

Resource-draining inbox: exploring how email incivility leads to job anxiety and depression

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Abstract

Purpose – Email incivility is an emerging workplace issue. However, empirical evidence is limited, especially around indirect mechanisms and contextual factors that amplify or mitigate its detrimental effects. This article examines the influence of experienced email incivility on job anxiety and job depression through the mediation pathway of work rumination and also explores working-from-home (WFH) as a contextual moderating factor.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is based on two samples from New Zealand. We collected data from 427 managers (Sample 1) and 654 employees (Sample 2). CFA was conducted using AMOS, and hypotheses were tested in SPSS using the PROCESS 4.0 program.

Findings – Across both samples, we find that email incivility increases job anxiety and job depression directly and indirectly through work rumination (partial mediation). Results also show that WFH (hybrid work settings) is likely associated with heightened negative outcomes of email incivility for employees only, but not for managers.

Practical implications – Organizations need to establish online communication norms and email etiquette rules. Synchronous communication (video conferencing) may be encouraged for important and time-sensitive tasks. Managers need to do regular check-ins and provide extra task and social support to WFH employees.

Originality/value – This research enhances understanding of the indirect mechanisms that shape email incivility influence, especially around cognitive processes like rumination. It added to the workplace incivility literature by testing WFH as a novel contextual factor. Moreover, our work extended the incivility target profile beyond employees and provided evidence on managers.

Keywords Email incivility, Work rumination, Job anxiety and job depression, Work from home, New Zealand

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Email has become the primary tool of workplace communication. Employees in interactive jobs spend 28% of their workday reading and answering emails (McKinsey Global Institute, 2012). Recent data shows that 347.3 billion emails were exchanged daily in 2023 and are projected to increase to over 408 billion emails daily in 2027 (Radicati Group, 2023). Since civility norms around online work communication are still evolving, such enormous human interactions might be more prone to misunderstanding (Nag *et al.*, 2024), resulting in uncivil and negative behaviors. Although email communication suits the flexibility and efficiency needs of contemporary work models (e.g. hybrid and remote), emerging evidence shows the rise in email incivility and its adverse effects on employee performance and well-being (Shahwar and Dhar, 2024). Moreover, uncivil and negative work behaviors result in high economic costs to employers globally and in New Zealand.

Email incivility refers to discourteous or negative email behaviors that violate workplace norms of mutual respect, underlined by low intensity and ambiguous intent to harm the target (Lim and Teo, 2009). It might include sending rude messages, using all caps, ignoring emails, delaying replies, copying others without need and sending urgent requests without

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adequate notice (Park and Haun, 2018). Experiencing email incivility might be more detrimental for employees than face-to-face incivility due to the lack of timely intervention, reduced opportunities to sensemaking through informal discussions, and the relieved incivility experience by rereading recorded messages (Park *et al.*, 2018; Niven *et al.*, 2022; Bernuzzi *et al.*, 2024).

Empirical evidence on the outcomes of email incivility is developing, revealing its deleterious effects on employee task performance (McCarthy *et al.*, 2020; Giumetti *et al.*, 2013), work attitudes and behaviors (Lim and Teo, 2009), work-life balance (Bernuzzi *et al.*, 2024), counterproductive work behaviors (Zhou *et al.*, 2022), turnover intentions (Niven *et al.*, 2022) and well-being (Park *et al.*, 2018; Yuan *et al.*, 2020). The extant research mainly focuses on the emotional mechanism linking email incivility to employee outcomes (e.g. Niven *et al.*, 2022; Giumetti *et al.*, 2013). However, underlying cognitive mechanisms and contextual factors that facilitate or hinder the adverse effects of email incivility remain underexplored.

Drawing on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), this article conceptualizes email incivility as a work stressor that drains resources. It explores how experienced email incivility can be detrimental to employee well-being, leading to higher anxiety and depression, indirectly through work rumination. Since employees are motivated to acquire and protect resources (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), receiving uncivil treatment through work emails can be perceived as a loss or threat to psychological and social resources. The perception of resource loss might lead employees to engage in negative rumination, attempting to understand the incivility incident and its related implications. But repetitive thoughts about the incident can further deplete resources, causing exacerbated anxiety and depression, manifested through a resource loss spiral. Moreover, there are recent calls to explore contextual or environmental factors affecting the occurrence and outcomes of cyber incivility (e.g. Shahwar and Dhar, 2024). For example, working-from-home (WFH) is a modern work model that provides vital resources like flexibility, saved commuting time and family support. However, we propose that WFH employees might experience magnified effects of email incivility due to limited and delayed availability of buffering resources like access to informal social support and supervisory intervention.

Our research makes several contributions. First, previous research on email incivility (e.g. Yuan *et al.*, 2020; Park *et al.*, 2018) primarily tested emotional appraisal and responses as indirect mechanisms to understand the negative effects on employee well-being. Emotional processes are well-suited to capture immediate reactions; however, our research advances this understanding by theorizing and testing the role of cognitive processes. We included work rumination as a cognitive mechanism to explain how the negative and resource-depleting effects of email incivility unfold beyond immediate reactions. Second, WFH literature generally highlights the benefits of flexible work arrangements, but some emerging evidence suggests potentially negative effects because of blurred boundaries and technostress (e.g. Dutta and Mishra, 2024). Notably, less is known about the incivility experiences of WFH employees. Since email is the primary mode of communication for WFH employees, this article explores how WFH settings might further deteriorate employee well-being when they experience incivility via the inbox. Third, we included both employees and managers as targets of email incivility to test whether negative effects hold across organizational hierarchies, a focus that is rare in the current literature. Our study model is shown in Figure 1.

Theoretical approach

COR theory posits that human behaviors can be explained through the evolutionary motivation of acquiring, conserving and nurturing resources for survival and goal attainment, and these resources include object, condition, personal and energy resources (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Work-related activities, events, and experiences influence resource reservoirs – through either losses or gains – which typically result in detrimental or beneficial effects. Stress and detrimental effects occur because of actual resource loss, a threat to lose resources, or failed

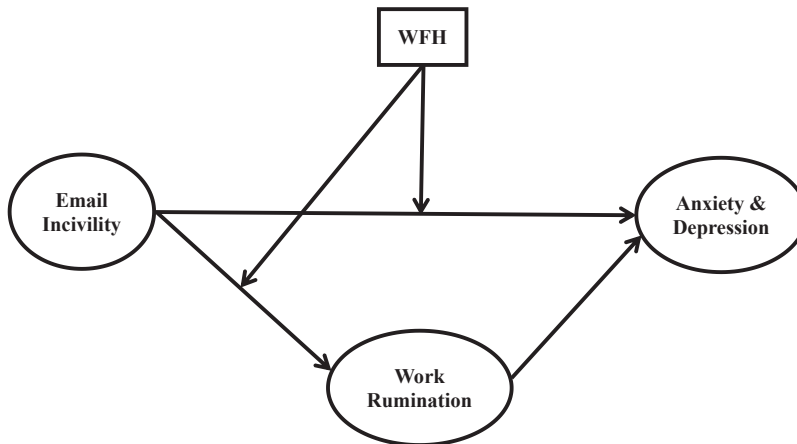


Figure 1. Study model. **Source:** Authors' own work

attempts to gain resources (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). This research on experienced email incivility and related resource-draining effects on employee well-being focuses on condition resources (e.g. a respectful work environment, relationship quality, manager/peer support), energy resources (e.g. time, psychological safety, emotional and cognitive focus) and personal resources (e.g. sense of control, recovery potential).

Based on COR theory, the experience of email incivility represents a work stressor that causes resource loss. For example, receiving a rude message from a supervisor or colleague might create the perception of a disrespectful work climate and signal future unavailability of support. Relatedly, work rumination begins with investing resources to limit the resource loss from uncivil treatment, but repetitive thought to make sense of the incivility incident can unintentionally consume more time and cognitive resources, limiting effective recovery. Indeed, unlike a verbal conversation that might be replayed mentally, email incivility represents a tangible act (the email) that can be reread over and over, potentially having critical effects on rumination.

COR theory is established on four principles to explain resource loss and gain processes. This study draws on two complementary principles. Principle 1 (primacy of loss principle), noting that “resource loss is disproportionately more salient than resource gain” (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018, p. 105). Related, Principle 2 (resource investment principle) suggests that “people must invest resources in order to protect against resource loss, recover from losses, and gain resources” (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018, p. 105). Thus, under Principle 2, employees invest additional resources when they ruminate to make sense of the incivility and the attached ambiguity, potentially leading them into a loss cycle. Hobfoll *et al.* (2018) uses Corollary 2 (resource loss cycle) and explains that “because resource loss is more powerful than resource gain, and because stress occurs when resources are lost, at each iteration of the stress spiral individuals and organizations have fewer resources to offset resource loss, and these loss spirals gain in momentum as well as magnitude” (p. 106).

Consequently, email incivility and work rumination can create a loss spiral, particularly damaging employee well-being, and we used this approach to test indirect effects. In addition, the resource caravan passageway represents contextual settings or factors that nurture or block resource creation (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). In this context, we expect that WFH settings may create an environment characterized by social isolation, a lack of timely intervention and reduced informal support, resulting in exacerbated resource loss and limited replenishment. In particular, the hybrid mode of WFH might present unique challenges because of fluid boundaries and intermittent social interactions. Thus, while some studies show WFH is

beneficial (e.g. [Bloom et al., 2024](#)), in the context of email incivility and negative rumination, we suggest WFH reflects a contextual resource loss condition. Thus, we also tested the interaction effects of WFH.

Hypotheses

Direct effects of email incivility

Email incivility is an emerging workplace issue that can be described as an interpersonal stressor eroding employee performance and well-being ([Park et al., 2018](#); [D'Souza et al., 2021](#)). It refers to disrespectful and deviant email behaviors, which violate workplace norms of mutual respect and regard. Examples of such behaviors include using a sarcastic or rude tone, ignoring emails, delaying replies, using all caps, and criticizing via reply-all, among others. Email incivility is distinct from other overtly negative workplace behaviors (e.g. abusive supervision, bullying and harassment) due to its low intensity and ambiguity around the senders' intentions ([Han et al., 2022](#)). Although the subtle acts of rudeness and inconsideration may operate under the disciplinary threshold and seem inconsequential, their cumulative effects are detrimental to employees and organizations (see [Shahwar and Dhar, 2024](#), for a recent review).

Experience of email incivility can put additional stress on target employees. Therefore, we focus on job anxiety and job depression since these are established psychological outcomes representing workplace well-being (e.g. [Koutsimani et al., 2019](#); [Haar and Brougham, 2022](#)). Job anxiety is defined as being in a state of low pleasure but high mental arousal, while job depression refers to a state of low pleasure and low arousal. Recent estimates show that globally, approximately 12 billion workdays are lost every year due to the consequences of depression and anxiety, which cost nearly \$1 trillion to the global economy ([ILO, 2022](#)). Therefore, understanding the effect that a ubiquitous factor like work email can have on well-being outcomes is warranted.

Under the COR theory, target employees will see email incivility as a loss or a threat to valuable resources, causing psychological and social strain. For instance, receiving rude messages from the supervisor or peers could create a sense of a disrespectful work environment and reflect low-quality relationships. It may also impair cognitive and emotional resources and recovery potential. These resource losses are in addition to what employees withdraw to cope with work demands and routine functioning; so, the cumulative and extended resource draining can translate into higher job anxiety and job depression. Besides resource loss, the ambiguity around the sender's intentions and the written form of email incivility will likely magnify its adverse effects on employee well-being.

Despite growing interest, empirical evidence is lacking, including the influence of email incivility on employee well-being. For example, [Park et al. \(2018\)](#) found that daily email incivility was linked with affective and physical distress in the evening, predicting next morning distress. In another diary study, [Yuan et al. \(2020\)](#) found that daily email incivility was positively linked with insomnia, leading to amplified negative emotions the next morning. Recent meta-analyses (e.g. [Han et al., 2022](#); [Chris et al., 2022](#)) confirm the link between face-to-face workplace incivility and job anxiety and job depression. However, the relationship between email incivility and these outcomes remains untested. This is an important focus, as the ambiguous and recorded nature of email incivility may take a greater psychological toll on employees. We posit the following.

H1. Email incivility will be positively related to (a) job anxiety and (b) job depression.

Work rumination

Work rumination is an established mechanism to understand the impact of negative factors in the workplace (for a meta-analysis, see [Jimenez et al., 2022](#)). It refers to repetitive and

difficult-to-control thoughts related to work issues and events outside work hours, which keep employees psychologically attached to work and limit adequate recovery (Querstret and Cropley, 2012). Work rumination captures an employee's inability to "switch off" from work, which can impede their well-being. Under the COR theory, employees who experience a resource loss due to receiving email incivility will be motivated to limit this loss by investing more psychological and energy resources to understand the situation and relationship implications (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Such sense-making and resource-investing efforts might prove counterproductive if this becomes work rumination, as it can hinder resource replenishment through delayed recovery. Specifically, email incivility can induce greater repetitive and intrusive thoughts due to limited clarification opportunities and delayed feedback. The very ambiguous nature of emails might encourage rumination as workers try to "figure out" what the sender meant. In addition, since email messages are recorded, the target employee may reread the rude messages and relive the experience, leading to even stronger rumination. Here, we argue that email incivility and negative rumination can create a loss spiral where initial resource loss and subsequent resource investment create a downward spiral effect, reducing employees' psychological resource reservoir, resulting in extended stress. Meta-analytical evidence supports the positive relationship between workplace incivility and negative rumination (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2022; Blanco-Encomienda *et al.*, 2020). However, we are moving beyond the previous focus on face-to-face incivility and testing the linkages between email incivility and work rumination to enhance understanding of uncivil behaviors in the digital workspace. We posit the following.

H2. Email incivility will be positively related to work rumination.

In addition, we argue that work rumination will be detrimental to worker well-being. Rumination keeps employees' cognitive and emotional processes engaged even after leaving the workplace. Such repetitive thoughts can lead to high job anxiety and job depression due to prolonged stress, compounded resource strain and an inability to detach and recover. For example, thinking about deteriorated work relationships, especially with incivility instigators, can trigger anxiety. Recent meta-analyses confirm the negative relationship between work rumination and employee well-being (see Blanco-Encomienda *et al.*, 2020; Jimenez *et al.*, 2022). We posit the following.

H3. Work rumination will be positively related to (a) job anxiety and (b) job depression.

Mediating role of work rumination

Building on the above theoretical explanations and empirical evidence showing the relationship between uncivil email treatment and repetitive intrusive thoughts (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2022), as well as the resultant impact on employee well-being (e.g. Blanco-Encomienda *et al.*, 2020), we expect that work rumination will mediate the relationship between email incivility and job-related anxiety and depression. COR theory supports this proposed mediation process, as the resource loss spiral (i.e. Corollary 2) formed by email incivility and work rumination can lead to prolonged psychological strain, ultimately resulting in anxious and depressive states. By focusing on the cognitive mechanism (i.e. work rumination) to explain the indirect effects of email incivility, we aim to extend the existing focus on emotional processes (e.g. Zhou *et al.*, 2022; Bernuzzi *et al.*, 2024). Taken together, this leads to the following hypothesis.

H4. Work rumination will mediate the relationship between email incivility and (a) job anxiety and (b) job depression.

Moderating effects of WFH

WFH is a flexible work arrangement that allows employees to perform their job tasks from home or other remote locations, using organization-provided information and communication

tools (Ahmad *et al.*, 2022). Although WFH offers employees autonomy and flexibility, it can also present challenges. For example, Walz *et al.* (2024) show that due to conflicting demands from work and home spheres, WFH employees could experience greater workplace loneliness. Similarly, Gajendran *et al.* (2024) in their meta-analysis confirm that intensive WFH can deteriorate employee well-being and relational outcomes.

COR theory encourages the inclusion of contextual factors (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018). Furthermore, recent meta-analyses on workplace incivility have called for a greater exploration of contextual or environmental factors that could exacerbate or mitigate the effects of uncivil behaviors (e.g. Han *et al.*, 2022). The present study focused on WFH and suggests that it might operate as a resource loss context. We separate out two WFH options: (1) all home (never in the office) and (2) hybrid work, representing a mixture of work in the office and home. According to Principle 1 of COR theory, WFH arrangements provide useful resources, such as saved commuting time, flexibility in structuring work and family support. However, incivility-related resource losses for WFH employees are expected to be more salient, which includes reduced social and psychological buffers.

Social proximity in the co-location settings has been found to alleviate work stress. But this buffering effect is likely to be weaker for WFH employees because of the limited opportunities to seek reassurance and guidance through informal conversations and feelings of social isolation. Further, the delayed and asynchronous nature of email communication perhaps makes clarification and conflict resolution even more complicated in remote settings. Interestingly, these issues could be more unique and salient for WFH employees who work in hybrid settings due to floating boundaries, additional demands of transition and coordination each week, and intermittent social interactions.

In addition, WFH settings can function as a resource caravan passageway (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018), potentially amplifying the resource loss, work rumination, and related negative outcomes. For instance, the blurred or floating boundaries between work and life spheres might lead individuals to dwell on uncivil emails outside working hours, potentially causing them to ruminate during personal or family time. WFH settings can also block the generation of new psychosocial resources. To illustrate, incivility-targeted remote employees may have reduced access to peer support to discuss the implications of the incident and seek reassurance, which is vital for curbing ruminative thoughts and generating regulatory resources (Park *et al.*, 2018). Thus, we posit the following.

- H5. The direct effect of email incivility on (a) work rumination, (b) job anxiety and (c) job depression would be stronger for individuals with WFH options.
- H6. The indirect effect of email incivility on (a) job anxiety and (b) job depression via work rumination is stronger for individuals with WFH options (moderated mediation).

Method

Sample and participants

Data were collected in New Zealand (NZ) using a Qualtrics survey panel, which represents large databases of individuals who are sent email invitations to do a survey. To boost confidence in statistical findings (see Nuzzo, 2014), we collected two samples targeting (1) managers and (2) employees. Respondents had to meet four qualifiers: (1) being 18 years plus and in paid employment; (2) working 20 h/week minimum; (3) not being self-employed or a business owner, and (4) being either (a) managing people for sample 1, or (b) an employee for sample 2. Recommendations by Bernerth *et al.* (2021) were followed, including removing respondents who completed the online survey too fast or too slow ($\pm 30\%$ of median completion time). Further, both surveys included an instructed response item (testing attention), such as “For this question, answer strongly agree only,” with failure leading to removal from the survey.

Initially, in sample 1, 141 self-employed/business owners were removed, and in sample 2, 48 unemployed respondents were removed. Next, respondents were dropped who were too young or did not work 20 h/week. This removed a further 20 employee respondents and 7 manager respondents. Finally, the attention test removed 61 employees and 68 managers. In total, sample 1 had 427 managers and sample 2 had 654 employees. Overall, respondents were more likely to be male (59.0%) in sample 1, but female (56.6%) in sample 2. By age, managers (sample 1) averaged 37.0 years (SD = 8.5) and this was similar for employees (sample 2) at 37.5 years (SD = 8.2). Average tenure was slightly higher in sample 1 (7.3 years, SD = 4.3) compared to sample 2 (6.2 years, SD = 4.0). By sector, the majority came from the private sector (83.6%/78.0% sample 1/2), followed by the public/government sector (14.8%/19.3%) and the not-for-profit sector (1.6%/2.8%).

Measures

Email Incivility was measured using the 14-item scale by [Lim and Teo \(2009\)](#), coded 1 = not at all, 5 = almost always. A sample item is “someone used emails to say negative things about you that he/she would not say to you face-to-face” ($\alpha = 0.98/0.99$).

Work-Rumination was measured using the 3-item scale by [Kinnunen et al. \(2019\)](#), coded 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree. A sample item is “I become tense when I think about work-related issues in my free time” ($\alpha = 0.88/0.91$).

Job Anxiety and Job Depression were measured using 3 items each by [Axtell et al. \(2002\)](#), coded 1 = never, 5 = all the time. The measure has three adjectives each, with sample items being “anxious” for job anxiety ($\alpha = 0.92/0.95$) and “depressed” for job depression ($\alpha = 0.94/0.97$). This short scale has been well-validated (e.g. [Haar et al., 2014](#)).

WFH was assessed by the question “Are you working from home/off-site at least one day per week?” with responses coded 0 = Not WFH (all office), 1 = Hybrid (1–4 days working from home/office), 2 = Only WFH (all home).

Control variables: We controlled for Age (in years), Tenure (in years), and Hours Worked (per week) due to meta-analytical support for these demographics on outcomes ([Ng and Feldman, 2008, 2010](#)).

Measurement models

A CFA with all measures using AMOS (version 28) was conducted with both samples. The overall CFA was a good fit to the data in sample 1: $\chi^2(df) = 721.3(224)$, CFI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07 and SRMR = 0.03 and sample 2: $\chi^2(df) = 1429.0(224)$, CFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.08 and SRMR = 0.02. We confirmed the nature of the measures by running alternative CFAs, and this resulted in all alternatives (both samples) being a significantly poorer fit (all $p < 0.001$). For example, combining anxiety and depression resulted in a poorer fit for sample 1: $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 74.0(4)$, $p < 0.0001$ and sample 2: $\Delta\chi^2(\Delta df) = 193.1(4)$, $p < 0.0001$. This analysis also confirmed the unique factor structure of the two outcome variables (job anxiety and job depression), showing they are distinct.

Analysis

Hypotheses were tested in SPSS (version 28) using the PROCESS 4.0 program. To test mediation effects, model 4 of PROCESS was used, while model 8 was used for moderation and moderated mediation effects. Because WFH is not a continuous (all office, hybrid, all home), the analysis included WFH as a categorical variable. Analysis included bootstrapping (5,000 times), confidence intervals across the 95% intervals, lower limits (LL) and upper limits (UL), and confirming mediation effects by examining indirect effects (in model 4).

Results

Descriptive statistics for the study variables are shown in [Table 1](#).

Table 1. Correlations and descriptive statistics of variables

Variables	Sample 1		Sample 2		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	M	SD	M	SD							
1. Age	37.03	8.53	37.46	8.23	–	–0.07	0.37**	0.04	–0.10**	–0.04	–0.06
2. Hours Worked	37.84	7.61	40.98	7.86	0.18**	–	0.02	0.17**	0.11**	0.14**	0.16**
3. Job Tenure	7.29	4.31	6.19	3.98	0.38**	0.11*	–	0.25**	0.19**	0.16**	0.19**
4. Email Incivility	2.66	1.19	2.85	1.36	–0.13**	–0.39**	–0.05	–	0.66**	0.82**	0.87**
5. Work Rumination	4.19	1.24	4.33	1.18	–0.13**	–0.18**	0.04	0.51**	–	0.72**	0.70**
6. Job Anxiety	2.85	1.14	3.07	1.18	–0.24**	–0.27**	–0.09	0.73**	0.54**	–	0.80**
7. Job Depression	2.68	1.26	2.99	1.34	–0.20**	0.31**	–0.06	0.80**	0.50**	0.79**	–

Note(s): Sample 1 (Managers) below diagonal: $N = 427$, and Sample 2 (employees) above diagonal: $N = 654$

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

Source(s): Authors' own work

Table 1 shows that email incivility is significantly correlated with work rumination, job anxiety and job depression in the expected directions for both samples (all $p < 0.001$). While job anxiety and job depression are highly correlated, our earlier CFA analysis showed these factors were distinct in both samples. Looking at the breakdown for email incivility, we find that 55.0% of employees and 45.4% of managers reported email incivility at a sometimes or higher rate. A t -test ($t = -2.346, p = 0.019$) confirms that managers ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.19$) report significantly lower email incivility than employees ($M = 2.85, SD = 1.36$).

The results of the direct and mediation analyses are presented in Figure 2 (manager sample) and Figure 3 (employee sample).

Figures 2 and 3 show that email incivility is significantly related to work rumination for both managers and employees (both $p < 0.0001$), having a large effect size (22% and 37% managers/employees). It is also related to job anxiety (both $p < 0.0001$), and job depression (both $p < 0.0001$). The effect sizes for job anxiety (44% and 62% managers/employees) and job depression (52% and 68% managers/employees) also represent strong effects. This supports Hypotheses 1a, 1b, and 2. Work rumination is significantly associated with job anxiety (both $p < 0.0001$) and job depression (both $p < 0.001$) in both samples. We also find the inclusion of work rumination partially mediates the influence of email incivility on both outcomes in both samples, reducing the direct effects of email incivility, but it remained

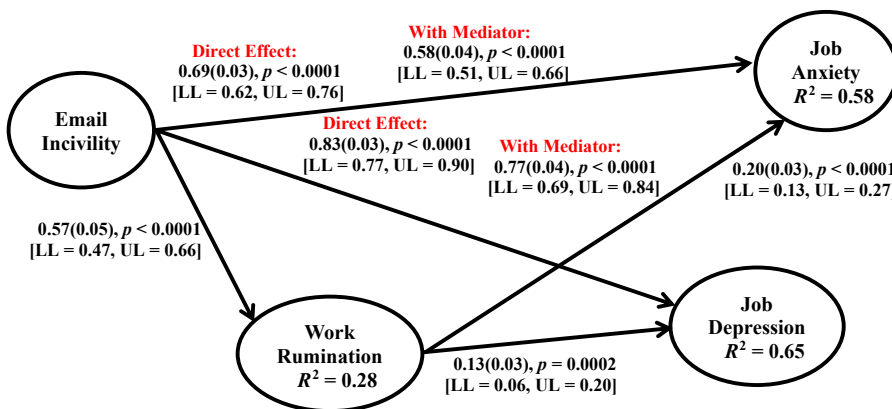


Figure 2. Study results (direct and mediation effects) – managers sample. Source: Authors' own work

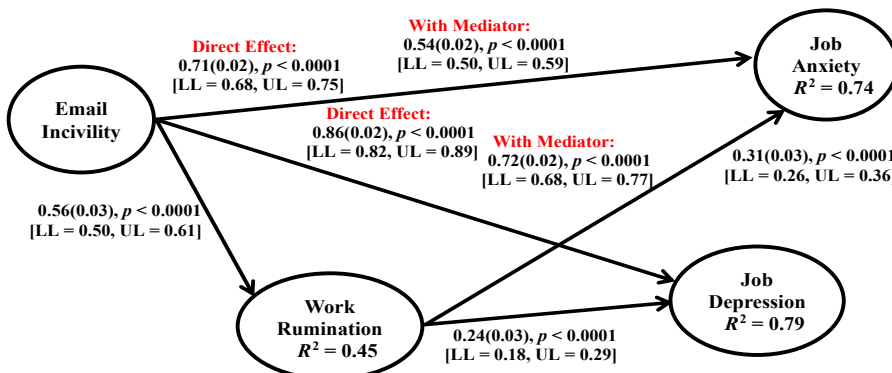


Figure 3. Study results (direct and mediation effects) – employees sample. Source: Authors' own work

significant (both $p < 0.0001$). This supports [Hypotheses 3](#) and [4](#). The effect size of work rumination on job anxiety was modest for both managers (3%) and employees (6%), and smaller for job depression for both managers (1%) and employees (3%).

The results of the moderation and moderated-mediated regression analyses ([Hypotheses 5](#) and [6](#)) are presented in [Table 2](#).

The direct effects of WFH options (hybrid and all home) are shown in [Table 2](#); although these were not hypothesized, they are highlighted to provide additional insight. For example, in sample 2 (employees), the hybrid option was directly and significantly related to job anxiety ($\beta = 0.18$ (0.07), $p = 0.0100$, [LL = 0.04, UL = 0.31]) and job depression ($\beta = 0.24$ (0.07), $p = 0.0004$, [LL = 0.11, UL = 0.38]).

Regarding [Hypotheses 5a-5c](#), there were no significant interactions in the manager sample (all $p > 0.05$). Thus, these hypotheses are not supported in sample 1. However, in sample 2 (employees), there is a significant two-way interaction between email incivility and WFH options. Toward work rumination there is a significant moderation effect with the WFH option all home ($\beta = -0.66$ (0.32), $p = 0.0384$, [LL = -1.3, UL = -0.04]), and between the hybrid options toward job anxiety ($\beta = 0.21$ (0.05), $p < 0.0001$, [LL = 0.12, UL = 0.30]) and job depression ($\beta = 0.28$ (0.05), $p < 0.0001$, [LL = 0.18, UL = 0.37]). So, in the employee sample, there is support for [Hypotheses 5b to 5c](#). Further, we did not find evidence of moderated mediation (both $p > 0.05$), meaning [hypotheses 6a and 6b](#) were not supported.

Overall, all models were significant ($p < 0.0001$) and accounted for significant amounts of variance toward work rumination (28% managers, 45% employees), job anxiety (58% managers, 74% employees) and job depression (65% managers, 79% employees). The significant interaction effects are graphed in [Figures 4](#) and [5](#).

The interaction effects of email incivility and WFH in sample 2 (employees) are combined in [Figure 4](#) because the effects are broadly identical. At low levels of email incivility, there is no difference in levels of job anxiety/job depression, regardless of whether employee respondents work hybrid or any other option. However, at high levels of email incivility, we find that employees working in a hybrid environment report significantly higher levels of both job anxiety/job depression compared to respondents working other options. This highlights the potential for hybrid work to exacerbate the detrimental effects of email incivility, supporting [Hypotheses 5b and 5c](#), in the employee sample only.

The interaction of email incivility and the WFH option all home in sample 2 (employees) is presented in [Figure 5](#). It shows that at low levels of email incivility, there is little difference in levels of work rumination, regardless of the WFH option for employees. However, at high levels of email incivility, we find that employees working all home report lower levels of work rumination compared to all other respondents. This highlights the potential for the WFH option all home to buffer the detrimental effects of email incivility, which fails to support [Hypothesis 5a](#) (employee sample only) because it is beneficial and not detrimental as hypothesized.

Discussion

Much research focuses on the antecedents and outcomes of face-to-face workplace incivility (e.g. [Zahid and Nauman, 2024](#); [Han et al., 2022](#); [Chris et al., 2022](#)); however, less is known about the consequences of email incivility. This article aims to provide much-needed empirical evidence and argues that email incivility can enhance job anxiety and depression by triggering ruminative thoughts. Moreover, these adverse effects may be more pronounced for those who work from home. Overall, across both samples, we found strong support for our direct, mediation, and moderation hypotheses (Sample 2 only). However, moderated mediation effects were not supported.

Results show that email incivility is associated with job anxiety and depression, which aligns with previous research on well-being outcomes of cyber incivility ([Park et al., 2018](#); [Yuan et al., 2020](#)). However, we extend these outcomes to include psychological strains. The experience of email incivility and related resource loss perceptions can create psychological

Table 2. Results of the moderation and moderated mediation effects (samples 1 + 2)

Relationships tested	β (SE) Sample 1	Confidence intervals	<i>p</i> -value	β (SE) Sample 2	Confidence intervals	<i>p</i> -value
<i>WFH moderator</i>						
Hybrid → Work Rumination	-0.27 (0.12)	LL = -0.51, UL = -0.03	<i>p</i> = 0.0260	0.13 (0.10)	LL = - 0.07, UL = 0.32	<i>p</i> = 0.1956
All Home → Work Rumination	-0.09 (0.44)	LL = - 0.96 UL = 0.78	<i>p</i> = 0.8468	-0.82 (0.52)	LL = -1.8, UL = -0.19	<i>p</i> = 0.1125
Hybrid → Job Anxiety	-0.02 (0.08)	LL = -0.19, UL = 0.15	<i>p</i> = 0.8110	0.18 (0.07)	LL = 0.04, UL = 0.31	<i>p</i> = 0.0100
All Home → Job Anxiety	-0.48 (0.31)	LL = -1.1, UL = 0.12	<i>p</i> = 0.1185	0.26 (0.36)	LL = - 0.44, UL = 0.96	<i>p</i> = 0.4637
Hybrid → Job Depression	0.03 (0.09)	LL = -0.14, UL = 0.20	<i>p</i> = 0.7373	0.24 (0.07)	LL = 0.11, UL = 0.38	<i>p</i> = 0.0004
All Home → Job Depression	-0.38 (0.31)	LL = -1.0, UL = 0.23	<i>p</i> = 0.2229	-0.12 (0.36)	LL = - 0.82, UL = 0.58	<i>p</i> = 0.7399
<i>2-way interactions</i>						
EI × Hybrid → Work Rumination	0.02 (0.10)	LL = -0.17, UL = 0.22	<i>p</i> = 0.8149	0.04 (0.07)	LL = - 0.10, UL = 0.18	<i>p</i> = 0.5734
EI × All Home → Work Rumination	0.34 (0.31)	LL = -0.28, UL = 0.96	<i>p</i> = 0.2852	-0.66 (0.32)	LL = -1.3, UL = -0.04	<i>p</i> = 0.0384
EI × Hybrid → Job Anxiety	0.03 (0.07)	LL = -0.11, UL = 0.16	<i>p</i> = 0.6730	0.21 (0.05)	LL = 0.12, UL = 0.30	<i>p</i> < 0.0001
EI × All Home → Job Anxiety	-0.12 (0.22)	LL = -0.55, UL = 0.31	<i>p</i> = 0.5922	0.08 (0.22)	LL = - 0.35, UL = 0.51	<i>p</i> = 0.7084
EI × Hybrid → Job Depression	0.04 (0.07)	LL = -0.10, UL = 0.17	<i>p</i> = 0.5742	0.28 (0.05)	LL = 0.18, UL = 0.37	<i>p</i> < 0.0001
EI × All Home → Job Depression	-0.04 (0.22)	LL = -0.48, UL = 0.40	<i>p</i> = 0.8506	-0.23 (0.22)	LL = - 0.66, UL = 0.20	<i>p</i> = 0.2999
<i>Index of moderated mediation</i>						
EI → WR → Job Anxiety × Hybrid	0.00 (0.02)	LL = -0.03, UL = 0.04	<i>p</i> = 0.3974	0.01 (0.02)	LL = - 0.03, UL = 0.06	<i>p</i> = 0.3085
EI → WR → Job Anxiety × All Home	0.07 (0.12)	LL = -0.06, UL = 0.31	<i>p</i> = 0.2884	-0.20 (0.17)	LL = - 0.55, UL = 0.07	<i>p</i> = 0.1179
EI → WR → Job Depression × Hybrid	0.00 (0.01)	LL = -0.02, UL = 0.03	<i>p</i> = 0.4013	0.01 (0.02)	LL = - 0.02, UL = 0.05	<i>p</i> = 0.3114
EI → WR → Job Depression × All Home	0.04 (0.08)	LL = -0.05, UL = 0.20	<i>p</i> = 0.2890	-0.15 (0.12)	LL = - 0.39, UL = 0.05	<i>p</i> = 0.1030
Note(s): EI = Email Incivility. WR = Work Rumination						
Source(s): Authors' own work						

strain in employees, making them worry about their job performance and relationships. Furthermore, frequent exposure to rude emails can erode feelings of psychological safety and trigger depressive thoughts, such as feelings of hopelessness and demotivation. We then found

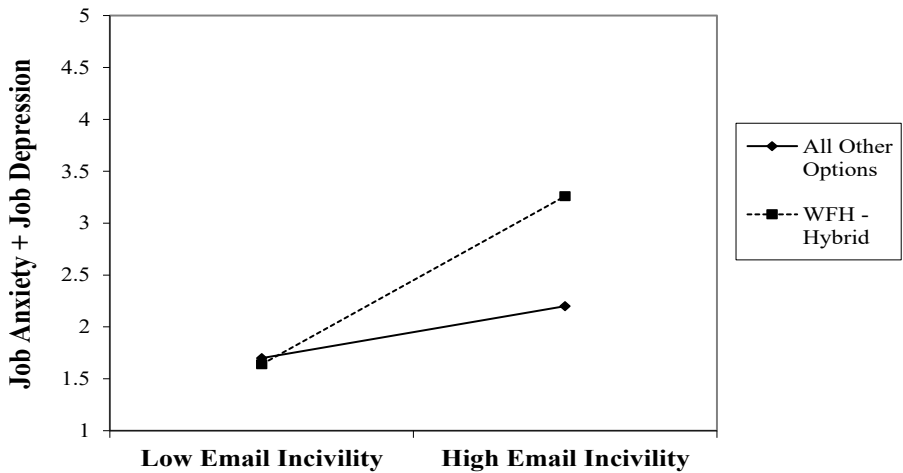


Figure 4. Email incivility \times WFH Hybrid to job anxiety and job depression (sample 2). **Source:** Authors' own work

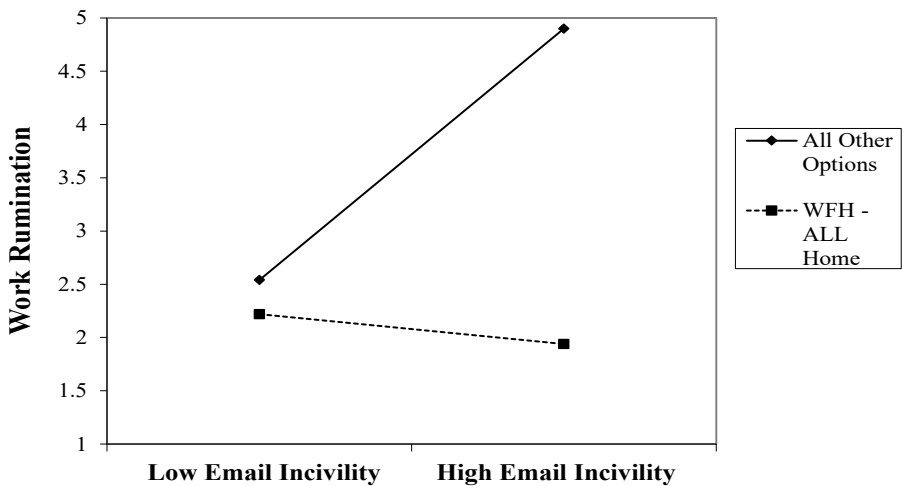


Figure 5. Email Incivility \times WFH all home to work rumination (sample 2). **Source:** Authors' own work

that email incivility is associated with work rumination, contributing to the existing evidence on the detrimental effects of uncivil email behaviors (e.g. [Bernuzzi et al., 2024](#); [Zhou et al., 2022](#)). Sensemaking attempts and strategizing future action can unintentionally drain even more resources, likely creating a resource loss spiral. Results also show the positive association between work rumination and job anxiety/depression, aligning with previous research (e.g. [Jimenez et al., 2022](#)) and highlighting the negative outcomes of overengaging cognitive mechanisms.

Further, we found support for the potential mediating role of work rumination in the relationship between email incivility and job anxiety and depression, which advances previous understanding of indirect mechanisms (e.g. [Zhou et al., 2022](#)). The resource loss cycle posited by the COR theory explains this indirect relationship. For instance, the loss perception after

receiving a rude email and subsequent mental efforts to understand the incivility incident and the instigator's intentions might result in compounding adverse effects on the resource reservoir. Negative rumination might be more intense here because the targeted employees can reread the recorded email and relive the negative episode. Thus, the loss spiral created by email incivility and negative rumination can prolong stressful experiences and block effective recovery, resulting in lingering psychological strains like anxious and depressive thoughts.

Our moderation results for the employees' sample (Sample 2) indicate that the WFH option of hybrid work potentially amplifies the direct relationship between email incivility and job anxiety and depression, such that a high level of email incivility might cause even greater levels of psychological strains among employees working in hybrid modes. These findings align with emerging evidence on the negative outcomes of WFH (e.g. [Gajendran et al., 2024](#)), but we provide novel evidence in the context of email incivility. It appears that the detrimental effects are more pronounced in the hybrid work modes due to frequent structural and social disruptions, leading to lopsided opportunities to seek supervisory intervention and informal peer support. Furthermore, the floating boundaries between work and home spheres, additional demands to manage continuous transitions each week, and intermittent social interaction/belongingness might put extra stress on resources and lead hybrid work employees to experience intensified psychological strains. However, we do find the WFH option of all home benefits those experiencing high email incivility, having limited effects on work rumination. It suggests that these employees might be better able to cope with such situations, perhaps due to stronger boundary-management routines, higher autonomy and family support resources. Overall, these findings highlight the role of the resource caravan passageway under COR theory and suggest that different WFH options might have distinct effects. Future research can shed further light on these differential effects.

Interestingly, the moderating influence of WFH was not supported in the managers' sample (Sample 1). Managers might not be immune to the additional negative impacts of rude emails when working remotely. However, managerial positions may enable them to access alternative resources to ward off location-based stress, such as seeking clarification, conflict management experience and emotional intelligence. We also tested for the moderated mediation effect for both samples, but did not find support. Resource losses and limited/partial social support in WFH settings may make the immediate reaction more salient by depleting emotional resources. Work rumination typically occurs after work hours and is a relatively slow internal cognitive response that may not be location dependent.

Theoretical implications

Our research makes several contributions. First, we moved beyond the previous focus on utilizing emotional mechanisms such as affective states to understand how email incivility detracts employee outcomes ([Niven et al., 2022](#); [Park et al., 2018](#); [Porath and Pearson, 2012](#)). Although emotional processes can explain the immediate reactions, the negative consequences of experiencing incivility might also unfold over time. Because email communications are recorded and easily accessible, cognitive factors such as work rumination likely explain the lingering negative effects of email incivility and resource depletion across time. This view is important because cognitive and emotional processes might complement or compete ([Hughes et al., 2023](#)) to shape the outcomes of email incivility. Future research can include both pathways to offer a more comprehensive view of these relationships.

Second, we add to the workplace incivility literature by testing WFH as a novel moderator of digital incivility experiences and outcomes, highlighting its potential to amplify resource-depletion effects. This is an important focus given current reliance on WFH arrangements (especially hybrid work) and the recent calls to explore the contextual or environmental factors that can exacerbate or mitigate the effects of uncivil work behaviors (e.g. [Han et al., 2022](#); [Chris et al., 2022](#)). These findings also contribute to the emerging literature on the negative side of WFH arrangements (e.g. [Gajendran et al., 2024](#)).

Third, while the existing workplace incivility literature primarily focuses on employees (e.g. [Shahwar and Dhar, 2024](#); [Park and Martinez, 2022](#)), this article extends the workplace incivility target profile beyond employees and provides evidence that managers can also experience incivility via emails and face resource-depletion effects. Our findings add to the growing evidence that managers are not immune to upward influence from team members (e.g. [Rashid et al., 2025](#)), though they may be better resourced to manage such incidents. Lastly, we contributed to the employee well-being literature (e.g. [Koutsimani et al., 2019](#)) by testing email incivility and the WFH context as novel predictors of job anxiety and depression.

Practical implications

Our research also provides implications for the practice. First, organizations need to create a culture of respect based on positive values, policies, and leadership behaviors. It might be helpful to identify and address evidence-based triggers of uncivil and negative work behaviors related to instigators and incivility contexts (see [Park and Martinez, 2022](#)). Incivility incidents might be curtailed by addressing such triggers using effective human resource policies and practices on recruitment, development, remuneration and work design.

Second, given the reliance on email communication, organizations should establish online communication norms and email etiquette rules. Strong and clear HR policies around email civility appear warranted, following civility training (see [Walsh and Magley, 2020](#)). These might include guidelines on message tone and content, email length, communication time, response expectations and using options like forward, bcc, and reply-all. In addition, HR departments can conduct digital civility training programs to enhance employees' awareness of being a target or an instigator of online incivility and reinforce communication norms. Organizations can also provide employees with the latest technology tools, such as AI plug-ins, to help them write effective emails with a polite tone. Furthermore, managers and supervisors should model civil email behaviors, such as being courteous, clear and avoiding sarcasm.

Third, managers may encourage the use of synchronous communication tools (e.g. video and audio conferencing, instant messaging, real-time collaboration tools) for tasks that are important and time sensitive. This will help reduce the ambiguity and misunderstanding in email communication arising from delayed feedback and limited clarification. Moreover, employees should be discouraged from subscribing to work emails on their personal devices and from checking emails outside of work hours. Thus, helping to limit electronic and psychological tethering to work issues (e.g. email incivility) and reduce work rumination.

Fourth, social isolation and disconnectedness can perhaps make WFH employees more vulnerable to the adverse effects of email incivility. Managers need to do regular check-ins and provide extra tasks and social support to help employees build buffering resources and psychological coping skills (e.g. [Mutter and Thorn, 2025](#)). Such support is particularly important for employees in hybrid work arrangements, because continuous adjustments in work routine and intermittent social interactions might create complex stress. Lastly, resilience and conflict management training should be provided to employees to equip them with emotional, cognitive and social skills to manage workplace stressors like email incivility.

Limitations and future research

Like all research, our work is subject to certain limitations that future studies can address. First, we collected cross-sectional data but followed [Nuzzo's \(2014\)](#) recommendation to use multiple datasets to provide confidence in our findings. This does not alleviate potential issues around common method variance, although we suggest the findings of significant direct and mediation effects across both samples do strengthen confidence in the data, as does finding moderation effects (Evans, 1986) in the employee sample. We conducted Harman's One Factor Test (as per [Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)) and found little evidence, with both unrotated factor analyses resulting in a single factor with less than 50% of the variance. A limitation with our moderating variable was the lack of capturing the differences specifically around days using

the hybrid work options (e.g. one to four day/s at home). While we do have distinction via all home versus hybrid, future research might extend the hybrid measurement to explore the total days working from home. Additional research might also seek to replicate our model using more robust designs, such as longitudinal and experience sampling methods, to improve causality.

Second, we tested the cognitive process (i.e. work rumination) that explains the lingering effects of experienced email incivility, but did not explore the emotional mechanism that might explain the immediate reaction (e.g. Zhou *et al.*, 2022). It might be fruitful to combine the cognitive and emotional pathways in parallel to understand their distinct or mutually reinforcing impact. This focus can help understand employees' differences and design tailored interventions. Furthermore, future research can investigate the role of employees' attributions as an underlying mechanism to explain the different responses and resultant outcomes. For instance, external attribution might result in a more retaliatory response compared to internal attribution.

Third, we explored WFH as a moderating factor that potentially can exacerbate the detrimental outcomes of email incivility. Still less is known about contextual and environmental factors that facilitate or hinder incivility incidents, particularly through email communication. In this regard, future research can explore the role of leadership behavior and styles (e.g. passive leadership), affective and incivility climate, and respectful cultures. Lastly, we sampled from New Zealand and found that managers, too, can receive email incivility. However, cultural differences may influence the experience of email incivility and its outcomes (e.g. Loh *et al.*, 2021), especially for managers. Future research can sample from different cultures and examine factors like power distance to explore whether and how managers respond to rude emails.

Conclusion

Email incivility is an emerging workplace issue, but empirical evidence is limited, particularly concerning the indirect mechanisms and contextual factors that facilitate or hinder its negative outcomes. Moreover, less is known about managers' experience of email incivility; therefore, we sampled both employees and managers. We hypothesized and found that experienced email incivility is associated with job anxiety and depression directly and indirectly through work rumination, for both employees and managers. Results also signal that employees working in hybrid work arrangements (a variant of WFH) might experience heightened negative effects because of floating work-home boundaries, additional demands for managing transition and coordination, and intermittent social interaction/belongingness. Our research suggests that the impact of email incivility extends beyond the immediate emotional response and engages the cognitive processes of the target employee, leading to negative outcomes over time. Organizations and managers should understand the risks associated with email incivility and establish clear guidelines for online communication and email etiquette to effectively address this phenomenon.

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