

Apprehension of the prospective unknown: Evidence of uncertainty aversion in the job choice process

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ABSTRACT

We investigated how uncertainty affects applicant evaluations of job prospects by testing a job choice model under uncertainty. Through assessments of prospective fit, results showed that greater uncertainty negatively affected job prospect attraction, but only when participants evaluated positively framed (i.e., offering a higher salary or better fit) job prospects.

BACKGROUND

- Applicants gather information on job prospects to inform subjective evaluations of job-organizational attraction (Chapman et al., 2005).
- Although applicants evaluate job prospects to the best of their ability, their evaluations are prone to misjudgment under uncertainty (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).
- We investigated how uncertainty affects applicant evaluations of job-organization attraction by testing a model of job choice under uncertainty.
- Additionally, job-organizational characteristics framing was examined to account for job prospect utility variance.
- H1:** Greater uncertainty is negatively related to job-organizational attraction.
- H2:** Greater uncertainty is negatively related to prospective fit.
- H3:** Prospective fit is positively related to job-organizational attraction.

METHOD

- 2x2 within-subject experimental design where the level of uncertainty (higher or lower) was crossed with job-organizational characteristics frame (positive or negative).
- Scenario based manipulation of uncertainty (see Table 1)
- Undergraduate student sample where course credit was given for participating in the study.

Uncertainty is negatively related to job prospect attraction

Table 1. JPET Job-organizational characteristics manipulation.

	Uncertainty	
	Lower Uncertainty JPETs	Higher Uncertainty JPETs
Positive Frame		
Salary	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Benefits	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Location	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Skills match	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Culture match	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Work-life balance	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Career advancement	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Professional development	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Negative Frame		
Salary	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Benefits	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Location	Lower uncertainty	Lower uncertainty
Skills match	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Culture match	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Work-life balance	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Career advancement	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty
Professional development	Lower uncertainty	Higher uncertainty

Note. Only the uncertainty level was manipulated. All the characteristics embedded in the positively and negatively framed JPETs were all framed as positive or negative, respectively.

Scenario Example
We ask that you imagine searching for your first job after you graduate from college.

You may have a few options, and you are trying to determine which job will be best for you.

Please carefully read the information about a job possibility on the next screen. Afterward, we will ask you some questions about this job possibility.

A company you interviewed with a week ago is going to offer you the following:

- An industry-standard salary with a benefits package that includes healthcare, dental care, and a 401k contribution matching program.
- The office you would be working at is near your hometown and would be less than a 30-minute daily commute to work.

You also learned that:

- The job entails projects directly related to your college major, but you were not sure what you would be doing.
- You are unsure if people maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- You are unsure if the company supports professional development opportunities.
- There are no clear guidelines for promotions and advancement.

Additionally:

- You are unsure if you would enjoy the work based on your interview and all the information you gathered so far.
- You did not get the chance to get to know your potential boss and colleagues.
- Your friends inform you that this company is a good place to work and has a supportive and friendly atmosphere.

But only when job-organizational characteristics were positively framed to applicants.

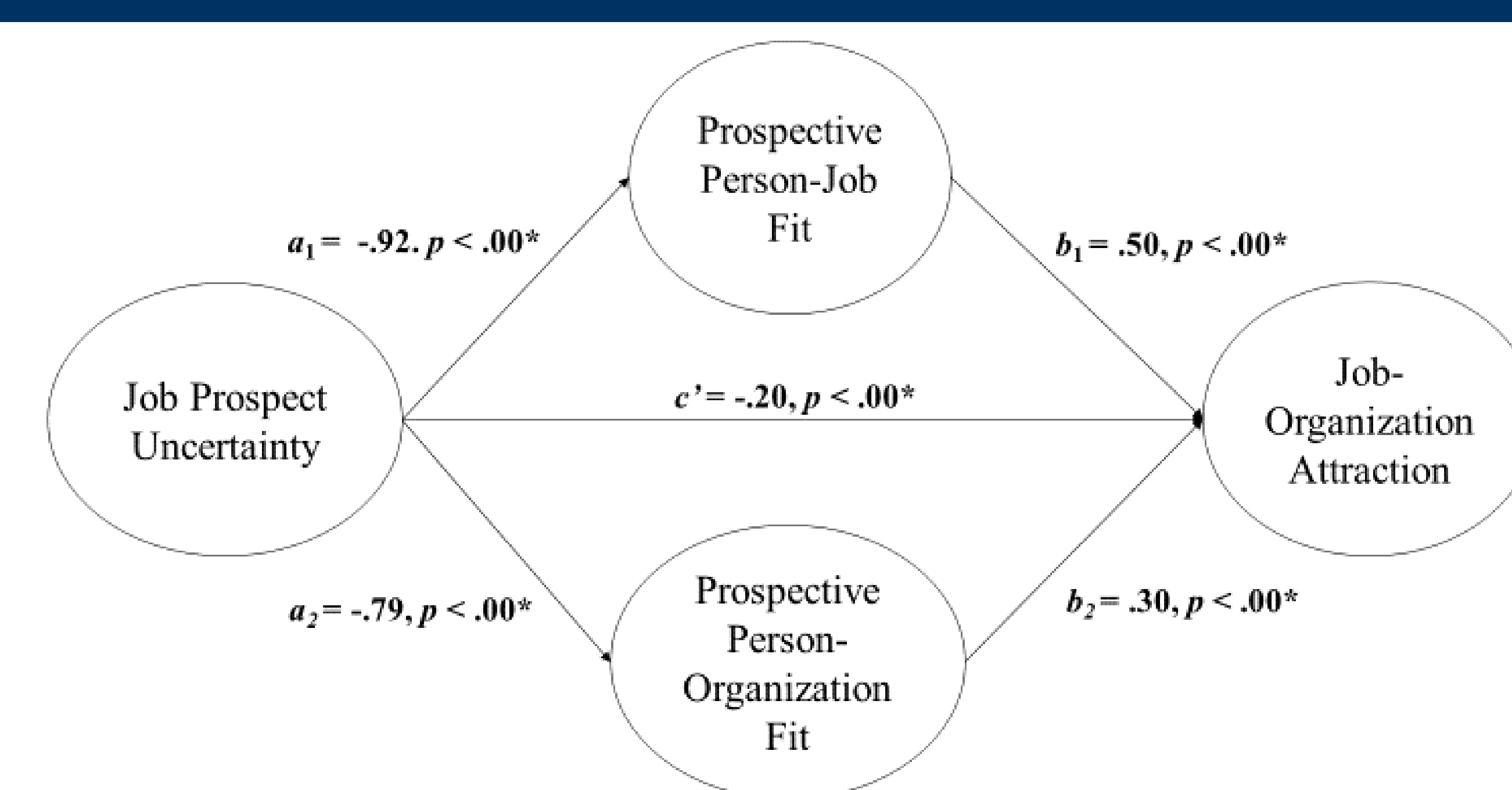


Figure 1. Positively framed model results.

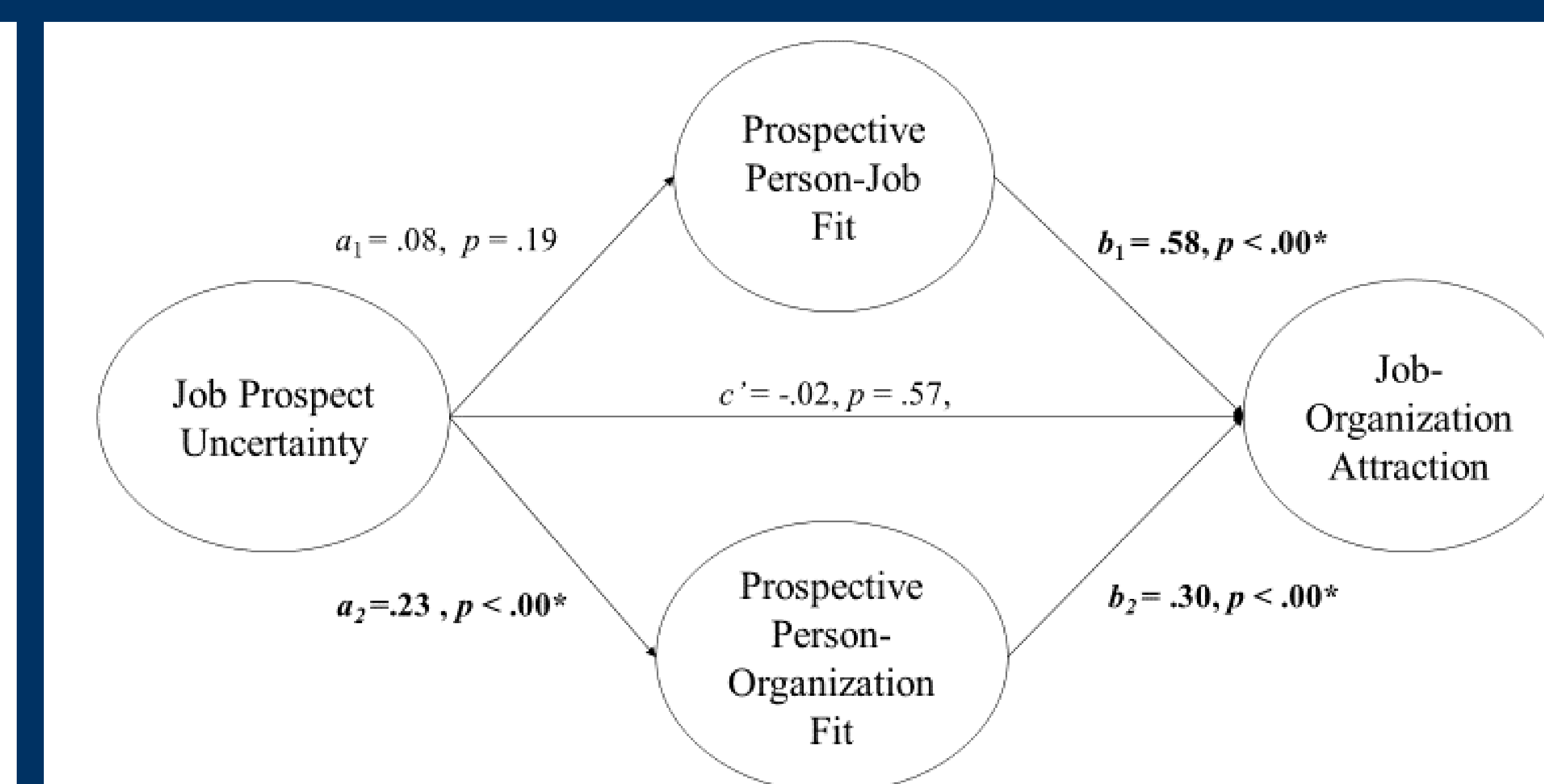


Figure 2. Negatively framed model results.

Zoom link: <https://auburn.zoom.us/j/6194222178>

Table 2
Regression Coefficients Estimates, Standard Errors, and Model Summary for the Job Prospect Uncertainty and Attraction Parallel Fit Mediator Model

Positive Framed Characteristics Model																					
Antecedent	M ₁ (P-PJ Fit)						Consequent														
	Est.	SE	t	p	LL	UL	M ₂ (P-PO Fit)		Y (JO-Attraction)												
X (Uncertainty)	a ₁						a ₂		c'												
X (Uncertainty)	a ₁	-.92	.04	-19.20	<.00	-1.02	-8.3	a ₂	-.79	.04	-16.28	<.00	-.89	-.70	c'	-.20	.04	-20.13	<.00	-.98	-.81
M ₁ (P-PJ Fit)		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	b ₁	.50	.05	10.37	<.00	.40	.59
M ₂ (P-PO Fit)		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	b ₂	.30	.05	6.44	<.00	.21	.39
R ² = .60 F(4,233) = 86.65, p < .00																					
Negative Framed Characteristics Model																					
Antecedent	M ₁ (P-PJ Fit)						Consequent														
	Est.	SE	t	p	LL	UL	M ₂ (P-PO Fit)		Y (JO-Attraction)												
X (Uncertainty)	a ₁						a ₂		c'												
X (Uncertainty)	a ₁	.08	.06	1.31	.19	-.04	.19	a ₂	.23	.05	4.11	<.00	.12	.34	c'	-.02	.03	-.56	.57	-.09	.05
M ₁ (P-PJ Fit)		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	b ₁	.58	.05	12.63	<.00	.49	.67
M ₂ (P-PO Fit)		-	-	-	-	-	-		-	-	-	-	-	-	b ₂	.30	.05	6.22	<.00	.21	.67
R ² = .66 F(4,235) = 111.57, p < .00																					

Note. Est. = Regression coefficient estimate., SE = Standard error, t = t-statistic between high and low uncertainty conditions, p = p-value for t-test, LL = 95% lower limit confidence interval, UL = 95% upper limit confidence interval.

RESULTS (see Figures 1, 2, & Table 2)

Analytical Approach

- Effects were estimated as the mean differences in M and Y following the path analytic framework for within-subject mediation analyses (Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001; Montoya & Hayes, 2017).
- Higher uncertainty subtracted from lower uncertainty in both frame conditions.

Positively framed model:

- Uncertainty was negatively related to job-organization attraction through perceptions of prospective person-job and person-organization fit.
- Prospective person-job and person-organization fit was positively related to job-organizational attraction.

Negatively framed model:

- Uncertainty was not negatively related to job-organization attraction through perceptions of prospective person-job and person-organization fit.
- Prospective person-job and person-organization fit was positively related to job-organizational attraction.

DISCUSSION

- Findings suggest the presence of uncertainty aversion in the job choice process is dependent on how job-organizational characteristics are framed to applicants.
- The higher amount of risk inherent in uncertain job prospects is the theoretical rationale for observing this phenomenon.
- The dynamics associated with choosing a first job on the emergence of finishing undergraduate studies are different from experienced employees.
- Uncertainty aversion limits the risk one incurs; it also biases our way of thinking about alternatives. Job prospects with greater uncertainty do not inherently offer less. However, they are often evaluated as less attractive.



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