



## Navigating the pitfalls of incivility: The role of resilience in job search behavior

Xiujuan Wang, Qingxiong (Derek) Weng<sup>\*</sup>, Wenyang Gao, Zia Ul Islam, Liyan Xi

School of Management, University of Science and Technology of China, Jinzhai Road 96, Hefei, Anhui Province 230026, PR China

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### ABSTRACT

In a challenging labor market, job seekers often engage in haphazard job search behavior to secure any available job. Integrating Affective Events Theory with the job search literature, this study, using a weekly experience sampling technique, develops a model exploring the influence of weekly experienced incivility on haphazard job search behavior. Data collected over four consecutive weeks from 102 job seekers with 408 observations indicated that experienced incivility was positively related to state negative affect, subsequently increasing haphazard job search behavior. Moreover, resilience moderated the relationship between experienced incivility and state negative affect; high-resilient job seekers experience less state negative affect than low-resilient job seekers. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

### 1. Introduction

Global labor markets are undergoing significant changes, with unemployment rate projected to reach 5.2 % in 2024 (International Labor Organization, 2024). Job seekers face unprecedented challenges, making securing employment an urgent and formidable task. As a result, they frequently compromise their employment expectations, settling for positions outside their expertise when applying for jobs. Crossley and Highhouse (2005) refer to it as haphazard job search behavior, which involves job seekers passively gathering information and adopting a trial-and-error approach in search process. Regrettably, such behavior often proves ineffective and leads to fewer job interviews (van den Hee et al., 2020) and job offers (Crossley & Highhouse, 2005). Upon securing employment, these individuals report lower job search satisfaction (Crossley & Highhouse, 2005) and diminished fit perceptions (Affum-Osei et al., 2021).

While prior research has linked traits like procrastination (van den Hee et al., 2020) and neuroticism (Islam et al., 2020) to haphazard job search behavior, less attention has been paid to contextual factors. Job search process are shaped by various events (Guan et al., 2022), and job seekers make sense of these events adjust actions accordingly (Van Hooff et al., 2021). Thus, a crucial question remains: How do contextual events influence haphazard job search behavior? One such event is incivility, typically arising from interactions with recruiters or interviewers during

job search process. Examples include “a recruiter or interviewer who is abrupt and dismissive of questions or make disparaging remarks.” (Ali et al., 2016, p. 334). Studies indicated that such incivility reduces job search intensity via lowering self-efficacy (Ali et al., 2016) and self-esteem (Islam et al., 2022). Building on this, we propose that experienced incivility may serve as a neglected socio-contextual event contributing to haphazard job search behavior.

Affective event theory (AET; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) provides the framework for our study, positing that affective responses to workplace events shape subsequent behavior. It traditionally applied to organizational insiders' responses toward supervisors (e.g., Li et al., 2023), coworkers (e.g., Lanaj & Jennings, 2020) and customers (e.g., Srivastava et al., 2024). This study extends this theory to organizational outsiders by proposing that experienced incivility could elicit job seekers' state negative affect, leading to haphazard job search behavior. AET also highlights the moderating role of dispositions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), offering ways to mitigate negative consequences. Specifically, some dispositions may enable a person to recover from interpersonal incivility more easily. Resilience is one such dispositional characteristic, as highly resilient individuals better cope with emotional challenges (Paredes et al., 2021). Therefore, we also investigate the moderating effect of resilience.

Given that job search is a dynamic process (da Motta Veiga et al., 2020) requires ongoing effort from job seekers on a weekly basis

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [psywxj@mail.ustc.edu.cn](mailto:psywxj@mail.ustc.edu.cn) (X. Wang), [wqx886@ustc.edu.cn](mailto:wqx886@ustc.edu.cn) (Q.D. Weng), [gaowy@mail.ustc.edu.cn](mailto:gaowy@mail.ustc.edu.cn) (W. Gao), [ziazadian83@mail.ustc.edu.cn](mailto:ziazadian83@mail.ustc.edu.cn) (Z.U. Islam), [xly1119@mail.ustc.edu.cn](mailto:xly1119@mail.ustc.edu.cn) (L. Xi).

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(Chawla & Gabriel, 2023), we further examine how weekly experienced incivility could potentially influence subsequent job search behaviors via the fluctuation of negative affect. AET emphasizes that work-related events tend to evoke immediate affective changes, and the within-person fluctuation may significantly influence subsequent behavior (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Thus, a within-person lens is adopted to enhance our understanding of how such experiences dynamically influence job seekers' affective states and behaviors over time (see Fig. 1).

### 1.1. Experienced incivility and state negative affect

According to AET, negative events are associated with negative affective reactions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), thus we posit that experienced incivility elicits negative affect. Job seekers typically expect respectful and fair treatment during job search process (Bauer et al., 2001), but uncivil behaviors disrupt these expectations, leading to state negative affective responses. Moreover, given the unstructured nature of job search, job seekers often evaluate their progress based on interactions with recruiters (Ali et al., 2016). Uncivil behavior might increase rumination on these negative experiences (Zhou et al., 2022), contributing to greater negative affect.

Empirical studies support this view, showing that abusive supervision (Santos et al., 2023) and workplace incivility (Liu et al., 2020) induce negative affect among those involved. Given the dynamic nature of job search process, we elected to examine the effect of incivility on a regular weekly basis. Thus, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 1.** On a weekly basis, experienced incivility is positively related to job seekers' state negative affect.

### 1.2. State negative affect and haphazard job search behavior

AET suggests that negative affect reactions can lead to increased affect-driven behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). State negative affect dampen job seekers' optimism and satisfaction, lowering expectations for securing ideal positions (Hill et al., 2020). This shift may cause them to abandon specific employment goals, believing them unattainable (Chawla & Gabriel, 2023). Consequently, they may forgo goal-oriented activities (Gabriel et al., 2021) and adopt more casual job search behaviors in order to fulfill their immediate emotional needs rather than long-term career plans.

Empirical research also revealed that high distress (De Battisti et al., 2016) and anxiety (Hu et al., 2024) were positively associated with haphazard job search behavior. Based on the above, we propose the following:

**Hypothesis 2.** On a weekly basis, state negative affect is positively related to job seekers' haphazard job search behavior.

The AET framework demonstrates that proximal workplace events elicit affective reactions (Cropanzano et al., 2017), driving affective-driven behaviors in response to events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Empirical research supports this idea (e.g., Junça-Silva et al., 2023;

Zhou et al., 2022). For example, experienced email incivility can elicit employees' negative affect, which in turn influences their cyberloafing behavior (Zhou et al., 2022). In this study, when job seekers experience rude treatment weekly, affective responses are elicited, which then translate into affective-driven behavior, i.e., haphazard job search behavior. Hence, following the theory's path, this study proposes the following:

**Hypothesis 3.** On a weekly basis, state negative affect mediates the relationship between job seekers' experienced incivility and haphazard job search behavior.

### 1.3. The moderator of resilience

Resilience serves as a potential moderator because it signals the ability to adapt efficiently and cope quickly with stress (Liu et al., 2017). High-resilient individuals handle stressors functionally, whereas low-resilient individuals struggle. Thus, we expect resilience to moderate the relationship between experienced incivility and state negative affect, creating a more functional trajectory for the downstream effect on job search behavior.

Specifically, after experiencing weekly incivility, high-resilient job seekers handle the situation efficiently and adjust their state affect accordingly through adaptive self-regulation (Paredes et al., 2021). In addition, their inherent positivism and hope (Harcourt & Ateke, 2018) help to alleviate feelings of state negative affect, limiting the spillover into haphazard job search behavior. In contrast, low-resilient job seekers recover relatively poorly from negative events (Waugh et al., 2008). Consequently, they may feel drained and have difficulty responding effectively, experiencing more state negative affect. This emotional strain can overwhelm their self-regulation, prompting fewer effective responses, in this case, more haphazard job search behavior. Based on the above discussion, we propose that:

**Hypothesis 4.** On a weekly basis, resilience moderates the relationship between job seekers' experienced incivility and state negative affect, such that the positive relationship is weaker for job seekers with high resilience (vs. low).

**Hypothesis 5.** On a weekly basis, the indirect effect of experienced incivility on haphazard job search behavior via state negative affect is moderated by job seekers' resilience, such that the positive relationship is weaker for job seekers with high resilience (vs. low).

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

New labor market entrants seeking full-time jobs were recruited through online student forums and face-to-face introductions. During these introductions, we provided an overview of the research. To qualify, participants had to be (a) at least 18 years old, (b) actively job searching, and (c) interacting with at least one recruiter weekly. Of the

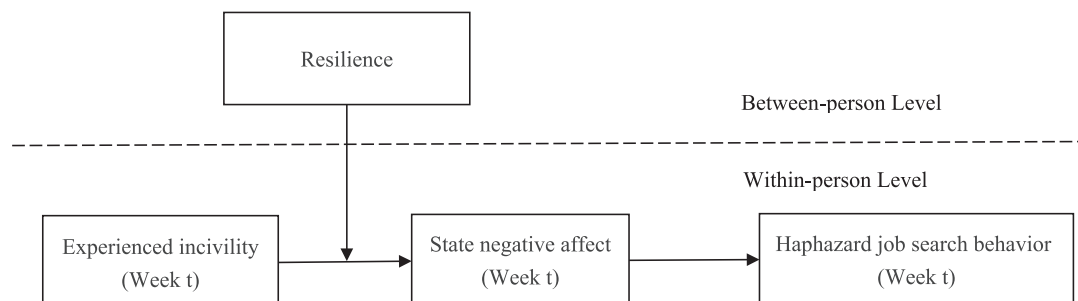


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

137 participants who completed the prescreening questionnaire, 17 participants were removed for not meeting the criteria, leaving a final sample of 120 job seekers from Anhui, Zhejiang, and Guangdong provinces in China. Each participant received a unique identifier for matching responses across different waves of data collection. Three attention checks were included in each questionnaire to ensure effortful responding, such as “Please choose disagree for this item” (Henderson & Matthews, 2023). Participation was voluntary and anonymous, with the data used solely for academic research.

Among the 120 participants who completed the initial personal information and Time 1 survey, six participants were excluded for failing the attention checks; 114 participants completed the Time 2 survey (between-person response rate = 95 %), with three participants excluded; 111 participants completed the Time 3 survey (between-person response rate = 92.5 %), with two participants excluded; 105 participants completed the Time 4 survey (between-person response rate = 87.5 %), with four participants dropped out due to a successful job search, and three failing the attention checks. After data screening, 102 participants remained, yielding 408 weekly survey responses. The sample included 44 males and 58 females, with 77 undergraduates and 25 graduates. The mean age was 23.21 years ( $SD = 1.59$ ), mean job search length was 8.41 weeks ( $SD = 9.15$ ), mean financial hardship was 2.99 ( $SD = 0.95$ ), mean trait positive affect was 3.48 ( $SD = 0.45$ ), and mean trait negative affect was 2.43 ( $SD = 0.61$ ).

## 2.2. Procedure

Following previous job search literature (Chawla & Gabriel, 2023; da Motta Veiga et al., 2020), participants completed multiple surveys with a one-week time lag between each. In the first phase, they provided demographic information (age, gender, education level, financial hardship and job search duration) and between-person variables (trait positive/negative affect and resilience). These initial questionnaires were distributed and collected in late April. In the second phase, starting in early May, participants completed short weekly questionnaires for four consecutive weeks, assessing experienced incivility, state negative affect, and haphazard job search behavior. Surveys were sent to participants via a web link at 7 p.m. and collected by noon every Friday. Participants received RMB 125 for full participation, with partial remuneration for early withdrawal.

## 2.3. Measures

Participants used a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) to reflect on their weekly job search experiences for each measure unless otherwise noted.

### 2.3.1. Experienced incivility

Experienced incivility was measured with six items adapted from Sguera et al. (2016). A sample item was “The recruiter had snide remarks, curt responses, and lack of openness.” Response ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*4 times or more*) ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ).

### 2.3.2. State negative affect

State negative affect was measured by five items adopted from previous job search studies (Chawla et al., 2019; Kreemers et al., 2018; Melloy et al., 2018), including anxious, frustrated, stressed, upset, and exhausted. Participants reported their feelings during the week ( $\alpha = 0.89$ ).

### 2.3.3. Haphazard job search behavior

Haphazard job search behavior was measured by four items from Crossley and Highhouse (2005). A sample item was “My job search was more or less haphazard,” using a seven-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

### 2.3.4. Resilience

Resilience was measured by a six-item scale by Smith et al. (2008). A sample item was “I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times.” ( $\alpha = 0.76$ ).

### 2.3.5. Control variables

Age was controlled because older job seekers tend to be demotivated in their job search (Liu et al., 2014). Gender (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*) was controlled because females face disadvantages in the labor market (Fang & Saks, 2022). Educational level (0 = *high school /vocational college*, 1 = *undergraduate*, 2 = *graduate*) was controlled because it positively relates to job search self-regulation and employment quality (Van Hooft et al., 2021). Job search duration (how long [*in weeks*] had the participant been searching for a job) was controlled because not all participants started their job search at the same time and variations in duration may affect subsequent job seeking (Van Hooft et al., 2021). Financial hardship (two items;  $\alpha = 0.78$ ; Wanberg et al., 2002) was controlled for its potential to increase stress and push individuals into less considered job search efforts (Van Hooft et al., 2013). Additionally, following prior study (e.g., Belinda & Christian, 2023), trait positive affect (10 items, PNAS scale;  $\alpha = 0.79$ ) and trait negative affect (10 items, PNAS scale;  $\alpha = 0.86$ ; Watson et al., 1988) were controlled because trait affect may influence state affective responses.

## 2.4. Analytic approach

Because the current data had a nested structure (i.e., weekly surveys nested within each participant), we employed Mplus 8.3 for multilevel confirmatory factor analysis (MCFA) and hypothesis testing, R 4.3 calculated the 95 % bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval of the (conditional) indirect effect by Monte Carlo simulation with 20,000 replications (Selig & Preacher, 2008). Results remained consistent with and without control variables.

To perform non-respondent bias, we conducted  $\chi^2$  and *t*-tests comparing the final sample ( $n = 102$ ) with those dropped or excluded ( $n = 18$ ). No significant differences were found in age [ $t(118) = -0.919, p = 0.360$ ], gender [ $\chi^2(1) = 1.494, p = 0.222$ ], education level [ $\chi^2(1) = 0.622, p = 0.430$ ], job search duration [ $t(118) = -0.639, p = 0.524$ ], financial hardship [ $t(118) = -0.275, p = 0.784$ ], trait positive affect [ $t(118) = -0.228, p = 0.820$ ], or trait negative affect [ $t(171) = -1.215, p = 0.227$ ].

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents the means, intraclass correlation coefficient ICC (1), and correlations among variables within- and between-person levels. The correlations were as expected. The ICC (1) for experienced incivility, state negative affect, and haphazard job search behavior were 0.45, 0.58, and 0.58, respectively, indicating that 0.55, 0.42, and 0.42, of the variance, respectively, is within individuals across weeks, necessitating multilevel path analyses.

MCFA tests were conducted to assess the distinctiveness of our measures. The hypothesized model fits well ( $\chi^2 = 387.09, df = 270$ ; CFI = 0.96; TLI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.03; SRMR<sub>[within]</sub> = 0.04; SRMR<sub>[between]</sub> = 0.07). Alternative models, including a three-factor model combining state negative affect and haphazard job search behavior ( $\chi^2 = 775.84, df = 275$ ; CFI = 0.81; TLI = 0.78; RMSEA = 0.07; SRMR<sub>[within]</sub> = 0.17; SRMR<sub>[between]</sub> = 0.25) and a two-factor model combining experienced incivility, state negative affect and haphazard job search behavior ( $\chi^2 = 1334.92, df = 278$ ; CFI = 0.60; TLI = 0.55; RMSEA = 0.10; SRMR<sub>[within]</sub> = 0.17; SRMR<sub>[between]</sub> = 0.23), were less effective (see Table 2).

As shown in Table 3, experienced incivility was significantly related to state negative affect ( $\gamma = 0.37, p < 0.001$ ). Thus, H1 was supported. In line with H2, the results showed that state negative affect was significantly related to haphazard job search behavior ( $\gamma = 0.39, p < 0.001$ ). The results of the bootstrap analysis revealed a significantly indirect

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics and correlations among the research variables.

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD<sub>B</sub></i>	<i>SD<sub>W</sub></i>	<i>ICC</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Age	23.21	1.59			1										
2. Gender	1.57	0.50			-0.06	1									
3. Education level	2.25	0.43			0.67**	0.04	1								
4. Job search duration	8.41	9.15			0.12	0.07	0.34*	1							
5. Financial hardship	2.99	0.95			0.03	0.03	-0.06	-0.13	(0.78)						
6. Trait positive affect	3.48	0.45			-0.02	-0.19	-0.03	-0.09	-0.14	(0.79)					
7. Trait negative affect	2.43	0.61			-0.02	0.15	-0.21*	-0.09	0.12	-0.21*	(0.86)				
8. Resilience	3.52	0.45			-0.02	-0.25*	0.17	0.05	-0.14	0.42**	-0.47**	(0.76)			
9. Experienced incivility	1.76	0.43	0.56	0.45	0.09	0.00	-0.07	-0.21*	0.18	-0.12	0.17	-0.01	(0.86)	0.44**	0.19**
10. State negative affect	2.94	0.59	0.71	0.58	0.08	0.23*	-0.16	-0.19	0.16	-0.29**	0.43**	-0.49**	0.53**	(0.89)	0.42**
11. Haphazard job search behavior	3.95	0.80	0.96	0.58	0.00	0.12	-0.09	-0.12	0.22*	-0.20*	0.23*	-0.33**	0.22*	0.47**	(0.87)

Note: Level 1 (within-person) correlations are above the diagonal (*n* = 408) and Level 2 (between-person) correlations are below the diagonal (*n* = 102). Coefficient alpha estimates of reliability are in parentheses on the diagonal. ICC = intraclass correlation coefficient. Gender (1 = male, 2 = female). Education level (0 = high school/vocational college, 1 = undergraduate, 2 = graduate).

**Table 2**  
Multilevel confirmatory factor analyses.

Model	Descriptions	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR <sub>[within]</sub>	SRMR <sub>[between]</sub>
The hypothesized four-factor model	[Resilience, experienced incivility, state negative affect, haphazard job search behavior]	387.09	270	0.96	0.95	0.03	0.04	0.07
Alternative three-factor model	[Resilience, experienced incivility, state negative affect + haphazard job search behavior]	775.84	275	0.81	0.78	0.07	0.17	0.25
Alternative two-factor model	[Resilience, experienced incivility + state negative affect + haphazard job search behavior]	1334.92	278	0.60	0.55	0.10	0.17	0.23

Note: Level 1, *n* = 408. Level 2, *n* = 102.  $\chi^2$  = chi-square test statistic; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker–Lewis index; SRMR = standardized root-mean-square residual; RMSEA = root mean-square error of approximation.

**Table 3**  
Multilevel analysis for the overall model.

	State negative affect		Haphazard job search behavior	
	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>	$\gamma$	<i>SE</i>
<b>Within-person level</b>				
Experienced incivility	0.37***	0.07	0.08	0.09
State negative affect			0.39***	0.09
<b>Between-person level</b>				
Age	0.08	0.05	0.01	0.07
Educational level	-0.29	0.18	-0.05	0.26
Gender	0.14	0.11	0.07	0.15
Job search duration	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Financial hardship	0.07	0.06	0.16	0.08
Trait positive affect	-0.26	0.16	-0.19	0.15
Trait negative affect	0.17	0.10	0.08**	0.16
Resilience	-0.17	0.19		
<b>Cross-level interaction</b>				
Resilience × Experienced incivility	-0.39*	0.19		
<b>Mediation and moderated mediation</b>				
Indirect effect	0.15 [0.003, 0.083]			
Indirect effect (high)	0.07 [-0.014, 0.163]			
Indirect effect (low)	0.23 [0.103, 0.355]			
Indirect effect (difference)	-0.16 [-0.305, -0.027]			

effect of state negative affect (indirect effect = 0.15, 95 % CI [0.003, 0.083], *p* < 0.01). Therefore, H3 was supported.

The positive relationship between experienced incivility and state negative affect was significantly moderated by resilience ( $\gamma$  = -0.39, *p* < 0.05; see Fig. 2). Further simple slope revealed that the relationship between experienced incivility and state negative affect was stronger for job seekers with low resilience (simple slope = 0.56, *p* < 0.001) versus

high resilience (simple slope = 0.19, *p* = 0.067). The difference between the slopes was significant (difference = -0.374, *p* < 0.05). Thus, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

The indirect effect of experienced incivility on haphazard job search behavior was stronger for job seekers with low resilience (estimate = 0.23, 95%CI [0.103, 0.355]) versus high resilience (estimate = 0.07, 95%CI [-0.014, 0.163]). The difference between the two conditional indirect effects was significant (estimate = -0.16, 95 % CI [-0.305, -0.027]). Therefore, H5 was supported.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study examined the within-person relationship between experienced incivility and haphazard job search behaviors with a weekly survey design. Further, we tested the mediating effect of state negative affect and the moderating effect of resilience. The implications are discussed below.

##### 4.1. Theoretical and practical implications

First, this study identifies experienced incivility as a significant contextual antecedent of haphazard job search behavior. Previous studies linked traits to such behavior, our findings highlight the importance of socio-contextual event in haphazard job search behavior, which is consistent with the research of Guan et al. (2022).

Second, drawing from AET, this study uncovers the mediating mechanism of state negative affect and the boundary condition of resilience in experienced incivility–haphazard job search behavior link. Prior research centered on self-regulation mechanisms (Ali et al., 2016; Islam et al., 2022) to explain the detrimental consequences of

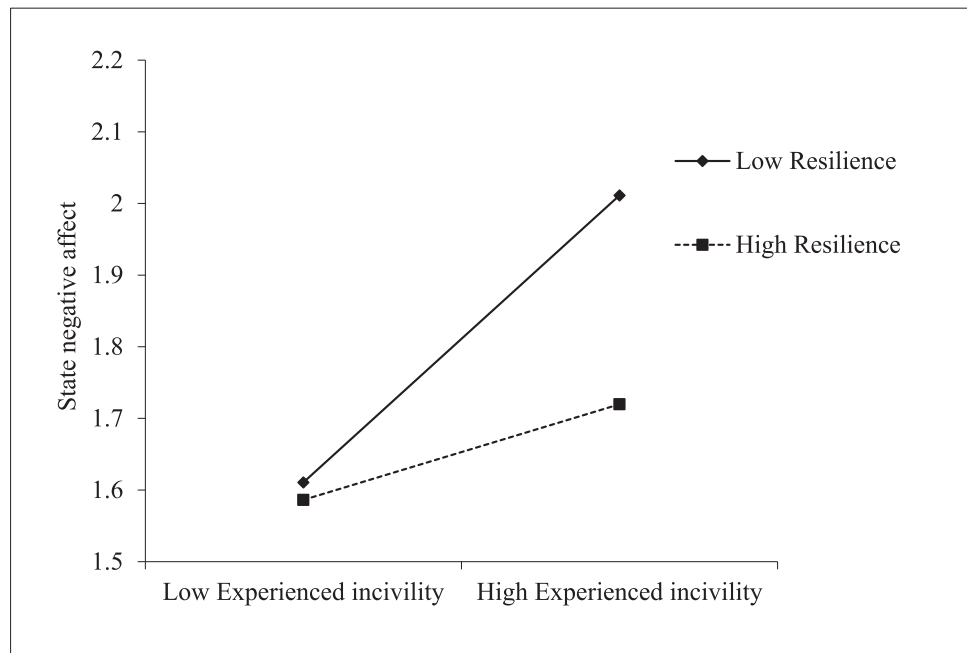


Fig. 2. Interaction between experienced incivility and resilience.

experienced incivility. Our findings showed that state negative affect mediates the link between experienced incivility and haphazard job search, with resilience mitigating this relationship. This finding enriches our understanding of how incivility shapes job search behavior.

Finally, our study contributes to AET by expanding its application to job seekers in the pre-employment phase. Traditionally, this theory was used to explore employees' emotional and behavioral responses to workplace events (e.g., Li et al., 2023; Srivastava et al., 2024). Our study broadens AET's scope to potential employees, demonstrating that work-related events can also influence individuals who are outside the organization.

Our findings have implications for organizations, recruiters, and job seekers. First, experienced incivility leads to haphazard job search behavior via state negative affect, highlighting the need for organizations and recruiters to manage interactions carefully during recruitment. Second, state negative affect is a critical outcome of experienced incivility and a proximal predictor of haphazard job search behavior. Job seekers can mitigate this by recognizing and addressing their negative affect to prevent it from influencing their behavior. Finally, low-resilient job seekers are more affected by experienced incivility. This indicates the importance of resilience in handling adversity during job search. Although traits are often considered static, they can be developed through self-regulation and intentional effort (Hennecke et al., 2014). Therefore, job seekers are encouraged to build resilience through training to better cope with negative experiences.

#### 4.2. Limitations and future research directions

Our study acknowledges certain limitations. First, the correlational design limits our ability to examine causality. Future research could benefit from exploring how incivility experienced in one period affects job search behaviors in subsequent periods, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the temporal dynamics involved.

Finally, while we emphasize resilience as a moderator between job seekers' experienced incivility and negative affect, it's not the exclusive mechanism. Investigating alternative explanations can offer valuable insights for future researchers. One such potential moderator is emotional stability. In this regard, job seekers with high emotional stability may exhibit muted negative affect after experiencing incivility.

#### Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

#### Ethical approval

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

#### CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Xiujuan Wang:** Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Qingxiong (Derek) Weng:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Wenyang Gao:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Formal analysis. **Zia Ul Islam:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Liyan Xi:** Writing – review & editing, Data curation.

#### Declaration of competing interest

All of the study authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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#### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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