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Effects of Nostalgia on Responses to Negative Feedback

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Introduction

Nostalgia is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as, “a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past.” It has been proposed by a large body of literature that nostalgia buffers against the effects of anger, loneliness, aggression, and negative feedback by increasing feelings of social connectedness and self esteem (Zhou et al., 2008).

Dijke et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine whether nostalgia buffers against the negative impact of low procedural justice on cooperation. The researchers developed two hypotheses, the first that low (vs. high) procedural justice leads to decreased cooperation and that this effect is buffered by high (vs. low) nostalgia. The second hypothesis was that low (vs. high) procedural justice leads to decreased cooperation via the mediating mechanism of weakened connectedness with the authority. However, high (vs. low) nostalgia buffers the relation between weakened connectedness with the authority and decreased cooperation, thereby maintaining cooperation levels. By conducting an organizational survey and four experiments, it was determined that both the hypotheses were supported, in that nostalgia weakens the negative impact of low procedural justice on cooperation.

These findings are important because it gives us insight into ways to improve social relationships among individuals and increase feelings of social connectedness among people who may otherwise feel isolated and lonely. One study by Gino and Desai (2012) found that keeping a journal about nostalgic memories increased feelings of being loved, supported, and protected and also increased prosocial behavior. These feelings could help to buffer against negative emotions such as depression, aggression, and defensiveness.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 70 undergraduate students (80% female, 20% male) between 18 and 24 years old. Participants were 38% White, 23% Black/African-American, 11.5% Asian, 10% Hispanic, 2% Biracial and 1.5% Other Race. This study is still ongoing.

Procedure

- Participants were randomly assigned to either a nostalgic or control essay condition, and to a positive or negative feedback condition.
- P's wrote a short essay response to a hypothetical question to be evaluated by the other student in the study. (In actuality, all essays received predetermined feedback and were not read by another student.) The essay topic was: “Should the United States pursue exploration of the planet Mars?” Each P was told that the other P would grade their essay, and asked to write another short essay, this time relating to a personal memory (nostalgia or objective memory prompt).
- P's then turned in their Nostalgia essay and received their feedback for the Mars essay (either positive or mildly negative feedback).
- P's filled out the Evaluation Feedback Rating report responding how they felt about the feedback and whether they felt the criticisms were helpful (this will mainly be used as a cover to enhance the validity of the essay task). They then reported state social connectedness, state positive/negative emotions, the SSGS, and emotions on the PANAS-SF, empathy adjective scale, and SSGS.
- P's then completed an aggressive behavior measure involving blasting a loud noise (modified Taylor task, Denson et al., 2011 see list of measures). Aggression was measured by how loud participants chose the “punishment blast” to be for their partner.
- Debriefing

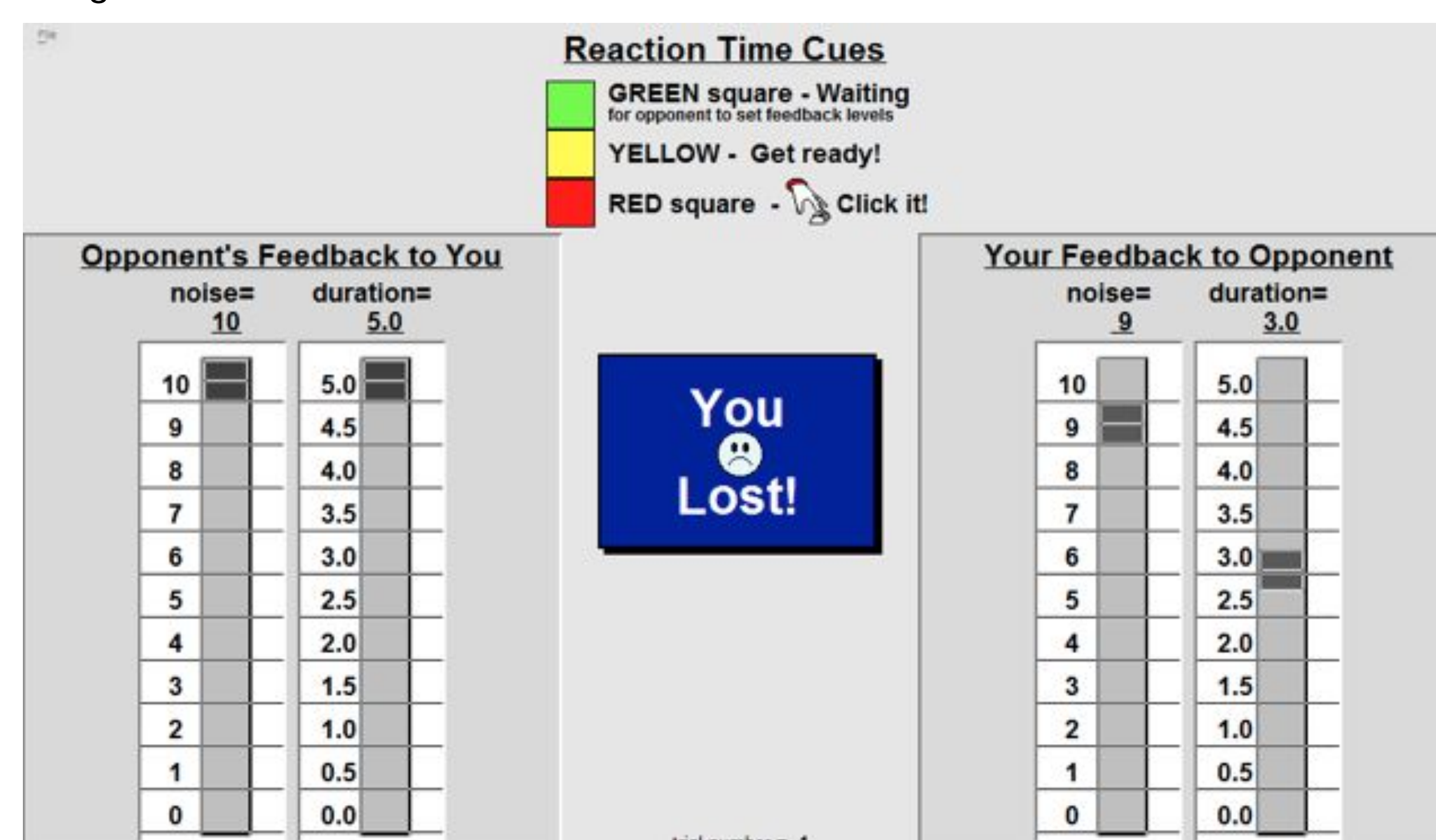


Figure 1. Reaction time game played by participant after receiving either negative or positive feedback from their “partner” to measure aggressive behavior.

Results

Essay manipulation checks. Main effect of memory essay on state nostalgia. P's in the nostalgic essay condition reported feeling more nostalgic after the essay than those who wrote about an ordinary memory, $F(1, 58) = 5.06, p = .03$. No main effects of feedback type or condition*feedback interaction effects were significant ($ps > .1$).

Responses to essay feedback. Significant main effect of feedback condition (positive or negative) on participants' reactions to their essay feedback. P's in the negative feedback condition perceived the feedback to be less useful [$F(1, 58) = 6.46, p = .01$], less positive [$F(1, 58) = 18.77, p < .001$], more negative [$F(1, 58) = 15.16, p < .001$], and reported agreeing with the feedback less [$F(1, 58) = 5.87, p = .02$] than those in the positive feedback condition.

Anger. Significant main effect of feedback condition on anger. P's in the negative feedback condition reported more anger than those in the positive condition, $F(1, 58) = 7.78, p = .01$. There was no main effect of memory essay condition ($p = .09$) or interaction between feedback and essay conditions ($p = .92$).

Aggression. Aggression was measured by examining the volume and duration of aversive noise blasts in a competitive reaction time game. In this competitive reaction time game, participants always lost the first round and were subjected to a punishment blast turned up to the highest volume and duration. We examined both the first blast choice (reflecting aggression in response to essay feedback) as well as the second blast choice (reflecting aggression in response to their partner's intense punishment decision).

There was no main effect of essay condition, main effect of feedback condition, or essay type*feedback condition interaction effect on the first noise blast choice ($ps > .12$). However, there was a significant essay type*feedback condition interaction effect on aggression measured by the second noise blast, $F(1, 58) = 5.30, p = .03$. Contrary to hypotheses, participants in the nostalgia essay condition administered a stronger noise blast in the positive feedback condition than the negative feedback condition, whereas participants in the objective essay condition administered a stronger punishment blast in the negative feedback condition than the positive feedback condition (see Figure 2).

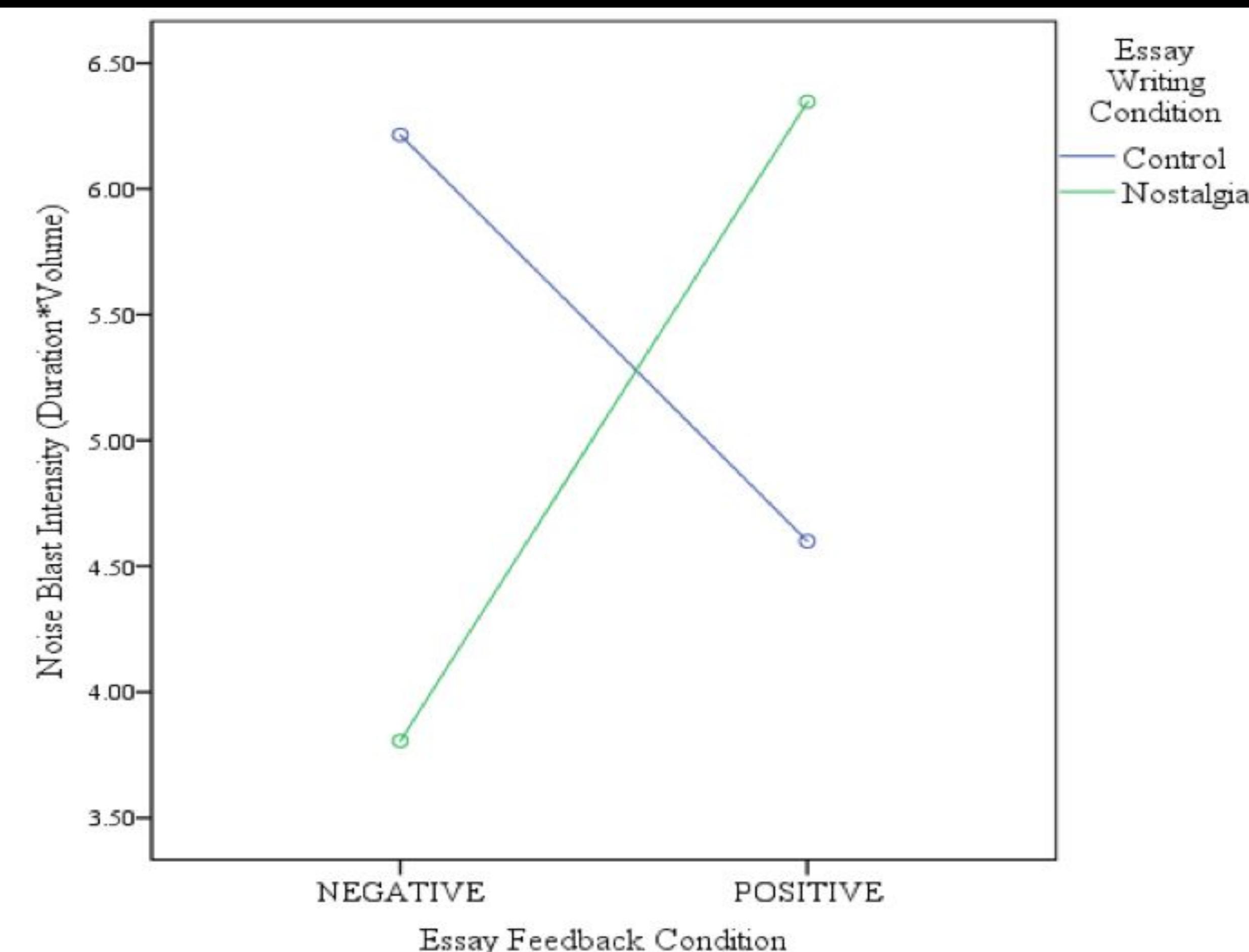
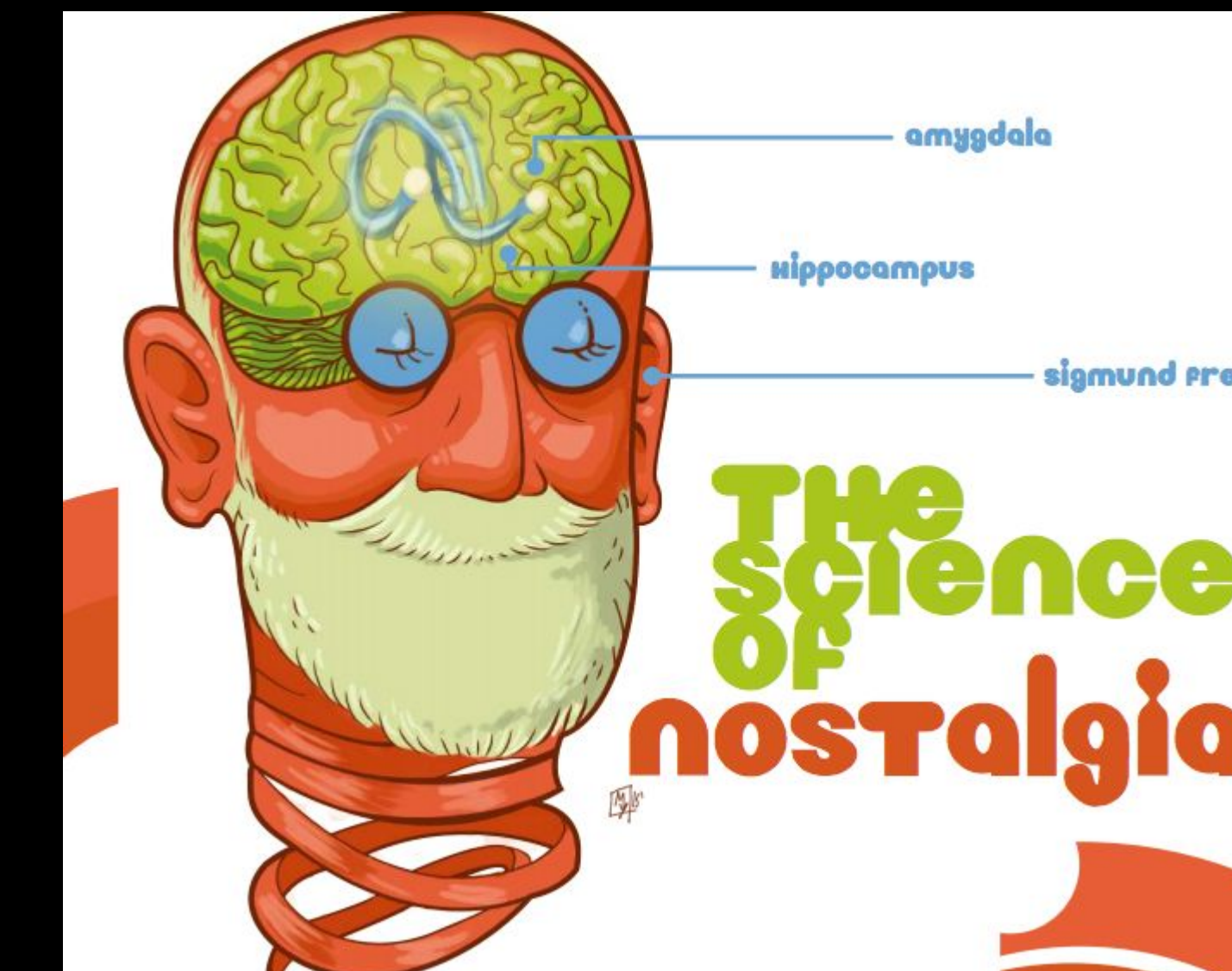


Figure 2. Interaction effects of essay memory type (nostalgia/control) and feedback (positive/negative) on aggression toward a peer.



Discussion

Our main finding was a surprising interaction effect where participants who wrote a nostalgic essay punished a stranger more after receiving positive feedback than after receiving negative feedback. In contrast, participants who wrote an essay about an ordinary memory punished a stranger more after receiving negative feedback than positive feedback. This may be due to small sample sizes, as there were less than 20 participants in each cell of the MANOVA.

There may be specific reasons for this trend. Because only the *second* noise blast showed significant effects, it reflects participants' responses after hearing a loud, intense punishment blast administered by their game partner. Prior research has shown that trait nostalgia is positively correlated with perceived hostility as well as social connectedness, and so participants in the nostalgic essay condition may have perceived the first intense punishment blast from their partner as particularly hostile after having just been praised for their writing ability. In contrast, participants who received negative feedback but wrote a nostalgic essay may have been motivated to try and affiliate with their partner after being rejected (Maner et al., 2010) as participants may have expected to interact with their partner during or after the study session. Future research will identify these motivations specifically, and a larger sample size is needed to identify whether these effects remain stable.

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