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## Experiences of Online Faculty When Peer-to-Peer Incivility is Observed

Juliet Lockwood  
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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Juliet V. Lockwood

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

Experiences of Online Faculty When Peer-to-Peer Incivility is Observed

by

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MS, Drexel University

BS, Northeastern Illinois University

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

## Abstract

Incivility in the college classroom distracts from the learning process. Students who are uncivil to their peers often shame and embarrass them in front of others, and uncivil students distract from learning opportunities by arguing with professors and coercing them for grades that were not earned. Incivility by students is counterintuitive to the goals of higher education which include offering a space for meaningful learning. The literature describes incivility by students in the physical classroom, yet lacking from current research is how peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom affects student learning. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand how incivility in the online classroom alters the learning environment for students as observed by online faculty. The theoretical foundation for this study was Azjen's theory of planned behavior, claiming that an individual's attitudes and beliefs about certain behaviors correspond with acting on those behaviors and believing in the desired outcome. The research questions for this study explored online faculty's experiences and observations of incivility related to asynchronous discussion boards and synchronous classroom activities. Results from online faculty interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, resulting in categories and themes that captured the perspectives and experiences of the online faculty. Understanding peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom has the potential to decrease uncivil behaviors by students toward their peers resulting in a more positive social change in the online learning environment.

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## Dedication

This is dedicated to my mother. She has always supported me and reminded me that I am worth it.

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To my husband, Paul. Your love, encouragement, and understanding have meant more to me than words can express. You are truly a gift and without you by my side I would not have been able to complete this journey. To my daughter, Peyton and my son, Alec, thank you for making me the proudest mom on the planet. My heart is full.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this study was to explore online peer-to-peer incivility and how it affects student learning in the online classroom as experienced by online faculty. Online students who experience incivility from their peers may perceive the uncivil behaviors toward them as a negative reflection of their abilities as online students. These experiences may affect the learning experience by struggling to meet course objectives (Knepp, 2012). While academic literature includes studies concerning peer-to-peer incivility as a continual problem in higher education, lacking in the research is the understanding of how online faculty perceive incivility as a detriment to student learning. By exploring online faculty experiences, a greater understanding of how incivility alters the learning experience will be shared.

Chapter 1 includes background on the proposed study topic, the problem statement, purpose, and research questions of the proposed study. This chapter also includes the theoretical framework, an explanation of the nature of the study, and operational definitions. This chapter concludes with the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, a chapter summary, and transition to the upcoming chapters.

### **Background**

Classroom incivility is described in the literature as rude and disrespectful actions and behaviors by students toward faculty and peers in both the face-to-face and online classrooms and continues to be a pervasive problem in higher education (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Knepp, 2012; Ng et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021). A comprehensive review of the

literature highlighted the following themes regarding student incivility in the online classroom: academic entitlement, classroom anonymity, communication, online etiquette, respect for others' opinions, self-esteem, self-efficacy, lifelong learning, and social media. Literature describing the active relationship between attitudes of academic entitlement and student incivility reports that the more entitled a student feels, the more their attitudes and behaviors become uncivil (Zhu & Anagondahalli, 2018). Academic entitlement in the college classroom contributes to student incivility when students' grades do not reflect their perceived amount of hard work (Jiang et al., 2017). Approximately 60% of students interviewed from 136 technical colleges and baccalaureate nursing programs claimed to have acted irresponsibly and inappropriately in the classroom when test scores were lower than the students' expected (Ibrahim & Qalawa, 2016). Uncivil behaviors can be characterized by their gravity when occurring in the classroom. Student incivility ranges from minor disruptive annoyances to possible volatile outbursts and violence.

As online education continues in popularity, students hope for a safe and collegial environment to share their thoughts and receive feedback. Communication among peers in the online classroom can be unnerving for students if they are new to online learning or returning to college after an absence. In asynchronous online discussion boards incivility may hurt students when their posts are ignored or when peers respond with rude or disrespectful comments (Ruthotto, 2020). During synchronous class time, incivility is described as interruption of learning and is reported as oversharing, grandstanding, and body language which projects boredom and lack of interest in the speaker and the content

(Donathan et al., 2017; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014; Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013; Ruthotto, 2020). Peers report instances of ringing cell phones, side conversations, and verbal challenges toward the instructor's expertise as common practice. These behaviors are repeatedly cited as having detrimental effects on the learning process (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Clark & Springer, 2007; Connelly, 2009; Donathan et al., 2017; Knepp, 2012).

This study focused on peer-to-peer student incivility in the online classroom as experienced by online faculty for the purpose of identifying common offending behaviors and the effects on student learning. It is hoped that results will inform the development of specific classroom management techniques that faculty can use to mitigate these behaviors so students can devote their full attention to learning. Incivility in the face-to-face classroom continues to be studied, but missing from existing research is the understanding of how peer-to-peer incivility affects student learning in the online classroom. This study may help to inform online faculty and other higher education professionals of this phenomenon striving toward mitigating these behaviors in order to maintain an environment for students to devote their full attention to learning.

### **Problem Statement**

Classroom incivility is described in the literature as rude and disrespectful actions and behaviors by students in both the physical and online classrooms. Students are distracted and embarrassed by the poor behavior of their peers and are personally affected when the incivility becomes offensive and cruel (Bonaccio et al., 2016, see also Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Clark & Springer, 2007; Connelly, 2009; Knepp, 2012). In



the early 1990s, the literature indicated that incivility in the face-to-face classroom was becoming problematic as student behavior began to disrupt the learning environment especially when peers were the targets of the incivility (Boice, 1996; Holten, 1995). Current research continues to describe a growing understanding of student incivility in the face-to-face classroom, including overall descriptions of uncivil behaviors, potential causes, and the ability of faculty to address the incivility in the moment (Reyson, 2017). Some of the same uncivil behaviors are observed and felt in both face-to-face and online classrooms; however, lacking from the research is an understanding of how peer-to-peer incivility specifically affects online learners. Online faculty are in a position to observe peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom, yet there is little research regarding online faculty's experiences and how the incivility is addressed.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reported that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, 11.8 million students enrolled in at least one online course versus six million in 2019. As online learning continues to be a choice for students, the need is great for better understanding of online student incivility (Chandra, 2021; Farzi et al., 2021; Small et al., 2019; Swartzwelder et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019). Understanding online faculty experiences with peer-to-peer incivility and its effects on student learning may assist other online faculty when these issues occur. Sharing information across the online teaching profession will serve online faculty, administration, and online students who are negatively affected by peer incivility.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand how peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom alters the learning environment for students as observed by online faculty. Peer-to-peer incivility is described as degrading and disruptive behavior by students, which interferes with teaching and may impede student learning and their achievement of course objectives (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Frischlich et al., 2021; Swartzwelder et al., 2019). As more is understood about peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom, online faculty may begin to recognize the negative behaviors, confront these behaviors with students, and mitigate the issue of incivility in the online classroom.

### **Research Questions**

RQ 1: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility on discussion boards in the online classroom?

RQ 2: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The theoretical framework for this study is Azjen's theory of planned behavior (TPB), which stems from the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Azjen & Fishbein, 1980). The theory of planned behavior is comprised of behaviors stemming from favorable or unfavorable perceptions of a situation. These behaviors can be predicted by beliefs represented by six constructs (attitudes, behavioral intention, subjective norms, social

norms, perceived power, and perceived behavioral control) that help define a person's control over their behavior in various situations (Ajzen, 1991).

TPB allows researchers to understand behaviors of individuals and their motivations to conduct those behaviors. For example, TPB was utilized in a study to determine student intentions to use institutional learning management systems (LMS) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intentions of the students were applied to the theory according to their attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. TPB was applied to understand the behavioral intentions of the students regarding the changes and their actual behaviors. Results indicated that students' attitudes toward the changes (will the students accept the new directives to continue in the course) did affect their behaviors (students' behaviors in the course were positive), allowing for continued learning; however, it is unknown if the students used the LMS because it was the only option for them (Yang & Su, 2017).

This theory relates to this basic qualitative study because the purpose of the study is to understand online faculty experiences, which may give insight into student motivation causing uncivil behavior toward peers. In this study, online faculty described their perceptions of incivility, experiences regarding peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom, why the incivility occurred, and its effects on classroom learning. TPB relates to this study by examining the experiences of online faculty when student incivility was observed then understanding if the beliefs of students acting uncivilly to their peers is a product of their perceptions, especially student attitudes and perceived power. For example, online students who pick on and embarrass their peers in an online discussion

board may feel their superiority over others as perceived power in the class. This theory supports thoughts behind attitudes and behaviors, which may help online faculty deter peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom. In this study, participants were asked to share their perspectives on student incivility in their online classes and the behaviors observed, which then led to discussion about student choices and effects of the behaviors.

### **Nature of the Study**

The qualitative research tradition allows individuals to verbalize their perspectives and personal experiences with a goal of learning more about a social problem. Qualitative methodology provides the researcher a means to learn about an issue through the experiences of individuals (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Alternatively, quantitative methodology seeks to understand relationships among variables using numerical data and statistical analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As the goal for this study was to learn directly from online faculty about their experiences with incivility in the online classroom, a qualitative study was appropriate.

Other commonly used qualitative research designs are phenomenological, ethnography, narrative, and case studies. These research designs, including the basic qualitative design, have common characteristics; however, their methodologies are different (Merriam, 2009). While a phenomenological design also includes learning about an individual's perspective regarding an issue, the focus is on the "lived experience" of the individual and the impact the phenomenon has had on their lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Percy et al., 2015, p .77). This research design aims to arrive at the core of how an issue affects a person. This process of learning leads to in-depth discovery, which differs

from the basic qualitative design. Ethnological design considers participants in the study as one group or culture. There are various patterns and commonalities found including language and traditions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The narrative design collects a large amount of data or an entire story over time versus a case study which usually covers a singular topic from a participant which can then be analyzed for data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for selecting a basic qualitative design was to learn from individual online faculty's own experiences and perspectives of peer-to-peer incivility through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. This design will meet the goal of this study, which is to gain a fundamental understanding of this social problem and the effects on classroom learning.

Participants for this study were higher education faculty who have experience teaching online courses. After the participants were provided informed consent and agreed to participate, confidential interviews were conducted. Research questions were written to elicit participant responses in order to answer the research questions. Interviews took place over Zoom as the participants were located in various areas of the Midwest. Findings were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis process and NVivo software to assist in organizing data into categories and themes.

### **Definitions**

Many of the terms and concepts used in this study would be familiar to online faculty and university stakeholders; however, I defined other concepts related to incivility in online higher education that may be less familiar.

*Academic entitlement:* A student's beliefs about their academic performance despite their efforts in class. When academically entitled students are not given concessions for poor grades or extensions on due dates, their behavior can be rude, bossy, and, disrespectful toward faculty and their peers (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Reysen et al., 2017).

*Asynchronous learning:* Online learning occurs independently, allowing students to complete coursework on their own time according to published due dates provided by the instructor (Fabrizz et al., 2021; Parkes et al., 2015).

*Cyberincivility:* Students belittling their peers' discussion board comments as well as disrespectful and insensitive behaviors via means such as text, email, chat room, or social media platforms. Cyberincivility also includes cyberbullying and cyberstalking which can cause severe emotional and physical repercussions for victims (Al-Rahmi & Othman, 2013; De Gagne et al., 2019; Kluck & Krämer, 2021; Small et al., 2019).

*Cyberloafing:* Students using their time online to engage in other activities in the virtual classroom such as participating in social media or working on other courses (Chavan et al., 2021).

*Grandstanding:* A type of incivility when students try to "one up" their peers believing their perspective should be the only one heard. Grandstanders are often rude, loud, and obnoxious toward others (Grubbs et al., 2019).

*Incivility:* Shaming other students, disrupting class, challenging professors, and a general lack of respect for those around them. (Boswell, 2012; Lippman et al., 2009).

*Live chat:* Generally seen in the synchronous classroom, live chat (also described

as live virtual learning) is the opportunity for online students and faculty to communicate in real-time, creating a more enhanced experience for students and their learning (Fadde & Vu, 2014).

*Social media/Social networking:* Well-known social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow individuals to share common interests, give advice, and follow current trends (Clark et al., 2017).

*Synchronous learning:* Real-time learning in which instructors and students access the online classroom according to a designated schedule (Fadde & Vu, 2014).

### **Assumptions**

In qualitative research, philosophical assumptions lead the research process from the beginning. The four assumptions researchers must recognize when preparing a qualitative study are ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Ontology is the assumption that those connected to a qualitative study have varying realities. The researcher should report biases and experiences which may have shaped their beliefs. While study participants will also have differing realities from their experiences, it is understood that these different realities will possibly lead to common themes discovered from the results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The epistemological assumption claims that the researcher will become as close to the study topic and participants as possible to fully understand participant responses. The opinions and various experiences of each participant will inform the knowledge of the topic allowing the researcher to fully understand their perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, axiology is the assumption that describes the connection between the researcher

and the study itself. Since I have experience as an online faculty member, my own perceptions and opinions should be kept apart from the study results. This assumption states that the researcher is considered the instrument in the study and not an active participant.

These assumptions weave into the methodology of the study. As an understanding of the study begins to emerge, the study components, including the research questions, may change in order to meet the overall goals of the study. Gaining clarity on the research problem is framed around the information gathered. The researcher must be prepared to modify data collection as analysis of data continues (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Providing a values-based approach to this qualitative study leads to an increased level of researcher ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In this basic qualitative study, it was assumed that participants have taught or currently teach online at the college level and have observed uncivil behaviors by students in the online classroom. It is also assumed that the online participants' epistemological views support the uniqueness of online instruction and student learning. Lastly, perceptions of what constitutes incivility are subjective, thus potentially affecting the identification of themes in the data. I confirmed and trusted that the participants met the study's parameters and did not question their integrity; however, there were four participants who were later deemed ineligible to continue with the study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This basic qualitative study attempted to understand the experiences of online faculty when peer-to-peer incivility was observed. Specific aspects of the research



problem focused on peer-to-peer communication in the online classroom when students participate in asynchronous discussion boards and during synchronous classroom time.

Transferability in research ensures that the reader of the study can interpret findings according to the data collected and presented (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). As this study will only include online faculty's experiences and perceptions of student incivility in the online classroom, transferability may be a challenge to those who are accustomed to the face-to-face teaching experience. Online classroom dynamics differ from face-to-face classrooms; for instance, students commenting on a discussion board prompt will not receive an instantaneous reply, yet in the face-to-face classroom, real-time communication allows for conversation.

One delimitation to this study is the inclusion of only faculty who have taught online at any type of higher education institution and any level of class. Online faculty from 2-year colleges or 4-year universities as well as any class level (freshman through senior) may be potential participants yet have different perspectives as to what constitutes incivility. Another delimitation of this study is the exclusion of the online students' perspectives. Online students' observations of incivility in the classroom may differ from the faculty perspective, especially if the student is the focus of the incivility. A third delimitation is confirmation bias. As an online faculty member and an online student, I will avoid influencing this study with my personal experiences by maintaining a journal to record my thoughts throughout the interview process and arrange member checking at the conclusion of the study.

### **Limitations**

Data were gathered from higher education faculty, but only from those who have taught or are teaching in the online setting. This may cause a lack of transferability if the responses by online faculty are very different from what is known about in-person faculty experiences with student incivility. Other limitations may include upsetting experiences of student incivility that the participants have dealt with prior to the interview. These negative experiences may affect the participants' ability to describe a situation in a way that does not skew future responses. In qualitative research, observing the participant for body language or enhanced behavior may further inform the research. Since this study's interviews were held on Zoom, it was difficult to observe the participants' body language; however, I took careful notes to indicate any changes in mood or tone of the participant.

### **Significance**

This study will provide a better understanding of what online faculty experience in the online classroom related to peer-to-peer incivility and the effects on student learning. The literature reports that online students have been embarrassed and ridiculed by their peers which has caused those students to doubt their abilities in the online classroom. This affects student motivation to participate in online class activities, therefore, making it difficult to meet their academic goals (Bonaccio et al., 2016). Results from this study may help to form the future of online higher education, in which the goals remain to educate students as thinkers, problem solvers, and future professionals able to communicate in a virtual work environment (Fairchild & Crage, 2014). This study

contributed to the existing body of research by its focus on understanding online faculty experiences and observations of incivility by students in the online classroom and by sharing the data will inform other higher education professionals to assist in decreasing these negative behaviors.

Understanding incivility in the online classroom may be a step forward in limiting online communication that is hurtful to others. As observed in social media and numerous public platforms, comments about any topic can be made anonymously without consequence. This study correlates with Walden University's (2022) views on social change, which includes educating online students to be "change makers." The results of this study will continue the work toward a global community of respect and kindness toward one another and consideration of others' points of view will move toward positive social change.

### **Summary**

This chapter introduced the problem of peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom as observed by online faculty. As online learning continues to be a popular choice for students, their peers' disrespectful and hurtful attitudes and behaviors may diminish the learning experience for students who are targets of their classmates' incivility. Existing literature describes active instances of incivility by peers in the face-to-face classroom; this study seeks to understand peer-to-peer incivility from the online faculty perspective, thereby addressing this gap in research. Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive review of the literature focusing on the phenomenon of incivility and its causes and consequences for student learning.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

As the online student presence continues to grow, online student incivility persists in higher education. Numerous research studies have identified incivility as reported by faculty and students as rude and bossy attitudes toward peers, uncomfortable situations as students challenge faculty expertise, and the general disregard for classroom rules and deadlines (Greenberger et al., 2008; Laverghetta, 2018; Spadafora et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2019; Yrisarry et al., 2019). Students who have been the recipient of peer-to-peer incivility report its negative impact on their mental health (Ng et al., 2020) and are fearful of aggressive verbal altercations (Strassle & Verrecchia, 2019). Students who are targets of incivility by a peer in the classroom lose motivation to participate (Loizzo et al., 2017) and are increasingly absent (Knepp, 2012; Segrist et al., 2018). Constant incivility forces faculty to take instruction time to mitigate issues in the classroom, taking away from the learning experience (Farrell et al., 2016; Lippman et al., 2009). However, less research is focused on the online classroom and online faculty perspectives of student learning. This study will focus on faculty experiences of incivility by online students toward their peers as it pertains to online discussion boards and the synchronous online classroom.

This chapter begins with a description of the literature search strategy and themes related to the study topic. A literature review of the theoretical framework for this study, the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1990) is provided in addition to literature regarding peer-to-peer incivility in the face-to-face and online classrooms, examples and causes of uncivil behaviors, online classroom settings, awareness of technology, and consequences of incivility toward classroom learning. Finally, a summary of the literature

according to specific themes from available research studies is included as well as a chapter summary.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

This literature search has spanned over 20 months and incorporated research articles dating back to the early 1980s when student incivility was noticed as a distraction in the classroom. The databases used were PsycArticles, PsycInfo, Thoreau, Education Source, SAGE, Google Scholar, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertation, and Theses at Walden University. Terms and phrases used in the searches were *online incivility, online learning, academic entitlement, antisocial behavior, attitudes, disrespect, norms, online behavior, higher education faculty, synchronous and asynchronous online classrooms, discussion boards, motivation, learning, technology, social networking, and distrust.*

Research on student incivility reports that uncivil behaviors are observed in many content areas; however, student incivility in healthcare majors is overwhelming (Clark & Springer, 2007; Eka & Chambers, 2019; Farzi et al., 2021; Kolanko et al., 2006; Muliira et al., 2017). Literature regarding the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic and the emergent shift from on-campus to online learning affected student stress (Chandra, 2021). Furthermore, studies from other countries around the world indicate student incivility is a problem everywhere (Clark et al., 2010; Dhawan, 2020).

### **Theoretical Foundation**

The theoretical framework for this study was the theory of planned behavior (TPB), which was derived from the theory of reasoned action (TRA; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Both behavioral theories report that behavior is influenced by intentions of

performing a behavior for a particular outcome. Azjen (1985) included behavioral control to the theory in that the decision to act has already been made prior to performing the act. TPB suggests that the chances an individual engages in a certain behavior are due to their intention to act out that exact behavior. According to the theory, intentions, attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control determine whether a behavior will be performed (Azjen & Fishbein, 1980). One's effort toward enacting the behavior and a strong belief that they can accomplish the behavior will result in confirmation of the intended result. Subjective norms apply when deciding to perform a behavior. Those who consider the thoughts or opinions of others along with the intended behavior may adjust the behavior to suit the norms (Azjen, 1991).

TPB is widely used in social science research to conceivably predict bullying in schools (Alotaibi, 2019), workplace bullying (De Gagne et al., 2021), engaging in questionable health behaviors (Wilhelm et al., 2008), and is used when seeking to understand college students' behaviors such as excessive alcohol use (Collins & Carey, 2007) and decisions to cheat on exams or engage in plagiarism (Stone et al., 2009). TPB supports this basic qualitative research design by affirming that behaviors can be predicted when one's attitudes and beliefs coincide with social norms and efficacy beliefs (Alotaibi, 2019; Azjen, 1991). A person will decide to perform a behavior dependent upon whether their intentions, which can be controlled, are supported. This theory supports the creation of this study's research questions, which focus on online faculty experiences and observations of peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom. The

interview questions were then established to elicit conversation focused on the faculty's perceptions of incivility and the effects on student learning.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Concepts**

In this qualitative study, the experiences of online instructors confronted with online student incivility were explored. In this chapter, current literature has been synthesized around the following topics: (a) definitions of student incivility, (b) experiences of incivility by students and faculty, (c) causes of student incivility, (d), and how the learning environment is affected due to online peer-to-peer incivility.

#### **Classroom Incivility**

Students who remain behind their computer screens evoke incivility by creating an uncomfortable learning environment for their peers (Vivek & Ansari, 2010; Yarmand et al., 2021). Unintentional incivility is described as a general lack of forethought or planning. Annoyances such as eating on camera or sitting in bed during synchronous class time often only require reminders from the faculty on professionalism (Spadafora et al., 2018). Alternatively, intentional incivility is recognized as a student verbally insulting another student during class and has been observed during synchronous class time (Spadafora et al., 2018). Furthermore, repeated unwanted communication via email, texting, chat rooms, or asynchronous discussion boards is identified as purposeful cyberbullying, cyberincivility, or cyberharassing (Lampman et al., 2008; Patchin & Hindjuja, 2006; Rafferty & Vander Ven, 2014).

In the synchronous online classroom, incivility is recognized as students looking bored on screen, portraying poor body language, and using their computers for other

activities during class. Faculty feel they are teaching to a “void” when students keep their cameras off and microphones muted also sharing that most students choose to avoid participating by acting anonymous (Yarmand et al., 2021, p. 1) feigning interest in course content. Behaviors such as logging on late to an online course and keeping their cameras off and microphones muted distract students and interrupts the learning process. As classroom incivility increases, students engage in other disruptive behaviors and become less involved in learning (Farrell et al., 2016).

Asynchronous discussion boards provide the opportunity to bring students together for collaboration on course topics. But incivility occurs when students use insensitive and vulgar language in an asynchronous discussion board posts, email, and other electronic communication. (Clark et al., 2021; Galbraith & Jones, 2010; Spafadora et al., 2018). Most uncivil communication occurs in writing via email, chat rooms, and asynchronous discussion boards and decreases student participation in the course and lowers overall satisfaction (Swartzwelder et al., 2019). Peers report instances of unacceptable treatment of one another and impoliteness during individual discussions, accompanied by denial that any behavior was wrong (Ng et al., 2020). Social perception is subjective and perceived hostility can affect participation. Remarks such as “she doesn’t know what she is talking about” or “why can’t they just read the directions?” can hurt a student who reads them. Students can send dislikes (a thumbs down), spread rumors, and complain at the click of a button. A study found that 46% of student participants who witnessed incivility in the online classroom also admitted to engaging in



incivility themselves by either “liking” uncivil online comments or posting their own (Kluck & Krämer, 2021).

The purposeful shaming and embarrassment of classmates, manipulation of discussions, engagement in hate speech, and overt disrespect for others’ perspectives continue to be observed and felt in the online classroom (Clark & Springer, 2007; Gervais, 2015; Swartzwelder et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019). Research studies have found that students who are victims of online incivility from a peer might drop their classes, which will affect their overall grade point average. It can thereby impact financial aid awards and graduation rates (Campbell et al., 2020). While class disruption and chaos may occur in the face-to-face classroom, students who experience incivility by a peer in the online classroom can be negatively skewed toward continuing their education online (Campbell et al., 2020). Students exposed to incivility in the online classroom express stress, depression, fear, and discouragement (Kluck & Krämer, 2021). Online faculty express concerns that online students who are victims of incivility by a peer may distance themselves from the on-campus community; therefore, increasing the chance the student disengages from the course (Serdyukov & Sistik-Chandler, 2015). These concerns, in addition to overall uncivil behavior, can permeate into a student’s personal and professional life, reiterating the need for this research.

In 2012, approximately 91% of female university professors reported experiences of student incivility toward themselves and other students in the online classroom (Campbell et al., 2020). Research has reported that older students exhibit less classroom incivility, and more senior instructors see less incivility by online students (Vural &

Bacıoğlu, 2020). If college students are held to a standard of making a conscious effort to control their negative impulses and aggressive thoughts, less incivility would occur in the online classroom (Smith & Bressler, 2013).

In 2019, nearly 71% of nursing faculty and students felt acts of incivility were a serious problem in their nursing programs (Beck & Harrison, 2019; Clark & Springer, 2007). Social work, pre-pharmacy, and pre-medicine report poor student attitudes toward peers and professors (Ausbrooks et al., 2011). To recognize incivility is not only seen in the healthcare field, Clark and Springer (2007) introduced the INE-Revised survey to measure faculty and student perceptions of incivility in other areas of higher education.

### **Causes of Incivility**

Studies focused on the causes of incivility reported that stress, anxiety, narcissism, mental illness, academic entitlement, and other emotional factors are regularly encountered. In addition, it was reported that political and cultural racism can bring out the “dark participation” (Frischlich, 2021, p. 2) of students explaining they may not act this way in a face-to-face classroom (Campbell et al., 2020; Frischlich, 2021; Hopkins et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2020).

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Students lacking positive self-efficacy feel they are inadequate among their peers. Such feelings of inadequacy can contribute to online peer-to-peer incivility. A study by Ruthotto et al. (2020) described students who are active in the online classroom as having a strong sense of self-efficacy, but their comfortability with technology may vary causing a lack of confidence (Bedenlier et al., 2021). Students who have a high need to be social

in the classroom are seen as interactive and engaged. Students who are in class to learn and are less interested in the social aspect often keep their webcams off, yet are present in class, and are known as “lurkers” (Ruthotto et al., 2020, p. 3).

### ***Academic Entitlement***

Attitudes of academic entitlement are regularly observed in online courses and may contribute to student incivility. Students who feel they are above classroom policies and rules beg their faculty until they get what they want. They feel they are above any of the set rules and regulations set by the faculty. Researchers reported that students have no qualms about fighting for better grades, due dates, and various assignments (Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Faculty recall situations of academic entitlement as student demands for higher grades without effort and have unrealistic expectations of faculty (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Schaefer et al., 2013; Whatley et al., 2019). Furthermore, online faculty report that demanding extensions to deadlines coupled with “I am paying for this class” are the most experienced actions by uncivil students (Galbraith & Jones, 2010).

### ***Lack of Engagement***

Online learning can seem cold and isolating to some students, resulting in their lack of engagement. Success in online learning is commensurate with student engagement as well as developing a connection with their peers. Online students who were only modestly engaged in online coursework did not fare as well as those who engaged in active discussions with peers (Hopkins et al., 2017; Serdyukov & Sistek-Chandler, 2015; Vallade et al., 2014). Promoting civil communication among online learners has shown some improvement over peer-to-peer incivility in higher education

(Campbell et al., 2020). In a study on student commitment, Chen (2008) found that students who chose to attend classes online typically had other responsibilities, such as full-time employment or families to care for, that kept them from attending traditional face-to-face classes. Online students reported that they were only able to begin or continue their education because online programs exist. This fact increases their commitment to online learning compared to on-campus students (Campbell et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021).

### ***Mental Health and Antisocial Behaviors***

Whatley et al. (2019) linked narcissism to academic entitlement behaviors by measure of the Academic Entitlement Scale (AES). Narcissistic students do not understand their rude and thoughtless behaviors (e.g., interrupting peers, laughing at, or teasing students) cause upset for other students and likely equate peer responses to weakness. Furthermore, variables such as self-esteem and self-efficacy are related to increasingly complex relationships. This is seen when online students are just beginning or returning to college and find themselves struggling to fit in. Non-traditional aged students or online students with above-average stress may lead to a reduced sense of well-being (Laverghetta, 2018; McNaughton-Cassill, 2013).

### ***Consumerism and Permissive Parenting***

Students' and parents' understanding of education as a consumer product construes education as something that it is not. Consumerism introduces well-known and flashy brands bringing status leading incoming college students to select an institution that has a recognizable logo apart from other colleges and universities. This practice is

contradictory in selection of an institution when academic readiness and financial ability should both be considered (Norris, 2020).

Permissive parenting precipitates classroom incivility as students are unable to cope with stress and other educational needs. Permissive parents do not set rules and offer few consequences for their adolescents' poor behavior leading to issues with authority in the education setting, for example, refusing to complete assignments or failing to accept an *unjust* grade. Permissive parenting may negatively affect a student's external locus of control as they blame others for their lack of academic success (Barton & Hirsch, 2015).

### **Synchronous and Asynchronous Online Modalities**

The online classroom can be synchronous (live over a learning management system) or asynchronous (students access coursework in their own time). In both modes, managing online behavior is imperative when the goal is a rich learning environment (Riaz et al., 2021).

Online faculty build and teach their classes in a variety of learning management systems. In the synchronous classroom, students and the instructor can communicate in real-time. The instructor leads discussion and then assigns students to small group activities; however, student participation is challenged when class sizes are too small or too large (Parks-Stamm et al., 2017). Research found additional challenges are faculty's lack of knowledge of the technology required for online teaching. Kumi-Yeboah et al. (2020) reported that online instructors who embrace technology and strive to learn new techniques have a more successful learning environment. The ease of academic

dishonesty is reported by online faculty because of the use of technology necessary for virtual learning.

Incivility in the synchronous online classroom ranges from lack of interest in group discussions to side conversations by text or unsupervised chat rooms not associated with the online class (Campbell et al., 2020; Dhawan, 2020). Different than what is seen in a face-to-face classroom, incivility in the online classroom can lead to psychological distress and poor graduation rates. Students report that incivility behind the computer screen is often worse because there is no time or opportunity to have a discussion. Efforts to find solutions to incivility in the synchronous classroom, especially for adult learners, are mainly avoided (Campbell et al., 2020). In the online synchronous classroom, online faculty report many of their online students choose to keep their webcams off and microphones on mute (Yarmand et al., 2021), yet this is the only way that online students can see one another. Online students report the reasons for keeping their cameras off include insecurity related to personal thoughts and feelings or a lack of group cohesion (Bedenlier et al., 2021).

In the synchronous classroom, a digital connection brings online students together as faculty lecture over video, often with a slide show or visual aid to keep students engaged. There is also a wide variety of email and internet use. Live-text chat is also a communication tool used in the synchronous online classroom. Faculty work to create an enhanced learning experience behind the computer screen. Communication via in-person conversation is replaced with typing on a keyboard. Online communication modes can be difficult for some students who do not have the experience (Bedenlier et al., 2021). A

study by Vivek and Ansari (2010) with 19 online students ranging in age from 19 to 50 years old reported a range of comfortability in the online classroom when introduced to new technology. The face-to-face classroom, in contrast, often features a passive and minimally engaging learning approach, such as an instructor lecturing while students listen.

Asynchronous discussion boards are used in some online classrooms to actively engage online students in discussion and provide students an opportunity to plan their contributions to the discussion or respond to questions posed by faculty. To avoid required discussion boards becoming a robotic task, students should be provided a rubric instructing them on what should be included in a discussion post, what should be left out, length, and attitude (Bergdahl, 2022). Vivek and Ansari (2010) reported that the time between students' response posts responses between students on discussion board can also affect a student's motivation. Loizzo et al. (2017) stated that instructors must be sure to tame uncivil behavior on discussion boards to ensure all students have the opportunity to participate. Participation in discussion boards can constitute a large part of a student's final grade.

Faculty value discussion boards in their online classes and report that problems occur when student incivility is observed (Massey et al., 2019). This manner of communication provides students an opportunity to exchange ideas and foster positive communication, but experiences in social media have hampered that for some students (Kluck & Krämer, 2021). Since the 1990s, research has indicated that collaborative learning can contribute to success in online learning (Vivek & Ansari, 2010). Discussion

boards can increase student engagement and peer-to-peer communication, but for some students this activity can cause a stressful reaction. Students reported that they often did not know what to say or were worried that what they wanted to say was inadequate (Massey et al., 2019). Discussion boards allow for some anonymity, but often peers' names are included in the discussions or class lists (Roberts & Rajah-Kanagasabai, 2013). When students experience negative comments from a peer in an online discussion board, the recipient of the comments may exhibit a decrease in participation in the discussion. In the asynchronous classroom setting, discussion boards allow students to participate in discussions that they would generally avoid in the face-to-face classroom (Kluck & Krämer, 2021).

### **Learning and Classroom Management**

Managing incivility in online classes takes time away from instruction. Professors are compelled to send extra messages to the students affected and spend extra time monitoring communications. Some situations can be negotiated between the students with the supervision and support of the professor, and at other times this is not possible (Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Online faculty who become overly stressed with student incivility on top of pressures to maintain current technological standards may respond with grade inflation, thereby reducing the quality of the students' education (Hopkins et al., 2017).

Successful online instruction results, in part, from professors who engage and motivate their students. In turn, the engaged student feels included and essential in the online format (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Bergdahl, 2022). Riaz et al. (2021) found that



student engagement is a positive precursor to online student success. Educators continually seek ways to make their online classes as engaging as possible. Students who thrive in the online environment feel connected to their peers, communicate outside of the online portal, and genuinely appreciate their peers' points of view (Riaz et al., 2021).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Incivility among peers in the online classroom can cause a non-collegial and challenging environment for students. When students are subject to incivility by a peer, they may be less likely to participate in online discussions and synchronous learning opportunities, which in turn can cause them to experience increased stress and more or worsened mental health issues, less motivation and participation, and possibly drop classes and leave the institution. Further understanding is needed as to how incivility affects student learning as observed by online faculty. As faculty report their experiences with peer-to-peer incivility, suitable classroom management techniques will be developed and shared with online colleagues.

This chapter focused on the review of literature, literature search strategy, key concepts within the study, and the theoretical framework. on the methodology. Chapter 3 will include a description of the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, and the methodology. Participant recruitment and selection procedures, data collection, data analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

This basic qualitative study explored the experiences of online faculty when peer-to-peer incivility occurs in the online classroom. This study fills the gap in the professional literature by understanding online faculty's experiences regarding student learning when peer-to-peer incivility is present in the online classroom. This chapter begins with the study's research questions, design and rationale, and the role of the researcher. Also included is an explanation of the study's methodology, including procedures for recruitment, participant selection, instrumentation, and data collection, data analysis plans, and issues involving data discrepancy. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's validity and trustworthiness.

#### **Research Design and Rationale**

To gain an understanding of online faculty experiences with peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom, a basic qualitative research design was employed. This approach allows the researcher to focus on experiences as provided by their past observations (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which helps form an understanding of the central concept (Teherani et al., 2015). In the context of this study, online faculty described what they had observed in their online classes among students. As the experiences of online faculty are understood, new and experienced educators may develop techniques to minimize peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom therefore creating a collegial learning environment for all online students. In support of this study's goals, the following research questions guided this study:

- RQ 1: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer student incivility on discussion boards in the online classroom?
- RQ 2: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer student incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?

While qualitative researchers seek to understand a social problem by understanding the meaning of the problem as experienced by individuals, quantitative researchers collect and analyze data to compare findings for testing a pre-established hypothesis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Of these two types of research, quantitative is more likely to utilize random sampling, in which study participants are arbitrarily assigned to differing experimental conditions and have an equal likelihood of placement within them, therefore inferring the entire population is represented by the sample. The qualitative research tradition was appropriate for this research study, utilizing purposive sampling, as it was important for the study participants to directly respond with their own experiences of the phenomenon in question

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the primary researcher for this study, I recruited participants according to the study's parameters, collected data through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with volunteer participants, and analyzed the data for patterns and themes utilizing thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). As an online instructor, I am cognizant of my own biases due to experiences with online student incivility. Strategies to prevent personal feelings and experiences from interfering with the study are essential in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I utilized reflective journaling to note any possible

biases during the interview process. To mitigate my own biases from interfering, an interview guideline was also developed and followed throughout the interview and interpretation processes. To avoid any issues of harm to colleagues, I did not recruit participants from my employer.

### **Methodology**

Participants for this study were faculty who have taught online at the college level. Course content area or class level (freshman through senior) did not affect selection of participants. Interested participants learned of the study through specific sampling strategies indicated in the following section.

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

Purposive sampling and the snowball strategy were used to build a participant pool. Purposive sampling meant that participants who meet the study requirements to join can be easily selected. Snowball sampling was also appropriate for this study as online faculty participants may know colleagues from various geographic regions who may be interested in learning more. Participants could share information about the study or provide my contact information.

For consideration to participate in the study, participants had a higher education background and specifically taught or had taught a synchronous or asynchronous online course for a higher education institution. In this study, specific course content or level of students taught did not apply. As potential participants contacted me with an interest to learn more, I verified they met study parameters through a discussion over the phone or by email.

I sought to include 15 to 20 participants in this study. A sample size common to qualitative research is between 15 and 30 participants; however, the number of participants is relative to the information provided. Depending on the responses from the participants and emerging patterns and themes, saturation is met when no new information is obtained (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Thirteen interviews were conducted, and 11 interviews were held and analyzed for this qualitative study.

### **Instrumentation**

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allow for natural conversations to form between the participant and the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I wrote the interview questions following an extensive review of the literature regarding incivility in the classroom. The theoretical framework supporting this study, Azjen's theory of planned behavior, also influenced development of the interview questions by focusing on content that would elicit participant responses about student choices and behavior in the online classroom. An interview guide contained the protocol for welcoming the participants and the interview questions to keep the interviews on track; however, I ensured that additional time would be available for follow up or clarifying questions by me or the participants (see Braun & Clarke, 2013). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio recorded utilizing a handheld recorder. When not in use, recordings, transcriptions, and my notes were secured in my locked private home office.

Content validity was established by member checking and researcher reflexivity. Member checking allows each participant to review their responses for credibility and confirm that the themes which emerged correspond with their experiences. Participants

were sent their transcripts via email to review and suggest corrections as necessary; however, I did not receive any edits. Researcher reflexivity is also important in establishing content validity so that the data is purely resulted from the experiences of the online faculty participants. Reflexivity was established throughout the study through reflective journaling (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Recruitment procedures included a Facebook post to a higher education faculty group and a flyer hung in a downtown area near the local library and coffee shops. The Facebook post and the flyer both indicated that participants must have experience teaching online at a college or university. My contact information was listed so I could address any questions of potential participants. With the use of snowball sampling, individuals can share information about this study with colleagues (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This was a benefit to the recruitment process as online faculty shared information about the study with their colleagues.

I communicated with potential participants by phone or email to gauge their interest and confirm they met the study requirement. Once this initial contact was complete, I sent the consent form, via email, to those who agreed to move forward. The informed consent contained information about the study's purpose, the required interview and duration, sample interview questions, confidentiality, security of their responses, and the remuneration for completing the survey. Participants who agreed to contribute to this study were asked to reply to the original email indicating "I consent." Once the consent form was returned to me, I contacted the participant either by phone or email to schedule

the one-hour interview. Interviews were scheduled according to each participant's availability and conducted via Zoom. All interviews took place on the scheduled days and times and began with a welcome and my thanks for their time. Prior to starting the interviews, I reviewed the consent form and reiterated that the interview would be audio recorded, their participation was confidential and voluntary, and they could withdraw their participation and their responses up to that point would be destroyed.

At the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participant if they had any questions for me, but there were none. At this point, I stated that I would transcribe their responses the following day and, if necessary, would contact them with clarifying questions to be certain their responses correlated with what they wanted to say. Participants were notified they would receive a copy of their transcript for review approximately one week after the interviews. I thanked each participant for their time and interest in my study and stated I would send a \$10 gift card as a thank you gift to arrive via email within one week.

I was able to complete 13 interviews in four weeks starting at the end of May 2023, yet two of the interviews were not included in the analysis. With no new data discovered at the end of the scheduled interviews, this sample secured data saturation (Saunders et al., 2018)

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data from interviews were analyzed for patterns and themes utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis process. In qualitative analysis, this six-part framework is used to thoroughly investigate the data produced from the interviews: (1) become

familiar with the data by reading and rereading participants' responses, (2) generate codes to organize data into categories, (3) begin a search for familiar words, terms, and ideas then combining them into themes, (4) review the themes accuracy, (5) define the themes for clarity, and (6) produce a worksheet or table within qualitative analysis software to house the final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).

I began the thematic analysis process by uploading the audio files to a Word document on my password protected personal computer. The audio files were transcribed using the Microsoft transcription tool and labeled with a numeric code to protect participant's privacy (P1 to P11). I utilized a hand coding procedure which included searching for common words, terms, and ideas then placed the common codes into categories. The categories were grouped into themes which connected to the research questions. In addition, I used NVivo software to aid in coding and theme development. After the final iteration of data analysis, three themes were established which were applied in addressing both research questions.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research seeks understanding of the human experience. Results of this study are available to others interested in understanding how peer-to-peer incivility affects a student's opportunity to learn and meet course objectives. In qualitative research issues of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure trustworthiness in my study, I incorporated reflexivity procedures throughout data collection and analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Nowell et al., 2017).



**Credibility**

Ensuring that the responses from study participants and the researcher's analysis align supports achieving credibility in a research study. Credibility of a study ensures that the participant group and the results of the data naturally align, and all data should be analyzed in the same manner to maintain credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1989). Providing the participants with the study's analysis gives them the opportunity to review the report of the findings to confirm accuracy (Nowell et al., 2017). All research findings were analyzed using the same thematic analysis process. Reflexive notes, data transcripts, analysis procedures, and the final report were all available for review by the participants.

**Transferability**

Researchers and other readers will be able to recognize the study's purpose and content when transferability is established. Transferability in qualitative research focuses on rich analysis of data which can be applied to other research studies in a similar context. While qualitative research is conducted from individual experiences, it is believed that individuals with common beliefs or experiences will have similar views. Transferability provides options for other professionals in the same or similar fields to apply the findings to their individual areas (Nowell et al., 2017). The participants in my study were college-level online instructors from various institutions, levels, and content expertise, which exposed common viewpoints and explanations of peer-to-peer incivility in their online classrooms resulting in transferability.

**Dependability**

Research that is understandable and logical to the reader is essential when identifying dependability in the data. Other researchers should be able to duplicate the study achieving related results. Quantitative and qualitative research both look to the truth in reporting research results. When dependability in qualitative research is pursued, the data are accurate to the researcher, as reliability is sought in quantitative research. To ensure dependability, research notes, audio recordings, and transcripts were accessible to study participants (Golafshani, 2003; Nowell et al., 2017).

**Confirmability**

Along with dependability, confirmability in research guarantees that the results compiled from the thematic analysis are accurate according to participant data. To confirm trustworthiness in this study, I created an audit trail to document the research process. The audit trail included an interview protocol, reflective journaling, a record of the research procedures including analysis procedures, and memberchecking. Future readers of this study will understand why this methodology was chosen and how the analysis was conducted (Nowell et al., 2017).

**Ethical Procedures**

The American Psychological Association (APA) requires any research study with human subjects should follow the Code of Ethics and General Principles (APA, 2024). In human research, it is the researcher's duty to protect the rights of human subjects. When my proposal was approved, I submitted materials to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to move forward. After receiving IRB approval, I

began recruiting participants from a higher education Facebook post and a flyer hung in a common downtown area.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary. While risk to participants was minimal, harm to the participants could have resulted from discussion of difficult topics that may have been upsetting to them personally or professionally. If any participant began to show signs of distress, the interview would have been paused or canceled. During the initial conversation with the potential participants, I shared details of the study including the purpose, the time required for participation, risks that it could entail, and benefits of participation. When participants agreed to move forward, I emailed the informed consent to each participant and offered to answer any questions they had.

Interviews took no longer than one hour, including 10 minutes to review the informed consent document. Participants were assigned a numeric code to protect their privacy. The audio recording, transcripts, and reflexive notes were stored in my private locked office to ensure participant privacy.

### **Summary**

As incivility continues to be a distraction among students in the classroom, the goal of this study was to understand how learning is affected when peer-to-peer incivility occurs in the online classroom as experienced by online faculty. This chapter described the role of the researcher, research rationale, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures for this basic qualitative study. This basic qualitative study used purposive sampling and the snowball method to recruit participants. Online faculty interested in participating received a consent form detailing the purpose of the study, how

the study will contribute to the teaching profession, time required, and a detailed description of how confidentiality will be maintained. To allow participants to openly share their perspectives on incivility in the classroom, semi-structured, open-ended interviews took place with only me and the participant present. Also included in this chapter was an explanation of data security plans which included storing the audio recorder and my notes in my locked personal home office. Ethical issues were also acknowledged in this chapter along with my plan to ensure issues of trustworthiness. Chapter 4 will describe the results of the thematic analysis process. Themes and categories derived from the results of the interviews will support the collective experiences of online faculty study participants.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand the experiences of online faculty when peer-to-peer incivility was observed in online classroom discussion boards and during synchronous classroom time. Two research questions were developed to guide this study:

- RQ1: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in discussion boards in the online classroom?
- RQ2: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?

This chapter will present the setting for data collection, participants' demographic information, data collection methods, thematic analysis procedures, issues of trustworthiness, and a report of study results. This chapter concludes with a summary and an introduction to Chapter 5.

### **Setting**

Participants for this study were college level faculty with online teaching experience who had observed student incivility in their online classroom settings. There were 17 inquiries to which I replied with screening questions and addressed any questions they had about the study. The consent form was emailed to each potential participant. Once consent was provided, interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and conducted through Zoom. At the time of the interview, each participant was reminded that they could stop the interview at any time with no repercussions. There were no extraordinary conditions that affected individual

participation. I was not acquainted with any of the participants. Thirteen interviews took place, but two interviews were not included in the data analysis.

### **Demographics**

The population recruited to participate in this study were college level faculty who have taught online and had experienced student incivility toward peers in their online classrooms. All participants stated they had online teaching experience from either private 4-year institutions, public 4-year institutions, or 2-year community colleges in a variety of college majors and had observed various negative behaviors in class. All participants have taught online in the Midwest. Years of online teaching experience ranged from 1 to 22 years (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Study Demographics*

Participant	Sex	Type of Institution	Years Teaching Online	Subjects Taught	Region
P1	Female	4-year Private	20	Business, Technology	Midwest
P2	Female	2-year Community College	4	Mathematics	Midwest
P3	Female	4-year Private	2	Social Sciences	Midwest
P4	Female	4-year Private	8	Social Work	Midwest
P5	Female	4-year Private	7	Nursing	Midwest
P6	Female	2-year Community College	5	Accounting	Midwest
P7	Female	4-year Public	12.5	Nursing	Midwest
P8	Male	4-year Public	22	Business Administration	Midwest
P9	Male	4-year Public	8	Sport and Recreation Management	Midwest
P10	Female	2-year Community College	8	Nursing	Midwest
P11	Male	2-year Community College	1	Business	Midwest

## Data Collection

Data collection procedures were conducted as indicated in Chapter 3. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were utilized as recruitment tools. Purposive sampling is an appropriate method for recruitment for this basic qualitative study due to specific study parameters. The snowball sampling method allowed participants to share the study information with colleagues who may be interested in participating (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Flyers were hung in a downtown area near coffee shops and the public library. A post on a higher education Facebook group invited potential participants to contact me to learn more about the study. The flyer and Facebook post included the study's purpose, sample interview questions, and ethical considerations. Both sampling methods allowed me to learn from online faculty who shared a variety of experiences with peer-to-peer incivility. Of the 17 inquiries, seven resulted from the Facebook post, and 10 potential participants were referred to the study by colleagues.

I began the recruitment process directly after approval was awarded by Walden University's Institutional Review Board on May 23, 2023. All interviews were conducted starting at the end of May 2023 and took approximately 4 weeks to complete. Interviews took place over Zoom in my private home office. After connecting to the Zoom call, I reviewed the consent form and asked each participant if they had any initial questions. I reminded the participants that they could stop the interview at any time and their responses up to that point would be deleted. The interviews were recorded on a handheld digital recorder and lasted no longer than 1 hour. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked the participants if they had anything else to add or had any questions for me. I

thanked each participant for their time and interest in my study and reiterated I would send a \$10 Amazon gift card by email. Finally, I informed each participant that I would be transcribing their interview responses and would forward a copy of the interview transcript in one week through email for confirmation of its accuracy. I did not hear back from any of the participants regarding discrepancies between their responses and the transcript.

It should be noted that after permission to post the flyer to the higher education Facebook page, I received 212 emails, all similarly written, indicating interest in participating in the study. As I began to read through the emails, I realized there was a possibility that these may not be legitimate inquiries. After arranging six interviews and conducting two, I felt that these participants were not reliable options. I deleted the audio recordings and transcripts of the two interviews and subsequently canceled the remaining four interviews, respectfully indicating that I no longer needed their participation. In consultation with Walden University's IRB, sending the gift cards was left to my discretion; however, I did send the gift cards after numerous email requests from the two individuals who completed their interviews. I removed my post from the Facebook group but left the posters in the downtown area until my data collection was complete.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis is an iterative process that allows a researcher to fully understand how data contributes to answering a study's research question (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To arrive at the rich and detailed data found in qualitative research, repeated examination of participant responses to interview questions is essential. To



analyze the interview data, I applied Braun and Clarke's (2013) six-phase thematic analysis process to understand, organize, and illustrate the descriptive data derived from each interview. This inductive process uses the data directly from the participants to address a study's research question. Finding common words or terms (coding), and then organizing and combining the codes into meaningful groups (categories) leads to the development of broad topics within the dataset (themes). Themes are not found in the data but are created by the researcher in support of the research question.

### **Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data**

Becoming familiar with the data is the first step to understanding the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the participants. To become familiar with the data, I listened to the audio recording while reviewing my notes to ensure I captured the correct meanings of the responses and feelings of the participants. While listening, I reviewed my notes to confirm what I had written down correlated with our conversation. Next, I uploaded the audio recording to my personal computer and used the Microsoft transcription tool to convert the data into a Word document. This step provided an opportunity to make edits or corrections to the transcription and was an opportunity to review the data once again.

### **Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes**

Codes are common features that emerge when organizing data. After reading and reviewing the transcripts, I began to see similarities in the data after the second interview. I began hand coding the transcripts working line by line and found this to be an effective way to identify and organize the codes. After hand coding, I uploaded the transcripts to

NVivo which served as another opportunity to combine codes into categories. This first round of coding resulted in the following categories and subcategories seen in Table 2.

**Table 2***Initial Codes, Categories, and Subcategories*

Codes	Categories	Subcategories
Lack of clarity Use all caps/shouting Only respond to the same students Curt responses Disrespectful Unkind/demeaning Unprofessional Rude	Student behavior	Uncivil response posts
Poor participation Keeping cameras off during discussion Social media or doing other work Poor body language, sitting “hunched over,” looking away Not including group members		Negative synchronous classroom student behaviors
Decrease in self-esteem New or worsening mental health concerns Feeling targeted	Impact on learning	Emotional toll of incivility
Students feeling left out Low motivation Decreased participation Increased absences		Effects on student success
Competition Mental health issues Academic entitlement Low self-esteem Low self-efficacy	Causes of incivility	Personal feelings and beliefs
Pull student aside Individual meeting Positive role model Encourage student collegiality Civility statement in syllabus Low-stakes assignment on classroom expectations Be clear on classroom expectations	How to decrease incivility in online learning	Classroom management Clear behavioral expectations

### Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Categories are derived from patterns found in similar participant responses named codes. Discovering categories required looking back at initial codes. The categories I initially established could be reworded to capture the essence of the codes, eliminating data that could be found in more than one category and theme. Codes that may seem relevant to the study but do not fit into any dedicated category should be reworked or deleted. When I was satisfied that the categories represented participant data, three themes were established: online faculty observations of student incivility (Table 3), how incivility impacts learning (Table 4), and causes and mitigation of incivility (Table 5)

**Table 3**

*Theme 1: Category, Subcategories, and Evidence*

Theme	Category	Subcategories	Evidence
Online faculty observations of student incivility	Student behaviors	Uncivil response posts	“My students seem to handle discussion posts well, but they always reply to the same students. I think they can be intimidated by some students, because some students are intimidating, and are going to stay away from those folks.”
		Negative synchronous classroom student behaviors	“...students feel intimidated and don’t want to answer questions, especially if student cameras are off. They don’t know what the students on the other end are doing.” “I stopped this practice, but when students are in the Zoom class, but on the same laptop...microphones muted, but other students can see them smirking or side talking.”

**Table 4***Theme 2: Categories and Evidence*

Theme	Categories	Evidence
How incivility impacts learning	Emotional toll of incivility	“I have posted office hours, but students don’t come. They don’t want to admit the problems they are having in class.”
	Student success is affected	<p>“...receiving emails from the campus counselor, with the student’s permission, telling me the student has been in [counselor’s office] several times for feeling unsafe.”</p> <p>“Even though we know, as faculty, students have to do the work to succeed, if they don’t participate it is hard to be successful.”</p> <p>“I think that some students believe online classes are easier and that is a mistake. If something goes wrong or they don’t have any friends in class [online class] they feel left out. I can see this, but it is so hard to help them.”</p>

**Table 5***Theme 3: Categories and Evidence*

Theme	Categories	Evidence
Causes and mitigation of student incivility	Possible causes of incivility	“...they [students] want what they want but can’t communicate.”
	Decreasing occurrence of incivility	<p>“I really believe that they feel they are competing with their peers. This has to come from high school, they don’t have to compete here...low self-confidence?”</p> <p>“I wouldn’t make an issue of it [incivility] during class, but I wouldn’t let it go on either if it was really disruptive.”</p> <p>“We have to set the rules on the first day...what our expectations are.”</p>

**Phase 4: Reviewing Themes**

During this phase, it is critical to refer to the data to confirm that the established themes are logical, do not overlap, and support the research questions. Throughout the coding process, it is important to show evidence to the reader that the data support the themes and the research questions. This can be illustrated by providing sample quotes, or

evidence, from the interview participants relating to the themes. If there are not enough data to support a potential theme, that theme should not be included in the final report.

### **Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes**

Themes should be labeled clearly and easily understood. The titles of the themes should be direct and related to the research questions. Since themes are not directly found in the data, but created by the researcher, the names of the themes should encompass the overall meanings of the data. Since the thematic analysis process is fluid, there are instances when the named themes no longer represent the codes and categories after continued iterations. In this case, it is recommended that theme names be reevaluated to confirm they illustrate the meaning of participant responses. Table 6 provides the themes and definitions for this study.

**Table 6**

#### *Definitions of Themes*

Theme	Definition
Theme 1: Online faculty observations of student incivility	Actions and attitudes of students described as uncivil were observed on discussion boards and in the synchronous classroom.
Theme 2: How incivility impacts learning	Students who are targets of peer-to-peer incivility struggle to meet course objectives.
Theme 3: Causes and mitigation of incivility	Participants describe what they believe are causes of incivility and ways they address uncivil actions and behaviors of student incivility to ultimately decrease the phenomenon.

## **Phase 6: Producing the Report**

The final report includes an explanation of the thematic analysis process in conjunction with verification that the themes correspond with answering the research questions. The report should not simply list the findings but include specific quotes from the participants that support the findings. For this study, the findings were organized according to themes in a logical progressive manner.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

In this qualitative study, a variety of procedures were conducted to confirm credibility. The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of online faculty when peer-to-peer incivility was observed. A basic qualitative research design was selected to meet this goal and included semi-structured interviews allowing participants to describe their experiences in a confidential meeting at a time of their choosing. After 11 interviews, no new data were obtained confirming data saturation. A verbatim transcript of interview responses was emailed to each participant, asking them to verify its accuracy. This member-checking process assists the researcher in validating that the information provided by each participant correctly reflects their ideas and experiences (Nowell et al., 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the interview process, I kept a reflective journal of my thoughts and experiences including any personal or professional biases that could alter the results of the data analysis and findings.

**Transferability**

Transferability is confirmed when providing a rich and descriptive account of the research process. Thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) is a thorough analysis of the research process in which other researchers should be able to duplicate and receive comparable results. Transferability provides options for other professionals in the same or similar fields to apply study findings to their own research (Nowell et al., 2017).

Interested researchers could apply the same strategies of this research study when seeking to understand more about student incivility in the online classroom.

**Dependability**

Readers should understand why a research design was selected, including sampling procedures, recruitment and data collection, analysis processes, and clear and accurate reporting measures (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Nowell et al., 2017). An audit trail is a roadmap describing the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, an audit trail was established to ensure dependability. It can be verified that a basic qualitative study was chosen because the goal of this study was to understand online faculty experiences. An interview protocol was developed and included the same welcome message, informed consent procedure, interview and follow-up questions, and the opportunity to review their responses by member checking process.

Sampling procedures and recruitment methods are clearly noted. Semi-structured interviews were an appropriate tool to learn from the participants. The interview protocol included a script to afford each participant the same interview environment, interview questions, and process for reviewing their responses for accuracy. Braun and Clarke's



(2013) thematic analysis process was explained and used to interpret participant responses to the interview questions.

### **Confirmability**

When credibility, transferability, and dependability are established, confirmability can be assured. Future readers of this study will understand why this methodology was chosen and how the analysis was conducted (Nowell et al., 2017). Reflexivity in qualitative analysis allows the researcher to acknowledge possible influences on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). While qualitative analysis can be subjective when analyzing data, I acknowledged my assumptions, beliefs, and previous work experience to confirm the results of this study are free from opinion and biases.

### **Results**

The overall analysis of the participants' responses during the interviews resulted in three themes: online faculty observations of student incivility, incivility impacts learning, and causes and mitigation of student incivility which address the research questions. These themes supported answering the research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in discussion boards in the online classroom?

RQ2: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?

This report of the results is organized by the three established themes and corresponding evidence from the participants. The first three interview questions covered participants' backgrounds including subjects taught and how long they had been teaching

online. Participants were asked what they enjoyed the most and the least about teaching online. All the participants responded that they enjoy teaching online. Reasons included the flexibility online teaching provides, the ability to continue working their other jobs, home for family responsibilities, and less travel to campus. Three of the participants only taught adult, non-traditional aged students and much prefer this to younger students with little to no online learning experience. Four participants stated that teaching online undergraduates (freshman and sophomore level) was a challenge due to lack of maturity. P3 claimed there is a lack of participation and motivation with younger students and P7 stated it can be difficult to keep their attention.

Question 4 examined how participants describe the term “incivility” (Figure 1, below). P1 stated, “I feel incivility is rude behavior...treating others badly.” P2 shared,

Like it’s obscenity, right? You know when you see it. Yeah. You know, I would say I think of incivility as being similar to disrespectful behavior. So not being able to disagree with someone in kind of a polite way say and so name calling or shaming or you’re dumb. Not really being able to listen to other perspectives.

P3 shared, “I would say that incivility is a lack of living by social norms, or the lack of the ability to treat others as you would like to be treated.” P6 stated that they believe “incivility is acting badly in any situation. You see it so much on the Internet and social media. I actually think it is out of control, not only online. In the grocery store or anywhere, people just seem angry.” P7 described incivility as:

When a person is treating others with disrespect. I don’t remember ever seeing these kind of issues, blatant rudeness...it can be honestly very destructive,

especially online when as we all know it's easy to act out when sitting behind a computer screen. Why do people find that it is okay to just say whatever they want and that there are no repercussions?

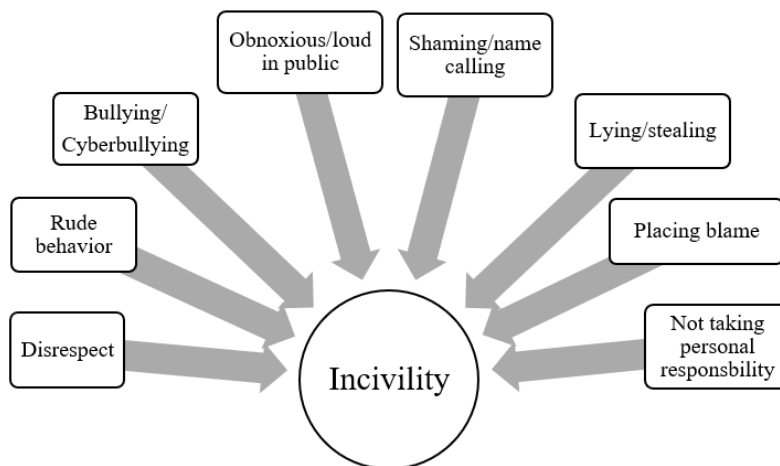
P9 and P10 provided similar explanations of incivility. P9 claimed:

This is such an interesting topic. Honestly, it's so unfortunate that we have to have these conversations. When I was young, I would have never dreamed of being overtly nasty to anyone, especially a teacher or other adult. Now, it's a big free for all" (*throws hands up*).

P10 said,

Wow, incivility... oh that's what it's called. To me, I would say, um um, it's just not being a nice person (*pauses for a moment*) this is actually hard to describe. I'm sure there is some way to say this delicately...to not be uncivil (*smirks*). I suppose I'm not sure where it comes from or when it started, this problem. As I get older it seems like people are just living to be unpleasant.

P12 stated, "Incivility is just plain bad behavior" and P13 shared, "It's the bad part of humanity, the times when communication breakdowns occur."

**Figure 1***Participant Descriptions of Incivility*

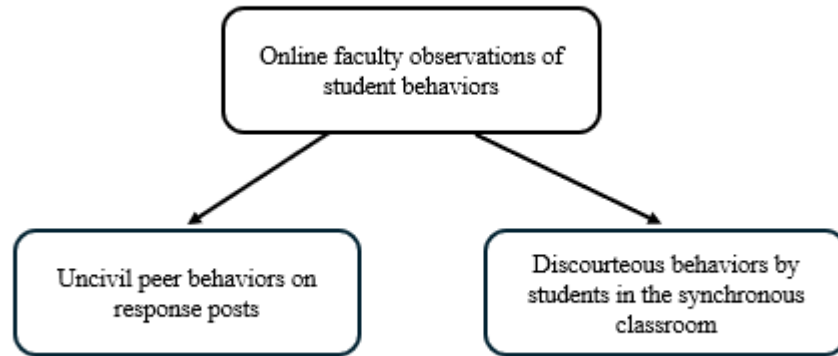
Questions five through 10 explored participants' experiences with peer-to-peer incivility in their online classrooms, specifically on discussion boards and in the synchronous classroom. Participants responded with instances of what they perceived as uncivil behavior, possible causes of incivility, and how they addressed situations when they arose.

**Theme 1: Online Faculty Observations of Student Incivility**

Theme 1 exemplifies participant experiences with student incivility on discussion board posts and response posts as well as experiences concerning students who disturb active learning during synchronous class time.

**Figure 2**

*Theme 1 and Subcategories*



### ***Uncivil Peer Behaviors on Response Posts***

Assigning a discussion question is a common activity in online courses. Faculty or the institution determine the requirements for discussion posts such as the length of the post, the minimum number of required responses, or whether the posts and responses are graded (Alwafi, 2022; Lee & Recker, 2021). Online discussion boards allow students to work collaboratively and actively participate while sharing ideas and dividing the workload for a group project. Online students who put effort into their posts and responses to peers tend to improve their written communication and success in their courses (Aderibigbe, 2020).

P7 shared a constant issue with student participation on discussion boards and their requirements for discussion board posts:

My classes are small. I require students to reply to two peers each week and they can't reply to the same person two weeks in a row. I get a lot of groans, but that's the rule. They need to take a risk, not get lazy.

P8 shared they only teach asynchronous classes and stated, "In general, I usually assign two or three discussion questions each week, it depends...depends on what we are covering. A lot of students answer the questions, but...their posts are basic." P8 further stated:

When students put little effort into their thoughts or can't get their thoughts down "on paper" so to speak, it is challenging for students to expand their thoughts...I mean, I require students to put effort into their posts and if they just give their opinion...it's their opinion, they offer nothing to substantiate it...nothing to back it up. That's the point of the discussion questions...to have discussions. I know it can be challenging for students new to online learning and I get that but give me something (*smirks*).

Participants described incivility in discussion boards as ignoring certain students' posts, especially when personal opinion was part of the discussion which could lead to a lack of respect for other students' viewpoints. P2 shared an experience:

... this semester, I just finished teaching human sexuality, and there was one person in the class who said pretty clearly at the beginning of the class that they were pro-life and that they felt that abortion was wrong. And I did not, you know, and there were plenty of other people in the majority of the class maybe felt the other way and I was really kind of waiting all semester like, "When is this going

to blow up” but it never did. When that topic came up, most students just chose not to reply to her... it’s not like she was, you know, pushing her opinion on the other students, it kind of came up once. I hadn’t thought of this until now, but this could be considered acting civilly or uncivilly. There had to be someone who believed differently. And then I think we had a chapter in the curriculum that deals with abortion and so people would respond to her on other topics, but otherwise they didn’t go there. But when it came to abortion, they just didn’t engage. They didn’t, you know, she wouldn’t get any replies at all.

P3 shared:

In general, I believe that a lack of interactivity in the online classroom can cause bad student behavior. This is the danger of not promoting interactivity, especially in online classes. If you do have a more passive situation, it doesn’t happen because they’re not responding, they’re not interacting publicly, they’re just, you know, spitting out information. This is the issue with discussion boards, they are just not interactive enough. Some students will only respond to their friends.

Short or dismissive response posts were also noted by participants and described as possibly more harmful as all posts can be viewed by their classmates. P2 shared:

These are actual response posts that I have kept track of... “I don’t get what you mean,” “This doesn’t make any sense,” and “I don’t agree.” I address stuff like this at the beginning of the term because I don’t want to see it. While I didn’t see it at the time, this is uncivil behavior. This is the easy way out. It is much more

challenging to ask a classmate, “Could you explain this again” or state “I see your reasons for having this viewpoint, but mine is “this” whatever it is.

### ***Discourteous Behaviors by Students in the Online Classroom***

Participants were asked to describe incivility they had observed while teaching in the live online classroom. The participants who taught synchronously had common beliefs about the meaning of incivility: a lack of engagement, poor body language, disrespectful comments, equipment failure, distractions, and completing other work or participating in social media during the live online class time. P1 stated:

I find that students are not as engaged in the synchronous classroom. I never know if they are actually listening, you know, following along with the lecture, I would much rather have a conversation. This becomes pretty obvious when I put them in groups during the class and they do not have an answer to contribute to the discussion. This could be incivility because there could be a student who wants to participate but the group members are talking about other things rather than the question.

P8 explained the effect on them as an instructor when students are not engaged and how this could promote incivility:

I mean, I know when the material we are talking about in class is maybe not exciting for them, but they have to realize, at some point, they are going to need this foundational material to fully understand how to tackle what is next. I mean, it's so hard sometimes. I prepared what I thought was an interesting lecture, not just a lecture but engaging, and they just stared back at me with these blank faces.



If no one speaks then I think it encourages students to also stay quiet. What am I supposed to do with that? If I ask a question no one answers or tries to answer. Sometimes there is that one student who will always finally raise their hand and give it a try. I am so grateful for these students. I would think taking the risk of answering a question in an online setting would be less intimidating than in a face-to-face setting, but, um, maybe I'm wrong. Sometimes it is hard to keep going with the class. I know from teaching online for about two years now that if a student is not motivated, they are going to struggle.

Several of the participants reported that students commonly say they are having "technical difficulties." P10 laughed and stated that "almost every live classroom session there are at least a quarter of the students claiming their laptop camera or webcam is "not letting them turn it on." P3 stated they call on the students whose cameras are not on. "When there is this long gap between calling on them and them answering...I'm just checking if they are actually 'there' then I know they are probably doing something else – snap chatting or other work." P5 offered "Honestly, I can't stand seeing their names in the black box in the Zoom class."

P8 shared beliefs regarding online learning and an interactive space:

It's supposed to be an interactive session where everybody is alike. You say something and then you respect others' views. Respect their ideas and each time somebody tries to like voice out a particular idea they are given the opportunity without shaming them. But in the aspect where you want only your voice to be

heard, you wouldn't want to give anyone else a chance. This is incivility...and intimidation.

P13 offered this experience:

I have to tell you this story. Okay, we are new to online learning because of Covid. I understand this is new to the students but come on. The students are popping up on the screen and I am asking everyone to make sure their cameras are on, and their microphones are muted. This is a small class; I think I have 15 students in there. A few of the students in the class are sitting together in their dorm room or in a common area and I guess that's fine. I hadn't talked to them about that, being on their own computers. Don't assume, right? (*smirks*). There are two young ladies sitting next to each other in a dorm room. That's fine, we'll see how it goes. I can tell that a student is logging on because their name is on the screen and when the camera is on, there are two students, um, on the screen. A young man was sitting on a bed with no shirt on and a young woman was sitting next to him. They were, you know like, sitting up against the wall with their legs stretched out. That is all I could see. The other students are still logging on and getting settled. I immediately made an announcement, "As we get ready to start, remember this "is the classroom" (*air quotes*) and you should be ready to learn as if we were in the regular classroom, sitting at a desk or table, be ready to go." Several cameras shut off, we still had two minutes, and when this particular student's camera was back on, the young man was "dressed" (*air quotes*) and the young woman was on her own laptop.

I asked this participant how these behaviors could cause incivility among peers.

P13 stated how uncomfortable they felt as an instructor and hoped nothing like that situation ever occurred again. P13 also shared this could have turned into an embarrassing scene with students laughing at other students on camera.

P3 admitted:

I have had to let students go for the day because no one would participate. I believe this to be true, no one would speak up for fear of being ridiculed and that is b.s. I was mad about it and talked to the class the next time we met.

### **Theme 2: How Incivility Impacts Learning**

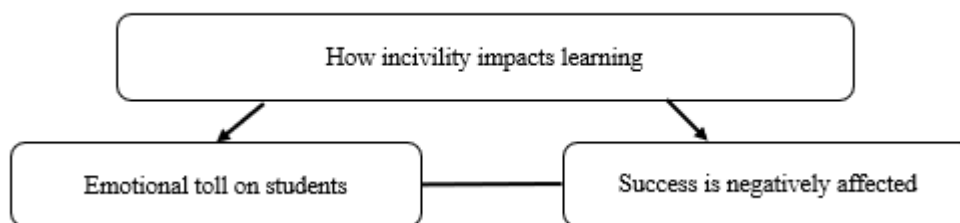
All participants claimed that peer-to-peer incivility has an impact on a student's ability to learn in the classroom. Students fear they will be shamed for their differing viewpoints and according to participants, some students will not take that risk.

Participants stated their online students become emotional and fearful to participate.

Students take their peers' poor behavior as personal attacks.

### **Figure 3**

*Theme 2 and Subcategories*



### *Emotional Toll on Students*

P3 stated, “If students are embarrassed or quiet because of another student picking on them or just being argumentative, it’s just not going to end well.” P2 shared, “When you’re feeling attacked, you’re probably, um, not going to put yourself out there with your personal opinion. This impacts their learning, and it isn’t fair.” P2 also stated:

When a student hears or sees from another student “You aren’t too sure of yourself are you?” they are most likely not going to share what they want to share. This is sad because for some reason the other student is pushing their agenda on this other student who is just trying to...to you know, um, actually participate.

### *Success is Negatively Affected*

When asked to describe their experiences when students avoid participating, P3 stated: Student learning is affected by incivility when there is a hot topic being discussed and this could be the grounds for argument emerging in a class...sometimes the actual topic for the discussions is something that can get students fired up. Don’t we want them to think? Sometimes I deviated from possible topics, like one example is gun control...in this particular class, I knew it wouldn’t end well. But sometimes it goes okay, and the students become interested in others’ perspectives. I guess they are somewhat interested (*Laughs*).

P6 revealed they, as faculty, have been angry and uncomfortable in class and at times felt like “calling out” the incivility but feared it would make the tension worse. P6 continues, “Sometimes classes are even shortened or are shut down and other students who are

interested and serious to learn are being affected and I feel it is not good at all, it's not good.”

P9 shared a short conversation with a student:

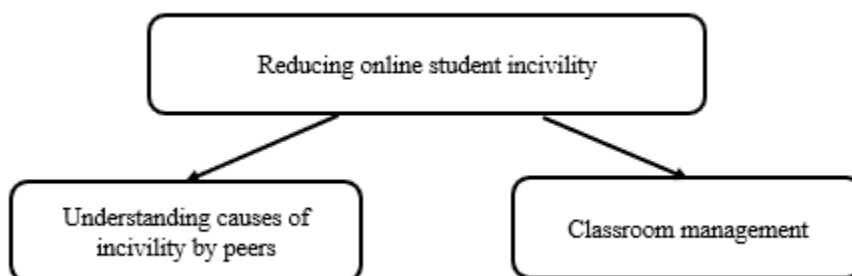
The student shared that they were afraid of putting their ideas out there. I thanked her for sharing that with me and that my expectation is that everybody here should be free to share what they think about a topic and we're not always going to think the same thing. I also told her that the students' jobs in the classroom are to share and be respectful and that I am always watching out for that.

### **Theme 3: Causes and Mitigation of Student Incivility**

This theme became an important part of identifying understanding of faculty experiences. Understanding the causes of peer-to-peer incivility correlated with answering the research questions and six of the 11 participants spoke about why they believe this occurs in the online classroom.

#### **Figure 4**

*Theme 3 and Subcategories*



Participants responses consisted of students as role models, lack of coping skills, and mental health. P3 stated:

Yeah, yeah, I try to model good behaviors, good morals to the students. I pay attention to student behaviors, and I feel that a way of preventing incivility you must pay attention to what is happening in the classroom with the students. They must pay attention to the larger world. It is almost like training them to be part of the larger world. A student who is uncivil to other students...what kind of character do they have? Are they just stubborn, where was this learned? We have to train them by being calm. When we are calm and approach the person, this is what will work for changing their attitudes. Not blaming but showing them how to act. Characters, they are world and the prizes they have been given and you try to talk to them. Model for them, this is the way to deal with students who are not treating their classmates with respect.

P7 made similar remarks about students being positive role models for their peers, Not only should we as faculty show good behavior and positive attitudes, I believe students can and should model positivity. In my profession (nursing) there is a lot of negativity. Believe it or not, nurses can be nasty to one another. Somehow this has become an issue in nursing programs as well. It would make sense to stop this behavior now, when students are students...teach them the coping skills they need. This is a major part of the problem, um, not having coping skills. If they can't handle it now, how will they act in the workplace? I really believe, and some other faculty will argue with me, that it is our job to teach them the skills they need to cope...and be nice to one another. I would love

it if students would take a stand against the incivility they see and observe from their classmates. It never fails, the negative ones always stick together.

P6 claimed, “I think this problem can and should be addressed. If it is caught now, I would think that they are young enough to change their attitudes.”

Causes of peer-to-peer incivility were mentioned in the data. P8 worries about online and in-person students, “I worry about some of my students. They seem so fragile. How are they going to handle life outside of university? How are they handling life now? P9 states,

Students seem to be craving a need to be successful, but don’t have the tools. This causes a mess of problems as they progress throughout their programs. Major issues come from their stress. I’ve worked with a lot of students over the years and their issues are not getting any easier. I wish that they would take advantage of the college’s resources.

P12 shared,

The college I work for has a large population of first-generation college students and a lot of students coming from impoverished areas. I mean, I am so glad they are able to come to college and most seem like they want to be here, but if I ask them why, they don’t know...although I think this is normal for a lot of college students. Some of these students end up unable to get to get to campus for a number of reasons. They send emails about attending my online classes because they share a car with their mother, have to babysit younger siblings, work full-

time jobs, it goes on and on. Online learning isn't for everyone. Am I supposed to let them in my async courses when they may fail?

College student mental health is a serious issue in the United States. A study conducted at the Mayo Clinic Health System found that among students across 133 college campuses, 44% of students reported feeling depressed and 15% seriously considered suicide (Bowe, 2023). The faculty reported concern for their students in their online classes. P3 stated,

Even though students attending at the college where I teach are welcome to come to campus to utilize services, I have no idea if they do. I work in a smaller city and most, if not all, who take online courses live locally, or at least close enough to come to campus.

P7 offered, "Because my classes are small, I really try to get to know my students in my online courses. They don't always want to share about their lives, but I do want them to trust me. I would rather they let me know if something is wrong than miss class or drop out."

### **Summary**

Participants were online faculty who observed peer-to-peer incivility in the online classroom setting. Eleven interviews were conducted resulting in the data used to understand the problem of peer-to-peer incivility by answering the two research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility on discussion boards in the online classroom?



RQ2: What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?

Participants described their beliefs about what constitutes incivility in general and incivility by students toward their peers in the online classroom. RQ1 focused on peer-to-peer incivility on classroom discussion boards. Observations included rude and disrespectful behavior, verbal and written instances of shaming peers, lack of motivation and failure to participate in class, and intimidation. Incivility occurred when students ignore certain students' posts or allude to a peer's lack of intelligence. Students would deliberately avoid responding to certain students' posts because they did not have the same views as the student posting. It was also discovered that students were uncomfortable sharing their perspectives for fear of ridicule.

RQ2 focused on participant perspectives and experiences of peer-to-peer incivility in the synchronous online classroom. Their observations included poor body language, including eye-rolling and smirking away from the camera creating a non-collegial atmosphere. Concerning for participants was the effect on learning when peers form cliques and ignore other students. Participants also described unprofessional student appearances which is distracting and creates an uncomfortable environment for students wishing to learn.

All participants responded with concern that a student's stress level or mental health issues could impact their success in a course. Participants felt that excessive pressure on students to succeed and earn high grades, while paying tuition and living expenses, when combined with an uncomfortable and negative learning environment due

to peer incivility, could and most likely would result in students withdrawing from the course of even the institution altogether.

In addition, all participants felt that something should be done to alleviate incivility in the online classroom. Some of the participants stated that they are not sure what would work to improve online student behavior, especially for students they do not see in person. For those participants who have specific discussions or activities regarding incivility at the start of the term, they have high hopes it will help decrease the phenomenon.

In this chapter, I reviewed the purpose of the study along with participant demographics and the study's setting, described the data collection procedure, data analysis, and issues of trustworthiness. In chapter 5, I will interpret the study's findings, discuss its limitations, and make recommendations for future research focused on student incivility in support of positive social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In the fall of 2023, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023) reported that 61% of undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one online college course during the 2021–2022 academic year. As online learning continues to attract students, the possibility of incivility among students in the online classroom is heightened. A strong online learning community helps students feel connected, offers a sense of belonging with shared goals, and helps students experience a higher quality learning experience (Ouzts, 2006). When incivility among peers is present in the online classroom, learning and succeeding is negatively affected (Chandra, 2021; Farzi et al., 2021; Small et al., 2019; Swartzwelder et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2019).

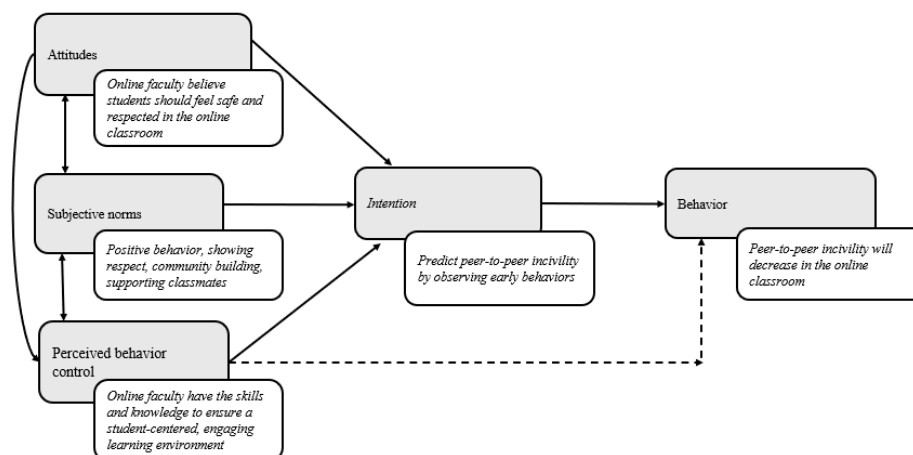
This basic qualitative study was designed to explore online faculty experiences when peer-to-peer incivility was observed. Online faculty were recruited by purposive and snowball sampling methods. Participants shared their perspectives on what constitutes incivility on asynchronous discussion boards and during synchronous class time. They explained the impact of demeaning response posts by peers and disruptive behaviors in synchronous learning. Understanding the impact of peer-to-peer incivility will assist online faculty to identify the uncivil behaviors, understand the possible reasons for these behaviors, and move toward a common understanding to decrease incivility and enhance the student learning experience.

Qualified participants were interviewed, and their responses analyzed utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic analysis process. Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) online faculty observations of student behavior, (b) how incivility

impacts learning, and (c) reducing online student incivility. These themes captured the study's findings, responding well to the research questions: "What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in discussion boards in the online classroom?" and "What are the experiences of faculty regarding peer-to-peer incivility in online synchronous video teaching platforms?" In this chapter, I will present my interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future study, implications of the results, this study's impact on positive social change, and a chapter summary.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Azjen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior explains the meaning and motivation behind behaviors. This theory supports the understanding of human behavior as influenced by attitudes and beliefs. Individuals determine whether a behavior should be acted on by reflecting on social norms and their beliefs and the effects of behavior on a situation. Figure 4 illustrates this theory within the context of this study's findings.

**Figure 5***Azjen's Theory of Planned Behavior*

*Note.* Shaded areas in this model indicate phases of TPB. Non-shaded areas illustrate an example of TPB when online faculty want to predict and decrease peer incivility in the online classroom. Figure adapted from Azjen (1991).

Each participant was asked to describe their perspectives of incivility in general followed with their experiences of incivility with students toward their peers in online classroom discussion boards and during synchronous classroom time. The findings indicated common descriptions of incivility in their online classrooms. In the literature, incivility is defined as rude and disruptive behavior, a lack of respect for others, intimidation, degrading verbal and written comments, shaming, and belittling other students' class performance (Bonaccio et al., 2016; Burke et al., 2014; Knepp, 2012; Ng et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021; Vurali & Bacioğlu, 2020) resulting in a less than desirable learning experience (Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Frischlich et al., 2021; Swartzwelder et al., 2019). Confirming what has been found in the literature, common responses were

rude and disrespectful behaviors, uncaring and unkind interactions, and increased frustration. Faculty described incivility in common terminology indicating they have observed uncivil behaviors of students. While some of the participants had more vivid examples of peer-to-peer incivility's impact on student learning, it was found that faculty participation in the control and mitigation of the incivility is vital to student success.

### **Theme 1: Online Faculty Observations of Student Behavior**

Participants were asked to share their observations of peer-to-peer incivility in their online classrooms, specifically on asynchronous discussion board posts and responses and during synchronous class time.

#### ***Uncivil Peer Behaviors on Response Posts***

Communication in asynchronous online classes most often comes in the form of written text, and if there is hurtful written communication by peers, the chances of success diminish over the term. Participants described uncivil behaviors by students on discussion posts, namely response posts, as purposely ignoring certain students' posts due to differences in opinion, rude or derogatory responses, questioning peers' intelligence, and only responding to the same students' posts week after week. Participant responses confirm what was found in the literature. For example, Ruthotto et al. (2020) claimed that communication and interaction among students in the online classroom will determine the level of success earned by students. Uncivil written communication, such as on discussion board posts and email, lowers student participation in the course (Swartzwelder et al., 2019). Participant 2 shared their thoughts:

Reading a response post by a student toward a peer that is rude ... I just don't want to see that ... [if a student writes] "I don't understand what you are saying" it can hurt the student who wrote the post... [this] is not a way students should react to a student's post.

Several participants had concerns about incivility in written communication because other students can see the posts and remain visible for the entirety of the course, affecting participation. Written communication provides students an opportunity to exchange ideas and create a learning community in an asynchronous course, but social media has had a negative impact on student communication (Kluck & Krämer, 2021). To address this, providing interesting and thought-provoking discussion board prompts may motivate students to share their viewpoints (McKenna et al., 2022).

### ***Discourteous Behaviors by Students in the Online Classroom***

Participants stated student behaviors such as eye rolling, putting their heads down, and looking off camera as if talking with someone are uncivil acts that are rude and distracting to their peers while in the synchronous classroom. Participants requested that students make themselves visible during synchronous lecture, but consistently hear "my camera isn't working" or "I keep getting disconnected." Belt and Lowenthal (2023) reported that faculty often do not know what their students are doing when their webcams are off, which confirms what participants revealed. Online faculty have described communicating with a dark screen (webcams off) as if are teaching to a "blank wall" and want to understand why their students are disinterested in the material (Belt & Lowenthal, 2023).

Participant 1 described a belief about student participation that can be considered uncivil:

It's obvious when I put them [online students] in groups during the class and they do not have an answer to contribute to the discussion. This could be incivility because there could be a student who wants to participate but the group members are talking about other things rather than the question.

### **Theme 2: How Incivility Impacts Learning**

Participants described their perspectives concerning a connection between student learning and peer-to-peer incivility. Participants agreed that incivility in the online classroom by peers takes an emotional toll on students who may begin to feel as though they are incapable of meeting course expectations. Feelings of inadequacy can lead to issues with participation and motivation, leading to a lower likelihood of success in the course. Riaz et al. (2021) found that student engagement is a positive precursor to online student success.

Research studies have found that students who are victims of online incivility from a peer might drop their classes, which will affect their overall grade point average and possibly impact graduation (Campbell et al., 2020; Riaz et al., 2021; Ruthotto et al., 2021). While class disruption and chaos may occur in the face-to-face classroom, students who experience incivility by another peer in the online classroom can be negatively affected when deciding to continue their education online (Campbell et al., 2020).



### ***Emotional Toll on Students***

Students who have been the recipients of peer-to-peer incivility report a negative impact on their mental health (Ng et al., 2020). Students exposed to incivility in the online classroom express stress, depression, fear, and discouragement (Kluck & Krämer, 2021). Participants in the current study claimed that students who feel they are victims of peer incivility may begin to experience new or increased mental health issues. Perceived peer incivility can cause a psychological response such as sadness, loneliness, or moodiness (Ng et al., 2020; Kluck & Krämer, 2021). Students feel shame when they are not meeting course expectations. Participant 8 worries about their online students' mental health and stated, "their lives are hard enough without feeling bad being in [online] class."

### ***Success is Negatively Affected***

Participants shared their feelings about students who feel targeted by their peers during discussion board assignments and in the synchronous online classroom. This is confirmed in the literature, as students who feel unwelcome by their peers lose the motivation to participate (Loizzo et al., 2017), resulting in missed class sessions or withdrawal from the course altogether (Knepp, 2012; Riaz et al., 2021). Segrist et al. (2018) indicated that some students who observe other students acting badly in class will also participate in uncivil behaviors. Peer-to-peer incivility affects learning from fear of being shamed by their peers and made to feel inadequate as a student.

Participant 2 shared, “When you’re [a student] feeling attacked, you’re probably, um, not going to put yourself out there with your personal opinion. This impacts their learning, and it isn’t fair.”

### **Theme 3: Reducing Online Student Incivility**

Participants shared techniques they have used at the beginning of a new semester to address classroom expectations. All participants stated that there is a civility statement in their course syllabi. Two participants give a syllabus quiz that students work on together. Participant 13 pairs students together to work on the quiz, “Allowing them to work together, or requiring them to work together, encourages conversation.”

When students feel a connection with their peers in the online classroom, they are more motivated to contribute and learn from one another. Social connections help to create a learning community among students in their online classrooms. Cocquyt et al. (2019) state that faculty must facilitate early, positive interactions among students. To accomplish this, faculty should create interactive assignments or activities to bring students together, which can begin to mitigate incivility in the online classroom.

#### ***Understanding Causes of Incivility by Peers***

Whatley et al. (2019) linked narcissism and academic entitlement behaviors as causes of peer incivility as observed and reported by online faculty. Narcissistic students are unmoved by upsetting their peers and consider reactions by the targeted student to be a sign of weakness, while denying any wrongdoing (Whatley et al., 2019). Students who feel inadequate may begin to exhibit new or worsening signs of depression and anxiety;

for non-traditional aged students or online students with above-average stress, this may lead to a reduced sense of well-being (Laverghetta, 2018; McNaughton-Cassill, 2013).

Participants concurred that all students feel stress throughout college. P9 expressed concern for students who lack resources to assist in meeting basic needs, “We have homeless students...students with financial issues and are accumulating a lot of debt.” Low self-efficacy and self-esteem issues may also be a cause of peer-to-peer incivility. (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023; Bambi et al., 2018). Issues of self-esteem affect motivation and decrease a student’s sense of control, possibly increasing fear. Students who have issues with a low self-efficacy may begin to place blame on others; therefore, acting out in class (Acosta-Gonzaga, 2023).

### ***Classroom Management***

Clear expectations for student behavior should be established (Galbraith & Jones, 2010). Participant 7 claimed, “You must pay attention to student behaviors ... paying attention is a way of preventing incivility ... you must pay attention to what is happening in the classroom with the students.” Several of the participants shared that their classroom management techniques have evolved over time. Participant 2 stated, “As a newer instructor, I still work to make an impact on my students’ [behavior] in class ... if something isn’t working, I can tell right away.” Hopkins et al. (2017) emphasized that classroom management can create a stressful environment but can also cause problems if the faculty is unable to establish control. Participant 7 is an experienced online nursing professor who shared strong feelings about peer-to-peer incivility, “Eliminating the ideas that students can treat each other badly ... we have to at least set the example that it

won't be tolerated.”

Research concentrating on methods for managing classroom incivility focuses mostly on in-person learning when incivility is present. This study's findings offer techniques to address incivility before it occurs, extending knowledge to new and experienced online educators.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations to this study have been identified. The first limitation is the population recruited for the study. This study sought higher education faculty who have online teaching experience, but the requirements did not specify a range of experience, i.e. participants may exclusively teach online or only teach an occasional online course. This would cause a difference in the amount of time spent in online classrooms, therefore limiting the opportunities to experience peer-to-peer incivility. Dependability could be affected if there are vast differences in the amount of experience in the online classroom. Individual differences in participant perspectives of what constitutes uncivil behavior is another limitation. Some faculty may describe incivility as excessive absences, while other faculty may believe that attendance is the responsibility of the student, and it is their choice to attend class for the content.

Interviews for this study were all conducted virtually, limiting the opportunity to observe participant body language. In qualitative research, body language or enhanced behaviors can inform the research. In this case, I was careful to note facial expressions and tone of voice when listening to each participant.

## **Recommendations**

This study confirmed that learning is impacted when peer-to-peer incivility is experienced in the online classroom. To explore differences in full-time vs part-time online faculty experience as related to peer-to-peer incivility, additional research is warranted. Determining if there are differences in the extent of incivility across college majors is also recommended. Further study should include perspectives of students who feel they have been the target of incivility by a peer, exploring how the students feel their learning has been impacted.

## **Implications**

### **Positive Social Change**

Empirical knowledge derived from individuals who directly experience a phenomenon can be instrumental in beginning the process of positive social change. Incivility does not only occur in the classroom but is observed and felt across middle and high schools, colleges and universities, the workplace, local gatherings, politics, and within families. The findings of this study have provided a better understanding of what faculty have experienced when peer-to-peer incivility has been observed in the online classroom. Sharing this information with administrators, faculty, and students will shed light on the problem of incivility and can help build positive and respectful communication skills as students transition into the workforce.

Online students have reported feeling embarrassed and ashamed when targeted with incivility by their peers. These feelings may stay with the individuals, negatively impacting self-esteem and hope for the future. With a greater understanding of why

incivility occurs and how online faculty can recognize it before it starts, the goals of higher education can continue to promote problem solving and critical thinking in online communication. When students learn that their behaviors harm others and learn better ways to communicate, they will take these skills with them into their personal and work relationships, moving toward more peaceful exchanges among individuals with differing points of view.

### **Conclusion**

Online learning continues to be a sought-after way for students to meet educational and professional goals. Understanding incivility in online learning is an issue that disrupts the learning environment leading to a challenging environment. This study was focused on understanding incivility in the online classroom by students toward their peers. Words to describe incivility vary according to its intensity, but the consequences of uncivil behavior, no matter the intention, inevitably hurt others. Understanding incivility in the classroom is a step forward in limiting online communication that is harmful to others. As observed in social media and numerous public platforms, comments about any topic can be made anonymously without consequence. The results of this study will continue the work toward a global community of respect and kindness toward one another and consideration of others' points of view will move us in the direction of positive social change.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

# Research Study Seeking Online Faculty

- Full-time, Part-time, and Adjunct faculty invited to participate
- Have experience teaching online at the college level
- An approximate one-hour interview – In-person or online
  
- Be a part of understanding incivility among students in online classes



\$10 Amazon Gift Card  
for participating

Walden University 2023  
IRB Approval

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been teaching at the college level?
  - a. How long have you been teaching online?
  - b. What courses have you taught online?
2. What do you like best about teaching online?
3. What do you like least about teaching online?
4. How would you describe the concept of incivility in general?
  - a. What about student incivility? How would you describe incivility among students in the online classroom?
5. Have you noticed students act uncivilly more in the synchronous or asynchronous classroom?
6. When using asynchronous discussion boards to facilitate discussion among students, will you share the types of behaviors you have observed?
  - a. Have you observed incivility in response posts?
7. In the synchronous classroom students are able to communicate in real time. What sort of incivility have you observed among students?
8. Will you describe how you feel when you observe students acting uncivilly to one another?
  - a. If you have the chance to intervene, how do you handle that?
9. How would you describe a student's reaction to incivility?
  - a. Within a discussion board post?
  - b. In a live classroom setting?
10. Will you describe how a student's learning may be affected by uncivil behavior by a peer?