



EAWOP CONGRESS

The Future is Now: the changing world of work
Katowice, Poland

BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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Paper 4

Explaining target-specific reactions to email incivility from colleagues: An experimental examination of mediating and moderating factors

Valentina Sommovigo, Sapienza, University of Rome; Deirdre O'Shea, University of Limerick; Francesco Montani, University of Bologna-Rimini; Ilaria Setti, University of Pavia; Monica Magrone, University of Bologna-Rimini; Chiara Bernuzzi, University of Pavia

Research goals : In recent years, email incivility (i.e., uncivil behaviours exhibited in email-mediated interactions) has become an ever-increasing concern in the workplace as most employees refer to experiencing rude email communications at work. However, despite the progress achieved in this research field, research has disregarded whether, how, and when a single episode of email incivility may trigger the intentions of an email recipient to reciprocate with uncivil online communications. Shedding light into how and when employees negatively react to email incivility is nonetheless crucial to formulate preventive measures that help companies reduce the likelihood of downward spirals of interpersonal behaviours. This study aims to experimentally examine the mediating processes – i.e., justice perceptions – and moderating conditions – i.e., individual values and goals – associated with the influence of the incidence of email incivility from a colleague on target-specific email uncivil reactions.

Theoretical background : Based on social exchange theory, we theorize a two-stage moderated mediation model in which interpersonal justice mediates, and individual uncertainty avoidance values and compassionate goals buffer, a negative indirect relationship between the incidence of email incivility from a colleague on target-specific email uncivil reactions. Precisely, we argue that respondents to uncivil email would cognitively interpret the email-mediated interaction as interpersonally unjust and, thereby, would be motivated to reciprocate by engaging in email incivility toward the sender of the rude email. However, holding high uncertainty avoidance values would help people reappraise the meaning of email incivility, preventing the emergence of negative justice perceptions. Moreover, holding compassionate goals would enable “victims” of email incivility to maintain a sense of interpersonal safeness and connection that prevents the likelihood of reciprocated uncivil reactions to interpersonal injustice.

Design : A total of 199 Italian (Study 1) and 330 English (Study 2) research participants completed questionnaires that included an experimental task manipulating email incivility levels through imaginative emails to create three conditions (civil, neutral, uncivil email). In both studies, interpersonal justice perceptions, uncertainty avoidance cultural values, and sender-directed email incivility intentions were analysed. In Study 2, we also collected data on employees' compassionate goals.

Results : In both studies, the manipulation check confirmed the effectiveness of our experimental manipulation. Respondents in the uncivil (versus civil) email condition were likely to reported higher engagement in email incivility toward the sender of the rude email through the mediating role of interpersonal justice perceptions. However, this relationship was stronger for employees who had high scores on the individual-level cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance (Studies 1 and 2). Moreover, even a single episode of email incivility motivated uncivil reactions toward the colleague-sender of the rude email (Study 2), especially when the employee-recipient of the email had high uncertainty avoidance levels and, simultaneously, low compassionate goals (Study 2).

Limitations : This cross-sectional study relied only on self-report measures.

Conclusions : The present findings contribute to extend prior research on email incivility, which had primarily focused on the direct impact of supervisor uncivil emails on subordinates' reactions. Our findings highlight co-worker email incivility as a specific form of uncivil behaviour leading to reciprocated email-mediated incivility intentions and discloses interactional injustice as a key process explaining why and how such a downward spiral of negative interpersonal behaviours arises. Moreover, our results shed new light on the boundary conditions associated with these negative effects by showing that the ambiguous intent of email incivility may be differently interpreted based on individual-level cultural values, and that compassionate employees are less likely to reciprocate email incivility. From a practical standpoint, organizations should set clear norms concerning acceptable and unacceptable emails. The topics of email incivility should be incorporated into formal training programs to make employees aware of potential misperceptions/biases in online communication. Online etiquette training may be useful to educate workers about the proper ways to interact through ICTs, while compassion meditation could have the potential to reduce employees' uncivil reactions.

Relevance to the Congress Theme : This study extends the topic of communication and relationships by disclosing how and when a specific incidence of email incivility from a colleague would lead to more target-specific uncivil reactions to colleagues as entities.

Relevant UN SDGs : Good health and wellbeing.

Audience : Both practitioners and academics

Keywords: email incivility, uncertainty avoidance, compassionate goals