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University Students' Perceptions of Student-Academic Incivility in Higher Education: A Study at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana

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Abstract: Academic incivility (AI) has emerged as a significant challenge in higher education institutions worldwide. Reports of verbal and physical bullying, violence, denied access to institutional facilities, and intimidation have taken the better part of life on various campuses. This phenomenon has far-reaching implications, undermining not only teaching and learning but also derailing interpersonal relationships among colleagues, students and faculty, as well as among faculty and support staff. This study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), a pioneer public institution in Ghana, concerning various forms of uncivil academic behaviours displayed on campus. Utilising a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from a sample of 564 students across four Colleges within the university. The 25-item questionnaire used for data collection hinged on

Feldmann's (2001) taxonomy of academic incivility. The study examined the perceived seriousness of specific uncivil behaviours among students within the academic environment. Findings revealed a high prevalence of student academic incivility, particularly involving violence, dishonesty, wrong phone use and disruptive classroom behaviours. These results underscore the urgent need to implement institutional measures to promote civility and safeguard the psychological well-being of both students and staff at the research site.

Keywords: academic incivility, bullying, faculty members, frequency of incivility, mental health, psychological well-being, students' incivility, university students, University of Cape Coast, violence.

Introduction

Higher education is widely regarded as a crucial pillar for both national and personal advancement. Despite its potential benefits, the higher learning endeavour is closely accompanied by significant stress and a host of challenges that often attract resilient student strategies for commendable performance. According to Rosiek et al. (2016), students in higher education face extreme academic pressure and stress that demand a student-centred learning environment characterised by high cordiality, interactivity and mutual respect to enhance retention. In line with this, Zhou and Colomer (2024) underscore the importance of teamwork, motivation, and mutual respect in promoting academic resilience among higher education students. A peaceful and respectful academic environment thus facilitates enhanced academic focus, deep engagement, and academic achievement. Conversely, the presence of incivility undermines the aforementioned ideals of commendable academic engagement, thus threatening both high academic attainment and students' emotional well-being.

Many studies confirm the existence of uncivil student behaviours in various educational settings (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2016; Buhrow & Yehle, 2023; Hudgins et al., 2023). In recent years, among the ever-increasing and most frequently observed student uncivil behaviors, also perceived as a discomfort both by students and instructors within the higher education settings; are talking to others during the class, using cell phones during lectures, being late to class or leaving class early, dosing at lectures, making sarcastic comments, and packing before the class is over (Ballard et al., 2022; Moghimian et al., 2023). On the other hand, it is stated that behaviours such as being unprepared, bored or indifferent during lectures do not constitute serious flaws in classroom management. However, such attitudes often cause students to lose interest and abandon the learning environment when repeatedly used by many students (Vural & Bacioglu, 2020).

Academic incivility has a profound effect on the classroom environment (Aliakbari & Hajizadeh, 2018; Snyder-Yuly et al., 2021). Turnipseed and Landay (2018), for instance, define classroom incivility as any action that interferes with a harmonious, co-operative learning atmosphere. When students act out in a college classroom, teaching and learning are derailed. Furthermore, uncivil acts affect teachers' performance and can negatively impact student learning and retention.

Predictably, teachers are embarrassed to discuss student incivility with colleagues or report it to the proper authorities (Abd-El-Aal & Steele, 2022). Indeed, many instructors feel that the administration will side with students and do very little, if anything, for them (King & Kabat-Farr, 2022). Chory and Offstein (2017) postulated that college professors might actually be the catalyst for most acts of classroom incivility. Simply, instructors' negative actions and behaviours (speaking too fast, refusing to answer questions, treating students with open contempt, etc.) create a negative learning environment that encourages students to behave inappropriately (Ibrahim & Qalawa, 2016; Dörnyei & Muir, 2019).

The issue of academic incivility in higher education has become increasingly alarming. Research by Hudgins et al. (2023) and Buhrow and Yehle (2023) highlights a disturbing rise in such behaviours. In a study conducted by Lemon and Barnes (2021), it was found that most staff at the school setting reported having been bullied, with female staff more frequently affected. The advent of technology also exacerbates the problem. Online platforms such as email, evaluation portals, and social media have become tools for harassment and bullying (Snyder-Yuly et al., 2021). This technological dimension of incivility has made the phenomenon more pervasive and difficult to control.

Research Problem

Academic incivility has assumed increasingly perturbing dimensions within many higher education settings. The phenomenon notably causes both physical and psychological harm to its victims. Studies by Piotrowski and King (2016) and Buhrow and Yehle (2023) highlight the devastating effects of AI on teaching, learning, and personal well-being. The perpetrators of incivility, on the other hand, include students, faculty, management, or support staff. For example, students often complain about strict grading and overly difficult examination questions set by faculty (Orfan, 2023; Hudgins et al., 2023).

Student incivility can also negatively impact the personal and academic lives of both lecturers and students (Nguyen-Viet & Nguyen, 2024). Khan et al. (2022), for example, found that students' uncivil behaviour toward other students (e.g., bullying, harassment) often damaged victims' self-esteem, ultimately excluding them from group activities. The authors further reported a serious conflict arising from a minor instance of incivility on campus. According to Orfan (2023), student incivility equally undermines the student-lecturer relationship, contributing significantly to lecturers' stress and dissatisfaction with their employment. Other studies, by Kim et al. (2024), Rawlins (2017), and El Hachi (2020), reported that student incivility often increased lecturers' stress, decreased their confidence, and harmed them emotionally. Rawlins (2017) stated that student incivility could cause physical, emotional, and psychological tension among lecturers. Investigating the impact of student incivility on lecturers, Ibrahim and Qalawa (2016) found that lecturers' self-esteem decreased, leaving them less confident in their teaching skills. They also reported that a few faculty members left their profession due to student incivility.

Incivility incidents may be as trifling as students eating noisily in class or as severe as students verbally and physically assaulting faculty members (Karim et al., 2024). Regardless, such incidents

often have a significant impact on student learning and teacher effectiveness (Rose et al., 2020). Several reasons have been advanced as causal factors and likely remedies for the increasing prevalence of incivility in various academic settings. It has, for instance, been suggested that changes in student learning preferences and styles, as well as in faculty behaviours and pedagogical methods in the classroom, could significantly influence the increasing incidence of academic incivility across campuses (Pittman, 2023).

The dire consequences of this problematic incident, especially for human health and interpersonal relationships, necessitate an urgent remedy to restore civility among institutional members. The saying that no human lives on an Island is a stark reality, and while sound mental health is essential for individual students to attain clear academic focus, engagement and performance, united study efforts such as teamwork, group discussions, and research projects also seem severely threatened in the face of increasing uncivil behaviour. Student academic incivility thus deserves immediate stakeholder attention to promote teaching and learning, academic attainment, retention, and to further improve human interaction across all institutional campuses. These, in effect, underscore the importance of the current research on student-academic incivility at the University of Cape Coast.

Research Focus

The current research was focused on two primary goals. First, to determine the frequency level of uncivil student-academic behaviours at the selected research site, and secondly, to examine the perceived seriousness of student groups associated with the dissimilarly displayed uncivil student behaviours, among both undergraduate and post-graduate student groups at the research site.

Research Aims and Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to investigate and compare the perceptions of undergraduate and postgraduate student groups at the University of Cape Coast regarding various forms of student-academic incivility behaviours displayed on campus. It also sought to determine the levels of seriousness students attached to various forms of uncivil academic behaviour prevailing in their respective classrooms, and how seriously different student groups perceived these behaviours. The researchers opined that understanding students' perceptions of such behaviours is critical to developing appropriate interventions to address the issue and to create a more conducive academic environment for their use.

The following research questions were generated to guide the entire inquiry:-

1. What is the level of perceived seriousness for the different forms of uncivil academic behaviours among students at the University of Cape Coast?
2. How seriously do undergraduate and postgraduate student groups perceive the incidence of incivility in their various classrooms?

Literature Review/Theoretical Overview

The Concept of Academic Incivility

Academic incivility refers to a spectrum of inappropriate and disruptive behaviours that violate the norms of mutual respect and decorum within academic settings (Sepehrinia et al., 2024). Piotrowski and King (2016) characterise incivility as a troubling interpersonal deviation that includes destructive leadership, abusive supervision, and adult bullying. Walsh et al. (2018) describe it as deviant behaviour that ambiguously seeks to harm others, violating workplace norms of mutual respect. Within classrooms, incivility includes actions that conflict with accepted academic norms, such as talking back, ignoring instructions, and disrupting teaching activities (Turnipseed & Landay, 2018).

This phenomenon is not limited to faculty-student interactions. Snyder-Yuly et al. (2021) emphasise that students sometimes engage in harassing behaviours towards faculty and staff, particularly those in positions of authority. Hudgins et al. (2023) note that approximately 15 per cent of the academic workforce is affected by such behaviours, although the prevalence varies by sector. Examples of incivility in the classroom include low engagement, poor attendance, retaliatory acts, verbal abuse, and physical altercations (Aliakbari & Hajizadeh, 2018; Hudgins et al., 2023).

As suggested by Vasconcelos (2020), incivility is generally framed in pragmatic terms as behaviour or actions that produce negative social, organisational, psychological, and emotional effects. Others also describe incivility as a set of behaviours that range from annoyances and interference with harmonious functioning to insolence, disregard, disrespect, violence, and bullying (Schilpzand et al., 2016). The characteristics ascribed to uncivil actions are excessive loudness, unpredictability, emotionality, negativity, apathy, disruption, coldness, dismissiveness, or belittling (Vasconcelos, 2020).

Level of perceived seriousness of the different forms of student-academic incivility

The perceived seriousness of academic incivility (AI) among university students has gained increasing attention in scholarly discourse due to its impact on the academic climate and student outcomes. Academic incivility refers to behaviours that violate norms of mutual respect in academic settings, including classroom disruptions, verbal abuse, dishonesty, and disengagement (Bhardwaj et al., 2025; Piotrowski & King, 2016). Several studies have highlighted that such behaviours, though often subtle, are deeply troubling to students and faculty alike, leading to strained interactions, reduced academic motivation, and mental distress (Hudgins et al., 2023; Snyder-Yuly et al., 2021). Students perceive these acts as serious threats to their academic success and psychological safety, especially in environments that prioritise interactive and student-centred learning (Bhardwaj et al., 2025). The seriousness with which students perceive these behaviours often reflects the degree to which these incidents disrupt not only individual academic pursuits but also the cohesion of the learning community. Moreover, literature from Buhrow and Yehle (2023) and Aliakbari and Hajizadeh (2018) confirms that incivility undermines the integrity of academic institutions by eroding trust and increasing attrition. The increasing technological presence in educational spaces has

further complicated these behaviours, with distractions such as mobile phones and online harassment becoming more prevalent (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2016). These findings emphasise the pressing need to explore how seriously students regard various uncivil acts, particularly within specific institutions like the University of Cape Coast.

Perceived seriousness of students' uncivil behaviours at various academic levels

Variations in perceptions of academic incivility across student levels—particularly between undergraduate and postgraduate students—have been widely observed in academic research. Postgraduate students, due to their advanced academic maturity and professional experience, are often more sensitive to ethical and academic integrity issues, including dishonesty, disruption, and disrespectful conduct (Turnipseed & Landay, 2018). On the other hand, undergraduate students are more affected by everyday classroom disturbances, such as noise, inattentiveness, and the misuse of digital devices during lectures, which they perceive as immediate barriers to concentration and engagement (Hudgins et al., 2023). This divergence may stem from differing expectations and responsibilities at each level; postgraduate students are typically more goal-driven and concerned with preserving the credibility of academic discourse, whereas undergraduates may still be adapting to the rigour and norms of university life (Snyder-Yuly et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies suggest that undergraduates may tolerate certain behaviours that postgraduates view as highly inappropriate, reflecting differences in academic socialisation and perceived academic stakes (Marques & Macedo, 2016). These variations highlight the importance of context-sensitive interventions in addressing AI, where academic policies and behavioural sensitisation efforts must consider the diverse perspectives and developmental stages of students. Exploring these perceptual differences within the University of Cape Coast offers a localised understanding of how academic level influences student judgments about incivility.

Theoretical Framework

The research was grounded in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that individuals possess three innate psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals are more likely to be motivated and perform well academically. A hostile academic environment, characterised by incivility, hinders the fulfilment of these needs, leading to disengagement and poor performance.

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) serves as a foundational theoretical framework for this research by offering a lens through which the impact of academic incivility on student motivation, behaviour, and academic outcomes can be understood. Developed by Deci and Ryan (1985), SDT posits that human motivation and psychological well-being are primarily driven by the fulfilment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. These needs are essential for individuals to function optimally in any learning environment, including higher education.

In the context of this study, SDT underpins the research by illuminating how academic incivility—such as verbal abuse, classroom disruptions, disrespectful behaviours, and psychological

intimidation—threatens the satisfaction of these three psychological needs. When students experience or witness uncivil behaviour in academic spaces, their sense of autonomy may be diminished. For instance, intimidation or authoritarian teaching styles can make students feel powerless or voiceless in their learning process. This stifling of autonomy can lead to disengagement and reduced intrinsic motivation, ultimately affecting academic performance.

Similarly, competence, or the need to feel capable and effective in one's tasks, can be undermined by incivility. Negative behaviours such as public humiliation, harsh grading, and discouraging feedback may cause students to doubt their abilities. This can trigger anxiety, reduce self-efficacy, and discourage effort and persistence. In an academic climate where incivility is prevalent, students may no longer feel confident in their intellectual contributions or their capacity to succeed.

The third component, relatedness, refers to the human desire to feel connected to, respected by, and supported by others. Academic incivility disrupts this vital need by creating hostile or alienating environments. Experiences of exclusion, bullying, or disrespect from peers or faculty erode students' trust in the academic community and their sense of belonging. As shown in this study, when students perceive the campus as unsafe or uncaring, they may emotionally withdraw, lose interest in academic pursuits, or even consider leaving the institution.

By applying SDT, this research goes beyond identifying the behaviours associated with incivility; it helps explain why these behaviours are harmful and how they affect students' motivation and success. SDT provides a theoretical justification for the study's call for more respectful, supportive, and inclusive academic environments—ones that protect and promote students' psychological needs. In summary, SDT underscores the central argument of this research: that a civil, respectful academic culture is not just ideal, but essential for fostering student engagement, academic achievement, and holistic development.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. The target population included all undergraduate and postgraduate students at UCC, totalling 66,637 individuals. From this population, a sample of 564 students was selected using convenience sampling. Participants were drawn from the four colleges in the regular stream and one department within the College of Distance Education. Data were collected using a 25-item questionnaire designed to align with Feldmann's (2001) taxonomy of academic incivility. This framework categorises uncivil behaviours into four dimensions: annoyance, academic terrorism, violence, and dishonesty. The instrument employed a 4-point Likert scale to assess both the perceived seriousness and frequency of these behaviours. The questionnaire's reliability was confirmed with a composite reliability score of 0.969, and its content validity was established through expert review. Data analysis involved frequency counts, means and standard deviations.

Significant study participant characteristics

The target population for this study comprises 66,637 students enrolled at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), including both undergraduate and postgraduate students. These students represent the broader academic community across the university. However, for practical and logistical reasons, the accessible population was limited to undergraduate and postgraduate students from the four Colleges in the university's regular stream. Additionally, students from one selected department or programme within the College of Distance Education were included to ensure some representation of distance learners. To collect data efficiently within time and resource constraints, the study employed convenience sampling to select a total of 564 students from this accessible population. This sampling approach enabled the researchers to gather information from readily available, willing students, while still ensuring a diverse representation across academic levels and disciplines.

Research instruments

The research instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire specifically developed to assess students' perceptions of academic incivility within the University of Cape Coast. The questionnaire comprised 25 carefully designed items categorised into four dimensions: annoyance, academic terrorism, violent behaviours, and dishonest behaviours, based on Feldman's (2001) taxonomy of academic incivility. It was divided into two sections: one capturing the perceived seriousness of these uncivil behaviours, and the other measuring their frequency in the classroom context. The items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to indicate the extent to which they observed or experienced such behaviours. A scoring criterion of 2.5 was applied to distinguish between what was considered serious and non-serious. To ensure the instrument's reliability and validity, a composite reliability coefficient of 0.969 was obtained, indicating high internal consistency. Furthermore, content validity was confirmed through expert judgment, ensuring that the instrument accurately reflected the domain of academic incivility. This methodical approach to instrument design enabled the researchers to gather robust and meaningful data to inform their findings and recommendations.

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were of paramount importance in conducting this study, given its focus on students' perceptions of academic incivility—a sensitive subject that touches on interpersonal behaviours and institutional culture. To uphold the dignity, rights, and welfare of participants, the research strictly adhered to ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Before data collection, participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study, their role in it, and that their responses would be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary, and respondents were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. No identifying information was collected, ensuring that all responses remained anonymous and that participants could express their views freely and honestly. Furthermore, approval and guidance were sought from relevant institutional authorities and ethics committees to ensure that the research met

established ethical standards. These measures ensured that the study was conducted with integrity and respect for all individuals involved.

Results

Demographics

The demographic data for the respondents of the study are as follows;

Table 1

Demographic Data of Respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Females	317	56.2
Males	247	43.8
Total	564	100
Academic level		
Undergraduates	387	68.6
Masters	177	31.4
Total	564	100

Research Question 1

1. What is the level of perceived seriousness for the different forms of uncivil academic behaviours among students at the University of Cape Coast?

Table 2

Level of perceived seriousness of academic incivility among UCC students

Dimensions	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Low	Moderate	High	Results
Annoyance	13	32.35	10.50	13-25	26-38	39-52	Moderate
Terrorism	4	10.12	4.01	4-6	7-9	10-12	High
Violence	4	10.68	5.00	4-6	7-9	10-12	High
Dishonesty	4	10.38	3.96	4-6	9-7	10-12	High
Total incivility	25	63.54	22.37	25-49	50-74	75-100	Moderate

The findings reveal that UCC students perceive academic incivility (AI) as a seriously disturbing, growing concern on the research campus. The fact that none of the results in Table 2 shows low results confirms the seriousness of AI within the institution. Respondents rated numerous uncivil behaviours—including verbal abuse, disrespect, dishonest academic conduct, and classroom disruptions—as seriously affecting students while severely undermining the academic environment.

The results painted a bleak picture, suggesting that UCC is increasingly seen as an unsafe academic space, not only in terms of physical security, but also in terms of psychological and emotional well-being. Students cited behaviours such as dishonesty, violence, academic terrorism (e.g., intentional disruption of class activities), and persistent annoyance as major contributors to the often-tense classroom and campus atmosphere. These behaviours were not only seen as disrespectful but also as threatening the academic focus, mental stability, and motivation of both students and faculty. The data suggest that the mentioned uncivil acts tended to weaken students' sense of institutional commitment, impair class engagement, and, in many cases, led to academic failure and attrition. As a result, the university's academic and ethical image may be at risk, potentially tarnishing its well-earned reputation as a valued research-focused institution. According to the current research, the seriousness with which students viewed the AI incident underscores the urgent need for institutional measures to promote civility and restore the integrity of the academic environment.

Research Question 2

2. How seriously do undergraduate and postgraduate student groups perceive the incidence of incivility in their various classrooms?

Table 3

How seriously do undergraduate and postgraduate student groups perceive the incidence of incivility in their various classrooms

Item content summary	Undergraduate		M.Ed/MA/MSc.	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Phone use (ringing, talking, texting, using apps, etc) during class	2.6899	.97745	2.51	1.09468
Skipping class	2.6589	1.15055	2.40	1.06274
Dressing inappropriately	2.6176	1.13059	2.34	1.08310
Talking/fidgeting that distracts other students or faculty	2.6124	1.08673	2.49	1.06747
Sending inappropriate emails to lecturers	2.5711	1.36461	2.40	1.41837
Engaging in non-class related activity such as reading the newspaper, doing homework	2.5245	1.11805	2.46	1.19663
Using a computer for tasks unrelated to class period	2.4677	1.16773	2.54	1.24482
Not paying attention/not taking notes	2.4160	1.05548	2.51	1.12122
Talking out of turn or interrupting others	2.3850	1.02005	2.23	.84316
Acting bored or apathetic	2.3618	.98874	2.00	.90749
Sleeping during class	2.3566	1.11837	2.69	.99325
Eating in during lectures/tutorial	2.1680	1.02316	2.20	1.20782

Getting up during class (can include leaving and returning to class	2.1628	1.01382	2.09	1.01087
Coming to class under the influence of drugs or alcohol	2.6693	1.35783	2.5667	1.44230
Making discriminatory comments(racial, ethnic or gender based) toward others	2.6357	1.22117	2.6167	1.35411
Challenging lecturers position (this can include questioning lecturers knowledge	2.4109	1.18898	2.4833	1.14228
Joking inappropriately	2.3695	1.04082	2.3000	1.06246
Verbally harassing/making offensive/disrespectful comments to lecturers or other students	2.6589	1.34567	2.7167	1.41531
Physically attacking lectures or other students	2.6357	1.41204	2.6667	1.46908
Causing damage to institutional property	2.6150	1.24430	2.7833	1.40329
Threatening lecturers or other students	2.5969	1.34388	2.6167	1.49680
Plagiarism/cheating on assignments, exams or quizzes	2.6693	1.14682	2.7833	1.24997
Demanding a passing grade when a passing grade has not been earned	2.6460	1.21145	2.5667	1.28045
Lying and constantly making up excuses about academic activities	2.6150	1.14678	2.5833	1.23908
Demanding make-up exams, extensions, grade changes, or special treatment	2.3824	1.16000	2.6500	1.05485

The study further explored whether perceptions of academic incivility varied among students at different academic levels—namely, undergraduate and postgraduate students. The results indicated significant differences in how these two groups perceived specific uncivil behaviours. Undergraduate students reported high levels of concern about behaviours such as mobile phone use during lectures, skipping classes, inappropriate dress, sleeping in class, and general inattentiveness (e.g., not taking notes). These behaviours were perceived as key distractors to effective teaching and learning. In contrast, postgraduate students appeared more sensitive to more serious academic violations, such as dishonesty, lack of academic engagement, and disrespectful interactions, possibly due to their heightened academic responsibilities and maturity. Despite differences in areas of emphasis, both groups consistently agreed on the detrimental impact of incivility on academic performance and on emotional well-being on campus. The variation in perceptions also underscores the importance of tailoring interventions and sensitisation efforts to the specific needs and expectations of students at different academic levels within the institution. Ultimately, the findings show that while the forms of incivility may be perceived differently, students agree that AI poses a significant challenge that requires immediate institutional attention and structured redress to restore civility on the research campus.

Discussion of findings

The findings of the study align strongly with existing literature on the perceived seriousness of academic incivility (AI), reinforcing the argument that AI is a critical issue affecting students' academic and emotional well-being. Just as Bhardwaj et al. (2025) and Piotrowski and King (2016) established that academic incivility encompasses disruptive, disrespectful, and unethical behaviours that breach norms of academic conduct, the results from the University of Cape Coast affirm that students view these behaviours as deeply troubling. The seriousness with which UCC students regard behaviours such as verbal abuse, dishonesty, classroom disruption, and academic terrorism mirrors the findings of Hudgins et al. (2023) and Snyder-Yuly et al. (2021), who highlighted the psychological toll of such incivility on both faculty and students. The recognition that UCC is perceived as emotionally unsafe underscores the psychological dimension of AI, echoing Aliakbari and Hajizadeh's (2018) conclusions that incivility erodes the academic atmosphere and trust within the institution. Moreover, the emphasis students placed on these behaviours affecting motivation, academic focus, and institutional commitment supports existing claims that uncivil academic environments contribute to higher dropout rates, weakened engagement, and a diminished institutional reputation (Buhrow & Yehle, 2023). Thus, the study's findings not only validate previous research but also add local depth to the global discourse by highlighting the specific experiences of students in Ghanaian higher education.

The second set of findings, focusing on the variation in perceptions of incivility between undergraduate and postgraduate students, also resonates with the broader academic literature, as Turnipseed and Landay (2018) noted, owing to their academic maturity, postgraduate students are more likely to view violations of academic integrity—such as dishonesty and disrespect—as serious threats to scholarly work. The UCC data corroborate this finding, showing that postgraduates were more sensitive to unethical academic conduct and emotional disruption. At the same time, undergraduates were more concerned with classroom-level distractions such as inattentiveness, mobile phone use, and inappropriate dress. This distinction is consistent with the assertions of Hudgins et al. (2023) and Marques and Macedo (2016), who emphasised that students' perceptions of incivility vary by developmental stage, academic exposure, and institutional expectations. Furthermore, Snyder-Yuly et al. (2021) underscored that undergraduates, still acclimatising to university norms, may tolerate behaviours that postgraduates find unacceptable. The findings from UCC illustrate the practical implications of these developmental differences, demonstrating a clear need for differentiated strategies in addressing incivility across academic levels. By tailoring interventions that account for these perceptual differences, institutions can more effectively foster respectful and inclusive academic environments. In essence, the study affirms that while incivility is universally acknowledged as harmful, its manifestations and perceived seriousness vary with academic level—calling for a nuanced, student-centred approach to campus civility policies.

Conclusions and implications

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that academic incivility (AI) is not only prevalent at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) but is equally perceived by students as a serious

impediment to effective teaching and learning. A wide range of uncivil behaviours were reported, including but not limited to verbal abuse, academic dishonesty, disrespectful conduct at lectures, classroom disruptions, and emotionally intimidating acts. The mentioned behaviours create a hostile and psychologically unsafe environment for both students and faculty, interfering with their concentration, lowering their academic motivation, and, in many cases, triggering emotional distress that hampers students' academic progress. The situation confirms a learning environment under strain, where the absence of mutual respect among students and between students and faculty weakens academic engagement, reduces class participation and results in increased attrition rates among both students and faculty members. The highlighted significant perceptual differences in uncivil behaviours across academic levels equally underscore the maturity levels among the student groups. However, both groups generally agreed on the seriousness of the AI incident and its detrimental impact on academic and institutional activities. In sum, the study emphasised the dire effects of AI incidence, not merely as a disciplinary issue but also as a severely alarming institutional distractor that threatens the lives and well-being of students and faculty, academic integrity, and the overall educational mission of the University of Cape Coast.

Recommendations

To respond effectively to the challenges posed by academic incivility, targeted interventions must be developed and implemented by key stakeholders at the University of Cape Coast. First, the University Administration should spearhead the development of a comprehensive and well-publicised Student Code of Academic Conduct. This document should define acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, provide real-life examples of academic incivility, and clearly outline the consequences for violations. This code should be embedded in student orientation programmes and reinforced periodically throughout the academic year. A reporting system that ensures confidentiality and protects victims of incivility should also be established to encourage accountability.

Second, academic staff must be supported and trained to act as role models for professional and respectful behaviour. Faculty development programmes should include training in managing uncivil classroom behaviour, creating inclusive learning environments, and addressing academic misconduct constructively. Lecturers should also proactively integrate discussions on mutual respect, digital etiquette, and academic ethics into course syllabi, especially in first-year and graduate-level courses. Classroom management strategies that promote active engagement, respect for diversity, and collaborative learning should be emphasised.

Third, the University Counselling Centre should collaborate with the Department of Guidance and Counselling to deliver institution-wide psychoeducational campaigns and workshops on civility, empathy, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and stress management. These workshops should be integrated into both academic and co-curricular programmes, especially during orientation week, mid-semester review periods, and before examinations when stress and incivility often increase. These programmes should be tailored to different student populations, with unique

themes for undergraduates (e.g., digital discipline, classroom etiquette) and postgraduates (e.g., research ethics, collegiality).

Fourth, the Students' Representative Council (SRC) should take a leading role in peer-to-peer advocacy. The SRC can organise semester-long campaigns themed around civility, institutional pride, and academic excellence. Initiatives may include the production of short videos, peer-led dialogue series, student testimonials, civility ambassadors, and social media engagement that encourage a culture of respect and academic responsibility. Through student-led clubs and societies, the SRC can also provide platforms for students to voice their experiences and collaborate with faculty to co-create solutions to address incivility.

Finally, each College or Faculty within UCC should be encouraged to establish an Academic Civility Committee comprising faculty, student representatives, and counsellors. These committees can track incidents of incivility, recommend policy adjustments, and provide quarterly reports on trends and responses to ensure continuous institutional learning and improvement. Through a united and coordinated effort across all levels of the university, UCC can begin to cultivate a respectful, engaging, and academically enriching environment where all students can thrive.

Limitations of the study

The main limitation of the research was its restricted focus on undergraduate and master's students, rather than the original intention to include PhD students. The removal of data from PhD students resulted from the rather low return rate of administered PhD questionnaires, which further reduced the research sample size from 577 to the current 564. The research findings, however, remain meaningful and informative.

Suggestions for Future Research

The research could be replicated at other public universities in the motherland to determine AI rates across sister institutions. A comparative study could also be conducted between public and private universities in the country to carefully plan feasible strategies to bring the menace under drastic control, if not completely eradicate it, given its devastating effects on the institutions' community members.

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Conflict of Interest

There was thus no conflict of interest regarding this research. Indeed, the researcher deemed it most essential to investigate this phenomenon, in her effort to increase awareness regarding 'this silent and severely devastating menace.

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