

Original Article



Medical faculty and students' perceived incivility in virtual classes during the COVID-19 lockdown: A qualitative study

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Abstract

Background: After the COVID-19 lockdown and the dominance of virtual classes in medical education, variant dimensions of incivility emerged and required further exploration. The present study was designed to explore and describe incivility in virtual classes as perceived by students and faculty members.

Methods: This qualitative study involved 55 students and 38 faculty members who were recruited by purposive sampling at a major medical university in Iran. Open-ended questions and semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to elicit the participants' perceptions of incivility in virtual classes. The narrative responses were analyzed by conventional content analysis.

Results: Nine major categories were extracted, four of which contained students' incivility (Irresponsibility, dishonesty, unreasonable expectations, and disruptive behavior in virtual classes); and five categories reflected faculty incivility (Lack of accountability, inappropriate classroom management, unfair academic evaluation, disruptive behavior in virtual classes, and inappropriate interactions with students).

Conclusion: The students' and faculty incivility as explored in the present study suggests acknowledging them by stakeholders (students, faculty, and educational management) to expedite effective management of virtual learning and teaching at universities.

Introduction

In higher education, student incivility presents a formidable challenge for instructors, significantly disrupting the learning process. Such behavior not only hinders the educational environment but also leads to strained relations between teachers and their students.^{1,2}

Studies in medical education have defined incivility as disruptive and unreasonable behaviors that cause psychological or physical distress for people involved in education, turning into threats if no action is taken to deal with them.³ Other definitions regard academic incivility as any behavior or verbal statement with negative impacts on faculty and students' health, and adversely affecting their occupational relationship, thereby disturbing the teaching and learning process.^{4,5} Common uncivil behaviors are categorized in a bottom-up hierarchical continuum by their severity; the lower categories include misbehaviors such as eating, sleeping, talking in class, and sidestepping the assigned tasks; and the higher categories contain misbehaviors such as physical fights with students and faculty.^{6,7} Such misbehaviors negatively impact the

rapport, ethics, and learning environment, and they threaten the tranquility of instructors, students, and the academic community.⁸ A meta-analysis of 11 qualitative studies explored a wide range of uncivil behaviors as faculty incivility from destructive to threatening behaviors, disqualification, unresponsiveness, and unfairness; also, it was revealed that faculty incivility had negatively impacted the students' learning and psychological health.⁹ Another qualitative study categorized the major challenges in virtual education into three aspects: moral education, creativity, and power relations.¹⁰

Several studies have been conducted on academic incivility and its management.¹¹ Currently, after the COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown of universities and higher education institutes, around 1.2 billion students are led to virtual classes around the world. Virtual learning management systems (LMSs) provide online and offline opportunities for learning and are widely applied in university education.¹² In Iran, due to its low popularity before the COVID-19 outbreak and poor infrastructure, its implementation encountered substantial barriers and

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major challenges, which hampered its full success. The Coronavirus pandemic took stakeholders in education into virtual classes with LMS tools and software to compensate for the lack of real classrooms.¹³ However, the lack of an effective infrastructure and adequate facilities for designing and implementing LMSs created serious challenges.¹⁴ LMS users faced challenges such as low-speed internet, expensive data traffic, availability of competent instructors, and unfamiliarity with educational software, which altogether disrupted the routine instruction in some universities.^{15,16} In addition to these shortfalls, the COVID-19 outbreak has deprived medical students of hands-on clinical training, severely disturbing the faculty-student relationships and undermining the students' learning outcomes.¹⁷

The renovation of instructional methods entails both faculty and students to act peacefully and patiently in virtual classes, but a trial-and-error approach to virtual learning and teaching is on the rise. Misunderstanding and mutually aggressive actions and reactions tend to severely harm academic relationships; also, deprivation of real face-to-face encounters sometimes lead to unacceptable misbehaviors, whose nature is radically different from those in real classrooms. Therefore, by a novel approach to understanding mutual uncivil behaviors of faculty and students towards each other, the present study was conducted to explore incivility in virtual classes during the COVID-19 lockdown as perceived by both students and faculty.

Materials and Methods

The present qualitative study benefited the content analysis. The study population was all the professors and students at Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences, Iran during the academic year 2021-2022. The instruction mode was virtual during this year, both online (synchronous) and offline (asynchronous). Live communication is used to shape during the synchronous mode of instruction, with Question and Answer opportunities during each session. However, the asynchronous mode involved uploading text, audio and/or video files for students' use at their convenience. Formative and summative assessments were also conducted electronically in a locally designed system (i.e. Navid LMS).

Sampling was purposefully done by the researchers' judgment and knowledge until the saturation point was reached during the interviews, when no novel themes or concepts emerged out of interviewees' comments. The inclusion criteria for both professors and students were: active participation in virtual learning for at least one semester, inclination to join the study interviews, and ability to provide adequate information during interviews. A maximum variety of participants' gender, age, major, and level of education was considered, and finally, 55 students (age range of 19 to 30 years) and 38 professors (age range of 27 to 50 years) were recruited from faculties

of Health, Nursing and Midwifery, and Medicine to join the study.

The study was completed during July and August 2021. The Participants' demographic information was collected through a researcher-made questionnaire, posted via Telegram and WhatsApp to the participants. In addition, open interview questions were asked on the phone, to conduct a semi-structured interview. In sum, 12 professors and 20 students participated in our in-depth interviews, and the remaining data were obtained from the participants' Telegram and WhatsApp responses.

To initiate the interviews, the interviewer explained the general aims of the study to the participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their identity and use of their responses only for research purposes. The same strategies for explaining the study objective and confidentiality of the participants' responses were emphasized. They were allowed to leave the study at any stage if they desired. They were assured of anonymity and confidentiality of their data. Then, informed consent was obtained from the participants.

The following were the main questions on the phone, and other complementary questions were asked in between for further clarification of the respondents' opinions and ideas. At the end of each interview, they were asked to add any comments if they felt further comments were necessary to complete their responses. Warm-up questions included an introductory statement of their age, area of residence, education, grade point average (GPA) and educational records, employment, marital status, their spouse's job if they were married, and ways of interacting with students in virtual classes). Major questions included the following: "What learning opportunities are created in virtual classes?"; "What are the challenges posed by virtual instruction?"; "What uncivil behaviors did the students show during virtual classes?"; "What were the professors' uncivil behaviors during virtual classes?" Other specific questions were also asked regarding emotions experienced under those circumstances, or in response to uncivil behaviors they encountered, and ways they tried to manage those behaviors. Clarification requests were also posed in certain cases to disambiguate the participants' comments, including "Please explain", "what happened next?", and "How did you feel then?" To be precise, questions posted on Telegram and WhatsApp were almost the same but no clarification requests were possible.

The duration of interviews on the phone varied between 30 and 60 minutes, which were recorded with the participants' permission. To transcribe their verbal comments, the researcher repeatedly listened to the interviews. After qualitative analysis of each interview's content, the next interview was conducted until the saturation point was reached. The interview time was arranged at a convenient time with each participant so that they could comfortably take part in the interview and freely express their views for the enrichment of the

study data.

Qualitative content analysis was adopted for data analysis, which is appropriate for subjective analysis and interpretation of textual data. In addition to extracting objective content of the text, this method helps hidden patterns and concepts emerge out of the text data. After repeated episodes of listening, transcription, re-reading, and exploration of the written data, a general picture of the findings was shaped, and themes were extracted. General concepts were discussed, and codes were categorized by their interrelationships. Responses to questions on Telegram and WhatsApp were similarly analyzed by qualitative content analysis. According to Lincoln, four criteria are suggested for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In this regard, for the credibility of sampling up to the saturation point, long-term and multi-faceted engagement with the data (open questions, in-depth interviews, and interviewing a large number of participants) was considered. Also, for dependability, member check and peer review techniques were used. For peer review, two authors independently coded and categorized the data, and discussed changes in coding and categorization to reach consensus in case of probable divergence.

In the process of member or participant check, the interview codes were returned to three interviewees who also confirmed the codes extracted by the researchers. For the confirmability of the methods of data convergence, sufficient data were collected from multiple sources including the professors and students with different ages, genders and education, completed by further reconsideration of the obtained data by the researchers. Furthermore, a detailed description of the setting, the participants, and the interviewees' diverse viewpoints and experiences was written for transferability. For final approval, MAXQDA 10 was used for better analysis, storage, and sorting of the qualitative data.

Results

Fifty-five students (30 male and 25 female) and 38 university faculty members (20 male and 18 female) participated in the study. Students and faculty mean and standard deviation of age were 23 ± 3.21 and 36.64 ± 6.51 years, respectively. Students' mean and standard deviation of GPA was 16.32 ± 0.66 (out of 20).

After analyzing data from open questions and interviews, 620 primary codes, 32 subcategories, and 9 categories were developed. Out of these nine major categories, 4 categories pertained to students' incivility (including Irresponsibility, dishonesty, unreasonable expectations, and disruptive behavior in virtual classes), and 5 related to faculty uncivil behaviors (including Lack of accountability, inappropriate classroom management, unfair academic evaluation, disruptive behavior in virtual classes, and inappropriate interactions with students);

each category contained a few subcategories displayed in Table 1.

Students' incivility perceived by the faculty members

Irresponsibility

According to faculty members, students did not complete the assigned tasks, did not adequately search to reach the solutions, did not care about the instructions of assignments, did not study the offline content for preparation before online sessions, did not meet the deadlines to hand in their assignments, were not on time for classes, did not participate in online discussions, and did not pay attention to teacher talk; these led to their frequent questions even about plain issues. They did not attend online classes; they showed false presence by entering the class and leaving after the roll call. Unjustified absenteeism became more frequent on the grounds of low-speed internet. In sum, real classroom presence was scanty, indicating their irresponsibility for academic tasks.

"Instructions demanded for completing assignments and projects were not regarded as important by the students."

(Instructor 5th participant)

Dishonesty

The faculty also complained of indescribably increased rate of cheating in exams and copying others' assignments, which are evidence of serious uncivil behaviors. One student took an exam for another; they opened books, classroom notes or course materials while taking a test; they formed teams to share the responses to test items; they also copied one another's assignment and handed in the copied task to the teacher. In cases, unreasonable excuses were heard (e.g. low speed internet); they avoided video connections with a webcam when the professor demanded; told lies about personally completed tasks; and were unable to answer the questions when professors asked them.

"In virtual exams, other people can answer the questions for the examinee, or they can easily share responses via messaging systems" (Instructor 8th participant)

Unreasonable expectations from the instructors

The faculty complained of students' expectations to cooperate with undue demands, particularly for shrinking the course syllabus, and submitting their assignments via mobile messaging systems such as WhatsApp or Telegram instead of academic LMSs; students mostly made phone calls or sent messages at inconvenient times and expected prompt answers; they nagged for lack of clinical training and practicum; they expected scores reparation or re-scoring, and quite unduly complained of the difficulty of (standardized) exams or their limited time, which altogether provided evidence for students' unreasonable expectations.

"Some students demanded some parts of the course be eliminated and not included in the final exam on the

Table 1. Categories and subcategories of incivility in virtual classes as perceived by the faculty and students

	Categories	Subcategories	
Students' incivility perceived by the faculty	Irresponsibility	Not completing the assignments	
		Not attending online classes	
		Not participating in online discussions	
		Untimely logging in and out of online classes	
		Objections to the uploaded volume of course content	
		Undervaluing the classes	
	Dishonesty	Cheating	
		Telling lies	
	Unreasonable expectations from the instructors	Undue comments about the exam	
		Negotiation for eliminating parts of the course materials	
		Submitting assignments via informal mobile messages	
		Expecting an answer to phone calls and SMSs at any time of the day	
		Expecting extra points in final exams	
	Disruptive behavior in virtual classes	Demanding repeated uploads of the same content	
Playing music files in online classes			
Making disturbing noises			
Posting irrelevant messages in online classes			
Joining late to online classes			
Mobile ringing			
Talking to another student when the microphone is on			
Faculty incivility perceived by the students	Lack of accountability	Not checking the submitted assignments	
		Not standardizing problematic content files despite frequent requests	
		Not being accessible	
		No attention to students' schedule	
		Not responding to students' objections	
		Not holding online sessions for exercises	
		Reducing the students' final scores	
		Announcing the scores too late	
		Inappropriate Classroom Management	Inefficient instruction
			Problems with uploading course content and organizing classes
	Problematic course content		
	Unfair academic assessment	Problematic assignments	
		A wide gap between difficulty levels of teaching and exam questions	
		Not applying formative assessment	
		Assigning unrealistic scores	
	Disruptive behavior in virtual classes	Not announcing the exact exam time	
		Not sticking to the weekly schedule	
		No discipline in holding online sessions	
		Answering mobile phones while teaching	
	Inappropriate interactions with students	Changing the time of classes without prior notice	
		Perceived unfairness	
		Hostility towards students	
		Humiliation and insulting the students	
		Discrimination between students	
		Ridiculing the students	
		Not knowing the students	

grounds of limited time to study and voluminous content of the course." (Instructor 3th participant)

Disruptive behavior in virtual classes

The faculty talked about common disruptive behaviors such as playing music files while attending an online class, making disturbing noise, posting irrelevant messages, chatting without permission, joining the classes late and leaving them early, and talking to others when their microphones were on.

"At the beginning days of turning into virtual classes, students came into class as a 'guest' in the academic LMS; they were able to join as anonymous participants and made mischievous behaviors by making irritating noises, playing music files, ..." (Instructor 10th participant)

Faculty incivility perceived by the students

Lack of accountability

According to students, some faculty were not accountable to their duties; they neither checked the assignments nor did they provide constructive comments to complete tasks. Although they had allocated points for assignments in their course plan, they did not keep their word to add the task scores to the final score. Most classes were offline, and the audiovisual quality of recorded sessions was low; they did not even try to enhance the quality of subsequent recordings although they heard the students' objections and comments. Most professors were not accessible, and did not respond to students' objections about final scores. Some even stressed that students were not allowed to ask for re-scoring the exams, while this is their undisputed right. Some even reduced students' scores if they insisted on re-scoring. Some professors avoided online sessions for different excuses while the university guidelines demanded at least one-fifth of the sessions be held online to provide students with error correction and feedback, enrich their learning, and help them adapt to instructors' teaching and testing styles; however, they only uploaded offline recorded materials. Professors also did not respond to students' questions and messages posted either in the official LMS or via mobile messaging systems. All of these were mentioned by students as indications of faculty unresponsiveness or lack of responsibility.

"One of such behaviors is that some professors did not score the final exams; we provide a full answer to a certain question, and then check the pamphlets and references [the course material] and see that the answer was right, but the professor does not give us the score which we deserved." (Student 6th participant)

Inappropriate classroom management

Students complained of mismanagement of assigned tasks, ineffective teaching, poor organization of course content, uploading unorganized and non-standard materials, and uncoordinated activities. Other uncivil behaviors attributed to inappropriate classroom

management included assigning tasks not directly related to course objectives, not engaging students in discussions and exercises, inability to express oneself in simple and intelligible language, inadequate and uncomprehensive instruction, just uploading PDF files instead of trying to teach the material in its real sense, lack of enough knowledge on a certain topic, inability to keep to the course schedule (followed by a bulky volume of files uploaded around the second half of the semester), canceling online classes due to some students' absenteeism, not adhering to the lesson plan, uploading files with low recording quality, uploading illegible handwritten notes, and uploading files from junior classes.

"Most of the uncivil behaviors fall into the scope of instruction itself, for example, audio files are of a very low quality..." (Student 8th participant)

Unfair academic evaluation

Students accused instructors of unfair academic evaluation or bad evaluation of their learning, relying mostly on summative evaluation rather than formative evaluation; faculty members solely emphasized their final scores and tended to overlook students' scores on assignments or tasks. Some professors did not announce the exact date of exams. Exam questions were of a much higher difficulty level than what they had taught throughout the course; sometimes questions contained points and topics not completely covered by the instructor of the course.

"The contents of the course did not match the credit hours of the course, and the final exam was distanced from what was taught ..." (Student 20th participant)

Disruptive behavior in virtual classes

Students contended that professors did not adhere to the academic weekly schedule; they also did not have close communication with students' representatives to accommodate changes in the schedule, leading to higher absenteeism rate just because students were unaware of the changes in the schedule. Professors had no discipline in commencing or terminating a session, and did not start online sessions on time. Most of the time, they changed the time of fixed weekly online classes, and unexpectedly canceled a class that they had already scheduled themselves. They had no timely and reliable way of informing students about classes, except at their whims. Another common disruptive behavior was answering their mobile phones while teaching.

"Instructors had no timely and appropriate way to inform us about changes in the time of online classes, they had no discipline in holding weekly online sessions ..." (Student 3rd participant)

Inappropriate interactions with students

Students perceived several cases of unfairness in this regard and highlighted them as follows: professors underrated students' time schedules and usually planned

online classes just at their convenience; they did not care about students' views. Professors showed hostile attitudes towards students with aggression and anger, some were arrogant and looked down upon students. Instances of humiliation and belittling were reported; sometimes they damaged the reputation of a certain student by disclosing his/her problem to other students in the class; some used derogatory remarks. Ridiculing and discrimination between students were also considered as faculty members' uncivil behaviors.

"A professor had assigned a classmate to add an audio file on each PowerPoint slide, but she mistakenly produced a video file, the professor was angry with her and left the WhatsApp group ..." (Student 11th participant).

Discussion

The present study was designed to explore and describe incivility in virtual classes from the perspective of medical students and faculty. Nine major categories were extracted, four of which contained students' incivility (unresponsiveness, dishonesty, unreasonable expectations, and disruptive behavior in virtual classes); and five categories reflected faculty incivility (unresponsiveness, inappropriate classroom management, unfair academic assessment, disruptive behavior in virtual classes and inappropriate interactions with students). Students' unresponsiveness (i.e. lack of a proper sense of responsibility) was the most important concern of professors, which is in line with the findings of Ibrahim and Qalawa who explored irresponsible behaviors in 60% of nursing students.¹⁸ Unfortunately, students accused the faculty members of the same sort of unresponsiveness (or lack of accountability). Such counteractions may occasionally take place in retaliation from both sides, but the fact is that "incivility incites incivility",⁵ and to preclude such negative feelings, preventative measures can be taken to discontinue the growth of incivility and hostility in academic contexts. A study in 2018 indicated that faculty members with positive and respectful behaviors received similar behaviors from their students.¹⁹ Conversely, incompetent, disinterested, and demotivated faculty may trigger hostility and aggressiveness.²⁰ In short, the most important uncivil behavior among students is perceived to be their unresponsive behavior which implies that passive attendance in online classes is an important phenomenon requiring prompt attention.

Another finding emerged as dishonesty (i.e. cheating and telling lies) which, according to instructors, had remarkably increased during the COVID-19 pandemic and virtual classes; this may be attributable either to students' attendance without preparation before classes, or to professors' poor responsiveness, inappropriate classroom management, and unfair assessment. Furthermore, the act of cheating became more prevalent with the popularization of virtual education. Examining the students with questions from previous terms,

allocation of excess time for each question, accessibility of books and references at the time of testing, and building cheating teams for sharing answers to each question while ignoring ethical and occupational commitments.

Students' disrupting the class discipline was another finding manifested as absenteeism, showing false presence in classes, joining the classes late and leaving them early and posting irrelevant messages; all such misbehaviors, were also reported in an early study by Rad et al, may be attributable to ineffective instructional strategies which lead to students' sense of boredom and demotivates them.³

In addition, low-speed internet was the students' main excuse for joining late or absenteeism in online classes. Another explored uncivil behavior was the students' unreasonable expectations which involved their frequent requests for eliminating parts of the course content, or shrinking the course syllabus, to reduce the final exam load, as well as adding extra points to their final scores on no grounds. In cases where no real encounters tend to take place between students and faculty, and interactions are limited to virtual courses, such problems may arise, particularly if professors' expectations are not vividly extended to the students by explaining the course plan at the beginning of the course. However, a student's objection to his/her final score can be an undisputable right, demanding a convincing and clear response from the instructor; in such cases, the distinction between self-assertiveness and misbehavior must be considered.²¹ Similarly, Mortazavi et al contended that since recorded offline classes provide inadequate feedback and are less interactive when online classes are scheduled, students show disinclination to join the class and to participate in interactive discussions.²²

From the students' perspective, faculty incivility manifested as insufficient responses, inappropriate classroom management, unfair assessment, disrupting the class discipline, and inappropriate interaction with students. Similarly, Park et al reported faculty incivility as 'unresponsiveness and unfairness'.⁹ According to our student participants, inappropriate classroom management manifested as certain uncivil behaviors; for example, the recorded course contents were of low quality; in cases, PowerPoint slides did not contain audio files, or contained audio files in a foreign language; uploaded files did not appear on a regular sequential basis; in some cases, explanations were insufficient and vague.

Appropriate interactions between the faculty and students tended to decline during virtual classes since the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the psychological tensions and has led to further faculty burnout.²³ Similarly, Mahyoob showed that the most challenging problems of virtual education, in addition to academic and technological problems, are the problems of 'communication'²⁴. Alzahrani however, suggests strategies to mitigate such challenges by applying cooperative learning, learner-centered instruction, and

enhanced interaction to increase the learners' attention and concentration on their classes.²⁵ Therefore, it appears that inappropriate classroom management measures, which originate from the faculty's unresponsiveness, can be improved if the educational managers ask them to standardize and enhance the quality of their course content before uploading.²²

Limitations of the study

The present study was limited to exploring uncivil behaviors in virtual classes while almost half of medical education is completed in clinical settings, which was not the focus of the present study. However, a hybrid approach to complementing the questionnaire data with interview questions may be considered as an advantage, which helped enrich the exploration of incivility.

Conclusion

Faculty members perceived "unresponsiveness, dishonesty, unreasonable expectations and disruptive behavior in virtual classes" as students' uncivil behaviors, while students complained of "unresponsiveness, inappropriate classroom management, unfair academic assessment, disruptive behavior in virtual classes and inappropriate interactions with students" as faculty incivility. We recommend the presentation of these findings to faculty and students at universities; their weaknesses in virtual classes can turn into good relationships and effective instruction if they mutually understand the nature of virtual classes and their roles in such environments. University administrators may keep on evaluating such behaviors and provide constructive recommendations to enhance the quality of course content and classes in virtual settings.

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Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interest.

Ethical Approval

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Sabzevar University of Medical Sciences (code: IR.MEDSAB.REC.1400.066)

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