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Abstract

This study examined the prevalence of cyber incivility as perpetrated by supervisors, its impact on individuals and the organization. Specifically, we examine whether working adults in Singapore experience cyber incivility when interacting with their supervisors via emails at the workplace. We also examine the impact of receiving uncivil emails from supervisors on employees' work and organizational attitudes. The effect of supervisor's gender on types of cyber uncivil behaviors were also investigated. Results suggested that male supervisors engaged in different kinds of cyber uncivil behaviors compared to female supervisors. Results of our study provided useful insights for researchers and managers in understanding the frequency and importance of email usage between employees and supervisors, as well as the role of information technology in facilitating cyber rudeness at the workplace.

Keywords: Cyber Incivility, Supervisor gender, Emails, Organizational Commitment, Singapore

1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet over a decade ago has changed the way we communicate and interact at the workplace. More specifically, electronic communication systems have been credited with diminishing temporal and physical interactional constraints and increasing horizontal and vertical communication in organizations (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). As well, the ease, speed and efficiency of electronic systems have made it an increasingly popular medium of communication in organizations today (Kahai & Cooper, 2003). In particular, studies suggest that emails are the most preferred and widely used form of electronic communication at the workplace as they facilitate organizational coordination and productivity (Markus, 1994; O'Sullivan & Flanagin, 2003).

Although emails have reaped many benefits for individuals and organizations, using emails to communicate may also be a double-edged sword. Indeed, the increased reliance and dependency on email systems at work have opened up and provided new opportunities and avenues for individuals to engage in incivility at the workplace. Recently, Pearson and Porath (2005: p. 7) noted that the complexity of fast-paced, high tech interactions facilitated by emails may feed incivility as people "believe that they don't have time to be 'nice' and that impersonal modes of contact do not require courtesies of interaction". Despite the pervasiveness of email usage at the workplace and its potential erosive impact on workplace interpersonal norms of interaction, not much

research has been devoted to examining uncivil email encounters or cyber incivility at the workplace.

In this study, we define cyber incivility as communicative behavior that are exhibited in the context of computer-mediated interactions and that violate workplace norms for mutual respect. As well, consistent with the definition used in previous incivility research (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001; Pearson & Porath, 2005), there may or may not be an intention on the part of the perpetrator of the cyber behavior to cause harm. Although the intent to harm may be ambiguous, the spillover effect of an uncivil interpersonal workplace encounter on others as well as the organization should not be underestimated.

Andersson and Pearson (1999) found that nearly 94% of the targets they examined described their uncivil encounters to someone else at the workplace or outside of work. As well, employees who perceived themselves to be victims of workplace incivility reportedly decreased work efforts, stopped offering assistance to newcomers and coworkers, and reduced their contributions to the organization (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001). Productivity was also affected as victims lost work time worrying about the incident that occurred, and/or about potential future interactions with the perpetrator (Pearson & Porath, 2005). These findings suggest that *perceptions* of employees at the receiving end of workplace incivility encounters play an important role in influencing how victims evaluate and respond towards the incident.

Salin (2003) explained that regardless of the intention of the perpetrator, the victim's subjective perceptions of the behaviors constitute an important element in any assessment of workplace incivility. Recently, Penney & Spector (2005) also suggested that workplace incivility is largely concerned with the victim's perspective and reactions. Indeed, extant studies focusing on interpersonal mistreatment largely examined the target's own perceptions, rather than the intentions of the instigator, and found that the victim's perception of the "uncivil behaviors", bullying or mistreatment were strongly associated with outcomes such as reduced productivity, commitment and absenteeism (e.g., Zellars, Tepper & Duffy, 2002). In accord with previous studies therefore, this research focuses on the individuals' perception of their perpetrator's cyber behaviors and its impact at the workplace.

Although subtle, cyber incivility is not an issue of triviality. Anecdotal evidence and practitioner reports suggest that uncivil email encounters are prevalent in organizations (Sun, 2005). For instance, 50% of employees have reportedly experienced cyber incivility at the workplace and a further 25% said they knew of coworkers who regularly receive uncivil emails (Novell, 1997). Another more recent poll noted that 45% of employees have reported an upward trend in occurrences of cyber incivility at the workplace (Evans, 2003). Conlin (2002) found that cyber incivility via emails is four times more prevalent than through voice mails and discussion forums at the workplace. This finding is hardly surprising since emails have been found to be the most commonly and widely used form of electronic communication at the workplace (Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Kahai & Cooper, 2003).

While experiences of cyber incivility affect the individuals directly, it is notable that cyber incivility can be detrimental to the organization as well. A staggering amount of US $5 billion in health costs has been estimated to have been incurred by organizations due to stress-related illnesses experienced by victims of rude emails (Evans, 2003). This is consistent with recent reports suggesting that negative online interactions are likely to generate a stronger adverse effect on victims compared to traditional face-to-face or telephone encounters. This is because in negative online interactions especially via emails, individuals lack the opportunity to seek immediate clarification or obtain dynamic feedback as the recipients may be separated from the senders physically, geographically and possibly, temporally (Sipior and Ward, 1999).

To the extent that cyber incivility is prevalent at the workplace, affects employees' productivity and entails costs for the organizations, it is important to understand the prevalence of cyber incivility at work as well as its impact on employees and the organization. With this knowledge, managers can then design and implement effective organizational intervention programs and policies to limit, or even, prevent the occurrence of cyber rudeness behaviors at work.

2. Objective of Study

The aim of this study is to examine the prevalence of cyber incivility as perpetrated by supervisors, and its impact on individuals and the organization. Specifically, we examine whether working adults in Singapore experience cyber incivility when interacting with their supervisors via emails at the workplace. As well, we examine the impact of receiving uncivil emails from supervisors on employees' work and organizational attitudes. The frequency and importance of using emails to communicate with supervisors at the workplace will also be examined. Results of this study will provide insights for researchers and managers in understanding the frequency and importance of email usage between employees and supervisors, as well as the role of information technology in facilitating cyber rudeness at the workplace.

3. Method & Respondents

Data were collected via questionnaire surveys. Potential participants were selected by drawing a random, stratified (by industry) sample from a list of company directories. A short briefing was then conducted at the various organizations which agreed to participate prior to the distribution of the survey package. This package contained a cover letter, the survey instrument, and a stamped reply envelope. Respondents were requested to return the completed surveys in the sealed envelope that was provided. Through this process, 250 surveys were distributed.

Respondents comprised 192 business executives and professionals (response rate of 77%) from organizations in a wide variety of industries. In particular, 42% of the respondents were employed in organizations in the finance industry, while 35.2% were from the service industry. The remaining 22.8% came from the manufacturing, construction, transport, information technology and education industries. Sixty-three percent of

respondents were women. The average age of the respondents was 30 years (SD = 7.4) and the average years of work experience was 8 years (SD = 7.7). Forty percent of the respondents were married. Majority of the respondents were Chinese (92%) while Malays, Indians and other ethnic minorities comprised 4%, 3% and 1% respectively. Approximately 83% of respondents had at least a diploma or a bachelor's degree.

4. Results

4.1 Reported Frequency and Importance of Email Communications at Work

Figure 1 summarizes the reported frequency of email exchanges between employees and their supervisors at the workplace. Respondents were asked to indicate the average number of work-related emails that they receive from, and send to, their supervisors on a work day.

Results in Figure 1 suggest that majority of respondents (42%) receive an average of 4 to 6 work-related emails from their supervisors in a work day, while 47% reported sending an average of 1 to 3 work-related emails to their supervisors in a work day. Taken together, these results suggest that in general, majority of employee-supervisor dyads in the Singapore workforce exchanged about five to nine emails at the workplace on a typical work day.

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These figures put emails as the second most frequently used communication channel between employees and supervisors. Indeed, as shown in Figure 2, 30% of respondents reported that they used emails most often to communicate with their supervisors while at work. Face-to-face communication was ranked first, with 40% of respondents reporting that face-to-face contact was used most frequently when interacting with their supervisors at work. Office phones and mobile phones were ranked third (17%) and fourth (13%) respectively.

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Despite being ranked second in terms of frequency of use, an overwhelming 79% of respondents reported that emails serve as an important communication tool in facilitating interaction with their supervisors at the workplace. Only 21% disagreed that emails serve as an important communication tool at their workplace.

[+]N = 192 and missing values have been excluded

In summary, the above results suggest that majority of employees in Singapore engaged in email exchanges with their supervisors on a daily basis. Although emails are ranked second behind face-to-face interaction, a large number of respondents reported that

emails function as an important communication channel in facilitating interaction between employees and supervisors at the workplace.

In the next section, we examined the extent to which working adults in Singapore experienced cyber incivility perpetrated by their supervisors at the workplace.

4.2 Extent of Cyber Incivility at the Workplace

Generally, our findings suggest that working adults in Singapore do experience cyber incivility while at work. As shown in Figure 4, results suggest that an overwhelming 91% of respondents have experienced cyber incivility from their supervisors at the workplace.

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4.3 Gender of Supervisor and Types of Incivility

Of the 174 respondents (91%) who experienced cyber incivility from their supervisors at the workplace, 47% reported they worked under male supervisors and 53 % reported working under female supervisors. Interestingly, our findings suggest that the type of cyber rudeness behaviors experienced by employees depends on the gender of their supervisor. Specifically, respondents with male supervisors reported that they experienced more active forms of cyber incivility i.e., uncivil email behaviors that are directly and openly targeted at victims (e.g., making sarcastic remarks, demeaning, saying something hurtful through emails) while respondents with female supervisors were m   [+]N = 192 and missing values have been excluded   ed passive forms of cyber incivility i.e., uncivil behaviors that are displayed in an indirect manner and which indicate a lack of respect (e.g., not replying to emails at all, using emails for time-sensitive messages such as cancelling or scheduling a meeting on short notice). These results are presented in Figure 5.

Of the respondents who have male supervisors, 62% reported receiving emails that put them down or were condescending in some way (Item 1), while another 60% received emails with hurtful comments (Item 2). Following closely behind, 59% of respondents with male supervisors were subjected to demeaning or derogatory remarks through emails (Item 3), while 58% reported that their male supervisors used emails to say negative things about them that they wouldn't say face-to-face (Item 4).

Compared to employees with male supervisors, only 28% of employees with female supervisors reported receiving emails that put them down or were condescending in some way (Item 1), and 22% of respondents with female supervisors reported receiving emails with hurtful comments (Item 2). As well, only 23% of employees with female supervisors reported receiving demeaning or derogatory emails (Item 3), and 26% reported that their female supervisors used emails to say negative things about them that they wouldn't say

face-to-face (Item 4). These results suggest that employees with male supervisors were more likely to experience active forms of cyber rudeness compared to employees with female supervisors.

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In contrast, an overwhelming 86% of respondents with female supervisors complained that their supervisors used emails for time sensitive messages such as cancelling or scheduling a meeting on short notice (Item 5). As well, 85% reported that their female supervisors tend to use emails for discussions that would require face-to-face dialogue (Item 6), while another 84% reported that their female supervisors did not personally acknowledge receipt of their emails even when an acknowledgement of receipt was specifically requested for (Item 7). Another 80% of respondents also reported that their female supervisors tend not to reply to their emails at all (Item 8). While the above four uncivil behaviors (Items 5-8) were common among respondents with female supervisors (80% and above responses), these same behaviors were experienced by less than 45% of respondents who have male supervisors.

These findings are notable in that they suggest that male and female supervisors engage in cyber incivility in different ways. Interestingly, male supervisors tend to display active and direct forms of cyber incivility (i.e., being condescending, demeaning, saying something hurtful) while female supervisors were more likely to engage in passive forms of cyber incivility (i.e., using emails for time-sensitive messages, not acknowledging receipt of emails, not replying to emails at all). A plausible explanation for this gender difference is that males are more assertive and are more prone to direct their displeasure towards their targets openly (Bjorkqvist, 1994). On the other hand, women tend to be less confrontational and prefer to avoid direct conflict with others (Crick, 1996). As such, men tend to engage in more active and blatant forms of aggression such as verbal abuse while women prefer to use more passive and non-assertive forms of incivility such as ignoring or showing little interest in communicating with their targets.

4.4 Does Gender of Supervisor Matter?

To statistically examine if supervisor gender impacts employees' types of cyber incivility experiences, t-tests were performed (see Table 1).

[+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded

Table 1: Results of T-tests on Supervisor Gender Differences in Employees' Cyber Incivility Experiences[+]

	Male Supervisor	Female Supervisor	t
1. Put you down or was condescending to you in some way through emails	2.20	1.51	4.55*
2. Said something hurtful to you through emails	2.10	1.32	5.90*

3. Made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you through emails	2.12	1.40	5.10*
4. Used emails to say negative things about you that he/she wouldn't say to you face-to-face	2.22	1.40	5.34*
5. Used emails for time sensitive messages (e.g., cancelling or scheduling a meeting on short notice)	2.04	2.75	-4.11*
6. Used emails for discussions that would require face-to-face dialogue.	2.08	2.61	-3.32*
7. Did not personally acknowledge receipt of your emails even when an acknowledgement of receipt was specifically requested for	1.98	2.57	-3.47*
8. Not replying to your emails at all	1.90	2.46	-3.47*

[+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded, *p < 0.01

Results of t-tests revealed that supervisor gender affects the type of uncivil cyber with male supervisors reported higher means for all active cyber incivility items. The active cyber incivility items are "Put you down or was condescending to you through emails" (Item 1), "Said something hurtful to you through emails (Item 2), "Made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you through emails (Item 3), and "Used emails to say negative things about you that he/she wouldn't say to you face-to-face" (Item 4). The means for employees with male supervisors for each of these four items were 2.20 (Item 1), 2.10 (Item 2), 2.12 (Item 3), and 2.22 (Item 4). On the other hand, employees with female supervisors reported means of 1.51 (Item 1), 1.32 (Item 2), 1.40 (Item 3), and 1.40 (Item 4). The mean difference for each of these four items was statistically significant.

Moreover, our findings suggest that employees with female supervisors reported higher means for all passive cyber incivility items. These items include, "Used emails for time sensitive messages (e.g., cancelling or scheduling a meeting on short notice)" (Item 5), "Used emails for discussion that would require face-to-face dialogue" (Item 6), "Did not personally acknowledge receipt of your emails even when an acknowledgement of receipt was specifically requested for" (Item 7), and "Not replying to your emails at all" (Item 8). The means for employees with female supervisors for each of the four passive cyber incivility items were 2.75 (Item 5), 2.61 (Item 6), 2.57 (Item 7), and 2.46 (Item 8). Employees with male supervisors reported means of 2.04 (Item 5), 2.08 (Item 6), 1.98 (Item 7), and 1.90 (Item 8). The mean difference for each of these four items was statistically significant.

Results of t-tests provide strong support that supervisor gender may impact the way supervisors exhibit cyber incivility at the workplace. Specifically, our findings suggest that men are more likely to engage in active cyber incivility while women are more likely to exhibit passive cyber incivility at the workplace. As well, this result corroborates findings of previous studies on aggression which explained that males are more assertive and tend to engage in overt forms of aggression while females prefer to use more passive and non-assertive forms of aggression (Bjorkqvist, 1994; Crick, 1996).

4.5 Impact of Cyber Incivility at the Workplace

Previous research that examined workplace incivility (e.g., Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Pearson, Andersson & Porath, 2000) suggested that rudeness at work may spiral and engender harmful effects for the organization. Not surprisingly, our findings also revealed that uncivil email behaviors have the potential to escalate and negatively impact employees' attitudes toward their supervisors, job and the organization.

4.5.1 Attitudes toward Supervisor: Satisfaction with Supervisor

Among the respondents who indicated that they had experienced cyber incivility from their supervisors, 65% reported that they would be unwilling to have their supervisors continue as head of their group/department if they had a choice (see Figure 6a).

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As well, Figure 6b suggests that 63% of respondents reported that they were dissatisfied with their supervisor's use of leader power (Item 1) and 61% were dissatisfied with their supervisor's performance as a leader (Item 2).

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As shown in Figure 6c, another 60% of respondents also indicated that they opposed instead of supported their supervisor.

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In gene   [+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded

affects employees' satisfaction and endorsement of the particular supervisor. These findings are consistent with results of past studies (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001; Johnson & Indvik, 2001) which suggested that uncivil behaviors perpetrated by higher status individuals negatively affect employees' perceptions of their leaders.

4.5.2 Attitudes toward Job: Quit Intentions

Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which uncivil emails from their supervisors influenced their attitudes toward their job.

[+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded

[+]N = 174   [+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded

As shown in Figure 7, majority (63%) of respondents admitted that they frequently *thought* of quitting their jobs (Item 1). When probed further, 44% of respondents stated that they will *probably* look for a new job in the next year (Item 2) while 38% disclosed that they will *actively* look for a new job in the next year (Item 3). In general, these findings suggest that cyber incivility perpetrated by supervisors at the workplace has a negative impact on employees' attitudes toward their job. As well, employees who

experienced cyber incivility from their supervisors were more likely to quit their employing organization.

4.5.3 Attitudes toward Organization: Organizational Commitment
Figure 8 presents a summary of the extent to which cyber incivility perpetrated by supervisors influences employees' commitment to their organization.
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Of the respondents who have experienced cyber incivility from their supervisors, an overwhelming 74 percent disagreed that their employing organization is the best of all possible organizations to work for (Item 5). Another 67 percent of respondents were unhappy with their decision to work for their current organization over others that they were considering at the time they joined (Item 3). As well, 62 percent of respondents admitted that they did not care about the fate of their organization (Item 4), and 61 percent acknowledged that they told their friends that their current place of work is *not* a great organization to work for (Item 1). Fifty-eight percent of respondents also disagreed that they are proud to let others know that they are part of their employing organization (Item 2). Taken together, our findings suggest that cyber incivility does have a negative impact on employees' levels of organizational commitment. More importantly, these results provide strong support for the spillover effect of an uncivil email encounter. Indeed, as our findings suggest, the negative impact of cyber incivility may escalate and have harmful effects on the organization as well.

5. DISCUSSION
Findings of our study suggest that emails facilitate interaction and are perceived as an important communication tool between employees and supervisors at the workplace. Results suggest, as well, that supervisors in Singapore engage in cyber incivility when communicating with their subordinates through emails. Indeed, while email has been viewed as a means of increasing organizational productivity and responsiveness, our findings provide compelling evidence suggesting that the use of electronic communication does have a dark side to it. Due to the lack of contextual and social cues

[+]N = 174 (Only respondents who have experienced cyber incivility). Missing values have been excluded

Kinney, 1998; Trevino, Webster & Stein, 2000). As well, the impersonal nature of emails may lead users to violate the courtesies required in social interactions, thus giving rise to cyber incivility.

Interestingly, our findings revealed that male supervisors tend to engage in active forms of cyber incivility (e.g., demeaning, saying something hurtful) while female supervisors are more likely to display passive cyber incivility (e.g., using emails for time-sensitive messages, not replying to emails at all) at the workplace.

As well, findings of our study are instructive in that they suggest that cyber incivility may escalate and engender negative impact for the organization. Besides low levels of satisfaction for their supervisors, victims of cyber incivility also reported reduced levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Majority of victims also contemplated

changing jobs. These findings provide strong support and add to conclusions of previous incivility research   (e.g., Cortina et al., 2001, Johnson & Indvik, 2001), which suggested that the negative impact of cyber incivility has the potential to spillover to the organization.

6. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Results of our study offer several practical implications for managers and organizations. First, our study has practical relevance in that it suggests that email users need to be mindful of their netiquette when communicating via emails at the workplace. Due to the lack of contextual and social cues, there is little opportunity for email recipients to seek immediate clarification and feedback. Thus, senders of emails have to be careful with the tone of their messages at all times. This can be done by carefully reading through emails and exercising restraint before clicking on the send button. In doing so, email users will be able to minimize inappropriate comments and language, reduce potential misunderstanding, and consequently, avert cyber incivility. Managers and employees alike should also make an effort to respond to the emails that they received. As well, it is not advisable to use emails to convey time-sensitive messages such as last-minute cancellations or postponement of a meeting. This suggests a lack of respect and consideration towards the recipient of the email.

Second, our study has strong implications for management as it suggests that there is a pressing need for organizations to establish explicit policies and expectations for electronic communications at the workplace. As seen in Figure 9, only 40% of respondents reported that their organizations have policies regarding the use of emails. Thirty-two percent were not even aware if their employing organizations had such email policies.

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The above findings are instructive in that they suggest that policies regarding use of emails to prevent inappropriate use, prohibit inappropriate language and conduct are much needed at the workplace. This is important as implementing these policies help to provide guidance for day-to-day conduct where email communications are concerned. However, companies should be mindful that even the most thorough and well-drafted policies are ineffective if not widely and repeatedly communicated. Thus, seminars, training and retraining sessions to ensure employees' awareness and comprehension of these policies are crucial.

Third, organizations may want to consider creating a platform where employees can discuss any difficulties that they may face when communicating via emails. For instance, employees who are not familiar with certain norms and conventions of email usage may discuss   +N = 192 and missing values have been excluded   tion from other employees who are more experienced with the electronic medium. By providing organizational employees with opportunities to contribute and air their views concerning appropriate email usage, there will be greater knowledge and consensus regarding netiquette and acceptable behaviors

for electronic communications, thereby reducing the occurrences and incidences of cyber incivility at the workplace.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

As our study suggests, cyber incivility is not an issue of triviality. Due to its impersonal nature, emails sometimes give the impression that the computer itself, and not another human being, is the audience. As such, email communications may strip away the social veneer that keeps people in check. Insights gleaned from our study provide useful advice and guidance for managerial action and consideration in designing effective organizational programs and policies to reduce the incidence of cyber rudeness at the workplace. As we enter the brave new workplace where technology plays an important role in how we work and communicate, cyber incivility remains a real concern to organizations and the public. Thus, it behooves researchers and practitioners to pay close attention to the cyber incivility phenomenon.

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