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Conciliatory and Non-Conciliatory Responses to Cyber Incivility

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

This paper examined a) non-conciliatory responses – revenge and avoidance, and b) conciliatory response – reconciliation to cyber incivility. Based on a survey of 192 employees, results showed that (dis)satisfaction with supervisor mediated the relationship between supervisor’s cyber incivility and victim’s responses. Individual responses to cyber incivility were moderated by a) victim’s personality through (dis)satisfaction with supervisor. The victim’s dark personality traits (Machiavellianism) and cyber incivility jointly produced conditional indirect effects on the victim’s responses. Machiavellianism produced a positive indirect effect on revenge and a negative indirect effect on reconciliation. Overall, findings suggested that the victim’s personality had a conditional indirect effect on the victim’s response to cyber incivility through (dis)satisfaction with supervisor.

Keywords: Cyber incivility, email, revenge, avoidance, reconciliation, Machiavellianism

Introduction

Electronic communication is a ubiquitous and popular medium of information transfer in the corporate world. However, since they are purely textual, the facial expressions or verbal nuances inherent in face-to-face conversations are absent. This along with a lack of real-time exchange imposes a high “understanding cost” on the participants of electronic interactions. Further, emails generally occur in a context devoid of awareness of human sensibilities and lack social cues (Brown et al. 2016). Therefore, people must base attributions about their communication partners on the content and linguistic features of the words used in emails.

The lack of contextual clues has a potential erosive effect on cyber interactions. The interaction over emails could be perceived as discourteous and hurtful. Lim and Teo (2009, p. 419) defined *cyber incivility* as the “communicative behavior exhibited in computer-mediated interactions that violate workplace norms of mutual respect”. Cyber incivility involves a lack of adherence to netiquettes, i.e. unspoken rules and norms one should follow while conversing with other parties using electronic medium, such as while communicating through emails. These rules include crafting emails in respectful and courteous language, and promptly responding to and acknowledging emails. When the sender fails to adhere to these norms, the receiver perceives such behaviors to be rude, uncivil and disrespectful.

Empirical studies have mainly been conducted on emails and their relation to information sharing (Alsharo et al. 2017), conflict escalation (Friedman and Curall 2003), productivity and communication effectiveness (Stich et al. 2018). Research on cyber incivility has been focused on the interpersonal and organizational deviant behaviors among cyber incivility victims (Friedman and Curall 2003). The conciliatory or non-conciliatory responses to cyber incivility have not been adequately examined.

Incivility may be a mild form of interpersonal mistreatment, but its frequent occurrences cause psychological distress and subsequently aggressive behaviors in victims. In an effort to understand the victim’s choice of responses, we examine a) the mediating role of (dis)satisfaction with supervisor, and b) the moderating effects of the victim’s dark personality trait (Machiavellianism). We also examine the meditation process by which cyber incivility exerts its effects on the victim and the conditions under which the victim chooses to respond in a conciliatory or non-conciliatory manner. Finally, we highlight the theoretical and practical implications and discussed what organizations can do to minimize the prevalence of cyber incivility.

Theoretical Background and Research Hypotheses

Responses to Cyber Incivility

Although cyber incivility is prevalent in organizations, the victim’s response to cyber incivility and the processes that evoke such responses are not well-studied. An important feature of workplace incivility was the upward spiral effect when negative behavior from one party was reciprocated by another party (Anderson and Pearson 1991). The subordinate thus perceives a breach of netiquettes and responds in a conciliatory/ non-conciliatory manner. Our research model is shown in Figure 1.

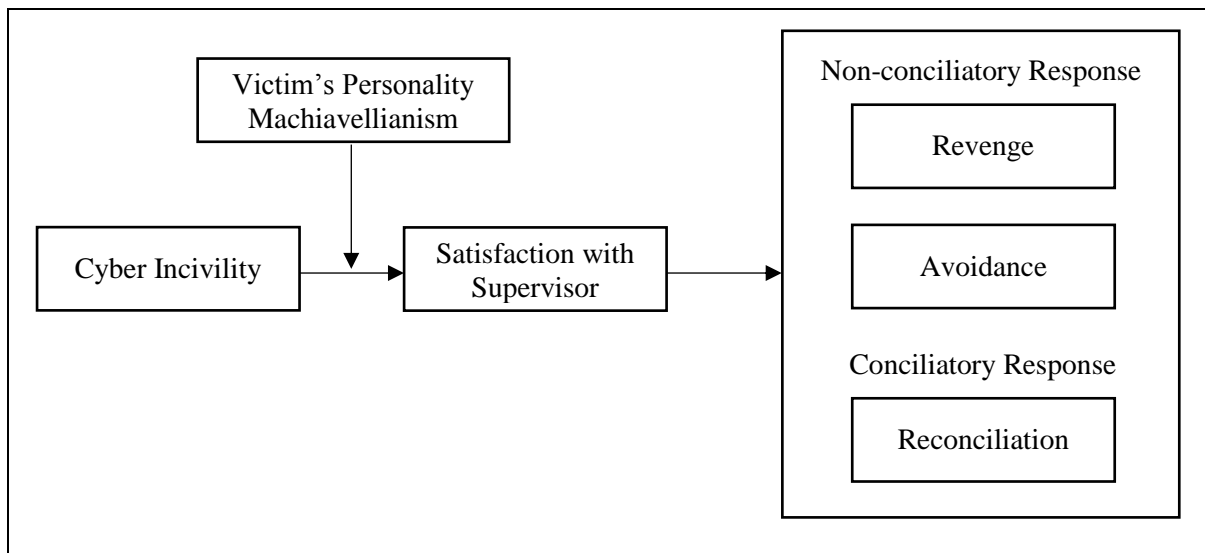


Figure 1. Research Model

Non-conciliatory Responses

Cyber incivility saps the emotional and cognitive resources of employees, thus motivating victims to retaliate. We defined workplace revenge as purposeful confrontational or non-confrontational actions over emails by the victim to directly or indirectly harm the perpetrator or the organization. Previous studies on workplace revenge suggest that the desire for revenge is invoked when formal rules are violated (Aquino et al. 2001). An alternative non-conciliatory response to cyber incivility is avoidance. Because of the perceived salience of painful email encounters, the victims are inclined to retaliate against the offending supervisor through avoiding interpersonal or psychological contact with him/her. McCullough et al. (1997) reported that people use avoidance to keep the offender at a safe interpersonal and psychological distance. Avoidance includes ignoring the perpetrator or spending less time together, avoiding the discussion of problems, treating the perpetrator poorly, or just letting things fall apart.

Conciliatory responses

The victims of interpersonal mistreatment do not always choose to react in a non-conciliatory way. Reconciliatory behaviors were more likely to occur than revenge behaviors when employees based their thoughts and cognitive energy on forgiveness. The victim takes the ‘departure’ route from the incivility

spiral by forgiving the perpetrator, giving the benefit of doubt, or denying purposeful intent in the perpetrator to inflict interpersonal harm. Hence, the incivility spiral ends and does not escalate to the 'tipping point' where the victim will have a higher tendency to seek revenge against the perpetrator (Anderson and Pearson 1999). Reconciliation is defined as an effort by the victim to extend acts of goodwill toward the offender in hope of restoring the relationship, relinquishing anger, resentment and the desire to seek revenge against the offender (Aquino et al. 2006). Given that cyber incivility is perceived as the violation of norms of mutual respect and interpersonal well-treatment, we posited that cyber incivility will positively relate to revenge and avoidance, and negatively relate to reconciliation.

H1. *Cyber incivility is positively associated with non-conciliatory responses (revenge and avoidance), and negatively associated with conciliatory responses (reconciliation).*

Mediating Role of Satisfaction with Supervisor

Cyber incivility poses a serious risk to the interpersonal relationship between supervisor and subordinate. Uncivil electronic communication causes dissatisfaction with one's supervisor and the relationship is further worsened through 'tit-for-tat' reciprocity of negative communication (Anderson and Pearson 1999). A potential impact of these behaviors is the erosion of the relationship between subordinate and supervisor. As the number of unpleasant and uncivil encounters increases, subordinates become increasingly dissatisfied with their supervisor. Therefore we posited that:

H2. *Cyber incivility is negatively associated with satisfaction with supervisor.*

An extensive amount of research has examined employees' satisfaction with their supervisor and its outcomes. (Dis)satisfaction with supervisor was (negatively) positively associated with organizational commitment, employee attitudes; self-efficacy, role clarity, job satisfaction, and team-member justice perceptions (Phillips et al. 2001; Shoemaker 1999). Ill manners or chronic destructive actions in close relationships result in dissatisfaction with the perpetrator. The relationship is worsened through persistent negative communication, affect and behaviors. Dissatisfied victims can respond to the perpetrator in a number of ways, including revenge and avoidance behaviors. Our proposition that the relationship between cyber incivility and victim response acts through (dis)satisfaction with supervisor is also consistent with Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut and Kelley 1959)—which suggests that employees engage in positive or negative behaviors toward the organization only in response to positive or negative actions that are seen to originate from the organization (e.g. (un)favorable working conditions, (un)fair treatment)—as well as the moral norm of reciprocity (Gouldner 1960) where people respond in a more positive manner to friendly actions and a more negative manner to hostile actions. These theories when applied to the subordinate-supervisor relationship predict that subordinates respond to perceived favorable interpersonal interaction by behaving in ways that strengthen the interpersonal relationship and benefit the organization and/or other employees. Similarly, employees retaliate against dissatisfying conditions (e.g. cyber incivility) by engaging in harmful behavior (e.g., revenge, avoidance). Thus, we posited that indirect effects of cyber incivility are carried through (dis)satisfaction with supervisor and influence the victim's response.

H3. *Satisfaction with supervisor is negatively associated with non-conciliatory responses (revenge and avoidance), and positively associated with conciliatory response (reconciliation).*

H4. *Satisfaction with supervisor mediates the relationship between cyber incivility and victim's responses. Cyber incivility has a positive indirect effect on non-conciliatory responses (revenge and avoidance), and a negative indirect effect on conciliatory response (reconciliation), through satisfaction with supervisor.*

Moderating Role of Victim's Personality (Machiavellianism)

Researchers have emphasized that perceived incivility at workplace depended on the individual's personality traits and disposition. Pearson et al. (2000) noted that incivility was difficult to detect because it often lay in the eye of the beholder. The victim's personality defined whether particular interpersonal acts are perceived as uncivil. A sensitive individual may interpret incivility in a situation where others do not. An impulsive individual may lose his/her temper easily on perceiving uncivil acts

and respond by taking revenge or avoiding the perpetrator. Thus, regardless of intent, individual personalities and temperaments play a large role in shaping victim response to cyber incivility.

The growing interest in the darker side of personality and the particular interest in the relationship between dark personality traits and responses to cyber incivility influenced our choice to study the Machiavellian personality trait over other personality traits. Machiavellians are lacking in interpersonal relationships, psychopathology and ideological commitment. People high on this trait will do whatever it takes in order to be successful. High Machiavellians often view unethical behaviors as acceptable (Christie and Geis 1970). Machiavellian subordinates were found to communicate with their supervisor with more escape and control motives, and were less satisfied with their supervisor (Walter et al. 2005). Machiavellian subordinates manipulated encounters with superiors so that they influenced and controlled work situations for their own needs. We thus posited that the joint effects of cyber incivility and Machiavellianism will further add to dissatisfaction with supervisor.

H5. *Machiavellianism moderates the negative relationship between cyber incivility and satisfaction with supervisor such that high Machiavellians will be more dissatisfied with their supervisor than low Machiavellians when subjected to cyber incivility.*

Past research showed that high Machiavellians tend to adopt an emotionally-detached and pragmatic interpersonal style (Geis 1978). Tripp and Bies (1997) reported that revenge was perceived as ‘good’ and ‘justified’ when the victim tries to restore his status, defends against his reputation, and helps himself materially. This phenomenon may be explained using the General Aggression Model (GAM). GAM posits that certain traits predispose individuals to engage in aggressive behavior by influencing the accessibility of aggressive thoughts, which subsequently biases behavior towards aggression (Anderson and Bushman 2002). Accordingly, we suggested that Machiavellianism increases the accessibility to aggressive thoughts and biases victim’s behavior such that they exhibit more hostility toward others. Zheng et al. (2107) found that high Machiavellians were more prone to engage in counterproductive work behaviors, which included harmful interpersonal acts. As well, Machiavellianism has been linked theoretically to workplace bullying (Rayner and Hoel 1997) and to intimidating subordinates (Schlenker 1980). Hence, we posit that:

H6. *Machiavellianism moderates the indirect effects of cyber incivility on victim response through satisfaction with supervisor. We predict a positive indirect effect on non-conciliatory responses (revenge and avoidance), and a negative indirect effect on conciliatory response (reconciliation).*

Research Methodology

Sample, Participants and Procedures

Prior to administration of the survey, a pre-test was conducted with 20 employees. This was to ensure the clarity of instructions and overall presentation of the survey prior to its administration. A short briefing of the employees was conducted on the company’s premises. We took great care to assure respondents that their responses would remain anonymous and that participation in the study was voluntary. The final questionnaire package containing the cover letter, survey instrument and stamped reply envelope was then distributed to 250 employees. Respondents were requested to return the completed surveys in the sealed envelope provided. 192 employees provided usable data (76.8% response rate). About 50% were men and 61% were married. The average age was 30 years.

Measures

Cyber incivility was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: Not at all, 5: All the time) with 14 items ($\alpha=.92$) (Lim and Teo 2009). Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they experienced cyber incivility from their immediate supervisor. Sample items include “The supervisor used emails to say negative things about you that he/she would not say to you face to face”, and “The supervisor made demeaning or derogatory remarks about you through email”. *Revenge* was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree, 5: Strongly agree) with 5 items ($\alpha=.92$). (Aquino et al. 2001). Sample items include “I confronted my boss/supervisor face to face”, and “I threatened my boss/supervisor through email”. *Avoidance* and *reconciliation* were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree, 5: Strongly agree) with 4 items ($\alpha=.94$) and 5 items ($\alpha=.91$) respectively (McCullough et al. 1997). Sample

items for avoidance include “I kept as much distance from my boss/supervisor as possible”, and “I gave my boss/supervisor the silent treatment”. Sample items for reconciliation include “I tried to patch things up with my boss/supervisor”, and “I made an effort to respond to what my boss/supervisor did”. *Satisfaction with supervisor* was measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1: Very dissatisfied, 5: Very satisfied) with 4 items ($\alpha=.94$) (Lawler and Thompson 1978). Sample items include “How satisfied are you with your boss/supervisor’s performance as a leader?”, and “To what extent do you support or oppose your boss/supervisor?” Machiavellianism was assessed using the 20-item, 7-point scale Mach IV scale ($\alpha=.82$) (Christie and Geis 1970). Sample items include “The best way to handle people is to tell them what they want to hear”, and “Most people are basically good and kind” (reverse-coded). We controlled for gender and age as well as job tenure.

Results

To test the hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses (Aiken and West 1991). Results of regression analyses showed that cyber incivility was positively related to revenge ($\beta=.32$, $p<.001$) and negatively related to reconciliation ($\beta= -.31$, $p<.001$). Cyber incivility was not significantly related to avoidance ($\beta=.02$, n.s.). Therefore, H1 was supported for revenge and reconciliation.

We tested the mediation hypotheses (H2 – H4) using an SPSS macro provided by Preacher and Hayes (2004) that facilitates estimation of indirect effect with two approaches, a) the Sobel test, and b) bootstrap estimates. Cyber incivility was negatively and significantly associated with satisfaction with supervisor ($B= -.68$, $t=-9.31$, $p<.001$). Thus, H2 was supported. Satisfaction with supervisor was negatively associated with revenge ($B = -.16$, $t = -2.18$, $p = .03$), and positively associated with reconciliation ($B=0.28$, $t=3.67$, $p <.001$). Satisfaction with supervisor was not significantly associated with avoidance ($B= -.11$, $t= -1.14$, n.s.). Thus, results supported H3 for revenge and reconciliation.

To test H4, we conducted sobel test to find indirect effect of cyber incivility on victim’s responses – revenge, avoidance and reconciliation via satisfaction with supervisor. Cyber incivility was found to have a positive indirect effect on revenge (value=.11, sobelz=2.11, $p=.04$) and a negative indirect effect on reconciliation (value=-.19, sobelz=-3.39, $p=.001$) through satisfaction with supervisor. Bootstrap results confirmed the sobel test, with a 95% CI around the indirect effect not containing zero for revenge (.01,.22), and reconciliation (-.31,-.08). Cyber incivility did not have significant indirect effect on avoidance (value=.07, sobelz=1.12, n.s.). Thus, H4 was supported for revenge and reconciliation.

To test for moderated mediation (H5 – H6), we used an SPSS macro designed by Preacher et al. (2007). The macro facilitates implementation of recommended bootstrapping methods. Results indicated that the interaction between cyber incivility and Machiavellianism was significantly related to satisfaction with supervisor ($B=.27$, $t=3.30$, $p<.001$). Thus, H5 was supported. Simple slope analyses revealed that the negative relationship between cyber incivility and satisfaction with supervisor was significant among high Machiavellians ($t= -6.00$, $p<.001$) and low Machiavellians ($t= -11.65$, $p<.001$). The interaction between cyber incivility and Machiavellianism was significant for revenge ($B=.31$, $t=3.75$, $p<.001$) but not for reconciliation ($B= -.02$, $t= -.26$, n.s.). As predicted, the inverse relationship between cyber incivility and satisfaction with supervisor was stronger for high Machiavellians compared to low Machiavellians (Figure 2). To test H6, we examined the conditional indirect effect of cyber incivility on revenge and reconciliation through satisfaction with supervisor at three values of Machiavellianism – mean (.00), 1 SD above mean (+.75) and 1 SD below mean (-.75). Bootstrapped confidence intervals indicated that cyber incivility had a positive indirect effect on revenge (-1SD: indirect effect=.21, $p<.01$; Mean: indirect effect=.16, $p<.01$; +1SD: indirect effect=.12, $p<.01$), and a negative indirect effect on reconciliation (-1SD: indirect effect= -.20, $p<.01$; Mean: indirect effect= -.16, $p<.01$; +1SD: indirect effect= -.11, $p<.01$) through satisfaction with supervisor. Thus, H6 was supported for revenge and reconciliation. We intend to carry out further analysis by examining whether perceived similarity to supervisor would play a moderating role between satisfaction with supervisor and response to cyber incivility.

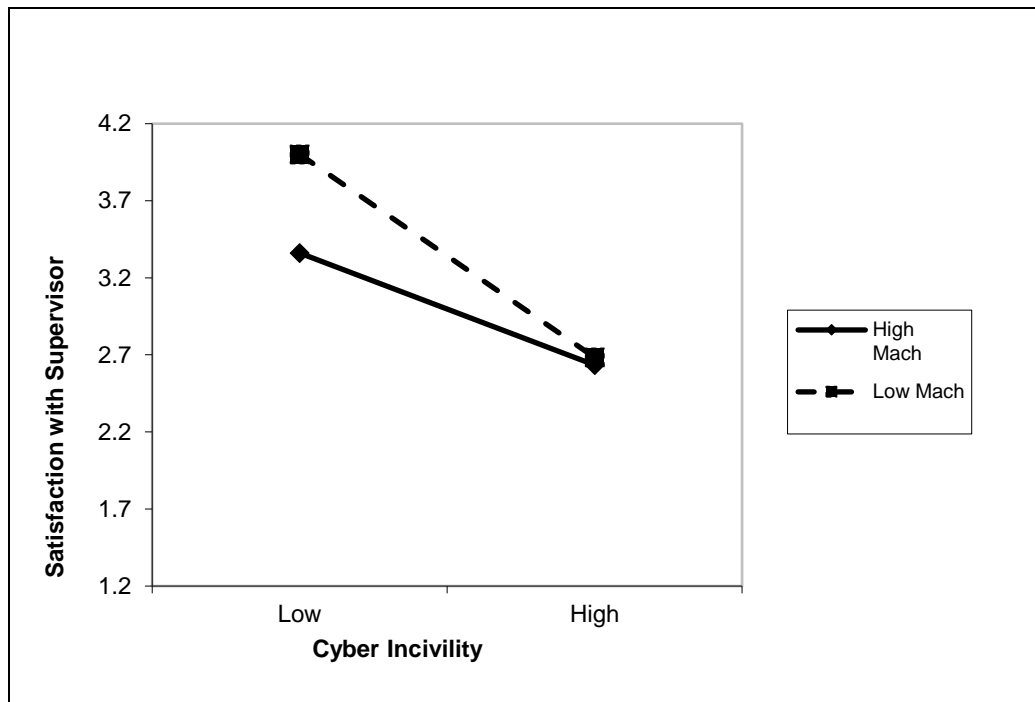


Figure 2. Interaction Plot

Discussion

Findings of this study showed that cyber incivility was positively related to the non-conciliatory response of revenge ($\beta=.32, p<.001$) and negatively related to the conciliatory response of reconciliation ($\beta=-.31, p<.001$). We did not find a significant relationship between cyber incivility and avoidance behaviors. The positive relationship between cyber incivility and revenge was consistent with prior research on workplace incivility and revenge (Cortina and Magley 2003). We argued that cyber incivility motivates revenge behaviors among victims because of (1) ambiguous intent of cyber uncivil behaviors, and (2) egocentrism involved in electronic communications. At times, cyber uncivil behaviors are not intended. However, the reason that the cyber behaviors are perceived as uncivil is because egocentrism (Kruger et al. 2005) is involved in email communications. Due to lack of the contextual cues in emails, what is obvious to us may be considerably less obvious to the person on the other end of the computer. Given that emails are purely textual, an email can be ‘read’ differently from the writer’s perspective, for example, same email may ‘sound’ as sarcastic or serious, disrespectful or deferential, sanguine or sombre. Egocentrically-biased victims ruminate about the harm they had experienced through cyber incivility and in retaliation seek revenge against the perpetrator.

Our study also revealed that the relationship between cyber incivility and victim response consisted of complex and indirect nuances. Results showed that (dis)satisfaction with supervisor significantly mediated the relationship between cyber incivility and victim responses, specifically revenge and reconciliation. The indirect effect of cyber incivility on victim response through satisfaction with supervisor also depended on a) the victim’s personality (Machiavellianism). As hypothesized, the inverse relationship between cyber incivility and satisfaction with supervisor was stronger for high Machiavellians compared to low Machiavellians. The finding that Machiavellians were dissatisfied with supervisor was consistent with prior research (Walter et al. 2005). Machiavellianism contributed to increased levels of dissatisfaction, thus motivating victims to seek revenge instead of reconciliation. Machiavellian personality contributes to an individual’s justification of revenge for a variety of reasons. First, high Machiavellians are found to use exonerative moral reasoning to reframe particular acts of direct and indirect revenge into what can be self-justified as a morally acceptable action. Second, Machiavellians are characterized by amoral orientation, distrust of others, and willingness to use unscrupulous tactics (Christie and Geis 1970). Third, Machiavellians tend to engage in

counterproductive work behaviors, including harmful interpersonal acts (Zheng et al. 2017). Therefore, high Machiavellians have stronger tendencies to seek revenge compared to reconciliation.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

First, this study deepens our understanding on the negative consequences of cyber incivility. Previous research on workplace revenge has focused on several predictors, such as perceived interpersonal injustice, individual differences, workplace bullying and abusive supervision (Aquino et al. 2001). Bies and Tripp (1996) described these antecedents as ‘sparking events’, which involve a damaged sense of civic order or a damaged social identity. Our study extends the research in this area by introducing cyber incivility as a sparking event. This involves the violations of rules or norms related to internet civility, i.e. a damaged sense of civic order. Second, we provide evidence that personality has a conditional indirect effect on victim response through (dis)satisfaction with supervisor. While previous studies have shown consistent positive association of incivility with revenge behaviors, consistent results have not been found on the boundary conditions influencing victim’s choice of non-conciliatory and/or conciliatory responses.

Our findings have practical relevance in the organizational sphere. First, supervisors should be considerate when writing to their subordinates, and not to violate norms and conventions of emails. Even unintentional rude and uncivil emails can cause stress in employees and generate conflict between supervisor and team member, resulting in less than desirable outcomes for the teams. Second, organizations could be encouraged to conduct netiquette awareness programs. Awareness is the best prevention method to reduce unintended cyber incivility. Awareness programs have two main benefits: 1) that the supervisor, being aware of the destructive consequences of cyber incivility, will become more considerate when writing emails and 2) that the subordinates, being aware of the unintentional nature of cyber incivility, will not react on impulse. Cyber incivility can also be addressed by creating a company culture that promotes openness, allowing employees to seek clarification in face-to-face communication, or through the phone. Lastly, in the event that one is the recipient of a continuous pattern of intended rude emails, employees should address the issue by reporting cyber incivility to the Human Resource (HR) department. HR managers also need to encourage employees’ feedback on their supervisor’s uncivil behavior online. Identification of such supervisors will help HR managers to counsel the offenders accordingly.

Limitations and Future Research

One limitation is the use of self-report survey; thus there is a possibility that the results may be inflated due to common method variance. However, using Harman’s one factor test, we did not find a single common factor across all items, suggesting that common method variance is not a threat in our analyses. Another potential limitation is the nature of the constructs being assessed makes them susceptible to self-enhancement biases. Respondents may under-report their willingness to seek revenge or over-report their willingness to forgive. A third limitation is that our research was conducted in an Asian setting. Given that cultural differences in netiquettes and email usage may exist, our findings should be interpreted within this boundary. Future research needs to investigate the patterns of responses to cyber incivility. As cyber incivility consists of day-to-day experiences, individuals do not respond consistently each time they experience cyber incivility. Future research should account for both between-person and within-person differences in cyber incivility

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