

CONTEXT SHAPES SOCIAL JUDGMENTS OF POSITIVE EMOTION SUPPRESSION AND EXPRESSION

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Introduction

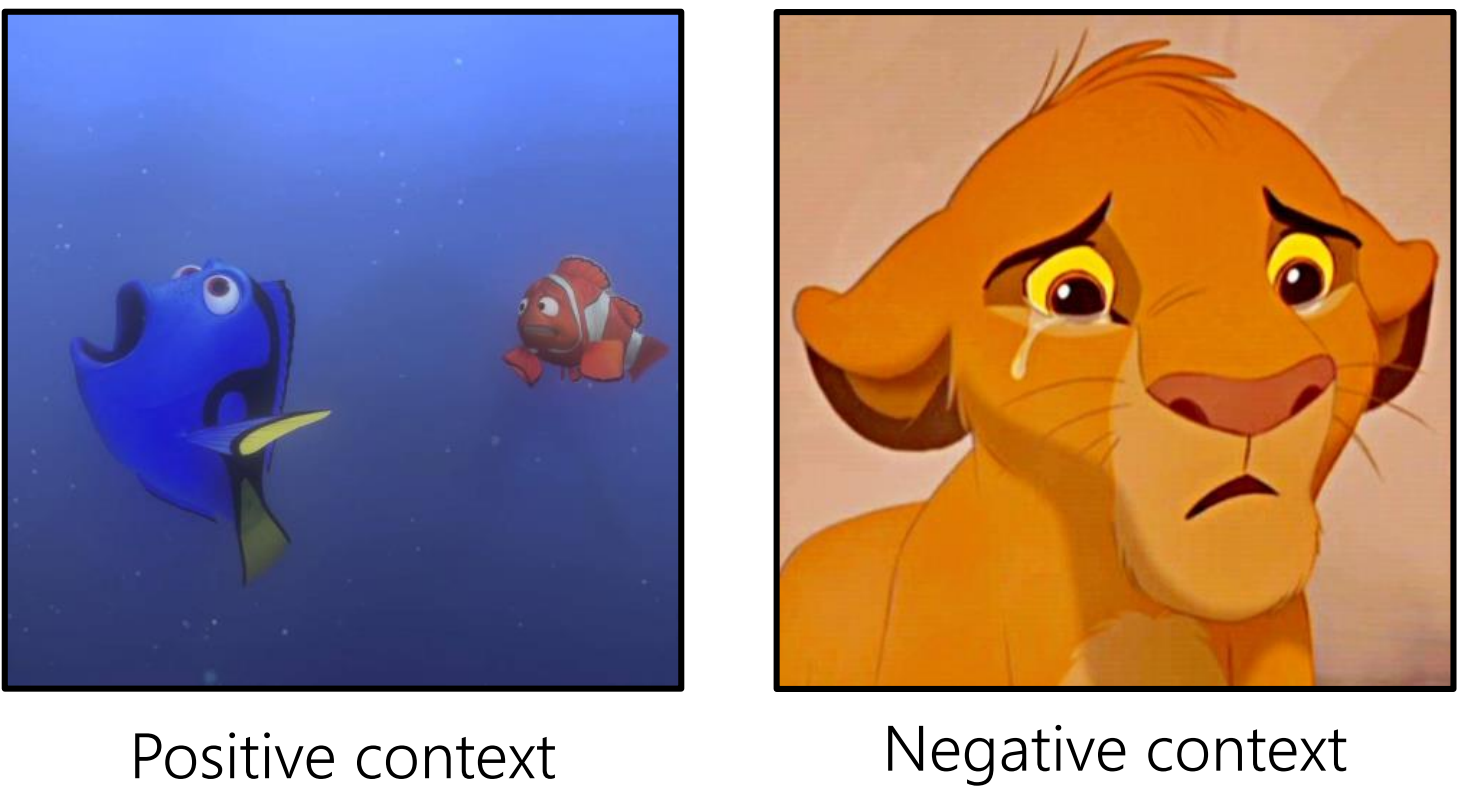
The emotion regulation literature has liberally documented the social pitfalls of expressive suppression. Yet, increasingly researchers are beginning to recognize that *context matters* in how people interpret and respond to emotions (e.g. Bonanno & Burton, 2013), although thus far little research has directly examined the role of context in emotion regulation. We investigate the role of social context in expressive suppression, hypothesizing that expressive suppression can be a socially adaptive strategy when one must down-regulate an emotion that does not match the context. We focus on positive emotion, since the expression of positive emotion is generally seen as a good social strategy (e.g. Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005), and so demonstrating that suppressing positive emotion can be socially beneficial is a stronger test of these hypotheses.

Hypotheses
In cases of emotion-context match (positive emotion + positive context), positive emotion *expression* will be rated more positively
In cases of emotion-context mismatch (positive emotion + negative context), positive emotion *suppression* will be rated more positively

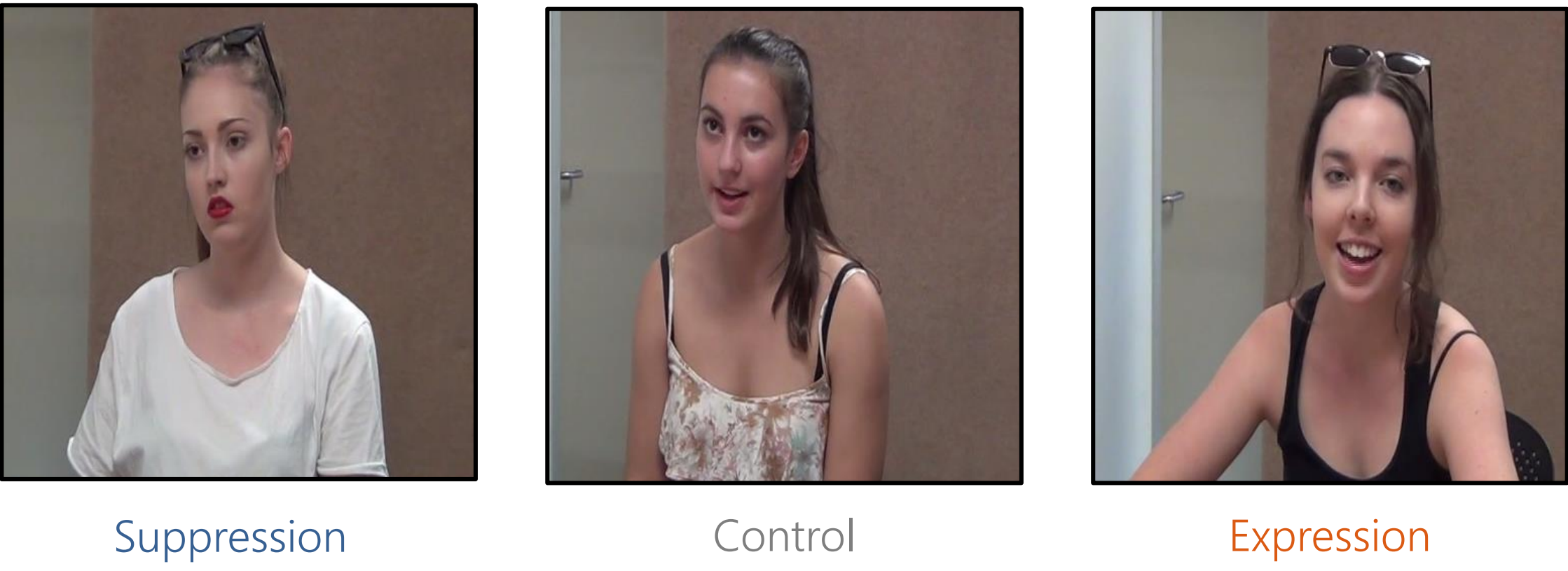
Experiments 1-5: Methods

In Experiment 1 we created the video stimuli for future experiments. 32 students watched a positive film clip, and then were randomly assigned to *Express* or *Suppress* their emotion (or to a *Control* condition) while completing a videotaped interview about that film clip.

In Experiments 2 through 5, participants rated the targets in the video stimuli from Experiment 1. Before viewing the videos of the targets, participants were randomly assigned to watch either a positive or negative film clip. Participants were informed that the targets they would rate were discussing the film clip that participants had just watched. This created a *Positive Context* when participants had watched the positive film clip and a *Negative Context* when participants had watched the negative film clip.

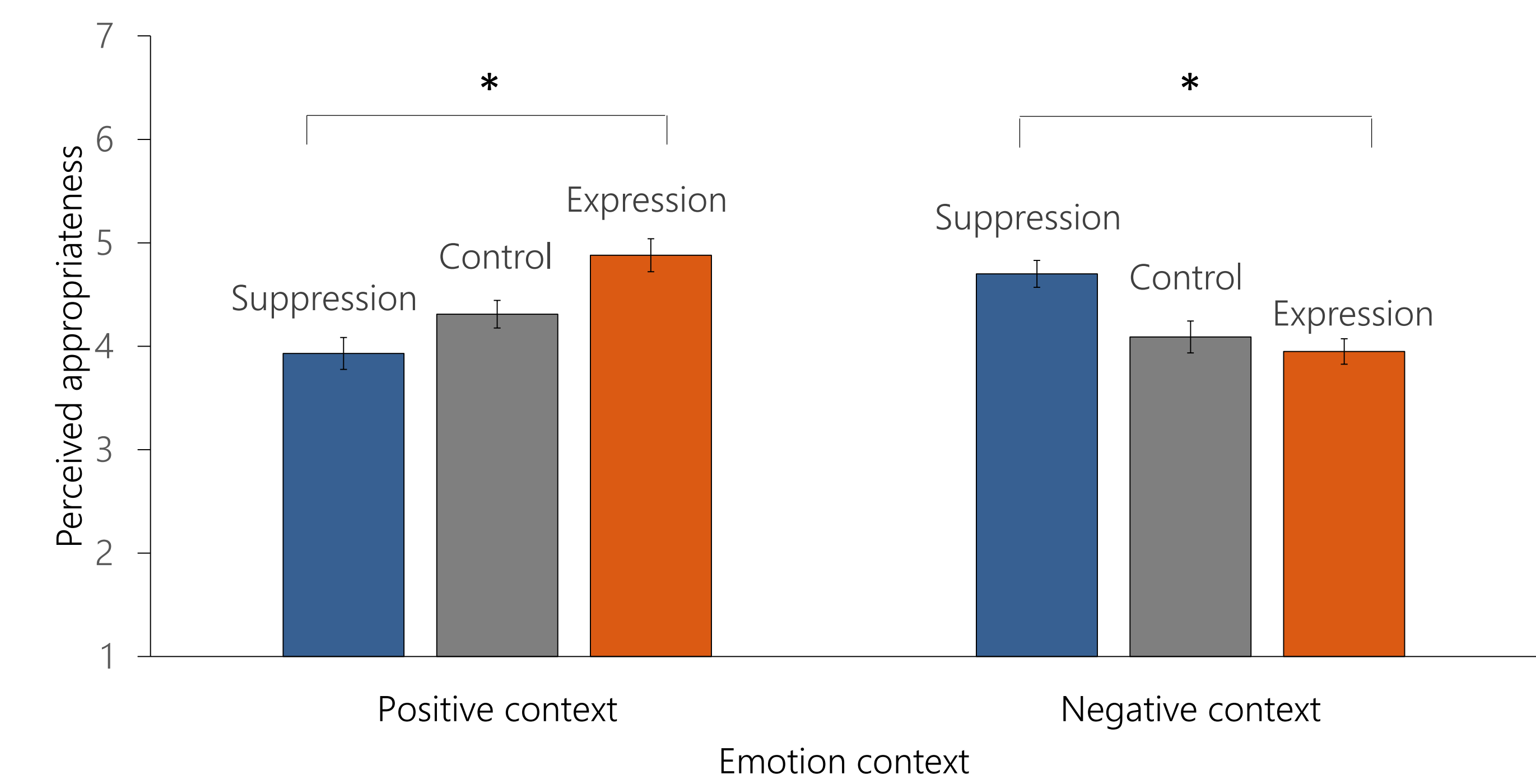


After watching the film clip, participants were then randomly assigned to view a set of 5 or 6 videos of either suppression, control, or expression targets. After watching each video, they rated the target on the dependent variables.



Experiment 2: Results

180 participants completed the study outlined in the method in a 2 (participant context: positive vs. negative) x 3 (target emotion regulation: control vs. expression vs. suppression) between subjects design. The key dependent variable was target appropriateness.



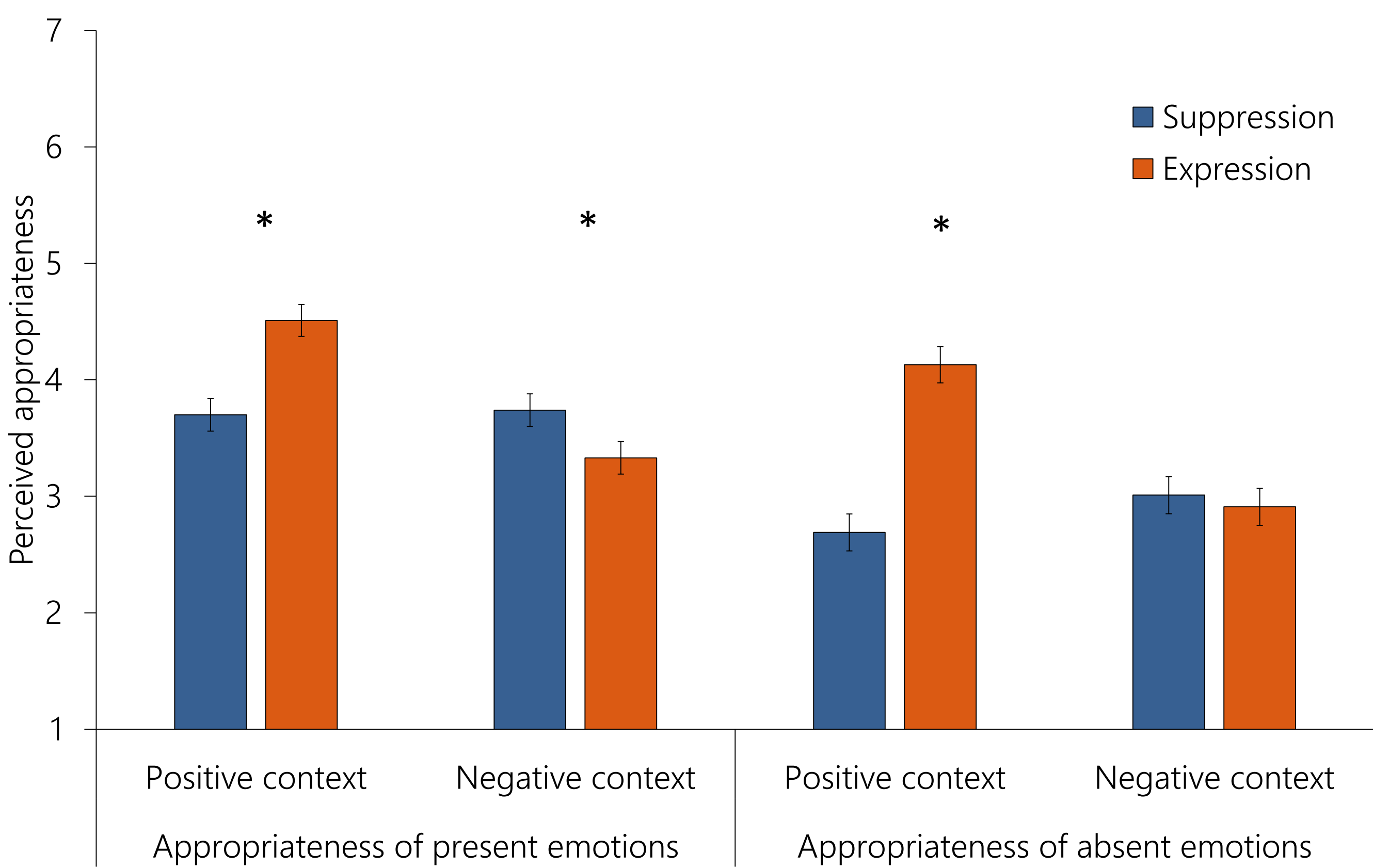
There was a significant interaction between emotion context and target emotion regulation, $F(2,174)=17.81$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.17$. Reflecting an emotion-context match, in the positive emotion condition, expressing targets were seen as more appropriate than suppressing and control targets. Reflecting an emotion-context mismatch, in the negative emotion condition, suppressing targets were seen as more appropriate than expressing and control targets.

Experiment 3: Results

Because we manipulated context using emotional videos, it is unclear whether context was the key moderating factor, or whether an emotion induction is enough to produce the effects. Experiment 3 was identical to Experiment 2, except participants ($N=197$) were told that the targets watched a nature film instead of the positive or negative film viewed by the participant. There was no significant effect of target emotion regulation in the positive emotion condition or the negative emotion condition, indicating that an emotion induction alone is not sufficient to produce these effects.

Experiment 4: Results

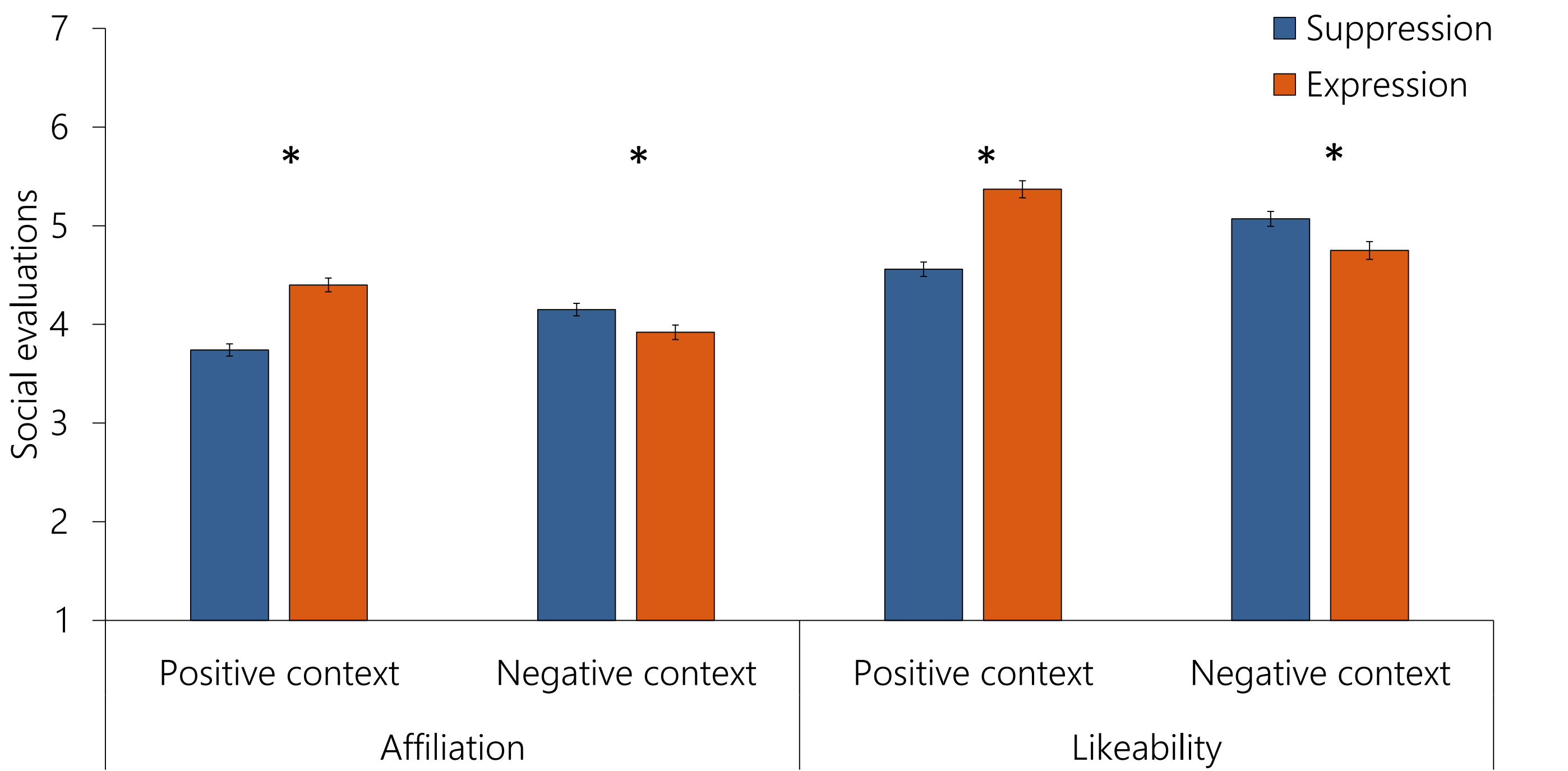
In Experiment 4, we replicated and extended Experiment 2 by using an extended measure of emotional appropriateness, which assessed specifically the appropriateness of present and absent emotions (Warner & Shields, 2009). 199 participants completed a 2 (participant context: positive vs. negative) x 2 (target emotion regulation: expression vs. suppression) between subjects design.



We found the expected disordinal interaction on the appropriateness of present emotions, that is, the degree to which targets showed emotion that was expected in the circumstances, $F(1,198)=19.26$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.09$. In the negative context (an emotion-context mismatch), targets who suppressed positive emotion were perceived as having more expected emotions present in their performance than targets who expressed positive emotion. In contrast, in the positive context (an emotion-context match), targets who suppressed positive emotion were perceived as having fewer expected emotions present than targets who expressed positive emotion. We also found a significant interaction for absent emotions, $F(1,198)=24.59$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.11$. In the positive context, targets who expressed positive emotion were perceived as having fewer appropriate emotions absent than those who suppressed positive emotion. Yet, in a negative context targets who suppressed and expressed positive emotion did not differ in the degree to which they were perceived as missing key emotions (i.e., negative emotions) in their performance.

Experiment 5: Results

In Experiment 5, we extended our investigation to two new dependent variables: Likeability (assessed using adjectives representing likeable personality traits; Kalokerinos et al., 2014) and desire for affiliation (Côté et al., 2014). 150 participants completed a 2 (participant context: positive vs. negative) x 2 (target emotion regulation: expression vs. suppression) mixed design.



Experiment 5 extends our findings beyond ratings of emotional appropriateness, providing the first direct evidence that suppressing the expression of positive emotion can have social benefits in the form of improved social evaluations, $F(1,148)=102.30$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.41$ and increased desire for interpersonal affiliation, $F(1,148)=65.11$, $p<.001$, $\eta_p^2=.31$.

Conclusions

As hypothesized, emotion-context match produced results similar to those seen in previous research: Targets who expressed positive emotion were rated as significantly more positively than suppressers and targets who did not regulate positive emotion. However, when there was an emotion-context mismatch, targets who suppressed positive emotion were perceived as significantly more appropriate, likeable, and desirable to befriend than expressers. With a simple context manipulation, we flipped the direction of the typical effect that people who suppress are evaluated less positively than people who express. This suggests a need for the field to move beyond a conceptualization of “hero” and “villain” emotion regulation strategies to identify the moderating factors that determine when each strategy will be socially functional and dysfunctional.

Further Information

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