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Punishing or praising gossipers: How people interpret the motives driving negative gossip shapes its consequences

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Abstract

Sharing negative gossip has been found to be pivotal for fostering cooperation in social groups. The positive function gossip serves for groups suggests that gossipers should be rewarded for sharing useful information. In contrast, gossip is commonly perceived negatively, meaning that gossipers incur more social costs than benefits. To solve this puzzle, we argue that whether receivers interpret gossip as stemming from pro-social versus pro-self motives shapes their reactions towards gossipers. We conducted a pre-registered experimental vignette study (n = 1188) in which participants received negative gossip statements, which we manipulated to reflect either pro-self or pro-social motives. Supporting our predictions, receivers were more likely to mistakenly interpret negative pro-social gossip as stemming from pro-self motives than vice versa. Nevertheless, receivers with a higher ability to overcome intuition were better able to correctly interpret negative gossip as driven by pro-self and pro-social motives. Furthermore, results showed that when receivers interpreted negative gossip as pro-socially (vs. pro-selfishly) motivated, they trusted gossipers more and gossip targets less (for behavioral as well as attitudinal measures of trust).

Martina Testori and Terence D. Dores Cruz contributed equally to this work.

KEYWORDS
gossip, motives interpretation, overcoming intuition, pre-registered, pro-self, pro-social, trust

1 | INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, almost everyone encounters some form of gossip, defined as a sender communicating to a receiver about a target who is absent or unaware of the content (Dores Cruz et al., 2021a, 2021b; Robbins & Karan, 2020). Such gossip often concerns negative information being shared, and research has shown that sharing negative gossip addressing norm violations can be useful for groups (Sun et al., 2023), as it benefits group cooperation (Giardini et al., 2022; Peters & Fonseca, 2020; Wu et al., 2015): Gossip allows people to withhold cooperation when encountering individuals that were described as untrustworthy, to only trust group members with a good reputation (i.e., described as trustworthy), and to set norms of group cooperation (Feinberg et al., 2012; Molho & Wu, 2021; Peters et al., 2017; Wu et al., 2016). Furthermore, since people fear the consequences of becoming the target of negative gossip, they are more likely to adhere to group norms (Nieper et al., 2022).

Given these beneficial consequences of negative gossip, one would expect that gossipers should gain benefits from sharing gossip. That is, informing others about untrustworthy people is a form of pro-social behavior that could result in positive consequences (Feinberg et al., 2012; Peters & Kashima, 2013). However, this is often not the case in everyday life, where gossipers are often perceived negatively: Farley (2011) found that people dislike others who they recall as (frequently) engaging in negative gossip, and Turner, et al. (Turner et al., 2003) showed that both friends and strangers were disliked and distrusted if they gossiped negatively. Especially in the workplace, negative gossip has been found to increase segregation-based environments (Chua et al., 2008) with senders often excluded by others (Shani & Westphal, 2016). Taken together, this presents a puzzle: The beneficial role of gossip in promoting cooperation might suggest that gossipers should be valued and trusted, yet unfavorable perceptions of gossip imply that gossipers are often not valued nor trusted.

2 | INTERPRETING GOSSIP MOTIVES

Some studies have attempted to solve this puzzle. Peters & Kashima (2013) argued that sharing gossip that helps receivers to regulate their relationship with the target would be perceived as moral and lead receivers to trust gossipers. Supporting this, Peters & Kashima (Peters & Kashima, 2015) found that gossipers are rated as more trustworthy when gossip helped receivers judge the targets' morality, rather than targets' competence.

Thus, receivers seem to particularly appreciate gossip about targets' (im)morality. However, not all this gossip is necessarily motivated by moral concerns on the part of the gossipers. Instead, gossipers might share information about targets' morality to benefit themselves, for example, by showcasing one's own morality by judging other's morality, or discrediting someone's reputation to enhance one's own (McAndrew et al., 2007). When they do so, the gossip they share might be biased or even outright false (Peters & Fonseca, 2020). This suggests that whether gossipers send information about targets' morality or not might not, by itself, be a good indicator of gossipers' trustworthiness.

Theoretical contributions suggested that receivers might take gossipers' motives into account when deciding how to react to gossip. Specifically, Beersma, et al. (Beersma et al., 2019) argued that receivers might react differently to gossip that they interpret as pro-socially motivated (i.e., when they perceive that the gossiper gossips to help the group) compared to gossip that is interpreted as pro-selfishly motivated (i.e., when they perceive that the gossiper gossips to benefit themselves). Likewise, Lee & Barnes (2021) argued that to understand the consequences of gossip for gossipers, it is imperative to consider how receivers interpret the content of gossip and the motivation behind it. Finally, in a computational model, Testori and colleagues (Testori et al., 2023) showed the impact of motive

interpretation for group cooperation, highlighting how the interpretation, rather than the original motive with which a gossip was shared, shapes group cooperation. The complexity of gossip motives' interpretation and the manifold consequences for the gossip sender is the central mechanism that the current studies shed light on.

Earlier studies that examined reactions to gossip have not yet measured motive interpretations. For example, Caivano and colleagues found that gossipers were rated as less trustworthy when sharing negative gossip, but this effect was moderated by the content of the information shared: gossipers were considered more trustworthy if the negatively-valenced gossip involved more actors who were affected by "bad" behavior of the gossip target than just the gossiper (Caivano et al., 2021).

When judging others, people tend to trust others perceived as pro-social and dislike and distrust those perceived as pro-self (Berman & Silver, 2022; Reeder et al., 2002). As such, we argue that the gossip motives interpreted by the receivers are pivotal in determining their reactions to gossipers, such that gossip containing the same information about a target's morality may result in positive versus negative consequences for gossipers depending on whether receivers interpret the gossip as pro-socially versus pro-selfishly motivated. Specifically, we predict:

H1a. Receivers who interpret gossip as pro-socially motivated will trust senders more than receivers who interpret gossip as pro-selfishly motivated.

H1b. Receivers who interpret gossip as pro-socially motivated will perceive senders as a more trustworthy source of information than receivers who interpret gossip as pro-selfishly motivated.

How receivers interpret the motive driving gossip should also impact their responses towards targets. When receivers interpret negative gossip about a target's morality as pro-socially motivated, this should lead them to trust the target less. Yet, when receivers interpret the same gossip as pro-selfishly motivated, they might attenuate their negative responses towards the target (Beersma et al., 2012; Dores Cruz, van der, et al., 2021; Hess & Hagen, 2006):

H2. Receivers who interpret gossip as pro-socially motivated will trust targets less than receivers who interpret gossip as pro-selfishly motivated.

3 | HOW RECEIVERS INTERPRET MOTIVES

Based on this line of reasoning, correctly interpreting gossipers' motives is a crucial task for receivers. In case they do it right, they trust pro-social, but distrust pro-self gossipers. Yet, in case they do it wrong, they might end up trusting selfish gossipers and punishing pro-social gossipers. Walmsley and O'Madagain (Walmsley & O'Madagain, 2020) showed that people are systematically biased in their interpretation of others' motives, as they tend to assume the worst motive behind others' actions, which would lead to an overestimation of selfish motivations when negative gossip is received. This might be due to the evolutionarily advantage of paying more attention to negative compared to positive stimuli, thus biasing judgements toward malicious, selfish motives.

Extrapolating this previous theory and research findings to gossip. gossip receivers should be relatively more likely to interpret negative gossip as pro-selfishly motivated than vice-versa. This would explain why, despite the positive functions gossip has been shown to serve for groups, gossipers are often not rewarded. In turn, this implies that, if individuals receive negative gossip driven by pro-self motives, they should be more likely to interpret the motives correctly:

H3a. Gossip receivers are more likely to correctly interpret negative gossip as pro-selfishly motivated (in which case the motive "matches" the valence of gossip) than to correctly interpret negative gossip as pro-socially motivated (in which case the motive "mismatches" the valence of gossip).

Since correctly identifying pro-self and pro-social motives for gossip has important implications for group dynamics (arguably, groups will function better if pro-self gossipers are not rewarded for their behavior and pro-social

gossipers are not punished) (Giardini et al., 2022), it is useful to shed light on factors that might help receivers to correctly interpret gossip.

One such factor is the ability to overcome one's initial intuitions, which has been found to influence the depth of information processing. Being able to overcome one's shallower intuitions and processing available information deeply and thoroughly has been associated with lower susceptibility to harmful information and better decisions in tasks where following one's first intuitions leads to mistakes (Pennycook et al., 2014, 2015; Pennycook & Rand, 2019).

Gossip is a unique form of information that most people have prior conceptions about. Yet, despite these prior conceptions that see negative gossip as a bad thing, gossip can be very useful for receivers as it can, for example, warn and protect them against norm violators (Feinberg et al., 2012). Therefore, overcoming initial intuitions could be important for the successful use of the information received through gossip. The ability to overcome intuition should especially help receivers to overcome the bias of misinterpreting negative gossip as pro-selfishly motivated. Our predictions suggest that negatively-valenced pro-social gossip would be more susceptible to incorrect interpretation than negatively-valenced pro-self gossip due to a systematic bias as postulated by Walmsley and O'Madagain (Walmsley & O'Madagain, 2020), and/or due to the larger cognitive effort required to understand the mismatch between the valence and the motive of gossip (Pennycook et al., 2015). As such, having a high ability to overcome intuition should be especially conducive towards more correct interpretations of negative gossip driven by pro-social motives, as for such gossip, the mismatch between motives and valence could steer intuitive interpretations in the wrong direction (John et al., 2019; Ten Velden et al., 2010). Thus, we hypothesize:

H3b. The better receivers are at overcoming their intuition, the more they will correctly interpret pro-socially motivated gossip (when the gossiper's motive does not match the gossip valence), but not pro-selfishly motivated gossip.

Thus, in this study we investigated how gossip interpretation affects receivers' reactions towards both senders and targets of gossip in a high-powered pre-registered vignette study. To provide more realistic gossip statements, we thoroughly examined real-world gossip and extensively tested the statements in two pilot studies (Study A and B) before further testing our hypotheses. Our study is unique in the sense that it explicitly measures ascribed pro-social and pro-self motives and relates them to behavioral and attitudinal trust. Moreover, our study, to our knowledge, is the first to point to negativity bias in gossip (pro-social gossip is more often misattributed than pro-self gossip) and to suggest an "antidote" to this: to the extent that people are able to overcome their initial intuition, they are better able to properly interpret pro-social gossip.

4 | METHODS

We pre-registered the design, hypotheses, and analysis plan for this study (https://osf.io/tpgdj/?view_only=7e73aa3fd8374c3bb4d4326e3258483f), and made the data, analysis code, and materials openly available (https://osf.io/p5ksf/?view_only=eb15e480228a48788858166049112e5f). We describe our sampling strategy, all manipulations, and all measures in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the University's Research Ethics Committee of [BLINDED FOR REVIEW].

5 | PROCEDURE AND MATERIALS

5.1 | Pre-tests: Stimulus generation

As detailed in our pre-registration (see https://osf.io/4uck8/?view_only=2645333055f74d85bbe3a3fee8fc11bc and the SI), we first conducted two pilot studies to calibrate the stimuli material, the scenario, and the sampling strategy.

These studies (Studies A and B), in which participants were presented with realistic gossip in a workplace scenario, are reported in the SI due to space considerations.

First, we coded gossip statements recalled by participants in an earlier online study on M-Turk and selected statements that occurred in the workplace between colleagues (rated as being about work in a work setting), that were clearly negative (highest negative valence rating), and that were clearly stemming from pro-social or pro-self motives (coded as motive being clear and certain about it; the coding materials and data for both pilot studies can be accessed via https://osf.io/p5ksf/). Second, we tested whether these statements could be identified as pro-socially or pro-selfishly motivated by participants that read them in the context of a workplace vignette (Study A, n = 152; dichotomous choice between proself and prosocial motive; see Gossip Motive Interpretation below). We found that the natural statements were frequently incorrectly interpreted by participants. To strengthen our manipulation, we therefore adapted the statements to include a sentence more explicitly describing a pro-social or pro-self motive following theoretical accounts of these motives (Beersma et al., 2012; Feinberg et al., 2012; McAndrew et al., 2007) (Study B, n = 200). We tested these adapted statements in a scenario study and found that these statements were more frequently correctly interpreted compared to Study A (see supplementary material). As such, we used the adapted statements in our current scenario to test our prediction about receiver's reactions to gossip.

Moreover, across both studies, we observed changes in attitudinal trust towards gossip senders but not in cooperative behaviors in the public goods game scenario used in the studies. A possible explanation is that, besides trust, competitive motives can also drive behavior in public goods games. In order to more unequivocally measure trust, we changed the scenario to reflect a trust game. For more details about Study A and B see the SI and the pre-registration on OSF.

5.2 | Gossip motive manipulation

Based on the results of Study A and B, we developed a scenario in which participants were presented with a work environment. In the scenario (see Figure 1 for an overview), participants were instructed to imagine that they were provided with a personal budget at work, and that they could decide to invest part of this budget in projects with their co-workers Jackie and Casey (Figure 1, panel 1). After this, participants received a gossip statement about one of their co-workers (Jackie) from another co-worker (Casey; see Figure 1, panel 2). The content of the gossip always described negative behaviors of the co-worker ("Jackie is always late for deadline and always slacks off. Jackie has also been very unprofessional with the clients"). The statements differed with regards to the gossiper's motive. In the pro-social motive condition, the gossip statement ended with: "Please be extra careful when working with Jackie!", whereas in the pro-self motive condition, the statement ended with: "I am definitely better at this job than Jackie!". In a between-subjects design, participants either received no gossip, pro-social gossip, or pro-self gossip. The gossip statements were pre-tested in Study B (see SI and pre-registration), where participants correctly interpreted the pro-self gossip 80.4% of the time and the pro-social gossip 54.9% of the time.

5.3 | Trust behavior towards the gossip sender and target

After reading the gossip statement, participants were presented with two opportunities to invest part of their personal budget in a project with the gossip target (Jackie) and sender (Casey; the order of the decisions was randomized, see Figure 1, panel 3). These investment opportunities were described as vignettes representing the structure of a trust game (Berg et al., 1995). In a trust game (Iacono & Testori, 2021), a trustor (the participant) receives an endowment and decides how much of this endowment to send to a trustee (gossip sender/target). The endowment sent is then multiplied by a fixed amount, and the trustee decides whether to keep the sum received or return part of it to the trustor. In our vignette, participants could decide to invest between 0$ and 100$ in the project (see SI for the full

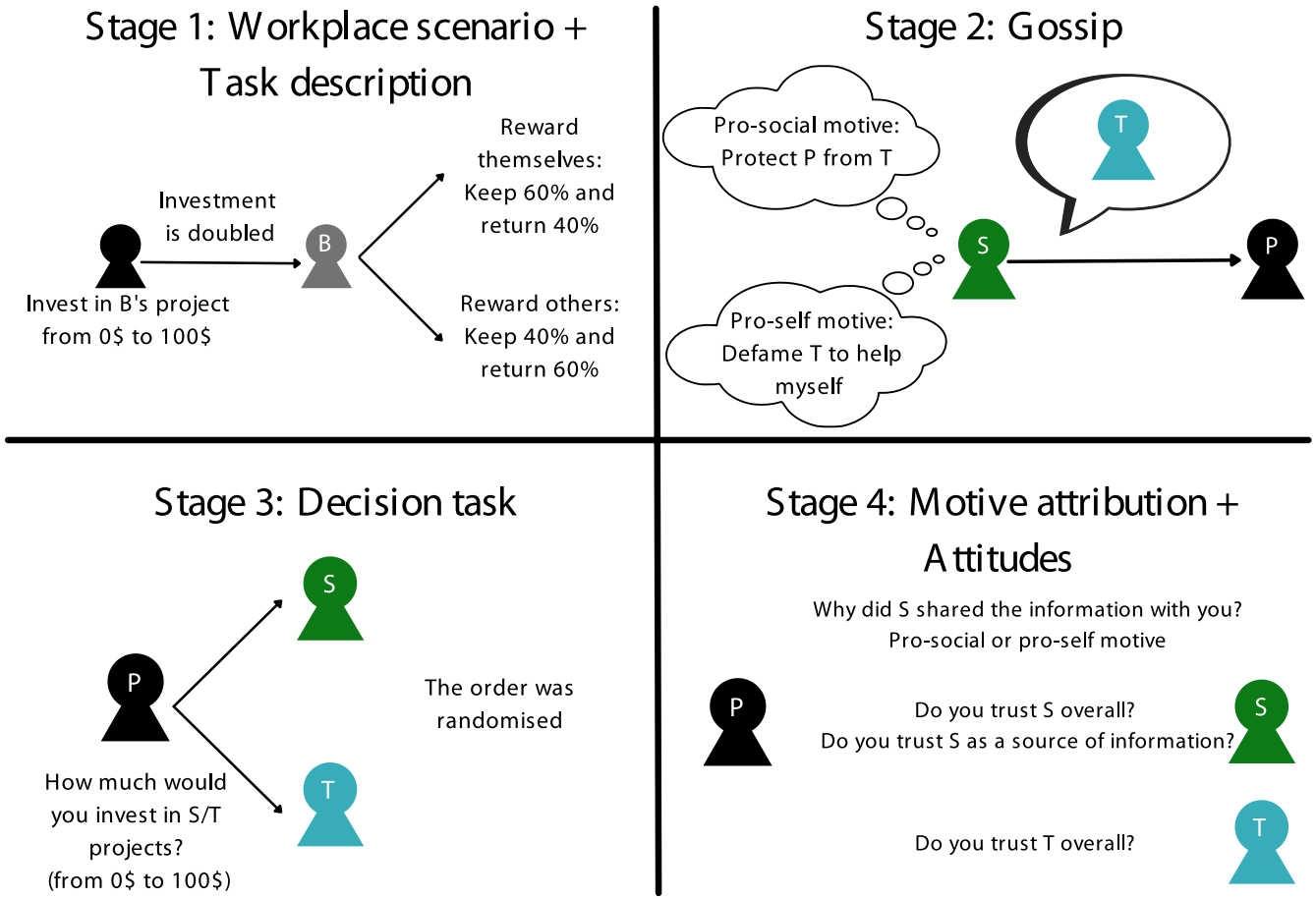

FIGURE 1 Overview of experimental design. P indicates the participant, Casey (C) the gossip sender and Jackie (J) the gossip target.

instructions). Any amount they did not invest was kept, and any amount invested was doubled. After the investment, the trustee could either *reward participants* by giving them 60% of the returns or *reward themselves* by giving the participant 40% of the returns. The amount invested is our behavioral measure of the participants' trust towards the gossip sender/target.

5.4 | Gossip motive interpretation

After the trust game, participants interpreted first which motive they thought the gossip sender had for gossip (Beersma et al., 2012, 2019; Dores Cruz et al., 2019; Peters & Fonseca, 2020). They did this on a forced choice item where they indicated whether the gossip sender shared the information "to benefit themselves" (pro-self motive) or "to benefit others including me" (pro-social motive; Figure 1, panel 4). We also collected motive ratings using continuous scales, please see the SI, page 7, for a description of these measures. Analyses based on the forced-choice and continuous items lead to the same conclusions, see SI, pages 9–21.

5.5 | Attitudinal trust

5.5.1 | Attitudinal trust in the sender and target

Second, we measured the extent to which participants trusted the sender and the target using two items: "I trust the sender/target" and "The sender/target is concerned for my welfare" (2). The items were combined to form a single composite score (r_{sender} = 0.68; r_{target} = 0.72), which represents our attitudinal measure of the participants' trust towards the sender/target (Figure 1, panel 4).

5.5.2 | Trustworthiness of the sender as a source of information

Third, we measured the trustworthiness of the sender as an information source using a questionnaire that is commonly used to measure bias perceptions of news sources (Lo Iacono & Daniel Dores Cruz, 2022; Yale et al., 2015). Participants indicated to what extent eight adjectives (e.g., fair, objective, trustworthy) described the sender as an information source (ω = 0.94). A higher score indicates being a more trustworthy information source (Figure 1, panel 4).

5.6 | Ability to overcome intuition

Lastly, we measured the ability to overcome intuition using the Cognitive Reflection Test (Frederick, 2005; Thomson & Oppenheimer, 2016). Participants answered seven questions for which the intuitive answer is incorrect (e.g., "if you are running a race and you pass the person in second place, what place are you in?"; The intuitive answer is "first", the correct answer is "second"). The more correct answers participants gave, the higher their ability to overcome intuition (ω = 0.79).

5.6.1 | Attention checks

We included three attention checks that asked participants to select a specific answer option within a scale (e.g., "Please select completely disagree"). Most participants passed all three attention checks (n = 1592, 96.4%), while the

TABLE 1 Overview of receivers' interpretation (correct or incorrect) of the manipulated gossip motive (pro-self vs. pro-social).

		Motive interpretation		
		Correct	Incorrect	Total
Condition motive	Pro-self	337 (71.8%)	132 (28.2%)	469
	Pro-social	463 (64.4%)	256 (35.6%)	719
	Total	800 (67.3%)	388 (32.7%)	1188

Note: Percentages indicate the percentages within a row. The control condition without gossip which did not involve the interpretation of a gossip motive (n = 463).

remaining participants failed at most a single attention check (n = 59, 3.6%). Because there were no participants who failed all attention checks, we used the complete sample of participants without exclusions for our analyses (see SI for more details).

5.7 | Participants

We recruited 1651 participants (832 men, 799 women, 11 non-binary, 9 did not want to indicate; M_{age} = 41.38, SD = 12.45, range 19–83) on Amazon's Mechanical Turk using CloudResearch approved participants (Hauser et al., 2022). There were 469 participants in the pro-self condition, 719 participants in the pro-social condition, and 463 in the no gossip control condition. As can be seen in Table 1, we reached the minimal required sample size in the incorrect interpretation conditions (see SI for power analysis). Sensitivity power analysis indicates that we were able to detect small effects of Cohen's f = 0.09 at 90% power and Cohen's f = 0.08 at 80% power (for α = 0.05 and two-tailed tests). For the comparison with the smallest sample (incorrect interpretation pro-self motive vs. incorrect interpretation pro-social motive), sensitivity power analysis indicates that we were able to detect medium effects of Cohen's f = 0.35 at 90% power and Cohen's f = 0.30 at 80% power (for α = 0.05 and two-tailed tests).

6 | STATISTICAL ANALYSES

To test hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H2, we used a linear regression model with the gossip motive condition (0 = pro-self, 1 = pro-social), the gossip motive interpretation (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct), and the interaction of these variables as predictors of (a) trust in the sender as indicated by the trust game in the scenario (H1a), (b) attitudinal trust in the sender (H1a), (c) trustworthiness of the sender as an information source (H1b), (d) trust in the target as indicated by the trust game in the scenario (H2), and (e) attitudinal trust in the target (H2). We fitted five separate models, one per outcome variable.

To test hypotheses H3a and H3b, we used binary logistic regression with the gossip motive condition (0 = pro-self, 1 = pro-social) as a predictor of the gossip motive interpretation (1 = correct, 0 = incorrect). Hypothesis H3b further included the Cognitive Reflection Test (CRT) score and the interaction between the gossip motive condition and the CRT score as a predictor of motive interpretation.

We exploratively tested the differences between gossip conditions and control condition (no gossip) using linear regression models (Fox & Weisberg, 2018), and followed up with contrast analyses comparing the gossip conditions to the control condition.

To test the robustness of our results, we controlled for participants' generalized trust (Nannestad, 2008), social value orientation (Murphy et al., 2011), and attitudes towards gossip (Litman & Pezzo, 2005) see SI for complete results with and without control variables). To further assess the robustness, in the SI, as previously mentioned, we

additionally compared the gossip motive interpretation with a subsequent Likert scale rating of both motives (2 items rated at the same time) to show that the choice of motive matches this rating and that the pattern of results leads to the same conclusions when using these ratings as predictors instead of the forced-choice measure. Analyses were conducted using R (Team, 2013) and the package 'emmeans' to test contrasts following interactions (Lenth et al., 2021).

7 | RESULTS

Table 2 gives an overview of the means and standard deviations of the variables used in the study as well as their intercorrelations and correlation with demographics.

8 | CONSEQUENCES FOR GOSSIP SENDERS

The consequences of gossip for the senders were shaped by the participants' interpretation of the gossip motives (interaction between the gossip motive condition and the gossip motive interpretation): for behavioral trust (b (se) = −15.36 (3.75), $t(1184) = 4.10$, $p < 0.001$, partial $r = 0.12$), for attitudinal trust (b (se) = −2.80 (0.14), $t(1184) = 19.93$, $p < 0.001$, partial $r = 0.50$), and for trust as an information source (b (se) = −1.64 (0.09), $t(1184) = 19.00$, $p < 0.001$, partial $r = 0.48$). As shown in Figure 2, when receivers correctly interpreted gossip motives, they trusted senders of pro-social gossip, compared to senders of pro-self gossip, slightly more in terms of behavior (b (se) = 4.22 (2.08), $t(1184) = 2.03$, $p = 0.043$, Cohen's $d = 0.15$; Figure 2, panel a), much more in terms of attitudes (b (se) = 1.62 (0.08), $t(1184) = 20.77$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.49$; Figure 2, panel b), and much more as an information source (b (se) = 0.94 (0.05), $t(1184) = 19.64$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = 1.41$; Figure 2, panel c). In contrast, when receivers incorrectly interpreted gossip motives, they trusted senders of pro-social gossip, compared to senders of pro-self gossip, slightly less in terms of behavior (b (se) = −11.14 (3.12), $t(1184) = 3.57$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.38$), much less in terms of attitudes (b (se) = −1.18 (0.12), $t(1184) = -10.09$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -1.08$), and much less as an information source (b (se) = −0.70 (0.07), $t(1184) = -9.73$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -1.04$). Taken together, supporting H1a and H1b, receivers who interpreted negative gossip as pro-socially motivated (compared to pro-selfishly motivated) trusted senders more as reflected in their trusting behavior and their attitudinal perceptions of the sender's trustworthiness, as well as their perceptions of the sender as a trustworthy source of information.

9 | CONSEQUENCES FOR GOSSIP TARGETS

The consequences of gossip for the target were also shaped by participants' interpretation of the gossip motives (interaction between the gossip motive condition and the gossip motive interpretation) for both behavioral trust (b (se) = −12.57 (3.54), $t(1184) = -3.55$, $p < 0.001$, partial $r = -0.10$), and attitudinal trust (b (se) = −0.70 (0.14), $t(1184) = -5.05$, $p < 0.001$, partial $r = -0.15$). As shown in Figure 3, when receivers correctly interpreted gossip motives, they trusted targets of pro-social gossip, compared to targets of pro-self gossip, somewhat less in terms of behavior (b (se) = −0.55 (0.08), $t = -6.63$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.44$, Figure 3, panel a) and somewhat less in terms of attitudes (b (se) = −9.63 (1.97), $t(1184) = 4.90$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen's $d = -0.35$, Figure 3, panel b). Yet, when receivers incorrectly interpreted gossip motives, there was no difference in trust towards targets of pro-social gossip, compared to pro-self gossip, in terms of behavior (b (se) = −2.94 (2.95), $t = -1.00$, $p = 0.318$, Cohen's $d = 0.11$) nor attitudes (b (se) = 0.14 (0.11), $t = -1.31$, $p = 0.191$, Cohen's $d = 0.21$). Taken together, partially supporting H2, receivers who interpreted negative gossip as pro-socially motivated (compared to pro-selfishly motivated) trusted targets of gossip less as reflected in their trusting behavior and their general perceptions of the target's trustworthiness.

Results were robust to the inclusion of control variables (see SI for complete results), with the only exception of the contrast comparing trust behavior towards the sender between the pro-social and pro-self gossip motive condition when gossip was correctly interpreted (b (se) = −3.18 (2.11), $t(1166) = -1.51$, $p = 0.132$, Cohen's $d = -0.11$).

TABLE 2 Overview of the means (M), standard deviations (SD), range, and correlations between the variables used in the study.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gossip condition (Pro-self vs. pro-social)	0.61	0.49	{0,1}												
2. Gossip condition (control vs. pro-self)	0.50	0.50	{0,1}	[a]											
3. Gossip condition (Control vs. pro-social)	0.39	0.49	{0,1}	[a]	[a]										
4. Correct gossip motive interpretation	0.67	0.47	{0,1}	−0.08	[a]	[a]									
5. Gossip motive interpretation	0.50	0.50	{0,1}	0.35***	[a]	[a]	0.22***								
6. Trust sender (behavioral measure)	46.37	29.52	[0,100]	−0.02	0.10	0.11**	0.06	0.12**							
7. Trust sender (attitudinal measure)	4.39	1.28	[0,5]	0.27***	0.37***	0.08	0.13***	0.56***	0.31***						
8. Trust sender as an information source	3.04	0.80	[0,5]	0.26***	[a]	[a]	0.11**	0.54***	0.24***	0.81***					
9. Trust target (behavioral measure)	34.98	30.06	[0,100]	−0.10*	0.31**	0.39***	−0.03	−0.14***	0.63***	0.11***	−0.08				
10. Trust target (attitudinal measure)	3.83	1.25	[0,5]	−0.10*	0.49***	0.53***	−0.12**	−0.20***	0.15***	0.19***	−0.14***	0.46***			
11. CRT score	4.56	2.03	[0,7]	−0.06	−0.06	<0.01	0.10*	0.07	−0.06	−0.02	−0.04	−0.10**	−0.09**		
12. Gender[b]	1.51	0.54	{0,1}[c]	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	<0.01	0.02	−0.05	0.04	0.03	−0.04	−0.03	−0.14***	
13. Age	41.38	12.45	[19, 83]	−0.05	<0.01	0.04	−0.07	−0.11**	−0.05	−0.05	−0.11**	−0.01	0.05	0.04	0.06

Note: Gossip condition (Pro-self vs. Pro-social: 0 = pro-self, 1 = pro-social; None vs. Pro-self: 0 = no gossip, 1 = pro-self; None vs. Pro-social: 0 = no gossip, 1 = pro-social), Correct gossip motive interpretation (0 = incorrect, 1 = correct), Gossip motive interpretation (0 = pro-self, 1 = pro-social), *$p < 0.05$. **$p < 0.01$ ***$p < 0.001$; p adjusted with Holm correction (35).

Abbreviation: CRT, Cognitive Reflection Test.

[a]Correlation could not be calculated because variables do not occur together.

[b]Other categories of gender excluded from all correlation analyses.

[c]Gender (0 = male, 1 = female).

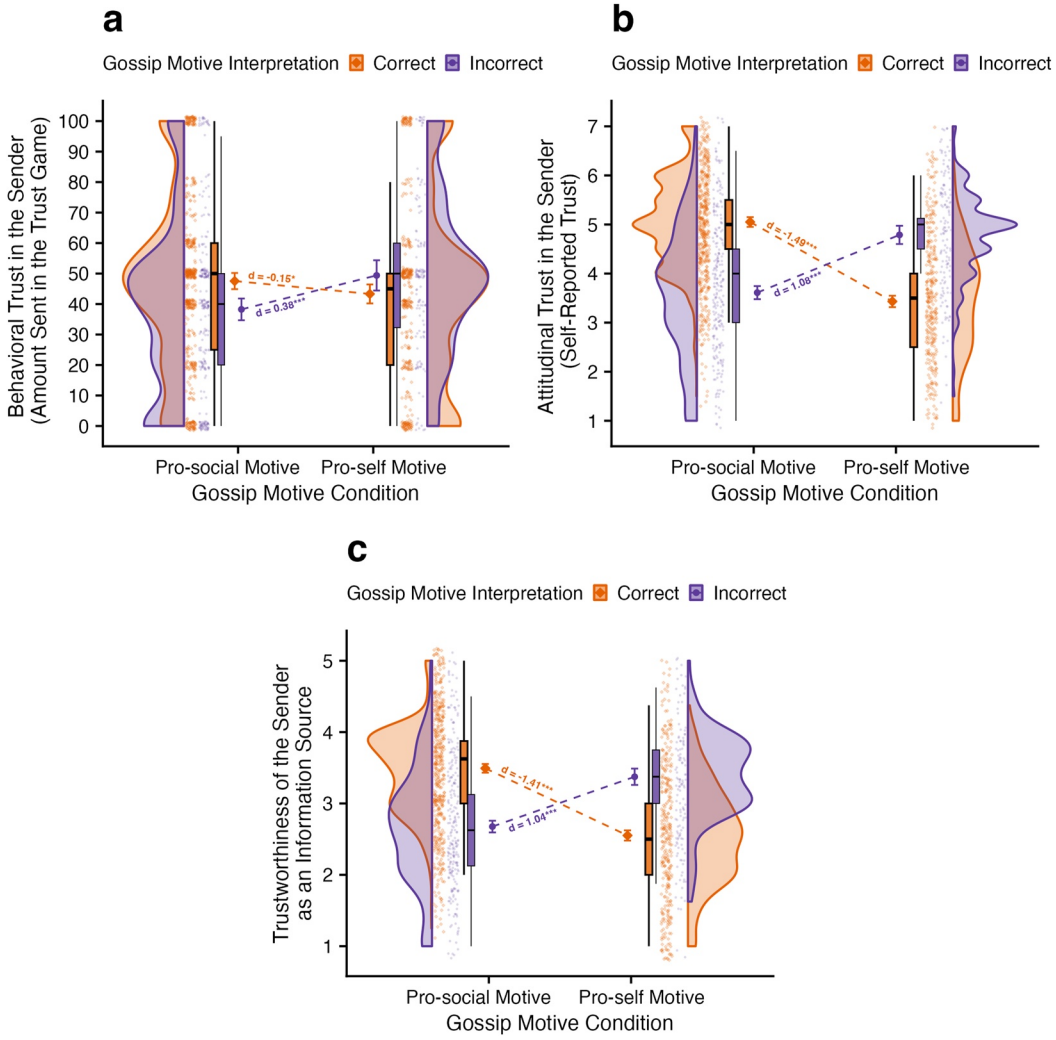

FIGURE 2 Interaction of motive condition (pro-self vs. pro-social) with motive interpretation (correct vs. incorrect). Results show that senders whose gossip was interpreted as pro-socially motivated (compared to pro-selfishly motivated) were trusted more/less in behavior (panel a), attributions (panel b), and as an information source (panel c) when gossip motives were interpreted correctly/incorrectly. Dots represent individual data points. The box limits show the 25th percentile, the median and the 75th percentile, respectively. The whiskers extend to 1.5 times the interquartile range. Diamonds and circles indicate the predicted mean with the error bars representing a 95% confidence interval. *$p < 0.05$, ***$p < 0.001$.

Overall, our results suggest that participants' interpretation of the motives behind gossip shaped their trust towards both the sender and the target of gossip, regardless of their individual attitudes.

10 | GOSSIP MOTIVES INTERPRETATION

Table 1 presents an overview of the motive interpretation per condition. The table shows that people were slightly more likely to correctly interpret pro-self motives compared to pro-social motives (*est.* (*se*) = −0.35 (0.13), $z = -2.68$, $p = 0.007$, $OR = 0.71$). Thus, supporting H3a, negative pro-self gossip was more likely to be correctly interpreted than

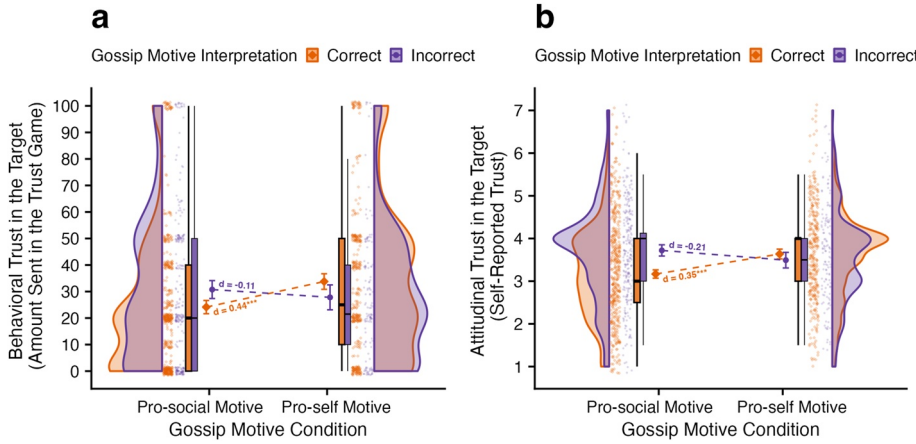

FIGURE 3 Interaction of motive condition (pro-self vs. pro-social) with motive interpretation (correct vs. incorrect). Results show that targets of gossip that was interpreted as pro-socially motivated (compared to pro-selfishly motivated) were trusted less in behavior (panel a), and attitudes (panel b) when gossip motives were correctly (but not incorrectly) interpreted. Dots represent individual data points. The box limits show the 25th percentile, the median and the 75th percentile, respectively. The whiskers extend to 1.5 times the interquartile range. Diamonds and circles indicate the predicted mean with the error bars representing a 95% confidence interval. ***$p < 0.001$.

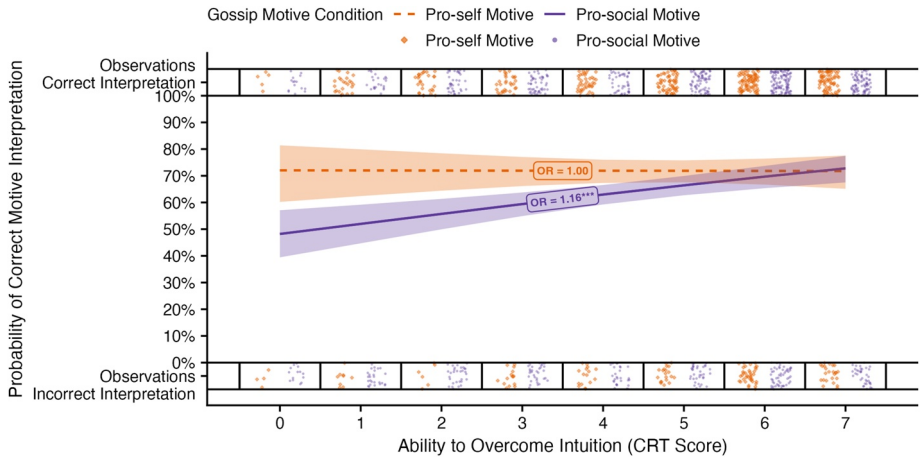

FIGURE 4 Interaction between the ability to overcome intuition and gossip motive condition. Results show the positive effect of the ability to overcome intuition on the probability to correctly interpret gossip motives in the pro-social motive condition but not in the pro-self motive condition. Ribbons around the lines represent a 95% confidence interval. Dots represent individual observations of correct and incorrect interpretations of the gossip motive. ***$p < 0.001$.

negative pro-social gossip. Thus, receivers of negative gossip were more likely to misinterpret pro-self motives as pro-social than they were to misinterpret pro-social motives as pro-self.

Furthermore, the ability to overcome intuitions (CRT score) influenced how people interpreted motives (interaction between the gossip motive condition and CRT score: *est.* (*se*) = 0.15 (0.07), $z = 2.27$, $p = 0.024$, $OR = 1.16$). As shown in Figure 4, supporting H3b, the ability to overcome intuition slightly increased the probability of correctly interpreting pro-social gossip (*est.* (*se*) = 0.15 (0.04), $z = 3.83$, $p < 0.001$, $OR = 1.16$). In contrast, further supporting

H3b, the ability to overcome intuition did not significantly impact the probability of correctly interpreting pro-self gossip (*est*. (*se*) = −0.002 (0.05), z = −0.04, p = 0.966, *OR* = 1.00).

Taken together, these results show that individuals who were better at overcoming their intuition were more likely to correctly interpret gossip motives when the motive did not intuitively fit the content: the content was negative, but the motive was pro-social (i.e., a "positive" motive). The ability to overcome intuition did not impact the probability to correctly interpret gossip motives when the motive did intuitively fit the content: the content was negative and the motive was pro-self (i.e., a "negative" motive).

11 | COMPARISON WITH CONTROL CONDITION

Finally, to better understand how people reacted to gossip, we also included a control condition in which no gossip was presented to the participants (the sender and target were solely introduced as colleagues). We exploratively compared trust behaviors and attitudes towards the sender/target in each combination of the gossip motive condition and the interpretation of the gossip motive with this control condition (see SI for more details and coefficients).

As shown in Figures 5a and 5b, when gossip was interpreted as pro-self, senders were trusted less by receivers compared to people that did not gossip. Yet, when gossip was interpreted as pro-social, senders were not trusted differently compared to people who did not gossip (only attitudinal trust was slightly higher when pro-social gossip was correctly interpreted). Thus, engaging in gossip, compared to refraining from it, led to costs for senders when gossip was interpreted as pro-self. On the other hand, there were small benefits when gossip was interpreted as pro-social (this was found to only increase attitudinal, but not behavioral trust).

Finally, as shown in Figures 5c and 5d, regardless of the motive interpretation, receivers of negative gossip trusted the target much less compared to when no gossip was received, in line with the negative information conveyed through gossip.

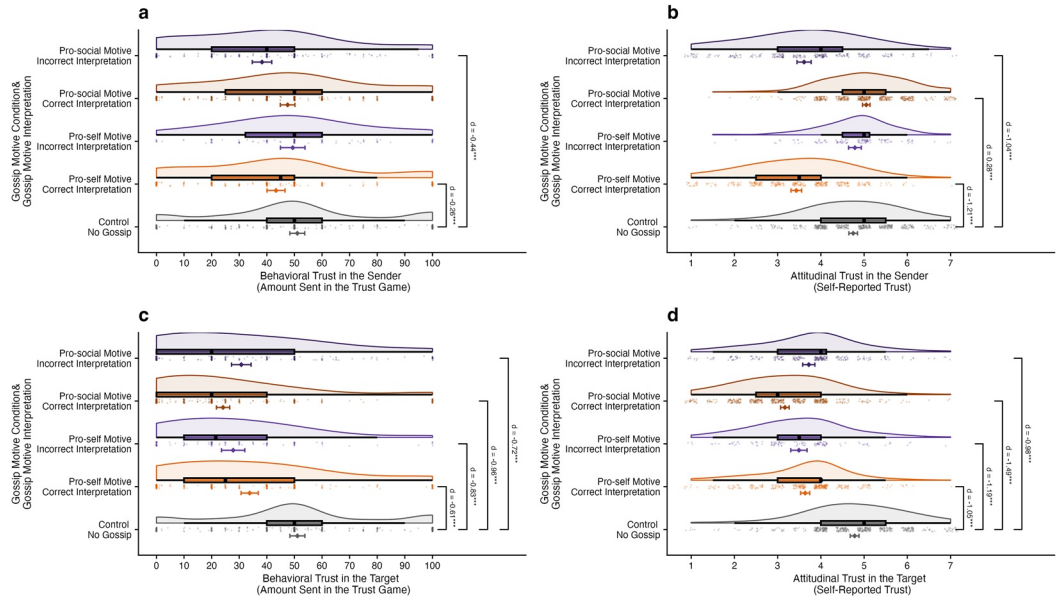

FIGURE 5 Differences between the control condition (no gossip) and the gossip motive conditions by motive interpretation for (a) behavioral and (b) attitudinal trust towards the sender, and (c) behavioral and (d) attitudinal trust towards the target. Brackets only presented for significant differences. Box limits show the 25th percentile, the median and the 75th percentile, respectively. Whiskers extend to 1.5 × interquartile range. Dots represent individual data points. ***p < 0.001.

12 | DISCUSSION

In this study, we aimed to solve the puzzle of negative gossip having beneficial effects at the group level, yet gossipers being often perceived negatively. Our results show that the receivers' interpretation of gossip motives was the key element to unravel gossip consequences.

When presented with a clear scenario and real-world-grounded gossip statements, receivers more accurately interpreted pro-self (roughly 72% accuracy) than pro-social motives (roughly 64% accuracy). As such, people more often misinterpreted negatively-valenced pro-social gossip as pro-self than vice versa, thus neglecting the potential benefit gossip could have for them. Moreover, receivers who were better at overcoming their intuition were more likely to correctly interpret gossip in which the motive did not intuitively fit the content (negative valence but "positive", pro-social motive). This indicates that overcoming intuitions about gossip could be essential to reap the benefits of pro-social gossip for cooperation while avoiding unjustified condemnation of gossipers (Beersma et al., 2019; Fonseca & Peters, 2021; Lee & Barnes, 2021).

An avenue for future research could be to investigate to what extent senders are aware of the effects of receivers' interpretations and whether senders select their receivers based on their perceptions of the receivers' ability to overcome intuition or based on their relations with the sender and target, to minimize the costs and maximize the benefits of both pro-social and pro-self gossip (Dores Cruz, Thielmann, et al., 2021; McAndrew et al., 2007).

Further, consolidating our argument, results showed that receivers' interpretation of gossip motives shaped gossip's consequences. In line with our hypotheses, correctly interpreted pro-social (pro-self) motives increased (decreased) trust in gossipers, whereas incorrectly interpreted motives showed the reverse pattern.

This could reveal a potential cost of gossip, which is often regarded as a low-cost mechanism to spread information relevant to cooperation (Molho & Wu, 2021). This cost might be mitigated by sharing negative gossip with receivers that are motivated to view one's motives as pro-social, because they have a positive relationship with the sender and negative relationship with the target, or because they are able and/or willing to overcome intuition (Dores Cruz, Thielmann, et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2021).

Regarding gossip's consequences for senders, we found stronger effects on perceptions than on behavior in the trust game. This might indicate that one's reputation as a gossiper could be (partially) separate from one's reputation as an interaction partner. In the short term, sending gossip might not lead to large benefits or costs for senders based on the motivational interpretation of receivers, a finding that resonates with results showing that sharing false gossip does not have negative consequences for senders (Fonseca & Peters, 2021). However, the costs of gossip could reveal themselves in the longer run and future research is needed to test the long-term consequences of having a negative reputation as a gossiper (Testori et al., 2023).

Besides influencing reactions towards gossipers, the receivers' interpreted motives also affected their reactions towards targets. In line with our hypotheses, when receivers interpreted gossip as stemming from a pro-social (rather than a pro-self) motive, they trusted targets less. However, counter to expectations, this only occurred when motives were correctly interpreted. A potential explanation for this could be that the negative valence, rather than the sender's motive, is key in shaping responses to targets. Explorative comparisons to a control condition without gossip support this interpretation: trust in the target when there was no gossip was significantly higher than in any gossip condition. Future research could also investigate whether similar results would be obtained when testing how different interpretations of the motives driving positively-valenced gossip shape participants' behaviors towards both the sender and the target of gossip.

Trust decisions were embedded in a scenario involving no real monetary consequences. Possibly, people would make different decisions if actual money was at stake or if decisions would impact their work life (Sheeran & Webb, 2016). However, behavioral intentions collected through vignette studies have been found to be predictive of actual behavior (Hainmueller et al., 2015). Finally, our gossip statements included very explicit gossip motives that might not often occur in everyday life. We used these rather "extreme" cases of pro-social and pro-self gossip, that are much less subtle than they would likely appear in real life, in our manipulations for the purpose of testing

whether interpretations of motives would drive reactions to gossipers and targets, whether prosocial gossip would be more likely to be misinterpreted than pro-self gossip, and whether the ability to overcome intuition would attenuate the latter effect. As such, we prioritized experimental control over mundane realism, and in achieving this control, some ecological validity was arguably lost. We would expect motive interpretation to be even more difficult in real life, where gossip is likely to provide motive cues less explicitly. If so, this would mean that the current studies test the hypotheses about misinterpretation of motives in a conservative way and lead us to underestimate the effects. Yet, when receiving real-life gossip, receivers may use additional cues to interpret gossip motives, such as body language, context, and the relationships between senders, receivers and targets, and these cues were absent in our study. Future research could investigate the accuracy of motive interpretation in a more realistic context and examine whether senders exploit ambiguity to disguise pro-self motives as pro-social (see also Giardini, et al. (Giardini et al., 2019)).

Our results indicate that the positive and negative consequences of gossip, for both senders and the groups in which gossip occurs can be harnessed if receivers correctly interpret why people gossip and act accordingly. In practice, this means that to support a correct interpretation, people should be encouraged to think deeply about the received gossip and the motives underlying it, before reacting to senders and targets. Consulting multiple gossip sources or taking the relationship context in which gossip occurs into account could help in making more accurate motive interpretations. Moreover, groups could aim to dispel the prejudice attached to gossip to recognize pro-social motives also in negative gossip.

In conclusion, the receivers' interpretation of the gossip motives is pivotal in understanding why people often dislike gossipers despite the usefulness of gossip for groups. Gossipers receive benefits when receivers interpret their motives as pro-social, but incur costs when receivers interpret their motives as pro-self.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

Martina Testori: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Project Administration. **Terence D. Dores Cruz:** Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization. **Bianca Beersma:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing, Supervision, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The study pre-registration, hypotheses, and analysis plan are openly available on OSF (https://osf.io/tpgdj/?view_only=74c90fd15f964487bfbec6e55455ceb6). The data, analysis code, and materials are openly available on OSF (https://osf.io/p5ksf/?view_only=5839d15ef96d433d8d4d46a7194e3c48).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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