

The Silent Strain: A Qualitative Exploration of Workplace Incivility Experiences among Academics in Malaysian Private Universities

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DOI Link: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v15-i8/26235>

Published Date: 29 August 2025

Abstract

This qualitative study explores the psychological and emotional effects of workplace incivility experienced by academics in Malaysian private universities. Using an in-depth interview, the research discovers how subtle and persistent forms of disrespect from students, colleagues, administrators, and superiors lead to emotional distress, including depression, isolation, and a sense of helplessness. Academics employ various coping strategies such as avoidance, seeking peer support, or considering resignation due to the lack of support system. The study highlights how Malaysia's hierarchical academic culture may aggravate silence around incivility and limit reporting or confrontation. Findings suggest urgent practical implications, including the need for formal reporting mechanisms, leadership training in civil communication, and access to mental health support services. Theoretically, the research contributes to the discourse on organisational behavior and workplace incivility in higher education. Limitations include a small sample size and geographic focus. Future research should consider quantitative studies, comparisons between public and private universities, and long-term effects of incivility on academic careers.

Keywords: Workplace Incivility, Academics (Lecturers), Malaysian Private Universities, Emotional Distress, Coping Strategies, Organisational Behavior, Mental Health, Higher Education

Introduction

Human Resource Development (HRD) plays an important role in enhancing employee well-being, job satisfaction, and organisational growth in every organisation. Beyond developing talent and improving the performance of employees, HRD professionals are also responsible for identifying and addressing subtle yet significant challenges that threaten a healthy work environment. Some challenges faced in organisations are workplace mistreatment, which is a

term that encompasses various forms of negative interpersonal behaviour such as bullying, exclusion, aggression, and most notably, incivility (Poell et al., 2014). Workplace mistreatment remains underexplored in HRD literature, resulting in limited institutional awareness and inadequate response strategies (Shim, 2010).

Lack of attention on workplace mistreatment harms employees' psychological health, organisational citizenship behaviours, and overall productivity (Aleksic, 2021; Schilpzand et al., 2016). Targets of workplace mistreatment usually experience increased stress, reduced morale, and a higher likelihood of disengagement and turnover (Hershcovis et al., 2017; Huang & Lin, 2019). There have been various forms of workplace mistreatment studied globally, yet not much attention has been given to workplace incivility, which is a form of ambiguous form of mistreatment. Andersson and Pearson (1999) defined workplace incivility as low-intensity deviant behaviour characterised by ambiguous intent to harm, which violates norms for mutual respect. Such behaviours include sarcasm, rudeness, dismissiveness, withholding important information, and subtle forms of exclusion or belittlement. Although these behaviours may seem harmless at first, they can build up over time and become more serious if ignored. This progression is explained by the Spiralling Theory of Incivility by Andersson and Pearson (1999), which posits that uncivil behaviours can trigger retaliatory responses, gradually escalating into more overt forms of conflict and aggression. Over time, this cycle of escalating negativity can lead to interpersonal breakdowns, increased tension, and a toxic organisational climate

Workplace incivility is particularly concerning due to its ambiguous and covert nature, which often leads to its normalisation and prolonged emotional strain. Studies reveal that continuous exposure to incivility harms mental health, contributes to burnout, lowers performance, and damages interpersonal connections within teams (Bunk & Magley, 2013; Porath & Pearson, 2012). These problems are quite pertinent in Malaysian organisations. It has been found that nearly 39.1% of employees across 47 Malaysian companies reported being bullied, while Reddy (2023) highlighted that 65% of surveyed Malaysian employees had experienced some form of workplace bullying, with verbal and psychological abuse being most common (Chan et al., 2019).

Higher Education and Private Universities in Malaysia

The Malaysian higher education landscape has evolved significantly since the 1990s, with private institutions complementing public universities (Chang Da, 2007). In private universities, factors such as psychological empowerment and organizational commitment play crucial roles in shaping academics' attitudes and performance (Choong et al., 2011). Within the higher education sector of Malaysian private universities, academics are very much prone to such hostile behaviours. In higher education, academics often endure disrespectful communication from supervisors, colleagues, and students, while also experiencing emotional strain and a decline in job performance (Arumugam et al., 2024). Besides that, the experience of incivility can significantly undermine their job satisfaction, productivity, and overall career retention (Pearson & Porath, 2005). This silent epidemic of incivility, which encompasses various forms of mistreatment, which is regarded as ethical harassment, presents unique challenges within academic settings that warrant focused investigation (Fazli et al., 2020). The subtle acts of disrespect to more serious kinds of aggression highlight their pervasive and sometimes underestimated impact on the academic

sector (Sprunk et al., 2014). Persistent exposure to uncivil behaviours may have an impact on academics' psychology, which can lead to increased stress, burnout, and an intention to leave, ultimately affecting the stability and academic quality of higher education institutions (Laschinger et al., 2009). This study aims to explore the lived experiences of workplace incivility among academics in Malaysian private universities and how such experiences are often endured in silence. It seeks to understand the emotional and psychological toll that these subtle and overlooked mistreatments have on academics.

Problem Statement

Workplace incivility is a form of interpersonal mistreatment that violates social norms of respect (Gupta, 2020). It is a pervasive issue across various sectors, including information technology, healthcare, and education (Awai et al., 2021; Gupta, 2020; Jackson et al., 2024; Schenck, 2017). Studies indicate that approximately 71% of employees report experiencing workplace incivility within five years (Cortina et al., 2001a). Common forms include spreading gossip, purposely excluding others, and belittling others (Gupta, 2020). Incivility can also lead to negative outcomes such as decreased job satisfaction, increased psychological distress, and reduced productivity (Bunk & Magley, 2013; Cortina et al., 2001a). It also affects employees' home lives, with spill over effects on marital behaviours (Lim et al., 2018). Incivility in the workplace has profound negative effects on employee that lead to anxiety, depression, emotional withdrawal, and reduced job satisfaction (Johnson & Indvik, 2001). In academic environments, workplace incivility often goes unreported and becomes normalized, particularly in a cultural context such as Malaysia, where deference to hierarchy and avoidance of open confrontation are the norms. This creates a climate of academics suffering in silence in Malaysian private universities, where subtle mistreatment is internalized rather than addressed. Over time, this emotional burden can lead to chronic stress, burnout, and low job satisfaction, ultimately increasing the risk of attrition and weakening institutional performance and stability (Leiter et al., 2009). Although workplace incivility affects both public and private universities in Malaysia, private institutions face unique challenges due to intensified performance pressures and limited support structures. Existing studies have identified coping mechanisms such as avoidance, confrontation, or seeking social support among lecturers facing incivility (Arumugam et al., 2025). However, while academic mistreatment has been broadly discussed, the specific emotional and psychological impact of workplace incivility on Malaysian academics remains underexplored (Fazli et al., 2020). The subtle yet pervasive nature of incivility, ranging from dismissive emails to intentional exclusion from academic opportunities, necessitates a focused, qualitative investigation into the lived experiences of those affected.

Research Significance

The focus of this study is on academics working at private universities in Malaysia. Academics remain underrepresented in the research of workplace incivility and often face high demand expectations and limited institutional support while balancing teaching, research, community services, and administrative duties. Within these demanding responsibilities, subtle forms of mistreatment can become routine and internalised, especially when there are no formal structures to report or address such behaviour. Despite the frequent occurrence of these behaviours, they go unreported due to cultural norms around deference to authority and fear of retaliation leads to silence among academics. As a result, incivility is not only

underreported but also normalised, making academics from private universities in Malaysia an important focus for deeper, experience-based inquiry.

This research is grounded in Andersson and Pearson's (1999) Spiralling Theory of Incivility, which posits that low-intensity deviant behaviours with ambiguous intent, such as sarcasm, condescending remarks, exclusion, or information withholding, can initiate a cycle of retaliation or emotional withdrawal. Over time, these subtle actions may escalate into more serious forms of interpersonal conflict and institutional disengagement. Within academic institutions, where shared relationships are essential to career development and mental well-being, this sequence can be particularly damaging. For academics in Malaysian private universities, repeated exposure to incivility, especially when left unaddressed, can erode trust, increase psychological distress, and create an environment of fear, competition, and isolation. This study uses lived experiences to reveal how incivility is enacted, perceived, and internalised in the daily practices of academic life.

This study contributes to both theory and practice, adding to the limited qualitative literature on incivility within the context of Southeast Asian higher education, specifically within private universities. Empirically, this study aligns with the findings from Arumugam et al. (2025), who identified seeking social support and confrontation as common coping strategies, and with Abas et al. (2020), who emphasize the role of supervisor support in overcoming job dissatisfaction and emotional stress. From an HRD perspective, this study provides timely insights into how institutions can foster a more respectful, inclusive, and psychologically safe work environment. Practically, the findings support the development of anti-civility frameworks designed for the academic environment. It supports calls for university management to design, implement, and monitor clear policies that address workplace incivility at all levels (Abas et al., 2020). Such policies should be integrated into faculty induction programs and reinforced through ongoing training, particularly in areas related to promotion and research collaboration. Furthermore, understanding the range of coping strategies adopted by academics can help management of private universities tailor support structures to promote mental well-being and employee retention. As Porath and Pearson (2013) and Osatuke et al. (2013) argue, many organisations still lack clear incivility policies, emphasizing the urgency of structured, preventative approaches. The inclusion of anti-incivility clauses aligned with the Employment Act 1955 and the Penal Code, as suggested by Ambikai (2019), can offer additional safeguards. Promoting positive work values (Alias & Rasdi, 2015) and enforcing zero-tolerance policies is also essential for fostering mutual respect and professionalism in academic settings. Ultimately, this research contributes actionable recommendations aimed at reducing academic turnover, improving well-being, and reinforcing a culture of respect and resilience in the academic setting.

Purpose of the Study

By exploring these silent strains within the academic setting, this research aims to:

- Explore the lived experiences of workplace incivility among academics in Malaysian private universities.
- Understand its emotional and psychological impacts to provide insights that can inform strategies for fostering healthier and more respectful academic environments.

Literature Review

Defining Workplace Incivility

Workplace incivility has recently gained attention (Faheem & Mahmud, 2015) and the behaviour of incivility at the workplace encompasses a range of disruptive and unpleasant conduct, including rudeness, condescending behaviour (Akella & Eid, 2021), making veiled threats, gossiping, ignoring co-worker requests, sending flaming e-mails (Holm et al., 2015; Reich & Hershcovis, 2015), ignoring others, withholding information, employing sarcastic gestures, spreading rumours, failing to greet subordinates, mimicry, looking down upon a colleague, sending offensive messages and signals and tarnishing the reputation of a colleague (Felblinger, 2008; Hershcovis, 2011; Martin & Hine, 2005; Vasconcelos, 2020).

Workplace incivility, defined as low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent to harm (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Schilpzand et al., 2016), has gained significant research attention over the years. It consists of experienced, witnessed, and instigated incivility (Schilpzand et al., 2016). Incivility in the workplace negatively impacts individual and organisational performance (Estes & Wang, 2008), leading to decreased job satisfaction, increased turnover intentions, and reduced mental health (Peng, 2023). Like bullying, workplace incivility is gradual and occurs repetitively, meant to “wear down” the target over time and can be “perpetrated through many small discursive and nondiscursive acts” (Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006). Passive forms of communication, such as ignoring a colleague, can be just as damaging as active forms of communication, such as yelling (Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006). Incivility may not always be of low intensity or ambiguous in its harm; however, it is these subtle verbal and nonverbal acts that express rudeness and disdain towards others in the workplace, allowing workplace incivility to spread (Sue et al., 2008). Some scholars claim that workplace bullying, and workplace incivility have similarities or comparable concepts (Sue et al., 2008). To achieve a harmonious work environment in the organisation, organisations must address the milder form of mistreatment by recognising that incivility also has similar consequences to other forms of negative workplace behaviour (Sintiong & Morshidi, 2015).

Academic Incivility

Academic incivility is an alarming topic and yet underestimated for the well-being and professional sustainability of faculty members in higher education institutions (Campbell et al., 2023). While incivility is a frequent problem in educational settings, its behaviours and tolerance levels vary heavily depending on the existing cultural and social norms of the place (Cahyadi & Hendryadi, 2021). Uncivil behaviour occurs between individuals who are considered peers or colleagues. This can also be classified as one individual does not have a formal hierarchical relationship with the other individual. Lateral incivility happens in academics when a student is uncivil toward another student, or a faculty member is uncivil toward another faculty member of equal rank (Marlow & Burgess, 2013). There are four types of incivility caused by students as identified by Feldman (2001): simple annoyances, intimidation, classroom terrorism, and the threat of violence. Disruptive use of cell phones, substance abuse, holding a disruptive conversation, reading newspaper during lectures, plagiarism, arriving late and leaving class early, being unprepared for class, making sarcastic remarks, threat of physical harm and verbal and physical assault (Alberts et al., 2010; Clark & Cynthia, 2008, 2015; Leiter, Laschinger, Day, & Oore, 2011; Segrist et al., 2018) are more examples of incivility caused by students. Workplace incivility experienced by academics from

their university administrators, faculty, and colleagues can be in the form of failing to uphold one's share of the workload, using cell phones or other handheld devices during meetings, putting down fellow faculty members, gossiping about colleagues, interrupting others, and challenging other colleagues' knowledge (Clark et al., 2013).

In Malaysian private universities, where multicultural and hierarchical dynamics coexist, incivility may often be normalized, subtle, or unreported despite its harmful effects. Academic incivility takes many forms, including peer-to-peer (faculty-to-faculty), student-to-lecturer, and administrator-to-academic behaviors, all of which can contribute to a hostile or psychologically unsafe work environment (Rawlins, 2017; Wright & Hill, 2015). Such behaviours often include passive-aggressiveness, exclusion, dismissive comments, and disrespectful communication (Clark et al., 2013).

Theoretical Framework

Research on workplace incivility reveals its adverse impact on individual and organisational performance, stressing the need for better theoretical frameworks (Estes & Wang, 2008; Kunkel & Carnevale, 2015). This study is grounded in Andersson and Pearson's (1999) Spiraling Theory of Incivility, which serves as an important theory for understanding how workplace incivility is experienced within academic settings among academics in Malaysian Private universities. Andersson and Pearson's spiraling theory illustrates how incivility can escalate into more severe aggressive behaviours (Kunkel & Carnevale, 2015) with an ambiguous intent to harm, violating workplace norms of mutual respect. Unlike overt aggression, incivility is subtle and covert, making it difficult to report or confront without incurring social or professional risk. The spiral theory makes us understand how incivility may begin with a minor violation of interpersonal norms, such as ignoring, dismissive gestures, or passive-aggressive remarks, which may be perceived as disrespectful or unjust by the target (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). This initiates the starting point of the spiral, where the target may choose to either ignore the behaviour (exit point) or respond with a similar uncivil act, thereby setting in motion a reciprocal pattern of negative interactions. This process is often driven by the perception of interactional injustice, a sense that one is being unfairly treated on a personal basis, which induces negative emotions and the desire to reciprocate (Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). The behaviour that reciprocates may escalate to a tipping point, a stage when the conflict shifts from ambiguous incivility to clear, intentional hostility. This usually occurs when a party perceives a threat to their identity, such as a loss of face, dignity, or professional credibility. The emotional response to such threats is often anger, and the behavioural outcome causes retaliation or coercive acts with a clear intent to harm. At this point, the incivility spiral transforms into a more serious conflict with escalating consequences, especially in an academic environment.

A third point of the model, secondary spirals, explains how incivility spreads beyond the original parties involved. When other members of the organisation observe or experience these uncivil acts, they may normalise such behaviour, and replicate it in their relationships if they witness or experience these uncivil activities (Masuch, 1985; Carter, 1998). In this way, incivility can spread horizontally and vertically within the academic environment, becoming embedded in its culture. This is particularly concerning in the academic environment where collaboration, collegiality, and mentorship are essential but easily undermined by normalized disrespect.

This theory is relevant in the context of academics in the Malaysian private universities. Academics may experience subtle forms of incivility from colleagues, superiors, or even students, yet are unable to address these issues due to fear of retaliation, career consequences, or institutional inaction. Over time, such experiences can lead to emotional exhaustion, detachment, and job dissatisfaction. The spiraling theory not only describes how these experiences occur but also considers the coping responses of targets, such as silence, emotional withdrawal, or avoidance, which, depending on the institutional setting, can either break or prolong the cycle of incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). This study utilised the theory to understand how workplace incivility is not only perceived and experienced but also silently absorbed and normalised by academics in Malaysian private universities. The theory also helps explain the emotional and psychological toll of persistent low-level mistreatment and reveals how ongoing silence perpetuates incivility. The theory underscores the urgent need for culturally sensitive and institutionally supported strategies to break the spiral and foster a more respectful and healthier academic environment.

Impact of Incivility on Academics

Workplace incivilities affect individual well-being and organisational performance yet remains underexplored in human resource development literature (Estes & Wang, 2008; Jawahar & Schreurs, 2018; Shin & Hur, 2020; Trudel, 2009; Yip et al., 2018). Within academic settings, where collegiality, engagement, and mutual respect are vital, such behaviours are damaging. Academics exposed to persistent low-intensity mistreatment often experience chronic stress, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and reduced self-efficacy, ultimately resulting in emotional exhaustion and a loss of motivation for teaching and research (Balducci et al., 2011; Hasan et al., 2024; Lewis, 2004; Lim & Cortina, 2005). Over time, this can lead to psychological withdrawal, lower productivity, and increased turnover intentions (Cortina et al., 2001b; Mobley et al., 1979; Razzaghian & Ghani, 2014; Zia-ud-Din et al., 2017). Clark and Ritter (2018) emphasize the need for policies that promote civility, as a supportive academic environment is vital for academics' retention and engagement. The organisational setting plays a crucial role in either enabling or preventing uncivil conduct. When structural power goes unchecked and status differences are normalized, incivility tends to cascade downward, eroding interpersonal norms (Demsky, 2019; Estes & Wang, 2008; Gustiawan et al., 2023; Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017). Incivility is both pervasive and harmful, calls for cultural change and strong leadership (Jackson et al., 2024).

The emotional toll of incivility affects not only the direct targets but also those who witness, who may fear becoming the next victim or disengage from collaborative relationships (Yaman & Erkan, 2010). Academics who are exposed to incivility often reduce their engagement, avoid collegial interaction, and withdraw from their responsibilities (Doshy, 2014; Pearson et al., 2000). Additionally, incivility has been shown to affect both genders similarly in terms of psychological distress (Cortina et al., 2001) and contributes to increased physical illness, stress, and burnout (Miner et al., 2012; Laschinger et al., 2009; Zhalkiatul et al., 2018). Academics who experience incivility are significantly more likely to consider leaving their positions, reinforcing the link between incivility and retention issues (Taylor, 2012). It is also noted that there is a growing trend from overt bullying to subtle forms of incivility in higher education (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). These findings point to the need for academic institutions to recognise workplace incivility as a systemic issue that threatens faculty well-being and institutional effectiveness.

Malaysian Context: Private Universities and Workplace Culture

In Malaysian private universities, workplace incivility is often rooted in structural hierarchies and cultural norms that discourage open confrontation. Deference to authority limits academics from reporting mistreatment, especially when it involves superiors (Callahan, 2011; Caza & Cortina, 2007). Those in power, often termed “smart bullies,” exploit institutional gaps to behave uncivilly without consequence (Heffernan & Bosetti, 2021). Vulnerable groups such as young, female, and lower-status academics are mostly affected, especially when they challenge traditional expectations (Frey, 2009; Gabriel et al., 2018; Johnson-bailey, 2016; Nilson, 2003; Settles & O’Connor, 2014). The situation is worsened by a growing consumerist mindset among students, who demand outcomes in exchange for tuition fees and may display incivility when expectations are unmet (Berger, 2000; Frey, 2009). Despite its impact on teaching, collegiality, and well-being, many institutions lack clear policies to address incivility (Hopkins et al., 2017; Lampley et al., 2016). Consequently, academics often rely on informal support networks rather than institutional solutions (Hershcovis et al., 2018). Given the limited research on incivility in Malaysian private universities, especially outside health-related fields, more focused attention is needed to protect academic integrity and academics’ well-being (Al-Asfour, 2023; Clark, 2008; Hidayah & Marinah, 2018).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how academics in Malaysian private universities perceive, experience, and respond to workplace incivility. The qualitative approach is particularly suited to capturing the depth and complexity of personal experiences, allowing the researcher to examine the emotional and job-related impacts of incivility within real academic environments. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and observations involving a purposively selected group of academics who have encountered or witnessed uncivil behaviour. Open-ended interview questions were employed to encourage rich, reflective responses and to facilitate the exploration of personal experiences. In line with Creswell’s (2013) view, qualitative research is appropriate for investigating social phenomena in their natural context, where the subjective meanings of participants can be meaningfully interpreted. This methodology allows the study to uncover the lived realities of incivility, which is often subtle, normalized, and overlooked in academic settings. The combination of interview and observational data provides a holistic understanding of how incivility affects academics emotionally and professionally, supporting the study's aim to propose more responsive institutional strategies. This research adopts a qualitative case study method that enables an in-depth investigation of individual experiences, offering rich, contextual insights into how incivility is perceived, experienced, and responded to within academic settings. As Merriam (2009) notes, case studies are particularly effective for uncovering complex human experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed. Given the interpretive nature of qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, with attention to reflexivity and ethical engagement (Creswell, 2003). In line with Silverman’s (2000) argument, qualitative methods are well-suited for examining social phenomena in depth, particularly on a smaller scale. This study employs purposive sampling to select participants with direct experiences of incivility, ensuring the data collected is both meaningful and aligned with the research objectives (Patton, 2002).

Sampling

The study involved ten academics from selected private universities in Malaysia, chosen to explore their lived experiences with workplace incivility and its effects on emotional well-being and job performance. In qualitative research, smaller sample sizes are often sufficient when the participants provide rich and relevant information. Malterud et al. (2016) introduced the concept of "information power," which suggests that the more relevant and focused the information, the fewer participants are needed. Similarly, Young and Casey (2019) indicate that a sample of 7–10 participants is often adequate to uncover the full dimensionality of key themes. Purposive sampling was employed to recruit lecturers with direct experience of workplace incivility, ensuring alignment with the study's objectives and enhancing the credibility of the data (Campbell et al., 2020). Snowball sampling complemented this by allowing initial participants to recommend others who met the inclusion criteria (Merriam, 2009), which is particularly effective for accessing specific academic populations (Naderifar et al., 2017). Sampling continued until thematic saturation was reached, when no new themes emerged and redundancy in responses was observed, thereby ensuring both the depth and quality of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rahimi & Khatooni, 2024).

Data Collection

To explore how workplace incivility is experienced and impacts academics, this study recruited ten Malaysian academics from selected private universities. Participants were required to have served in a private university setting for at least three years to ensure sufficient exposure to the academic work environment. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted between 40 to 60 minutes, allowing participants to share in-depth reflections on their experiences. The participants brought a diverse range of academic tenure as seen in Table 1: two had 16 years of experience, one had 20 years, two had 17 years, one had 25 years, two had 12 years, one had 15 years, and the least experienced had served for 9 years. The sample also reflected ethnic diversity, comprising four Indian, two Chinese, one Punjabi, and three Malay lecturers. This variation in professional experience and background provided rich insights into how incivility is perceived and internalized across different academic and cultural contexts within private universities.

Table 1

Demographic Summary of Participants

Participant (P)	Gender	Age	Race	Years of work experience
P1	Female	43	Indian	16
P2	Female	49	Indian	20
P3	Male	44	Chinese	17
P4	Female	40	Punjabi	16
P5	Female	43	Indian	17
P6	Female	50	Indian	25
P7	Male	38	Malay	12
P8	Female	38	Malay	12
P9	Female	35	Malay	9
P10	Male	41	Chinese	15

Data Analysis

This study involved conducting detailed semi-structured interviews with each participant. Using the semi-structured interviews, collection of rich and personalized information, personal perspective on the outward behaviours of participants (Patton, 2002), and what is on participants' minds (Merriam, 2001) was able to be obtained. Interviews enable researchers to probe follow-up questions to clarify uncertainties and prevent misunderstandings and misinterpretations. The data gathered were analysed by systematic and analytical data evaluation using thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Thematic analysis is selected for its emphasis on identifying patterns or themes within the data. The data collected is aligned with the theoretical framework of this study, if it accurately reflects the participants' perspectives. Data were analysed inductively, where the themes identified were closely related to the data itself (Patton, 2002). This allows the data coding process to expand according to the research questions. Lastly, the data gathered were analysed based on Ryan and Bernard's (2000) six steps of thematic analysis: familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness in this qualitative study, several strategies were employed. Member checking was used to validate the credibility of the findings. Participants were allowed to review and confirm the accuracy of their interview transcripts and the interpretations drawn from them, minimizing the risk of researcher bias, and ensuring that their perspectives were accurately represented (Merriam, 2009). Throughout the research process, detailed documentation and systematic analysis were maintained to support the integrity and dependability of the findings. Reflexivity was also practiced, with the researcher actively acknowledging and setting aside prior assumptions to remain open to the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, the concept of transferability was addressed by providing rich, contextual descriptions, allowing readers to determine whether the findings may apply to similar academic environments (Merriam, 2002). The methodological steps adhered to the qualitative descriptive framework, enhancing the credibility and applicability of the study, and by ensuring the research objective was achieved (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sandelowski, 2010).

Ethical Consideration

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed throughout this qualitative investigation to ensure the protection and dignity of all participants. Ethics were upheld at every stage of the research process, from participant recruitment to data collection and reporting (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined by the American Psychological Association. All participants were fully informed about the voluntary nature of their involvement, their right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality of their recorded interviews and transcripts. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at Universiti Putra Malaysia. To protect participant anonymity, pseudonyms (P1 to P10) were assigned, and no identifying information was disclosed. Interviews were only conducted after participants reviewed the study information and provided informed consent by signing the consent form.

Results

In total, interviews with ten academics from selected Malaysian private universities were analysed for this qualitative study on workplace incivility. Six major themes emerged from the data: subtle forms of incivility, structural power, emotional and psychological impact, impact on job performance and motivation, cultural and structural barriers, and coping strategies and social support. These themes represent the core areas of lived experiences shared by participants and offer insight into the emotional toll, systemic challenges, and personal responses associated with incivility in academic settings. The following sections provide a detailed description of each theme, supported by narratives from participants.

Subtle Forms of Incivility

Subtle forms of incivility emerged as a prominent theme, reflecting the everyday experiences of academics who encounter low-intensity, often unspoken forms of disrespect from students, colleagues, and administrators. These behaviours such as being ignored, dismissed, or excluded, usually go unreported but have an emotional impact. Academics shared instances of students showing disinterest during lectures, leaving the classroom without acknowledgment, or failing to engage respectfully, which was perceived as a lack of basic courtesy. Twenge (2017) argues that contemporary cultural trends, such as the focus on self-esteem and instant gratification, have contributed to a generation of students who may be less tolerant of authority figures and more inclined to challenge traditional norms of respect and deference. As a result, educators may find themselves dealing with students who want quick responses, personalised attention, and accommodations tailored to their preferences, sometimes exhibiting irritation or frustration when these expectations are not satisfied (Twenge, 2017). Additionally, some participants described disregard from peers, such as delayed or absent email responses, especially when timelines and responsibilities were communicated. These seemingly minor acts were experienced as signs of poor collegiality and eroded a sense of professionalism and teamwork within academic departments. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Structural Power

Structural power refers to the misuse of positional authority by superiors to dominate, intimidate, and silence subordinates, often masked under everyday interactions. In this study, participants shared multiple accounts of superiors leveraging their rank to assert control through favouritism, condescending demands, or discriminatory behaviour. One participant described how superiors enforced submission over trivial matters, using patronizing tones to reinforce authority, which led to feelings of helplessness and prolonged emotional strain. Others reported clear instances of bias, where preferential treatment toward certain staff members created a divisive and demoralizing work environment. More seriously, some participants recounted cases of exploitation, including sexual harassment by individuals in leadership roles, where power was abused to manipulate or punish those who resisted advances. Based on the literature, structural power is a cause of incivility that academics experience, as highlighted by the literature. Those supervisors who hold formal positions in the hierarchy oversee assigning and coordinating duties and have the power to influence subordinates' attitudes and behaviours toward the organization (Abas & Otto, 2016; Frone, 2000). Employees appraised incivility incidents more negatively when the instigators have more power than them (Cortina & Magley, 2009). Targets may also suffer worse outcomes when incivility is initiated by someone with a higher status (Lim & Lee, 2011). These

experiences highlight how deeply embedded power hierarchies in private universities can perpetuate a culture of fear, silence, and unequal treatment, often with little or no institutional accountability. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Emotional and Psychological Impact

The experience of workplace incivility among academics in Malaysian private universities often leads to deep emotional and psychological distress. Participants described feeling overwhelmed by persistent negativity in their work environments, which gradually evolved into symptoms of depression, emotional exhaustion, and isolation. One academic shared a sense of helplessness, expressing how the lack of recognition and support caused them to feel left behind and emotionally defeated. Another participant reflected on the loneliness of dealing with constant stress and the absence of safe spaces to talk openly about their struggles. These emotional burdens not only affect mental health but also erode an individual's confidence and sense of purpose within the academic community. A positive work environment usually contributes to higher productivity, better organisational commitment, and better employee engagement which will positively impact organisational citizenship behaviours with better overall mental and physical well-being, and better performance (Jex & Britt, 2008). It should also be noted that unhealthy working conditions may lead to negative behaviours among employees. Clerc (1985) defined poor working conditions such as irregular work hours, excessive workload demands, understaffing, and unreasonable dateline. This type of hostile environment mentioned by Clerc can detrimentally affect employees' health and well-being and influence their attitudes and sentiments toward both their work and the organisation. The findings underscore that incivility, though often subtle or unspoken, can have a significant and lasting impact on academics' well-being. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Impact on Job Performance and Motivation

Workplace incivility significantly undermines academics' motivation and job performance, often leading to disengagement from teaching, research, and collegial responsibilities. Participants shared that persistent negativity and lack of support created a sense of frustration and demoralization. One academic expressed feeling "fed up" due to the absence of meaningful solutions from the institution, which contributed to a sharp decline in motivation. Another described how their passion for teaching diminished over time due to repeated experiences of unappreciation and being overlooked for professional growth. The emotional toll even led some to withdraw from collaborative efforts or consider resignation. In more severe cases, the distress was so intense that participants preferred unemployment over continuing in a toxic environment. It is also believed that employees who experienced workplace incivility usually spend most of their time worrying about the incident and their interaction with the instigator in the future (Estes & Wang, 2008). Victims who experience demotivation and lose interest in their jobs will eventually resign and lose their creativity and commitment toward work and organisation (Cortina, 2008). These accounts highlight how incivility not only affects emotional well-being but also leads to reduced performance, disengagement, and a potential loss of talent in the academic workforce. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Cultural and Structural Barriers

The issue of workplace incivility in Malaysian private universities is deeply rooted in both cultural and structural barriers that foster a toxic and disrespectful environment. Authoritative practices embedded in institutional hierarchies create power imbalances where administrative staff may feel emboldened to disrespect academic staff, ignoring expected protocols and professional decorum. One lecturer recounted being treated rudely by administrative personnel who disregarded formalities and demonstrated a lack of basic respect, highlighting a breakdown in institutional culture. Simultaneously, student consumerism, where students view themselves as paying customers, has led to a shift in power dynamics, with some students feeling entitled to challenge or disrespect lecturers, particularly female academics, due to underlying gender biases. This entitlement is reinforced by the belief that tuition fees give students authority over educators, leading to instances where students openly harass or belittle lecturers. According to Knepp (2012), students assume that their four-year journey at a university is just to attain a higher-paying job for their future. Nordstrom et al. (2009) article, it was citing a 2006 report conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute showed that 69% of students claimed they attended college to earn more money; in contrast, just 21% of students in 1976 endorsed this as their primary reason for attending college. Modern universities are becoming increasingly diverse, bringing students with varied attitudes and expectations about learning and the academic environment. Many traditional-age students have experienced success in universities without practicing the courtesies that university-level academics expect (Nilson & Jackson, 2004). Consequently, evidence suggests that today's college students are often unprepared for the university culture and atmosphere (Knepp, 2012). Furthermore, the absence or ineffectiveness of policies addressing incivility exacerbates the issue. While official guidelines may exist on paper, their implementation is either minimal or absent in practice. Lecturers report that institutional responses to incivility are largely symbolic, with little real concern for staff welfare. These factors authoritarian structures, gender discrimination, the commodification of education, and weak policy enforcement collectively normalize incivility, making it an entrenched and unchallenged part of academic life in many private universities. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Coping Strategies and Social Support

Academics experiencing workplace incivility adopt various coping mechanisms to manage the emotional and psychological toll. Coping strategies for dealing with incivility include seeking social support, confronting, or avoiding instigators, and emotional detachment (Arumugam et al., 2025). Many resort to ignoring or avoiding confrontation, especially when they feel powerless against institutional hierarchies or when formal channels like HR are perceived to side with top management. This avoidance stems from a belief that speaking up could lead to retaliation or further marginalization. Some lecturers emphasize the importance of emotional release and social support, such as confiding in trusted friends or family members. These personal networks offer a safe space to vent frustrations and regain emotional balance whether over tea with a friend or through conversations during the commute home. Social support, particularly from colleagues, superiors, and family, plays a crucial role in managing incivility (Arumugam et al., 2025). Others adopt a more confrontational approach, choosing to address uncivil behaviour directly in private to assert boundaries and preserve self-respect. However, in more severe cases, prolonged exposure to incivility leads some to contemplate resignation, driven by a desire to seek healthier, more respectful work environments. These

diverse strategies highlight both the lack of effective institutional recourse and the crucial role of informal support systems in helping academics cope with persistent incivility. Several of these illustrative experiences are captured in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes from the Study

Theme Definition	Exemplary Experiences
Subtle forms of incivility – this encompasses academics experiencing incivility from students, colleagues, faculty administrators, and superiors	<i>“Uh, basic things like when you enter the class, you're not greeted. And then while you're teaching and they're not paying attention and then leaving the class as they wish that I suppose it's a form of a way of showing this respect as well ... as an academic and probably as a person who is teaching in front there. I suppose that basic respect should be given, so in many occasions I have faced that, besides that other form of uh.”</i> <i>“Coming to that... my colleagues... Yes, sometimes when you send emails to colleagues, you don't get response in time.... Or you get response after like two months.... or one month whereby the due date probably has been mentioned clearly in the email and they just take it lightly and I feel that's a form of way of showing you are not and collaborating together or having a teamwork within the team.</i>
Structural Power - refers to the misuse of positional authority by superiors to exert control, enforce silence, or display bias, often through intimidation, favoritism, or exploitation, especially in contexts where formal	<i>“Examples like I said, being biased, being biased towards one staff, and another when you like one staff and then you like you are so overprotective over the staff. So, the superiors are like the rest of the uh.... the staff can see what is happening around, but the superior is so obviously if you're in favoritism, unfairness”.</i> <i>“There is no issue in my documentation. There is no pending work and what is the magic word that I missed out. Then, I'll ask him, what is the magic word? Sorry I didn't get your point. He will say where is that “please” if you want me to sign your form, if you want me to fill up anything for you, please use the word “please” and this “please” is not coming in a normal tone. It will come like a very harsh tone to show that “I'm in the power” (referring to superior) ... You should listen to me so this is not only happen one or two times this has been happening for several time until we like a used to it and we feel like we being discriminated by this immediate superior for few years, and we don't have a choice, we have raised this issue to our head of school earlier, but no action was taken”.</i> <i>“Yes, yes there is a written policy. Let me share that. That this is also from my previous institution where the superior who actually hold the position as a dean has been sexually harassed many female colleagues during his position or using his position as dean. He will try to target the people who are actually went through the divorce or maybe the single... he tried to approach them so whenever they're not agree with them then he will start to find out the way to torture them. Yeah, and there is some situation we have seen that the married couple tried to have affair with him due to this reason because they don't want to go through”.</i>

Emotional and Psychological Impact - incivility leads to emotional distress, marked by depression, isolation, and a sense of helplessness.	"I used to feel very depressed because you just got no answer of why such thing is happening and somebody else is going through all the best thing in life without doing anything. So, that actually lead me to depression and, uh, of course I feel very threatened, but I just feel very upset and depressed because you just seem to be not able to climb because nobody is giving you a hand..." "Yeah, somehow in some of the level, yes, I do. I do feel the stress. I do feel depressed, and I do feel like because I'm alone here. And then sometimes I do need someone that I can talk. I can release myself my feeling about these insecurities, even... even in in terms of the workload"
Impact on Job Performance and Motivation - diminishes academic motivation, disrupts focus, and leads to withdrawal from teaching, research, and collegial engagement	"Of course, of course it has affected me morally, and it has affected me overall in the sense that, in the sense that I'm very demotivated I'm... I'm very frustrated at times. I'm just fed up. Okay? That because when whatever that we talked to or whatever, whoever we talk to, it is basically not helping the situation. Umm, I want solution, not problems. So that is my whole thing". "You know I used to, uh, I used to give a lot of effort when it comes to example, for example, in teaching, for example, I... I used to love what I'm doing, but after seeing the scenario that's happening around me, there's no appreciation, there's no recognition, and you are always denied on furthering anything so. I'm trying, I just feel I just do my... my I just fulfill my job performance. I don't have to be competent or outstanding". "So, this internally create the insecure fear to go to work that like every day we having the fear to go to office and 3 of us will continuously in the stress we are talking a lot until after 2 months everyone tried to find out the job another Institution leaving the institution immediately without the proper completing our duration, like for myself, but I'm giving the notice for 1 month. But before I complete my one month, I cleared up all my things and I also taking the additional annual leaves to complete that one month so that the mental torture that we go through that time is really terrible and I'm willing to be unemployed for one month because I... I want to get some relief from that man (CEO)".
Cultural and Structural Barriers - Deep-rooted authoritative practices, student consumerism, demographic vulnerability, and absence of clear policies collectively reinforce a culture where incivility is normalised and rarely addressed in private universities.	"From administrators... admin staff. I also have experience whereby you know, normally in academic institutions or in higher learning institutions, we respect lecturers. So, we expect the admin staff or the administrators to have some form of respect towards the lecturers. And... I... I've gone through situations or scenarios where, when you ask the administrators, they're quite rude to you. They don't know who they are talking to, and they don't follow protocols or salutations when they send emails, and so I... I find it a bit uncivilized." "I had students where they're not willing to take comments if you are a female and... and also, they are not willing to learn from you and not uh, not abiding to your instruction those kind of things they tend to do to you. So... Yes, I really think it's, uh, it's because of this culture that... that they are being raised in. Because countries where they have women is seen as still, as seen as number 2 in anything that they're doing or they are the second-class citizen". "There is no issue in my documentation. There is no pending work and what is the magic word that I missed out. Then, I'll ask him, what is the magic word? Sorry, I didn't get your point. He will say where is that "please" if you want me to sign your form, if you want me to fill up anything for you, please use the word "please" and this "please" is not coming in a normal tone. It

	will come like a very harsh tone to show that "I'm in power" (referring to superior)." "I explained the reason why she got a lower mark compared to her friends and so on and she not happy with my explanation and she tried to raise her voice and say that oh this is the institution that we all are paying and you should listen to us and because she can try to harass me. Exactly, the student can come and tell us that they are paying your salary and you are there like slaves for them". "There is rule to show that... ok... what are the like HR policies say that whenever there is incivility, what other action needs to be taken how to handle the situation and so on... In a paper... in documentation, yes there is. But when you ask me, in reality very, very minimal, I will say no one actually care about the welfare of the lecturers."
Coping Strategies and Social Support - Academics cope with incivility through ignoring, avoidance, seeking peer support, confronting offenders, or contemplating resignation as a last resort	"I will ignore that because, no point. I mean, it's a, you know it's a fighting battle. You're, you're gonna be losing at the end of the day. No point of going on, and you know what, what's the best part? They will actually mark you. They will either make your life miserable. There's no point, and then you go to HR, this doesn't make a big difference. The HR is in support of the manage top management, not you. Umm, I basically do not, it, I don't wanna go into a confrontation, neither would I want to actually approach them". "Some positive way to handle the situation is where whenever we are stress, I will immediately call my friend to go for tea. I will stress out I will clear out all my stress... I will throw out all my anger while we are having coffee. So, I try to forget it. Second, throughout the journey from home, from the office to the home, I will call my husband... I will explain everything, then my husband will say, OK, you already experience... forget it. You don't need to think back. Then the weekend I try to spend the quality time with my daughter." "I confront in private because I don't want to humiliate these people, among others. And I believe that bully should not be I, I should not believe people as well. If I'm really people as well, nothing, we are just at the same page. So, better not. That's why I'm, I'm always saying myself I'm better than others. So, when people do this, I'm not, I'm not doing that thing too. So, so we have to, we have to plan like that, that, that la. So that uh we are not uh bully people as well." "I'm not happy with the environment, not because of the organisations. Organisations, is another part. But, for, for this uncivilization, yes. This is one of the factors. One of the factors that make me feel like I, I'm, I'm, I'm plann to leave because I want to get a, a better culture, a better environment which can value people or accordingly to what they deserve."

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that workplace incivility among academics in Malaysian private universities is a persistent yet subtle phenomenon that deeply impacts professional identity, mental well-being, and job performance. Participants described being subjected to indirect exclusion, dismissive communication, and passive-aggressive behaviours from peers, students, and administrators, confirming the view that incivility is often covert and ambiguous, as outlined by Andersson and Pearson (1999). These findings align with international literature that portrays incivility as a low-intensity deviant behaviour with

ambiguous intent, which accumulates over time to erode morale and psychological safety. However, the data also uncover culturally specific aspects. In the Malaysian academic context characterized by collectivism, hierarchical respect, and power distance, many participants felt discouraged from reporting or confronting incivility. This tendency to tolerate or normalize incivility due to deference to authority or fear of reprisal highlights how cultural norms may exacerbate silence and helplessness, particularly in private institutions where job security is often tenuous. While the literature suggests that strong organisational policies can buffer against toxic climates, many respondents expressed that such mechanisms were either absent or ineffectual, suggesting a gap between formal organisational values and lived experiences. Furthermore, the study adds to existing research by demonstrating how incivility from students—a growing trend in market-driven education systems can be equally demoralizing as incivility from colleagues or superiors. Participants' narratives suggest that student consumerism, coupled with management's tendency to appease students, shifts institutional power dynamics, and undermines academic authority, thus breeding emotional exhaustion and diminished professional efficacy. The overall findings can be seen in the conceptual findings in Figure 1.

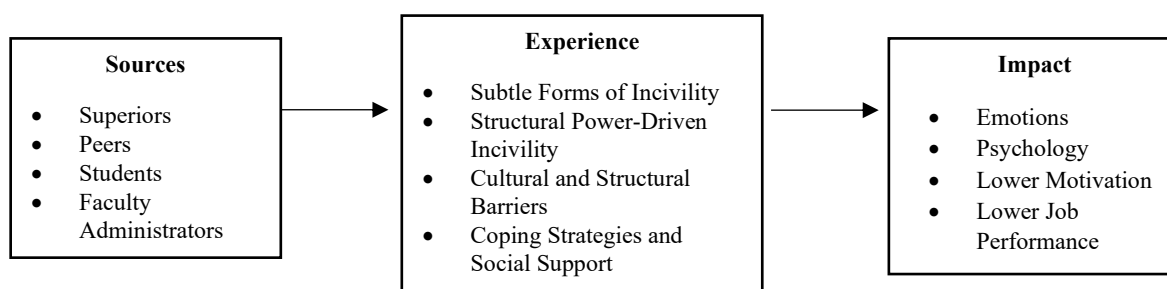


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework: Workplace Incivility among Academics

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the expanding discourse on workplace incivility and organisational behaviour by underscoring the relational and cultural complexity of incivility in non-Western academic environments. While much of the existing theory has been developed within Western organisational settings, the findings demonstrate how cultural expectations such as conformity, avoidance of conflict, and respect for hierarchy can reinforce a culture of silence around incivility in Malaysian private universities. Additionally, the study challenges the dominant framing of incivility as dyadic and episodic by highlighting its systemic nature in academia. Incivility is not merely interpersonal but institutional, embedded within structures that reward silence, prioritize profit, and devalue emotional labour. This points to the need to extend incivility theories to incorporate organisational culture, institutional policy, and cultural conditioning as mediating factors in how incivility is experienced, tolerated, or resisted.

Practical Implications

The results call for urgent practical reforms in private higher education institutions in Malaysia:

Implementation of Formal Reporting Mechanisms

Many participants reported having no safe channels to express grievances or report misconduct. Universities must institutionalize anonymous reporting systems, supported by clear anti-incivility policies that protect whistle-blowers and address power imbalances.

Training for Leadership and Faculty

Faculty members and academic administrators should undergo continuous training in civil communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intelligence. Such training is especially critical in multicultural and hierarchical contexts where indirect aggression may go unchallenged due to cultural norms.

Mental Health Support Services

The psychological toll of sustained incivility was evident in the emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout shared by participants. Institutions should offer confidential counselling services, stress management workshops, and peer support groups to help academics cope with the emotional burden. Ensuring that mental health resources are accessible and destigmatized is key to sustaining well-being in academic communities.

Conclusion

This study highlights how workplace incivility is silently embedded within the culture of Malaysian private universities, manifesting through subtle disrespect from students, colleagues, and superiors. The emotional and professional toll is evident in how academics cope often through avoidance, informal support, or contemplation of resignation due to a lack of effective reporting mechanisms and organizational accountability. While the findings deepen understanding of incivility within a uniquely Malaysian academic context, the study is limited by its small sample size, geographic focus, and reliance on self-reported data. Nevertheless, it underscores the urgent need for university management and policymakers to establish formal anti-incivility policies, introduce communication training, and expand access to mental health support. Researchers are encouraged to conduct quantitative studies, comparative analyses across public and private institutions, and long-term tracking of how incivility affects academic careers to better inform systemic change.

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