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Politically knowledgeable ideologues believe they are less effective in political conversations

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How accurately can people estimate how influential they are when they talk about politics? Using data from two field experiments in which partisans discussed political issues with anonymous partners via messaging apps, I find that peoples' perceptions of their influence are not related to their actual influence. Instead, perceptions of influence are shaped by political knowledge and ideology. In both cross-party and all-Democrat conversations, people who know more about politics believe they are less influential. In cross-party but not all-Democrat conversations, those who are more ideologically extreme believe they are less influential. Notably, political knowledge has no effect on the amount of influence respondents actually have. These findings suggest a need to better understand potential differential effects of conversation-based depolarization interventions by level of participant political knowledge.

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Introduction

Many Americans avoid conversations about politics, fearing they will lead to conflict (Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018; Groenendyk et al., 2025) and social isolation (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Matthes, Knoll and Von Sikorski, 2018). They are especially averse to conversations with those who hold different political views (Gerber et al., 2012; Hampton, Shin and Lu, 2017; Cowan and Baldassarri, 2018; Settle and Carlson, 2019), particularly in polarized and politically charged environments (Wells et al., 2017). Avoidance of political conversation has complex downstream impacts, both reducing opportunity for cross-party interaction that can decrease affective and ideological polarization (Fishkin et al., 2021; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021; Santoro and Broockman, 2022; Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023; Rossiter and Carlson, 2024) while also reducing opportunity for the warping of information that may increase it (Carlson, 2024; Settle, 2025).

Political conversations involving disagreement certainly can be uncomfortable and go poorly (Chen and Rohla, 2018; Carlson and Settle, 2022). However, they often go better than participants anticipate. Partisans generally find both exposure to content they disagree with, like speeches and statements made by the opposing party (Dorison, Minson and Rogers, 2019), and actual conversations with people they disagree with (Geiger et al., 2023; Wald, Kardas and Epley, 2024) to be less unpleasant than they initially expect. Members of the other party are less ideologically extreme, on average, than partisans expect (Robinson et al., 1995; Sherman, Nelson and Ross, 2003; Druckman et al., 2022). They are also more willing to learn about opposing views (Collins et al., 2022). This means the opinions of opposing partisans are less distant and opinion change is more likely than partisans anticipate.

The discrepancy between the negative conversational outcomes people expect and the positive conversational outcomes researchers measure raises the question: how connected are subjective conversational experiences to actual, measured outcomes? Here, I investigate the perceptions people have of their success in persuading others in deliberative political conversation. Previous research has focused on the effects of these conversations on actual political opinion change. However, we do not know whether people accurately perceive the shifts that they cause to their partner's opinions—or, conversely, whether they accurately perceive when their efforts at influence are not working.

Influence and influence perceptions in political conversation

Persuasion is just one among many reasons people enter political conversations (Eveland, Morey and Hutchens, 2011; Carlson and Settle, 2022). However, a large and increasing number of people try to persuade others about politics at least some of the time. Argyle and Pope (2022) find that trying to change someone's vote is a more common form of political participation than any other measured by the American National Election Study. Nearly fifty percent of Americans reported trying to change someone's vote in the period leading up to the 2016 election, up from ~30% prior to elections in the 1980s (Argyle and Pope, 2022).

While we know that people try to persuade others about politics, we know little about the subjective experience of those influence attempts. Perceptions of influence and subjective experiences of conversation more broadly are important for at least two reasons. First, perceptions of influence can precipitate actual opinion change. When people believe conversation partners are receptive to what they have to say, they enjoy the interaction more and consider their opinions more in return, creating a cycle that can lead both parties to change their opinions more (Itzhakov and Reis, 2021; Minson and Chen, 2022).

Second, whether people believe that they have changed a conversation partner's mind may affect whether they choose to have similar conversations in future. People who are perceived as more conversationally receptive—more likely to thoughtfully consider opposing points of view—are seen as more desirable collaboration partners (Yeomans et al., 2020). Interventions meant to convince people that their discussion partners are willing to learn about their views increase willingness to engage in future (Collins et al., 2022). More broadly, when people experience being politically effective, they are more likely to engage in politics in future (Valentino, Gregorowicz and Groenendyk, 2009; Gastil and Xenos, 2010; Preece, 2016; Geiger et al., 2023).

I investigate the relationship between the influence people have in political conversation and their perceptions of that influence in conversations where influence is a goal. Since people who are receptive to arguments signal this through their own conversational behavior, we might expect influence and influence perceptions to correspond (Minson and Chen, 2022). However, a large body of psychological literature on the Dunning-Kruger Effect demonstrates that people, particularly people who perform poorly, often misestimate their performance (Svenson, 1981; Kruger and Dunning, 1999; Anson, 2018; Marisguia and Dias, 2021). Such self-deception may actually be useful for persuasion (Smith, Trivers and Von Hippel, 2017; Schwarzmann and Van Der Weele, 2019). This leads to the possibility that influence and perceived influence may not in fact be strongly related.

Political knowledge

In addition, I explore how influence and perceptions of influence are patterned by a person's level of political knowledge. Knowing more about politics may enable people to make stronger arguments for their positions on political issues, increasing their ability to persuade a conversation partner (Park et al., 2007; Schreiner et al., 2018). If people can accurately estimate their influence, then this increase in influence might also increase perceived influence.

Political knowledge may also impact perceived influence through expectations of influence. People who lack political knowledge and interest are especially hesitant about political conversation, finding it particularly uncomfortable and risky (Conover, Searing and Crewe, 2002; Klar and Krupnikov, 2016; Geiger et al., 2023). It is possible lowered expectations for their ability to influence a conversation partner translate into lower perceptions of influence at the end of the conversation—although this effect may be dampened by demonstrated tendencies of the less knowledgeable to overestimate their political knowledge, particularly in contexts where partisan identities are salient (Anson, 2018).

Political knowledge might also have an effect on influence perceptions through its effect on the social ontologies around politics. It is possible that people who are more familiar with politics—and who know how to align their beliefs with those of their “team”—perceive a greater level of division and so expect changing other peoples' minds to be more challenging (Martin and Desmond, 2010; Pinsof, Sears and Haselton, 2023).

Methods

I re-analyze data collected as part of two field experiments on influence in political conversation (Combs, Tierney, Alqabandi, et al., 2023; Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023). In both studies, respondents were asked to use mobile messaging apps developed by the research teams to talk to a randomly assigned discussion partner about a political issue. Both studies were structured to

make influence a conversational goal by asking participants to convince their partners of their opinion on a controversial issue (Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023) or come to consensus about candidate choice (Combs, Tierney, Alqabandi, et al., 2023), making them particularly well-suited for studying influence perceptions. See Supplementary Materials section 1.1 for more information on study design.

The original publications focused on the effects of pre-registered experimental manipulations of identity labels on influence and depolarization. However, in addition to their actual influence, both studies also measured the influence respondents believed they had on their discussion partners. This allows me to study the relationship between actual and perceived influence across several different configurations created by the different study environments and experimental conditions within them.

Data collection. The first study, called DiscussIt, paired respondents with members of the opposite political party and asked them to persuade their partner of their views on either immigration or gun control (Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023). The sample was stratified to include 50% Democrats and Democrat-leaning and 50% Republicans and Republican-leaning. True independents were excluded. Partisan labels were experimentally manipulated such that some respondents' parties were labeled correctly, some incorrectly, and some not at all. Respondents could not see their own partisan labels, only those of their partner. In a piece about the effects of the experimental manipulations on polarization measures, Combs, Tierney, Guay, and colleagues (2023) found that the cross-partisan conversations decreased measures of affective and ideological polarization, though to a lesser degree when partisanship was unlabeled.

The second study, called UniteDem, paired Democrats with other Democrats and asked them to come to consensus on which candidate was best suited to receive the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination (Combs, Tierney, Alqabandi, et al., 2023). This study included only Democrats and Democrat-leaning. UniteDem respondents were paired with an either same or other-gender partner and asked to come to a consensus on which of the eight candidates who were pursuing the Democratic presidential nomination at the time fielding began had the best chance to beat then-President Donald Trump. Respondents had gendered avatars which were experimentally manipulated to either match or not match their gender identity. As in DiscussIt, respondents could see their partner's avatar but not their own. The sample was stratified to include 50% men and 50% women. As at this time YouGov provided only these two genders as response options on their standard demographic survey, I do not have data on the number of people in the sample who may have identified with other gender categories. In a piece about the effects of the experimental manipulations on influence, Combs, Tierney, Alqabandi, and colleagues (2023) found that mislabeling men as women decreased their influence, but mislabeling women as men did not increase theirs.

In both studies, respondents were recruited from a nationally representative online panel maintained by YouGov, a large survey firm. They were required to be U.S. citizens over 18 years of age and use a smartphone or tablet running iOS or Android. See Supplementary Materials section 1.2 and Table S1 for details.

Respondents invited to participate in the DiscussIt study, which was fielded first, were removed from the sampling frame for the UniteDem study. Respondents downloaded a messaging app custom-built by the research team to their mobile device. They were compensated to use the app to have a conversation about a political topic with a randomly assigned anonymous partner. Conversations took place between late January and early

March of 2020, during the height of the 2020 Democratic presidential primary election and before COVID 19-related lockdowns began in the United States.

Measures. Respondents were surveyed about their opinions on their assigned conversation topic before and after the conversation task. I consider a respondent's influence to be the pre-post change in their discussion partner's opinions. In each of the two studies, opinions were measured in two ways, leading to four distinct influence operationalizations. The variation in types of items, timing, and conversation task between studies and between influence operationalizations within studies allow for robustness checks that speak to the generalizability of effects across contexts. The influence operationalizations are summarized in Table 1.

Both studies also included measures of political knowledge and a measure of perceived influence. See section 1.4 and Table S2 of the Supplementary Materials for details. Their parallel designs allow me a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between political knowledge, influence, and perceived influence in both cross-party conversations and same-party conversations, which have been found to have distinct effects on outcomes like polarization (Suk et al., 2022).

See the Supplementary Materials for further detail on study design (section 1.1), respondent sociodemographic characteristics (section 1.2 and Table S1), variable operationalizations and distributions (section 1.4, Fig. S1, and Table S2), uptake and attrition (section 1.3), and inclusion criteria (section 1.5). For further analysis of uptake and attrition patterns, see the supplementary information of the initial papers published using these data (Combs, Tierney, Alqabandi, et al., 2023; Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023).

Results

The relationship between influence and perceived influence.

Can people tell when they have influenced a discussion partner? Fig. 1 shows the distribution of perceived influence for respondents whose discussion partners did (blue) and did not (red) change their opinions, as measured by each opinion operationalization. These results suggest that people do not tend to come away from political conversations with clear ideas about whether or not their attempts at influence were successful. On average, respondents in each subgroup "neither agree nor disagree" that they influenced their discussion partner. For each influence operationalization, pluralities of respondents selected this response option. There are no apparent differences in perceived influence distributions between respondents who did and did not influence their discussion partners. Although respondents who influenced their partners report slightly higher average perceived influence in each of the four influence operationalizations, the difference in means is only statistically significant in one case—that of influence in DiscussIt as measured using the ostensibly-unrelated surveys [Welch's *t* test results of the difference in perceived influence means between did/did not influence subgroups, from left to right: $t = 1.39$, $p = 0.166$; $t = 2.02$, $p = 0.044$; $t = 0.93$, $p = 0.351$; $t = 0.39$, $p = 0.697$]. Together, these results suggest that influence perceptions are uncertain and not strongly patterned by influence.

Political knowledge negatively predicts perceived influence.

Do people with different positions in political space perceive their influence in political conversations differently? Fig. 2 shows exponentiated estimates of the effects of influence, political knowledge, and ideology on perceptions of influence. These effects were estimated in ordinal logistic regressions that additionally controlled for the initial distance between partners'

Table 1 Influence operationalizations in the two studies.

	DiscussIt		UniteDem		Thermometer
	App	Surveys	Rank	Rank	
N	745	816	389	389	514
Partner opinion measurement	Partner's response to "The benefits of [immigration / gun control] outweigh the downsides"	Partner's average standardized response to 10 questions on assigned discussion topic	Partner's rank order placement of respondent's initial 1st choice candidate	Partner's rank order placement of respondent's initial 1st choice candidate	Partner's feeling thermometer rating of respondent's initial 1st choice candidate
Context in which item(s) were administered	In study app immediately before and after conversation	Ostensibly unrelated surveys administered -1 week before and after the conversation	In study app immediately before and after conversation	In study app immediately before and after conversation	In study app immediately before and after conversation
Influence calculation	Partner's pre-post change in opinion standardized such that 0 = no change and values are in standard deviation units	Partner's pre-post change in opinion standardized such that 0 = no change and values are in standard deviation units			
N is the number of observations available for analysis after all ineligible respondents are dropped.					

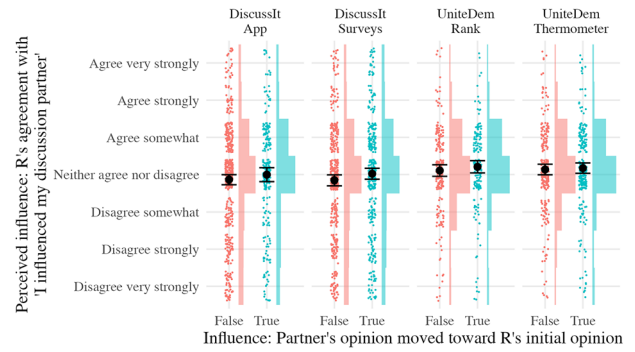


Fig. 1 Distribution of subjective influence for respondents who did and did not successfully influence their discussion partners. Red and blue points show raw data values. Histograms show their distribution over the subjective influence scale. Black points show means. Error bars are for 95% CIs around the means, calculated using standard errors clustered by discussion dyad. Participants are pooled across labeling conditions and, in DiscussIt, discussion topics. See Table S3 for values corresponding to those shown in the figure.

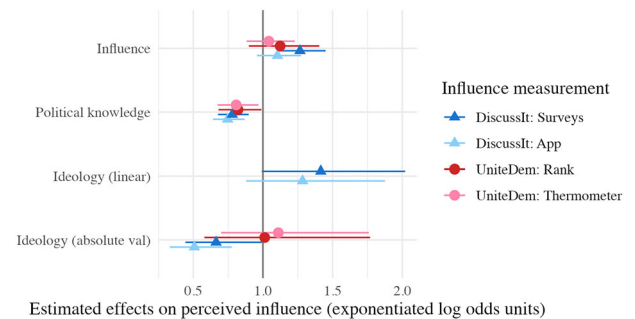


Fig. 2 Estimated effects of influence, political knowledge, and ideology on perceived influence in political conversations. Coefficient estimates are from ordinal logistic regressions and have been exponentiated. The models additionally control for several other variables including initial distance between partners' opinions, gender, labeling condition, and, in DiscussIt only, party identification and discussion topic. See Table S4 for full results. Ranges represent 95% confidence intervals and are calculated using cluster-robust standard errors clustered by chat dyad. Models that share data sets use the same dependent variable (measure of perceived influence) but different operationalizations of the influence predictor variable.

opinions, gender, labeling condition, and, in DiscussIt only, party identification and discussion topic. Additional sociodemographic controls do not meaningfully change independent variable effect estimates but do harm model fit, so are not included. See Table S4 for full coefficients of these models.

Consistent with the results presented in Fig. 1, influence is not in general a strong predictor of perceived influence. Only one of the influence operationalizations—influence as measured by change in opinions in the ostensibly unrelated surveys administered in DiscussIt—has an effect on perceived influence that reaches statistical significance. Importantly, including it in these models allows me to interpret the coefficients of political knowledge and ideological extremity as effects on perceived influence *holding influence constant*, therefore isolating any effects these factors have on influence from their effects on influence perceptions.

Across all influence operationalizations in both studies, political knowledge negatively predicts perceived influence. The effect size in both studies is substantial, indicating that a one

standard deviation increase in political knowledge is associated with a 18-25% decrease in the probability of a respondent providing an answer in a higher perceived influence response category. These effects are statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level in all cases. There is some evidence of variation in political knowledge effects between experimental conditions employed in the studies. The effect of political knowledge is more negative in DiscussIt (cross-partisan conversations) for people who were asked to discuss immigration than gun control. For further analysis of interaction effects between political knowledge and experimental conditions, see Supplementary Materials section 2, Fig. S4, and Tables S6 and S7.

Figure 2 also suggests that ideological extremity, operationalized by taking the absolute value of responses on 0-centered ideology scales (scaled from -1 to 1; negative = liberal), can also be related to perceptions of influence in cross-party conversations. In DiscussIt, in which all conversations were between a Republican and a Democrat, moving from moderate to extreme liberal or conservative ideology is associated with an estimated 33-48% decrease in the probability of a respondent providing an answer in a higher perceived influence response category. These effects are significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. In UniteDem, in which all conversations were between Democrats, the effect of ideological extremity is near zero and not statistically significant. This result is consistent with prior work demonstrating that people with more extreme ideological leanings expect members of the other political party to be more ideologically extreme and less receptive than they really are (Robinson et al., 1995; Sherman, Nelson and Ross, 2003; Druckman et al., 2022). This work suggests that these expectations can persist even through conversations, leading those with more extreme ideologies to lower estimations of their influence, holding their actual influence constant.

Political knowledge does not predict influence. We might expect that political knowledge would have an effect on the influence that respondents actually have, either positively, by enabling people to make stronger arguments about political issues, or negatively, because of interactional feedback loops resulting from lower perceived influence associated with higher political knowledge. I estimate the effect of standardized political knowledge on standardized conversation influence in a series of linear models, one for each of the four influence operationalizations in the two studies. These models contain the same control variables as those shown in Fig. 2.

Figure 3 shows the coefficients for political knowledge as estimated in these models. There is no evidence that political knowledge has an effect, either positive or negative, on conversation influence. Coefficients in all cases are small and do not reach statistical significance. See Table S5 for full model results.

This null finding does not rule out the possibility that political knowledge may have both positive and negative effects on influence that combine to cancel each other out. Specifically, we might expect a positive direct effect (through increased argument quality) and a negative indirect effect (through reduced perceived influence). To evaluate this possibility, I perform a mediation analysis of the effect of political knowledge on conversation influence, treating perceived influence as the mediating variable. I use the same control variables as in the models presented in Fig. 3 and calculate confidence intervals and p values using standard errors clustered by chat dyad.

This analysis, results of which are presented in Fig. 4, shows no evidence for a direct effect of political knowledge on influence and only weak evidence for an indirect effect through perceived

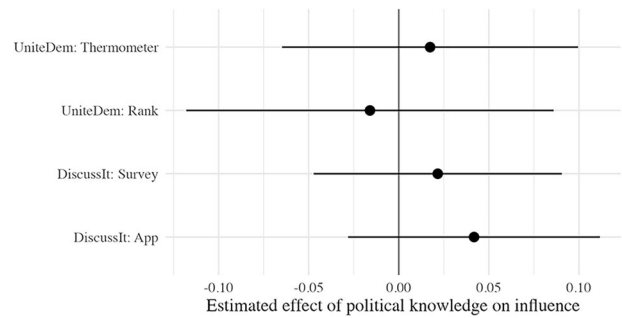


Fig. 3 Estimated effect of political knowledge on influence (both standardized) in political conversation. Estimates shown come from linear models that additionally control for several other variables. See Table S5 for full model results. Ranges shown represent 95% confidence intervals which are calculated using cluster-robust standard errors clustered by chat dyad.

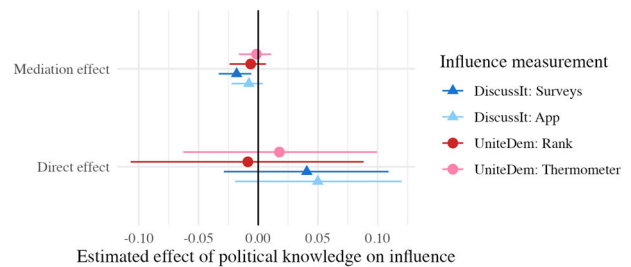


Fig. 4 Mediation analysis results for the effect of political knowledge on influence for each of the four influence operationalizations. Perceived influence was used as the mediating variable. Political knowledge and influence are standardized. Models control for initial distance between partners' opinions, gender, labeling condition, and, in DiscussIt only, party identification and discussion topic. 95% confidence intervals are calculated using standard errors clustered by chat dyad.

influence. Political knowledge has no direct effect on conversation influence for any of the four influence operationalizations. Mediation effect estimates are negative across both studies and all influence operationalizations, consistent with the expectation of a suppression effect, but they are small and only reach statistical significance at the $p < 0.05$ level in one case: the ostensibly unrelated survey operationalization in the DiscussIt study. In summary, political knowledge has little effect on influence in political conversations, directly, indirectly, or in total.

Discussion

This study contributes to literatures on political deliberation and influence by drawing attention to the distinction between influence as measured by opinion change and participants' subjective experiences of their influence. I show that these perceptions of influence are driven not by the amount of influence people actually have, but rather by their own political knowledge and in some cases their ideological extremity. Specifically, though people who know more about politics are in fact no more or less successful at influencing their discussion partners than people who know less about politics, they *think* they have less influence. It is possible that this is because with political knowledge comes a set of pessimistic expectations about the utility of political engagement. People who are familiar with politics, in other words, may be more exposed to political polarization and see their conversation partners as not only more extreme than they really are (Druckman et al., 2022) but also harder to convince.

The amount of influence people think they have in political conversations is important because it affects their willingness to

discuss politics in the future (Bohns and Flynn, 2013; Yeomans et al., 2020; Collins et al., 2022; Geiger et al., 2023). This implies that differences in perceived influence on the basis of political knowledge could lead to differences in future participation. A growing body of literature argues that pairing people to have political conversations with strangers is a useful intervention for reducing political polarization (Fishkin et al., 2021; Levendusky and Stecula, 2021; Santoro and Broockman, 2022; Combs, Tierney, Guay, et al., 2023; Rossiter and Carlson, 2024). My work suggests the possibility that these kinds of interventions may have differential effects on future political participation for people with high political knowledge as compared to low political knowledge. Specifically, those with low political knowledge may be especially likely to perceive influence in these kinds of conversations, leading them to be disproportionately likely to seek out similar opportunities in future. These results draw attention to the importance of studying the impacts of these kinds of depolarization interventions for subjective experiences, not merely opinion change.

My results hold in both conversations between Democrats and Republicans about the contentious issues of gun control and immigration and in cooperative conversations among Democrats about potential presidential nominees. The effect is also robust to differences in measurement between and within the two studies. However, this work also has important limitations. First, I study a limited set of conversational topics that take place under a limited set of labeling conditions. Additionally, both samples are somewhat whiter and older than the general population, limiting generalizability. Finally, all respondents in these studies were strangers to one another, and their conversations were anonymous. I cannot determine whether my results would generalize to more informal, less structured conversations in which people try to influence those they know.

Data availability

All data and code necessary to reproduce the results presented in the manuscript and supplementary materials are available at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/F9JJPD>.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Data collection was approved by the Duke University Institutional Review Board. The DiscussIt study was conducted under protocol #2019-0236, approved on November 30, 2018. The UniteDem study was conducted under protocol #2020-0326, approved on

January 31, 2020. Ethical approval was obtained prior to the beginning of the studies. All procedures involving human subjects complied with relevant institutional and national ethics guidelines and regulations.

Informed consent

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participation. The studies did not involve vulnerable individuals or minors under 18 years of age. Electronic consent was obtained between January 24, 2020 and February 27, 2020 for participants in the DiscussIt study and between February 28, 2020 and March 3, 2020 for participants in the UniteDem study. As the DiscussIt study involved three ostensibly-unrelated components—a pre-survey, a conversation on a mobile app, and a post-survey—they provided informed consent to each part separately, immediately before completing it. Participants received information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, expected duration, compensation, and data handling practices. They were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time without penalty, and that all data would be non-identifiable, ensuring anonymity. Participants provided their consent by clicking “Yes” in response to the statement “I am at least 18 years of age, and desire of my own free will to participate in this study,” which appeared at the bottom of the first page of the study instructions. Contact information for the researchers was provided to address any questions or concerns. Both studies involved deception in the form of the omission of certain information regarding study purposes and procedures. Participants were fully informed about the nature and purpose of the deception following the conclusion of the studies.

Additional information

Supplementary information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06470-8>.

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