P10	Male	50	Malay	Manager	25
P11	Female	32	Malay	Manager	3
P12	Male	46	Malay	Manager	20
P13	Female	46	Malay	Manager	10
P14	Male	32	Malay	Project Coordinator	6
P15	Female	32	Malay	Executive	5
P16	Female	42	Malay	Executive	8
P17	Female	39	Malay	Manager	14
P18	Male	33	Malay	Executive	5
P19	Female	34	Indian	Team Leader	6
P20	Female	26	Malay	Administrative Assistant	1

Interview data was recorded and transcribed. Next, the transcribed data was analyzed manually using thematic analysis method. Data collection was stopped when the study findings reached the saturation level. The themes produced were then compared with the literature and between the data to get an overview of the characteristics of cyber incivility in the workplace. The validity of these themes was done by two experts in the field of organizational behavior from a local university in Malaysia.

Findings

Communication channels where cyber incivility occurs

The findings of the interview show that the participants use various communication channels when performing their work, namely e-mail, WhatsApp, Telegram, Microsoft Teams, and Slack. However, most participants stated that they use e-mail and WhatsApp more often than other applications. Between these two channels of communication, participants reported that cyber incivility occurred more through WhatsApp than e-mail. It is because e-mail is a formal work communication channel and primarily focused on work-related matters, where there is less room for informal interactions that can escalate into cyber incivility. Among the responses given are as follows:

“This senior manager sent an instruction to his subordinate, a senior executive, through e-mail and “CC” it to me. I think it is an uncivil behavior.” (P2)

"Cyber incivility happened before but not to me personally. It happened in the WhatsApp group." (P3)

"Cyber incivility commonly happens in the WhatsApp group and Telegram. For example, an individual who likes to show off and interrupts other's conversations." (P6)

"I never discuss non-work related issues via e-mail because e-mail is a formal communication tool. I use e-mail only for work. So, this cyber incivility usually happens in WhatsApp, Telegram and other similar applications." (P6)

"There was no [cyber incivility] in the email, and he didn't talk face-to-face. However, it happens inside WhatsApp." (P20)

Participants also explained that cyber incivility occurs when communicating directly using online platforms such as Microsoft Teams. However, this cyber incivility only happens in chat rooms. A participant provided the following response:

"There is [cyber incivility] even in the form of a text. For example, this one customer asked for the payment to be expedited. After talking to my boss, we found out there was another issue that caused the payment to be delayed. But when we explained the issue, he didn't accept it and he continued to attack us in the Microsoft Teams chat room." (P2)

However, the participant stated that cyber incivility through email is an isolated, non-serious case occurring in the workplace. For example:

"I believe there is but not to a serious degree. So no official report was sent to the human resource management department." (P13)

Another participant also mentioned that cyber incivility occurs through work instant messaging applications such as Slack. For example:

"If we use an abusive word in the Slack like 'shit', the system will send an email to our boss to inform him that we used that word." (P19)

In conclusion, cyber incivility occurs more in informal communication channels such as WhatsApp and Telegram. The formation of cyber incivility perception as a non-serious behavior is due to the regulation of user etiquette by the organization and the types of communication channels used. In addition, the absence of official reports related to incidents of cyber incivility to the human resource department indicates to the participants that it is not a case that needs to be taken seriously.

Characteristics of Active and Passive Cyber Incivility

The findings of this study also identify the characteristics of cyber incivility that occurs among employees in Malaysia. The results of the study are categorized according to the characteristics of cyber incivility, namely active cyber incivility and passive cyber incivility.

Active Cyber Incivility

The results of this study show that there are six characteristics of active cyber incivility expressed by the participants. The characteristics are described as follows:

(1) Offensive words

Offensive words refer to messages that are inappropriate and can make the recipients of the message feel bad when reading it.

"From what I understand, cyber incivility is like an act that will make others feel offended. In the Microsoft Teams, for example, employees offend each other because of their dissatisfaction." (P2)

"I think, usually, cyber incivility happens through the use of words that can offend other employees." (P14)

These offensive words also refer to abusive and rude words. Expressing abusive and hurtful words through writing is considered cyber incivility because it has a negative impact on the individual employees. When this happens, it may demotivate the employees and affect their relationships with the perpetrators.

"I have a problem with this one staff. When he is not satisfied with any kind of work, rude and abusive words always came out of his mouth. Words such as fools and stupid are common. So, I feel discouraged and uncomfortable to work with this kind of person." (P20)

"He was angry, cursing through e-mail. For example, if I did something wrong, he should have taught me, instead of getting mad at me by saying the "F" word." (P16)

"If the seniors want to reprimand us, they sometimes use language in abusive manner. When we read the message, the voice tone is a little less appropriate. It could be due to the use of language in texts and e-mails that they sent." (P5)

(2) Selfish or lacking empathy

Selfish and lack of empathy were also described by the study participants. These characteristics are categorized as active cyber incivility because the perpetrator takes the opportunity of electronic channels (i.e., convenience and accessibility) to communicate in a selfish manner by not showing empathy and not respecting the time of other employees.

"In the work context, I think it is like when a boss doesn't respect his employee's time. For example, the boss still calls for work-related matters even when he knows that the employee is on vacation. He still bothers us when there is an unfinished business. This is what I understand about cyber incivility." (P5)

"Cyber incivility refers to disobeying and disrespecting the rules or not having empathy towards someone or something. In addition, these impolite actions include being self-centered when communicating on online media applications." (P7)

(3) Expressing negative emotion

Expressing anger or dissatisfaction via e-mail or other platforms and publicly reprimanding others in large groups gives them the perception that the message is a fault-finding behavior rather than constructive criticism. Thus, it is a characteristic that constitutes active cyber incivility.

“Expressing emotions such as dissatisfaction or anger on social media such as Telegram, WhatsApp or other communication channels used at work. This expressed emotion is intended to let go his anger by displaying or directing the emotion to others.” (P3)

“Reprimand employees in a large WhatsApp group, not in person, for being unhappy. The reprimand seemed to find fault with the employee in the large group.” (P8)

“Usually, when we are affected by the negative emotions, for example anger, without a second thought we would say something inappropriate.” (P13)

(4) Message manipulation

Participants stated that message manipulation is also a reflection of cyber incivility. Manipulation of messages by perpetrators of cyber incivility can be misleading and have a different meaning than the sender’s intended meaning.

“Cyber incivility occurs when we do not show good manners when we are online. For example when I have answered a question asked via e-mail but the recipient later either uses my answer or distorts my answer to blame me.” (P1)

(5) Inappropriate salutation and choice of words

Active cyber incivility described by participants also included inappropriate or informal salutations and introductions. For example, when incorrect salutations and introductions are used but they are not in line with the work context, then it is considered cyber incivility. Inappropriate salutations or introductions, especially those that are too casual or disrespectful, can damage self-image and interfere with effective communication.

“Examples of cyber incivility are the use of an incorrect salutation for someone and no proper introduction when starting a letter to someone else.” (P7)

“I once sent a formal e-mail to a superior, but, unbeknownst to me, the sentence used was actually informal. My boss scolded me for this mistake, and I had to change many sentences at that time. I didn’t realize what I said was impolite.” (P2)

(6) Abbreviations, capital letters, and exclamation marks

Participants emphasized that the use of abbreviations, capital letters, and exclamation marks gave the perception of the received message or email being disrespectful. However, this characteristic is associated with age. For example, older age groups may not fully understand younger people, and younger people give different perceptions when receiving messages from older people.

“In my opinion, the use of short form can be defined as cyber incivility. It is because some groups at some age levels may not understand the essence or content that the younger generations want to convey on social media.” (P7)

“For example, using capital letters in casual conversation is fine but when working or when someone asks about work, or work-related follow-up, or emphasizing something important using capital letters, I think it’s a bit impolite.” (P8)

Passive Cyber Incivility

The results of the interviews showed that uploading sarcastic statuses on social media, delayed or not responding, and sending irrelevant messages are the defining characteristics of passive cyber-incivility.

(1) Uploading a sarcastic status on social media

The act of uploading a status on social media such as on the WhatsApp is seen to be a trend that occurs lately when employees feel dissatisfied at work or when the dissatisfaction is related to work matters. An example given by the participant is a status uploaded with sarcastic message directed at someone. This behavior is seen as passive cyber incivility because the intention of the perpetrator is unclear and creates confusion for colleagues.

“Also, acts like uploading a status on the WhatsApp with a sarcastic message about someone but not directed at that person expressively may be a form of cyber incivility.” (P2)

“I like to see my friend’s status on WhatsApp. The friend usually writes a status that pokes fun at someone.” (P6)

(2) Delayed or no response

Delayed response to important inquiries and no response when receiving e-mails or messages using other cyber communication channels have a negative impact on the quality of an individual's work and will slow down the work process.

“We asked something but he didn’t answer or took a long time to answer. Not half an hour or an hour, but the next day. I think that is rude.” (P5)

“One of the examples that I can share is when I need to get approval for a given job or assignment. An e-mail was sent to the superior but he did not respond to the e-mail.” (P7)

(2) Irrelevant messages and emojis

Participants mentioned that passive cyber incivility was perceived as occurring when male employees shared non-work-related videos for public viewing in large WhatsApp group. According to the participants, among the videos that are considered impolite is sharing videos about polygamy. Participants also emphasized that communication etiquette is important because WhatsApp, which has a large group involving a mix of men and women of various positions and from different departments, are used for work communication. If there is information shared that is not related to work, it is considered inappropriate. In addition, the use of pictures or icons to convey emotions or reactions reflecting cyber incivility will emotionally disturb the other members in the communication channel.

“For example, the rolled eye emoji, the slanted mouth emoji, or even the pig’s nose emoji are inappropriate, and the recipient will refer them as cyber incivility.” (P8)

“Most of the members are either from the headquarters or branches. The group has a mix of men and women, managers and non-managers, as well as executives. There are many messages that we feel are not very relevant, but maybe these people have mistakenly extended or intentionally included something that is

inappropriate. For example, posting videos on polygamy that trigger negative emotions. For us men, it may be ok, but when we are in a group mixed with women, the manners of communicating through cyber channels should be observed. I think this kind of thing should be avoided.” (P12)

“An example of cyber incivility is the use of inappropriate stickers in WhatsApp. It may also be sensitive videos that are included in the communication channel.” (P13)

Table 2

Characteristics of active and passive cyber incivility based on the research results.

Active cyber incivility	Passive cyber incivility
Offensive words	Uploading a sarcastic status on social media
Selfish or lacking empathy	Delayed or no response
Expressing negative emotion	Irrelevant messages and emojis
Message manipulation	
Inappropriate salutation and choice of words	
Abbreviations, capital letters, and exclamation marks	

Table 2 provides a summary of active and passive cyber incivility characteristics derived from this study as described by the participants. There are six characteristics of active cyber incivility and three characteristics of passive cyber incivility.

Discussions

The objective of this study is to explore the understanding of the characteristics of cyber incivility experienced by employees in Malaysia. The findings highlighted that cyber incivility in the workplace occurs in instant messaging applications (e.g., Whatsapp, Slack, and Telegram) and it is not specific to the use of e-mail only. Interestingly, the participants mentioned cyber incivility occurs more frequently on other electronic communication channels than e-mail. It is because e-mail is used as a formal communication channel for most organizations. Some organizations also have implemented regulatory mechanisms to prevent cyber incivility from occurring in formal communication channels.

Most of the participants had a clear view in differentiating cyber incivility from other cyber deviance such as cyber harassment. Only a few participants gave an example of cyber harassment as cyber incivility. For example, one participant referred to cyber bullying when describing his boss’ disrespectful behavior towards subordinates. Another participant referred to cyber-aggressive behavior by customers when his request to expedite payment could not be fulfilled.

In terms of the types of cyber incivility, most participants discussed both active and passive cyber incivility characteristics. However, study participants were more aware of active than passive cyber incivility. It may be because active cyber incivility is more noticeable in participant observation than passive cyber incivility (Xiao et al., 2023). Additionally, individuals may take longer time to passively think about the intentions of the perpetrator of cyber-incivility (Zhou et al., 2022).

The findings of this study also support some of the items constructed by (Lim and Teo, 2009). The item “said something hurtful to you through email” has the most matches with the responses given by the study participants. It includes using words that are offensive, rude, abusive, and disrespectful. Only three items from Lim and Teo (2009) were not mentioned by the participants, namely, “used emails to say negative things about you that he/she would not say to you face-to-face”, “made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you through email” and “put you down or was condescending to you in some way through email”. On the other hand, participants described being selfish, making inappropriate carbon copies, distorting facts, sending messages outside of office hours, using incorrect salutations, using informal language, and using abbreviations as active cyber incivility.

As for Lim and Teo’s (2009) items that refer to passive cyber incivility, only three out of seven items match the participants’ views. These items are “not replying to your email at all”, “ignored a request (e.g., schedule a meeting) that you made through email”, and “paid little attention to a statement made by you through email or showed little interest in your opinion”. Interestingly, participants gave examples of passive cyber incivility that are more relevant to the latest digital communication channels such as WhatsApp. They reported passive cyber incivility occurred when employees uploaded sarcastic statuses, delayed responses, used inappropriate emojis and stickers, and posted distasteful videos in WhatsApp groups. The behavior described does not have a clear definition as to whether it is cyber incivility or not. It depends on how the recipient interprets the intention of the sender of the message.

Although participants did not directly associate cyber incivility with the cultural dimension, the responses given illustrated how the cultural dimension influenced their perception. Based on past studies (e.g., Ghazali et al., 2017; Hofstede, 2015; Hofstede et al., 2010; Isa et al., 2019; Kwan et al., 2020), the Malaysian community with a majority of Malay practices a culture of collectivism, has low uncertainty avoidance, accept a high power distance, focus on a short-term orientation, and tend to be compliant. As almost all participants in this study are Malay employees, they are those who value harmony in the work relationship, and expect disrespectful behavior from their superiors and those around them due to different position level. As such, they tend to tolerate to cyber incivility despite the existence of cyber incivility. Their ability to identify cyber incivility may also be due to cultural convergence (Kaasa and Minkov, 2020) resulting from the use of digital communication (Ünver, 2018).

Implications and suggestions

This study shows that existing perspectives on cyber incivility do not apply in the Malaysian context. Although cyber incivility is seen as similar to its original conceptual definition, employees in Malaysia identify its characteristics differently. Therefore, the existing items developed by Lim and Teo (2009) cannot be used without modification and item adaptation. An alternative step is to build a new measurement instrument to more accurately measure the frequency and impact of cyber incivility in the Malaysian work environment. This study also shows that the perspective of employees in Malaysia about cyber incivility may be influenced by the dimensions of national culture. However, this study only briefly explains the relationship between these concepts. Further empirical studies need to be done to ensure that the relationship between cyber incivility and national culture does exist.

Practically, this study provides an indication to industry practitioners that cyber incivility is one of the negative behaviors that occur in the workplace. Although employees may not take it seriously, past studies have shown that cyber incivility has a negative impact on employees and organizations. Therefore, the management of the organization, especially the human resource practitioners, is urged to take more decisive action to deal with this problem. It can be done by establishing policies and ethical guidelines for online communication in a work environment. To ensure that every individual in the organization follows and practices ethical behavior in accordance with policies and guidelines, management can use the knowledge-attitude-practice or KAP approach. This approach emphasizes the importance of imparting knowledge to employees so that they are more aware of polite and impolite behaviors. Only then this knowledge can change their attitude. When employees have changed their attitude, then their behavior will also change gradually.

Conclusion

Cyber incivility is negative behavior that occurs through digital communication channels such as e-mail, WhatsApp and Telegram. It does not only happen in Western countries, but it is a phenomenon that happens all over the world. The findings of this study demonstrate that cyber incivility also occurs among employees in the service industry in Malaysia. However, their perspective on cyber incivility is different from the original perspective presented by the pioneers of this phenomenon. As such, the existing understanding of cyber incivility needs to be modified to fit the perspective of employees in Malaysia. Overall, the findings of this study contribute to the development of theoretical knowledge as well as further understanding for industry practitioners. Addressing cyber incivility is important in supporting the aspirations of Malaysia MADANI and also as a key driver towards employee well-being, business sustainability, and national progress.

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