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Electronic warfare: A personality model of cyber incivility



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ABSTRACT

Cyber incivility is defined as communicative behavior exhibited in computer mediated interactions that violate workplace norms of mutual respect. This study examines the impact of personality traits on cyber incivility via work email. Specifically, by drawing on the abridged big-five dimensional circumplex (AB5C) model of personality and the extant literature on cyber incivility, this study proposes a personality model of cyber incivility and posits that the personality traits of extraversion and emotional stability can be linked to cyber incivility more closely when each of them is accompanied by the personality trait of conscientiousness than when without it. We test our model by conducting a two-phased online survey of 265 full-time employees in the country of India. Results indicate that the relationships of extraversion and emotional stability with cyber incivility are negatively moderated by conscientiousness. Our findings contribute to the knowledge base of both personality and cyber incivility by understanding their linkages.

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1. Introduction

The rapid proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has altered the way employees communicate and interact with their superiors, subordinates, co-workers or colleagues, and customers or clients (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2015). Although ICTs provide several benefits like reduced temporal and physical constraints, and increased horizontal and vertical communication (Alder, Noel, & Ambrose, 2006) in the workplace, they also have severe negative implications for both employees and organizations in terms of their health and its efficiency respectively (Giumetti et al., 2013). Cyber incivility, defined as “communicative behavior exhibited in computer mediated interactions that violate workplace norms of mutual respect” (Lim & Teo, 2009, p. 419), has been reported to be widely prevalent in organizations. As email is a fundamental mode (or channel) of work-related communication and interaction for employees in many organizations, cyber incivility via work email is likely to occur (Park et al., 2015).

To illustrate, a report by the Radicati Group, Inc. (2015), a technology market research firm based in the United States, indicates that in 2015, an average business user sent and received 122 emails a day, and this figure is expected to average 126 emails a day

per business user by end of 2019. A report on “networked workers” by Madden and Jones (2008) from Pew Research Center highlights that most workers (about 60%) use the Internet or emails at their jobs. Further, the report acknowledges that these technologies are a mixed blessing for the workers as they add stress to their work lives despite the increased efficiency in work communication. Another large scale study by Porath and Pearson (2013) involving 14,000 people throughout the United States and Canada indicates that incivility can take subtle forms (e.g., a manager sending emails during a presentation). Empirical studies on cyber incivility enacted in email communications has found that employees who experience cyber incivility engage in workplace deviance or quit their jobs (Lim & Teo, 2009). A study by Giumetti et al. (2013) examined the impact of incivility in a simulated online work environment and found that incivility was associated with lower energy levels, and increased negative affect and decreased positive affect. Further, the study also found that incivility was associated with poor performance on a simulated workplace task and lower levels of engagement in uncivil condition. A recent study by Park et al. (2015) showed that “on days when employees experienced cyber incivility, they reported higher affective and physical distress at the end of the workday that, in turn, was associated with higher distress the next morning” (p. 1). Taken together, given the prevalence of cyber incivility and its potentially erosive consequences, there is a pressing need to examine the causes of cyber incivility at

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workplace.

While a few attempts have been made to study the causes of cyber incivility, extant studies have focused on causes that are exclusively from within work domain. For instance, a study by Francis, Holmwall, and O'Brien (2015) found that workload impacted cyber incivility. That is, "individuals in a high workload condition perpetrated more incivility than those in a low workload condition" (p. 198). Another study by Blau and Andersson (2005) reported that while the perceptions of distributive justice and job satisfaction were negatively related to instigated incivility at workplace, work exhaustion was associated with increased uncivil behavior. Although this research has been useful in making important initial steps in cyber incivility literature, our review of extant literature indicates that research conducted on individuals' trait-based constructs related to workplace incivility (and by extension cyber incivility) are scarce. As cyber incivility is often prompted by thoughtlessness (Porath & Pearson, 2013), and as "there may or may not be an intention on the part of the perpetrator of cyber behavior to cause harm" (Lim & Teo, 2009, p. 419), it is logical to presume that "certain personality traits that are annoying, unusual, or bothersome" (Milam, Spitzmueller, & Penney, 2009, p. 58) can explain workplace cyber incivility. In recent years, recognizing that the impact of an individual personality trait on work behavior depends on other traits (e.g., Witt, Burke, Barrick, & Mount, 2002), "researchers have taken an interactionist approach to understand the impact of personality on behavior" (Penney, Hunter, & Perry, 2011, p. 62). In line with this approach, the major purpose of our study is to construct a personality model of cyber incivility at workplace by drawing on the abridged big-five dimensional circumplex model of personality (Hofstee, de Raad, & Goldberg, 1992). Specifically, among the big-five traits of personality, we expect conscientiousness to moderate the effects of both extraversion and emotional stability with cyber incivility. Accordingly, the key research question (RQ) that this study strives to address is as follows:

RQ: How does conscientiousness interact with (1) extraversion and (2) emotional stability in predicting cyber incivility via work email?

To test our model, we conducted a study of 265 full-time employees in the country of India, which entailed two points in time data collection. We discuss the results of the empirical test, which supported our proposed model. We then close with a discussion of the implications, limitations, and future research directions of this research for the understudied topic of cyber incivility.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Abridged big-five dimensional circumplex model of personality

Personality refers to cognitive and behavioral patterns, which reflects the unique facets of every human being and his/her thoughts and actions (Devaraj, Easley, & Crant, 2008). Hofstede and his associates in their work on 'culture and organizations' indicate that the personality of an individual "is his or her unique personal set of mental programs that needn't be shared with any other human being" (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 7). Research in the domain of workplace deviance had found personality traits as one of the key antecedents of counterproductive work behaviors (CWBs; e.g., Berry, Ones, & Sackett, 2007). According to these studies, personality is related to CWBs as such behaviors are generally considered as an expression of individuals' natural inclinations (Penney et al., 2011). Along these lines, we presume cyber incivility via work email as a reflection of employees' trait proclivities (Milam et al., 2009). In other words, we expect personality traits to explain a significant amount of variance in cyber

incivility.

Two key models that are central to personality and work behavior research are (1) five-factor model (FFM); and (2) circumplex model (Witt, 2002; Witt et al., 2002). FFM is based on factor analysis approach in which "personality items have principal loadings on one or another of the highest-level factors" (Witt, 2002, p. 836). According to this model, the domain of personality can be parsimoniously and comprehensively represented by five subordinate factors, labelled as the big-five: (1) agreeableness; (2) conscientiousness; (3) extraversion; (4) emotional stability; and (5) openness to experience (Goldberg, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999; McCrae & Costa, 1999). Researchers have used different labels to describe these five traits (Saucier & Goldberg, 2001), which shows stability over time and across situations (Marcus, Goffin, Johnson, & Rothstein, 2007). Table 1 summarizes the alternative names used in the literature for each of these five factors.

Alternative to the FFM is the circumplex model of personality, which "presents traits along angular positions in a two-dimensional factor space" (Witt, 2002, p. 836), and designates no optimal orientation of the principal axes of the circumplex "because any rotation is as good as another" (Wiggins & Trapnell, 1997, p. 748). Although this model provides "much more opportunity for identifying clusters of traits that are semantically cohesive" (Hofstee et al., 1992, p. 146), it does not capture all of the trait space and miss "at least two of the five general personality factors" (Witt, 2002, p. 837). To overcome this limitation, Hofstee and associates combined the aforementioned two models and proposed the abridged big-five dimensional circumplex (AB5C) model of personality (Hofstee et al., 1992), which consists of ten two-dimensional circumplexes that considers all possible pairs of the big-five dimensions as coordinates. That is, "each trait is characterized by its loadings on a subset of two of the five factors at a time" (Witt, 2002, p. 838). This model explicates "cross-dimensional effects of personality traits," and offers "support for a constellation approach to examine personality's influence on work behavior" (Witt et al., 2002, p. 165). In other words, this model provides a strong theoretical base to analyze interactions among personality variables (e.g., high extraversion in the presence of conscientiousness). Our review of extant literature indicates that there is a considerable support for utilizing this model as a theoretical lens for linking personality (and analyzing interactions among them) to work behavior constructs. For instance, in a study on relating personality traits to job performance, Witt et al. (2002) by drawing on this model found that "highly conscientious workers who lack interpersonal sensitivity may be ineffective, particularly in jobs requiring cooperative interchange with others" (p. 164). Another study by Witt (2002), utilizing the same model, found that "additional units of extraversion led to increments in performance among high-conscientious workers but to decrements in performance among low-conscientious workers" (p. 835). In line with these studies, we draw on the AB5C model of personality to theorize interactions among traits that could explain cyber incivility at workplace.

2.2. Relating personality to cyber incivility

Extant literature on cyber incivility indicates that there are three aspects of cyber incivility that makes it distinct from other forms of CWB, thereby highlighting the need for constellation (or interactionist) approach (i.e., analyzing interactions among personality variables) while linking trait-based constructs with cyber incivility. First, while CWBs are committed with the unambiguous intent to harm another (Baron, 2004; Neuman & Baron, 2005), cyber incivility is not necessarily intentional or malicious (Lim & Teo, 2009). Second, unlike CWBs like bullying that is more severe, recurring,

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