Emotional acknowledgment: How verbalizing others' emotions fosters interpersonal trust

Alisa Yu [a,*], Justin M. Berg [a], Julian J. Zlatev [b]

[a] *Stanford Graduate School of Business, 655 Knight Way, Stanford, CA 94305, United States*
[b] *Harvard Business School, Wyss House, Soldiers Field, Boston, MA 02163, United States*

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ABSTRACT

People often respond to others' emotions using verbal acknowledgment (e.g., "You seem upset"). Yet, little is known about the relational benefits and risks of acknowledging others' emotions in the workplace. We draw upon Costly Signaling Theory to posit how emotional acknowledgment influences interpersonal trust. We hypothesize that emotional acknowledgment acts as a costly signal of the perceiver's willingness to expend personal resources to meet the needs of the expresser. Across six studies, we found convergent evidence that emotional acknowledgment led to greater perceptions of costliness, and in turn, to higher evaluations of trust. These effects were stronger for negative than positive emotions because acknowledging negative emotions involved a greater perceived cost. Moreover, inaccurate acknowledgment fostered greater trust than not acknowledging when positive emotions were mislabeled as negative, but not when negative emotions were mislabeled as positive. These findings advance theory on key dynamics between emotion and language in work-related relationships.

1. Introduction

Emotions are integral to the development of social relationships and thus, to the functioning of organizations (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; van Kleef, 2016). Social theories of emotions suggest that emotions provide rapid insight into the goals and needs of others, thereby informing how perceivers should respond (Keltner, Haidt, & Shiota, 2006, van Kleef, 2009). In short, emotions are powerful communication devices. Given our capacity to glean how others may be feeling based on their nonverbal emotional displays (Ekman & Keltner, 1997; Fridlund, 1994), people often face important choices about whether or not to explicitly acknowledge the emotions they see others express. Consider the following example. An employee has a meeting with her manager, in which she is berated for her slow progress on a project. She is feeling distraught. When the employee returns to her desk, she takes a deep sigh. Two coworkers notice her emotional expression. One pauses for a moment, and then goes back to work. The other acknowledges her emotions by saying "Hey, you seem upset." We call this ubiquitous, but potentially meaningful, response *emotional acknowledgment*—verbal communication by which a perceiver signals the recognition of an expresser's emotional display.

Despite the role of emotional sharing and responsiveness in strengthening interpersonal relationships (Greenberg, 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988; Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998), surprisingly little is known about how verbally acknowledging others' emotions affects relationships. The scant attention paid to emotional acknowledgment is particularly noticeable when juxtaposed with the wealth of research on the psychological and physiological benefits of using language for processing one's *own* emotions (e.g., Brooks, 2014; Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Torre & Lieberman, 2018; Wolf, Lee, Sah, & Brooks, 2016). Furthermore, research on active listening and partner responsiveness typically focuses on responses to someone's *verbal* accounts of their personal events (Jones, 2011; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008; Weger, Bell, Minei, & Robinson, 2014), yet responses to their *nonverbal* expressions have largely been ignored. What are the risks and rewards of explicitly surfacing our interpretations of others' nonverbal emotional expressions using language? In this paper, we advance theory on this largely overlooked question by examining how emotional acknowledgment shapes interpersonal trust—a universal and core pillar of well-functioning social relationships (Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Simpson, 2007).

We adopt the framework of Costly Signaling Theory (Zahavi, 1995) to suggest that emotional acknowledgment is a costly signal that reveals the willingness of a perceiver to allocate personal resources (time,

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energy, and attention) to the emotional needs of an expresser (Dovidio, Piliavin, Shroeder, & Penner, 2006). Specifically, we examine contexts in which the emotions being expressed are neither caused by nor directed at the perceiver, and in which the two parties already have an established relationship. We hypothesize that individuals who acknowledge others' emotions will be seen as more trustworthy than those who do not, because acknowledgment may be costly and conflict with their own interests to protect and conserve resources (Murray & Holmes, 2009). Furthermore, we hypothesize that acknowledging negative emotions will be a stronger driver of trust than positive emotions, as acknowledging negative emotions will be seen as costlier. Across six studies examining the perspectives of both expressers and third-party observers, we found support for our hypotheses.

The present research offers important theoretical contributions. First, whereas social theories of emotions predominantly focus on inferences drawn about the expresser (van Kleef, 2009; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Frijda & Mesquita, 1994), we focus instead on inferences drawn about the *perceiver,* based on their response to the expresser's emotions. We suggest that representing the influence of emotions as bidirectional, rather than unidirectional, provides a more accurate depiction of emotional sensemaking and communication. Second, by integrating social theories of emotions with Costly Signaling Theory, we introduce a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the role of emotions in interpersonal relationships. Third, we complement research on labelling one's own emotions (e.g., Brooks, 2014; Wolf et al., 2016) by exploring the consequences of labeling the emotions of others. Finally, we add to research on active listening and responsiveness, which focuses on responses to what a speaker states *verbally* in a conversation. Supplementing this perspective, the current research examines responses to what an expresser displays *nonverbally* (Jones, 2011; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008; Weger, Bell, Minei, & Robinson, 2014), which may be more ambiguous and therefore, potentially riskier to acknowledge. Overall, our research sheds light on how the explicit acknowledgment of emotions can be used as a powerful tool for shaping and understanding social relationships.

1.1. Conceptualizing emotional acknowledgment in organizations

Whereas past research has examined emotional labelling, or verbal appraisals of one's *own* emotions (e.g., "I feel excited", Brooks, 2014), emotional acknowledgment refers to verbal appraisals of *others'* emotions. Emotional acknowledgment is directed at the expresser and conveys information about the perceiver's interpretation of the emotional display. For example, in response to noticing a coworker's enthusiastic grin, an employee might acknowledge this coworker's emotion by saying, "You seem excited." Emotional acknowledgment communicates both (1) the perception of an emotional expression ("I picked up on an emotion"), and (2) the content inferred from the expression ("The emotion I perceived was excitement").

Conceptually, emotional acknowledgment belongs to a larger category of responses that convey active listening and partner responsiveness. For example, active listening includes displaying nonverbal involvement (e.g., nodding, eye contact), paraphrasing the speaker's message without judgment, and asking questions prompting the speaker to elaborate on their story (Bodie, 2011; Weger, Bell, Minei, & Robinson, 2014). Similarly, responsiveness can be conveyed by providing perspective on the situation, offering encouragement and reassurance, or validating the person's effort or identity (Maisel et al., 2008). Generally, these responses lead to positive interpersonal evaluations (e.g., asking follow-up questions increases liking; Huang et al., 2017). However, research in these domains often makes an implicit assumption that the listener responds only to what the speaker communicates explicitly and verbally in the conversation. In reality, nonverbal channels also play a critical role in interpersonal communication. Emotional acknowledgment complements this body of work by focusing on responsiveness to *nonverbal* displays. Because nonverbal displays tend to be more ambiguous and difficult to decipher than verbal remarks, perceivers may have greater latitude in how they choose to respond. For example, it may be easier to ignore a coworker wearing a frown, than a coworker who says, "I'm feeling really frustrated right now." Thus, the decision to acknowledge others' emotions may be perceived as riskier, but also more discretionary and volitional than other potential responses.

Emotional acknowledgment is related to, but conceptually distinct from, other emotion-relevant constructs, such as empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993) and emotional understanding (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). Table 1 provides two dimensions by which to compare these constructs: (1) whether the construct refers to an intrapersonal or interpersonal phenomenon, and (2) whether the construct refers to an ability or behavior. Critically, many of the constructs arising from the literature on emotional intelligence focus on personal abilities (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). However, possessing the ability to decode and regulate emotions is conceptually distinct from the decision to act on these abilities. For example, a perceiver may notice when an expresser starts crying, and may accurately infer that the expresser is experiencing emotional distress, yet choose not to intervene. Indeed, research suggests that empathic accuracy alone does not predict whether a partner will be perceived as responsive (Winczewski, Bowen, & Collins, 2016). Rather, empathic accuracy only leads to perceptions of responsiveness when coupled with high motivation to act compassionately toward others. As such, studying responses to others' emotions may shed unique insight into the process of emotional communication that examining personal abilities alone cannot.

1.2. Perception of emotional acknowledgment as a costly signal for trustworthiness

We draw upon Costly Signaling Theory to explore the signaling value of emotional acknowledgment. Costly Signaling Theory (Zahavi, 1995) originated from the field of evolutionary biology, but has since been adapted by psychologists to explain how people interpret costly behaviors that seemingly violate norms of self-interest. The theory asserts

Table 1
Constructs that relate to emotional acknowledgment.

	Ability	Behavior
Interpersonal	**Emotional management:** The ability to manage emotions and emotional relationships for personal and interpersonal growth (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). **Empathic accuracy:** The ability to accurately infer the thoughts and feelings of another person (Ickes, 1993).	**Emotional acknowledgment:** An externally-directed communication by which the perceiver signals the recognition of an expresser's emotions.
Intrapersonal	**Emotional Perception:** The ability to identify emotions through nonverbal emotional expressions (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001). **Emotional Understanding:** The ability to comprehend emotional information about relationships, transitions from one emotion to another, and linguistic information about emotions (Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios, 2001).	**Emotional labeling:** A statement about one's own experience of emotion (e.g., Brooks, 2014; Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Wolf et al., 2016).

that it is difficult for people to ascertain whether someone has potential as an ally, mate, or competitor because their underlying qualities are often hidden (Smith & Bird, 2000). Consequently, people rely on behavioral signals to infer these underlying qualities indirectly. The theory suggests that the costliness of the signal helps distinguish those who possess desirable qualities from those who lie about them because presumably only individuals who can afford to bear the burden of the signal would choose to engage in it. For example, adhering to strict religious rituals is perceived as a costly signal and, thus, an indicator of trustworthiness because presumably only the truly devout would be willing to make the costly sacrifices (Hall, Cohen, Meyer, Varley, & Brewer, 2015). To this end, costly signals should convey higher-quality information about the underlying attributes of the person sending the signal.

Viewed through this lens, emotional acknowledgment may be perceived as a costly signal that reveals the trustworthiness of the perceiver. To be considered a costly signal, the behavior must be seen as "expensive" for the signaler in terms of personal resources (Smith & Bird, 2000; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006). Responding to others' emotions, especially in organizational contexts, may be viewed as costly. Perceivers have a finite pool of personal resources (time, energy, and attention; Hobfoll, 2002). When perceivers direct their scarce personal resources toward the emotional needs of others through emotional acknowledgment, others are likely to recognize that this effort may come at the expense of perceivers' own needs or goals (e.g., meeting an approaching deadline). Specifically, perceivers may face tradeoffs between expending their personal reserve of cognitive, psychological, and emotional resources to advance their own goals, or attend to the needs of the expresser (Bono & Vey, 2005; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Zaki, 2014). Furthermore, compared to everyday life, emotions in organizations can be more difficult to interpret (DePaulo, 1992; Porter & ten Brinke, 2008) because they are not always authentically expressed. Organizational display rules prescribe which emotions employees should display for their roles (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1979; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989), but these emotions may not reflect their internal affective states. For this reason, verbally acknowledging these "noisy" emotional signals may be seen as reputationally risky because it could expose a norm violation or faulty interpretation of an expresser's emotion (e.g., mislabeling an expresser's emotion). To this end, we expect expressers (and third-party observers bearing witness to the interaction) to view those who acknowledge emotions as possessing a higher capacity to respond to others' emotional needs.

By verbally calling on others' emotions, emotional acknowledgment can facilitate an open dialogue, providing permission for the expresser to engage in subsequent self-disclosure (Antaki, 1988; Rempel, Ross, & Holmes, 2001). When a perceiver says, "You look distressed", not only might this act imply a momentary resource investment (i.e., noticing the emotion), it also implies the perceiver's willingness to invest *additional* resources in the future (e.g., listening to the expresser's explanation or providing social support). Because nonverbal expressions tend to be more ambiguous and more easily ignored, the decision to engage in acknowledgment may be perceived as more volitional, conveying the perceiver's voluntary desire to understand and construct a shared meaning of the expresser's experience (Rossignac-Milon & Higgins, 2018; Weick, 1995). To this end, emotional acknowledgment may act as a catalyst for opening the emotional "floodgates", licensing the expresser to share their underlying needs. Because this process may require the expenditure of scarce personal resources, emotional acknowledgment should signal that the perceiver is willing to incur costs for the sake of the expresser.

Insofar as emotional acknowledgment signals a readiness to accommodate and sacrifice personal resources, emotional acknowledgment should advance the formation of *interpersonal trust*, a cornerstone of high-functioning and high-quality relationships (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985; Simpson, 2007). Although many conceptualizations of interpersonal trust exist, we focus on a

benevolence-based definition: the expectation that an individual will demonstrate care for the interests and welfare of the trustor (Holmes & Rempel, 1989; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Past research suggests that trust often emerges when a conflict arises between the partner's personal interests and the interests of the relationship, putting the partner's true goals and motives to the test (Balliet & Van Lange, 2013; Holmes and Rempel, 1989). When a partner voluntarily sacrifices their own interests to prioritize the relationship, this behavior provides unambiguous evidence of the partner's benevolent intent (Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999), thereby facilitating trust. Similarly, emotional acknowledgment may demonstrate a perceiver's costly willingness to prioritize an expresser's needs over their own. In turn, emotional acknowledgment should increase perceptions of trustworthiness (see Fig. 1 for visual of hypotheses).

Hypothesis 1. When individuals engage in emotional acknowledgment, they are seen as more trustworthy than if they do not engage in emotional acknowledgment.

Hypothesis 2. The relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust is mediated by perceptions of costliness.

1.3. Valence as a moderator: the costliness of acknowledging negative vs. positive emotions

According to Costly Signaling Theory, the costliness of the signal should enhance the credibility of the signaler's desirable qualities, and subsequently incur greater benefits for the signaler. For example, Hardy and Van Vugt (2006) showed that the most altruistic members in a group achieve the highest levels of social status because they are seen as bearing the greatest costs for their generosity to the group. Applying this same logic, we expect seemingly costlier forms of emotional acknowledgment to be rewarded with greater interpersonal trust.

Specifically, we suggest that the valence of the expresser's emotions may influence the link between emotional acknowledgment and trust because negative emotions often signal greater underlying needs, which subsequently places higher social, cognitive, and affective demands on the perceiver than positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001; Staw & Barsade, 1993; Zaki, 2014). Consequently, the decision of whether to engage in emotional acknowledgment may be more influential on perceptions of trust in the wake of negative than positive emotions. To unpack this logic, we start by reviewing the evolutionary functions of negative emotions.

The expression of negative emotions alerts others to problems that require attention and potentially threaten survival (Frijda & Mesquita, 1994). As such, negative emotions should subsequently recruit valuable resources and responses from the community (Baker, McNulty, & Overall, 2014). Indeed, negative emotions communicate the unmet and heightened needs of the expresser and compel perceivers to engage in actions that alleviate or solve the problem (e.g., provide social support or compassion; Keltner & Haidt, 1999). However, for perceivers, responding to negative emotions may come at a price. Because negative emotions typically signal a greater underlying need, addressing negative emotions may be more demanding and "expensive" for the perceiver. For example, attending to the negative emotions of others may require the perceiver to engage in emotional regulation, which over time can become depleting and harmful to the perceiver's own well-being (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). Additionally, confronting others' negative emotions potentially obligates perceivers to help expressers, which may require subsequent expenditure of personal resources (Zaki, 2014). Furthermore, studies show that through contagion, perceivers often "catch" the negative emotions of others (Barsade, 2002; Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1993), which can even increase the perceiver's own risk for depression (Rosenquist, Fowler, & Christakis, 2011). Because negative emotions convey the heightened needs of the expresser, and therefore make them potentially more challenging and personally costly for the perceiver, acknowledging negative emotions
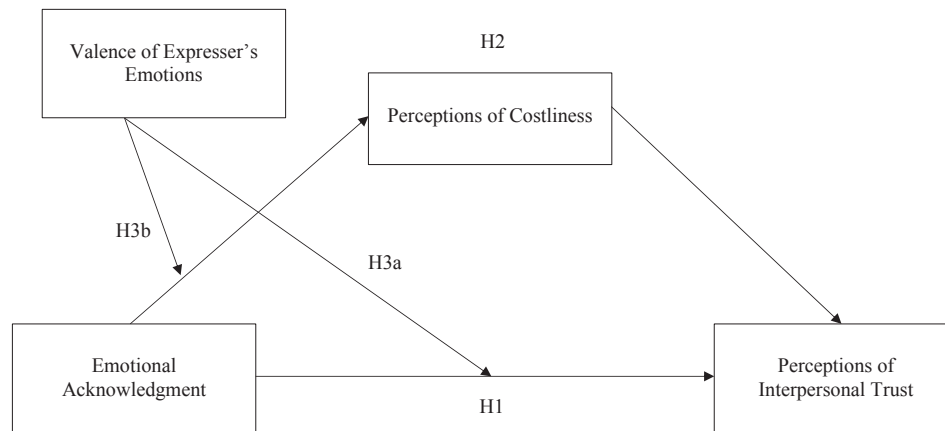
Fig. 1. Theoretical model of hypotheses.

should be seen as highly diagnostic of the perceiver's capacity to nurture the expresser's needs. Thus, the effect of acknowledging emotions on trust should be stronger when responding to negative emotions.

In contrast, the acknowledgment of positive emotions may be perceived as less costly. Positive emotions are used to build and broaden personal resources for the long term (Fredrickson, 2001). They encourage expressers to engage in approach behaviors toward others, which procure social resources for the future. However, the call to action for perceivers is less immediate and clear for positive emotions (Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). Positive emotions largely arise in the absence of problems, and therefore do not necessarily compel perceivers to deliver a specific momentary response. For positive emotions, because there are no pressing needs requiring immediate assistance, the decision to respond may be lower stakes and therefore, less resource-depleting or demanding. Furthermore, even though responding to positive emotions may still require an expenditure of one's own personal resources, doing so may reap some personal benefits. For example, perceivers may "catch" the positive emotions of others, thereby elevating their own affective experiences (Barsade, 2002; Morelli, Ong, Makati, Jackson, & Zaki, 2017). Research on capitalization suggests that the sharing of positive emotions can strengthen existing social bonds (Gable & Reis, 2010). Because responding to positive emotions can potentially provide benefits to the perceiver, the act may be perceived as more compatible with self-interest than responding to negative emotions. Consequently, the allocation of resources required to acknowledge positive emotions may be interpreted as relatively "inexpensive". Thus, although acknowledging positive emotions should increase trust more than not acknowledging, we expect a weaker effect for positive, relative to negative, emotions.

Hypothesis 3a. The relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust is moderated by the valence of the expresser's emotion, such that the relationship is stronger when the emotions expressed are negative as opposed to positive.

Hypothesis 3b. This moderation occurs because negative emotions are seen as costlier to acknowledge than positive emotions.

2. Overview of studies

Employing a diverse set of methodologies, we examine the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust from the perspective of the expresser (Studies 1–4) and third-party observers (Studies 5–6). In Study 1, we surveyed a field sample of hospital employees, providing preliminary support for the link between emotional acknowledgment and trust in a high-stakes organizational context. In Study 2, we provide causal evidence for our hypotheses using an experiment involving work-related scenarios. In Study 3, we show

that emotional acknowledgment led to greater trust than non-emotional acknowledgment. In Study 4, we show that the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust is attenuated when perceivers are seen as acknowledging out of concern for their own reputation. In Study 5, we examine our hypotheses from a third-party perspective using videos of two coworkers interacting in a breakroom. In Study 6, we examine situations in which perceivers acknowledge an expresser's emotions *inaccurately* and test empathic accuracy as an alternative explanation. See Table 2 for an overview of each study (i.e., study purpose, sample, design, perspective, and hypotheses tested).

For the five experiments (Studies 2–6), we set a fixed rule prior to data collection to collect approximately 100 participants per cell and then exclude any participants who failed the comprehension checks that were included in each experiment (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011). See the Online Supplement for details on the exclusions and comprehension checks, which showed that the manipulations were effective in each of the five experiments (Studies 2–6). Data and materials for all studies are available at: https://osf.io/dn3wh/

3. Study 1: Examining emotional acknowledgment and trust in the field

This study examined the link between emotional acknowledgment and trust in a field sample of healthcare providers working in two intensive care units of a children's hospital. As initial tests, we explored the association between emotional acknowledgment and trust (H1) and investigated whether the relationship depended on the valence of the expresser's emotions (H3a).

3.1. Participants and procedures

As part of an organizational development initiative, all healthcare providers in the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) and the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit (CVICU) of a large children's hospital in California were invited to participate in this study. The study was conducted in two phases. The hospital sent the survey to a subset of employees in the PICU during the first phase (*n* = 92; response rate of 25.3%), and to all CVICU and remaining PICU employees during the second phase (*n* = 154; response rate of 42.3%). We capitalized on the staggered rollout by administering a general measure of emotional acknowledgment during the first phase and measures of negative and positive emotional acknowledgment during the second phase. This allowed us to examine the main effect of emotional acknowledgment and the differential effects of acknowledging positive and negative emotions, respectively.

Overall, we surveyed 246 healthcare employees. The employees in the sample occupied several different roles: 54.5% were nurses, 14.6%

Table 2
Summary table of all studies.

Study	Main Purpose	Sample	Design	Perspective	Hypotheses Tested
1	To establish external validity	$N = 246$	Field survey with hospital employees	First-party (expresser)	H1, H3a
2	To find causal evidence	$N = 374$	Between-subject experiment using vignettes	First-party (expresser)	H1, H2, H3a, H3b
3	To compare emotional vs. non-emotional acknowledgment	$N = 195$	Mixed-design experiment using vignettes	First-party (expresser)	H1, H2, H3a
4	To examine moderation by reputational concern	$N = 395$	Between-subject experiment using vignettes	First-party (expresser)	H1, H2
5	To test hypotheses from third-party perspective	$N = 541$	Between-subject experiment using video stimuli	Third-party	H1, H2, H3a, H3b
6	To examine the role of acknowledgment accuracy	$N = 581$	Between-subject experiment using video stimuli	Third-party	H4, H5, H6a, H6b (outlined on pg. 33–34)

were respiratory therapists, 12.2% were physicians, 2.8% were nurse practitioners, 2.4% were social workers, 3.7% were rehabilitation therapists, and 9.8% occupied other roles. Most (79.3%) employees worked in full-time positions, 18.3% worked part-time, and 2.4% had other working arrangements. The majority (65.9%) worked day shifts, 27.2% worked night shifts, and 6.9% worked approximately equal numbers of night and day shifts. Lastly, 82.9% worked weekdays and weekends, while 16.7% worked weekdays only. In line with the hospital's wishes to increase participation by protecting the employee's identifying information, we did not collect additional demographic information.

3.2. Measures

Participants were asked to answer all survey items based on their attitudes and behaviors during the past two weeks. The survey included measures of interpersonal trust, emotional acknowledgment, and additional control variables. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree").

3.2.1. Interpersonal trust

Interpersonal trust ($\alpha = 0.78$) was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Mayer and Davis (1999): "My coworkers look out for what is important to me", "My coworkers would not knowingly do anything to hurt me", "My coworkers are concerned about my welfare", "My coworkers think my needs and preferences are important".

3.2.2. General emotional acknowledgment

During the first phase of the study, general emotional acknowledgment ($\alpha = 0.88$) was measured using a four-item scale: "When my coworkers notice my emotions, they will bring them up", "When my coworkers see that I am experiencing an emotion, they will mention it.", "My coworkers do NOT refer to my emotions" (reverse-scored), "When coworkers see that I am feeling an emotion, they do NOT say anything about it" (reverse-scored). The pre-registered validation of this scale can be found in Appendix A.

3.2.3. Negative/positive emotional acknowledgment

During the second phase of the study, negative ($M = 3.24, SD = 0.71$, $\alpha = 0.85$) and positive emotional acknowledgment ($M = 3.41, SD = 0.69, \alpha = 0.87$) were measured using the following eight items: "When my coworkers notice my negative [positive] emotions, they will bring them up", "When my coworkers see that I am experiencing a negative [positive] emotion, they will mention it.", "My coworkers do NOT refer to my negative [positive] emotions" (reverse-scored), and "When coworkers see that I am feeling negatively [positively], they do NOT say anything about it" (reverse-scored).

3.2.4. Control variables

Based on recommendations provided by Becker et al. (2016), we included three control variables that were empirically and theoretically related to interpersonal trust, our main dependent variable (De Jong, Dirks, & Gillespie, 2016; Guinot, Chiva, & Roca-Puig, 2014): job satisfaction, perceived stress, and perceived team functioning. Job satis-

satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.91$) was measured using three items adapted from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983; e.g., "I have enjoyed working as a member of this care team"). Perceived stress ($\alpha = 0.59$) was measured using four items adapted from Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (1983; e.g., "I felt difficulties were piling up so high at work that I could not overcome them"). Perceived team functioning ($\alpha = 0.71$) was measured using three items adapted from the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2006; e.g., "My unit operates at a high level of efficiency").

3.3. Results and discussion

To examine the association between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust, we used our sample from the first phase and conducted a series of linear regression models (Table 3). We found that participants were more likely to trust coworkers when their emotions were acknowledged, $\beta = 0.59, SE = 0.09, p < .001$. This relationship persisted when we controlled for demographic variables, $\beta = 0.63, SE = 0.10, p < .001$, and when additional controls were included for job satisfaction, perceived stress, and perceived team functioning, $\beta = 0.30, SE = 0.11, p = .006$. Consistent with H1, these results provide preliminary evidence of a relationship between general emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust in an organizational context.

To examine the differential effects of positive and negative emotional acknowledgment on interpersonal trust (H3a), we used our sample from the second phase. Using a series of linear regression models (Table 4), we found that participants were more likely to trust coworkers when their positive emotions were acknowledged, even after controlling for demographic variables, $\beta = 0.23, SE = 0.08, p = .004$. However, the relationship did not persist when we included additional controls for job satisfaction, perceived stress, and perceived team functioning, $\beta = 0.12, SE = 0.08, p = .12$. Likewise, we found that participants were more likely to trust coworkers when their negative emotions were acknowledged, even after controlling for demographic variables, $\beta = 0.34, SE = 0.08, p < .001$. Moreover, this relationship persisted even when we included the additional controls, $\beta = 0.23, SE = 0.08, p = .004$. When we added positive and negative emotional acknowledgment to the same model with all covariates, negative emotional acknowledgment persisted as a significant predictor of trust, $\beta = 0.20, SE = 0.08, p = .01$, but positive emotional acknowledgment did not, $\beta = 0.07, SE = 0.08, p = .36$, indicating that only negative emotional acknowledgment accounted for unique variance in trust. These findings provide suggestive evidence in support of H3a that acknowledging negative emotions has a stronger effect on trust than acknowledging positive emotions.

This first study provides initial evidence in support of H1 and H3a in a high-stakes organizational context. However, the cross-sectional nature of this study precluded us from drawing inferences about causality, and we did not test our proposed mechanism of perceived costliness directly (H2 and H3b). We address these limitations in Study 2.

4. Study 2: Experimental tests of H1-H3 from the expresser's perspective

In Study 2, we build on our cross-sectional field study using an

Table 3
Standardized OLS regression models for first phase of Study 1.

	Dependent variable: Interpersonal Trust		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Emotional Acknowledgment	0.59***	0.63***	0.30**
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.11)
Role: Physician		−0.01	−0.26
		(0.36)	(0.30)
Role: Rehab. Therapist		0.57	0.42
		(0.54)	(0.45)
Role: Resp. Therapist		0.06	0.24
		(0.31)	(0.27)
Role: Other		0.44	0.04
		(0.38)	(0.32)
Shift: Night		0.36	0.21
		(0.24)	(0.20)
Shift: Both Day and Night		−0.22	−0.14
		(0.52)	(0.44)
Days on Duty: Weekdays only		−0.27	−0.35
		(0.33)	(0.28)
Days on Duty: Weekend only		−1.24	−1.00
		(0.88)	(0.75)
Full-Time Status: Part-Time		−0.19	−0.18
		(0.26)	(0.22)
Full-Time Status: Other		−0.54	−0.44
		(0.54)	(0.45)
Job Satisfaction			0.33**
			(0.12)
Stress			−0.16
			(0.12)
Team Functioning			0.15
			(0.10)
Constant	0.05	0.01	0.09
	(0.09)	(0.15)	(0.13)
Observations	82	82	82
R^2	0.34	0.41	0.61
Adjusted R^2	0.33	0.31	0.52
Residual Std. Error	0.82 (df = 80)	0.83 (df = 70)	0.69 (df = 67)
F Statistic	41.65*** (df = 1; 80)	4.38*** (df = 11; 70)	7.39*** (df = 14; 67)

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

experimental design. Participants imagined themselves in a hypothetical scenario with a coworker. We varied the description of how the participant was feeling at the time (either positively or negatively) and how the coworker responded (either by acknowledging their emotions or not). In addition to interpersonal trust and emotional acknowledgment, we also measured perceived costliness, thereby allowing a test of our full theoretical model (H1-H3b).

4.1. Participants and procedures

Participants included 374 individuals recruited through Mechanical Turk (35.3% female; $M_{age} = 37.08$, $SD_{age} = 12.71$). The sample was 12.0% African-American, 7.5% Asian, 71.1% Caucasian, 5.3% Hispanic, and 4.0% other. The experiment employed a 2 (valence of expressed emotion: positive, negative) × 2 (emotional acknowledgment: yes, no) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios, in which they imagined themselves interacting with a coworker. The scenarios were described as follows:

You just finished a meeting with your boss, and it went very poorly [very well].
You are feeling upset [happy].
Your coworker nearby is flipping through a report and then says to you, "I just talked to the team about the new deadline and they're okay with it."
Your coworker looks up at you and pauses for a moment.

In the acknowledgment condition, participants then read: *"Then, your coworker says, "You seem upset [happy]."* In the no acknowledgment condition, participants instead read: *"Then, your coworker continues*

talking about the report." Next, participants answered questions about their perceptions of this coworker and filled out a set of demographic questions.

4.2. Measures

4.2.1. Interpersonal trust

Interpersonal trust ($\alpha = 0.88$) was measured using adapted versions of the four items from Study 1 (e.g., "This coworker is concerned about my welfare").

4.2.2. Perceived costliness

Perceived costliness was measured using a five-item scale that captured potential costs associated with emotional acknowledgment in the focal context ($\alpha = 0.96$): "This coworker is willing to spend [attention]/[effort]/[time]/[energy]/[personal resources] on the relationship." Specifically, we constructed these items based on previous conceptual definitions of costliness in Costly Signaling Theory (Smith & Bird, 2000; Hardy & Van Vugt, 2006), focusing on the forms of costliness that are relevant in workplace relationships.

4.3. Results and discussion

4.3.1. Interpersonal trust

In support of H1, we found a main effect of emotional acknowledgment on interpersonal trust. Specifically, participants trusted the perceiver significantly more in the acknowledgment ($M = 5.09$, $SD = 1.06$) than the no acknowledgment condition ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.30$), $F(1, 370) = 29.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$. Consistent with previous research

Table 4
Standardized OLS regression models for second phase of Study 1.

	Dependent variable: Interpersonal Trust				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Positive Emotional Acknowledgment	0.23**	0.12			0.07
	(0.08)	(0.08)			(0.08)
Negative Emotional Acknowledgment			0.34***	0.23**	0.20*
			(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Role: Nurse Practitioner	0.63	0.59	0.85	0.74	0.71
	(0.44)	(0.40)	(0.44)	(0.40)	(0.40)
Role: Physician	0.65*	0.41	0.73**	0.48	0.51
	(0.28)	(0.26)	(0.28)	(0.26)	(0.27)
Role: Rehab. Therapist	0.67	0.41	0.76	0.51	0.55
	(0.53)	(0.49)	(0.53)	(0.49)	(0.49)
Role: Resp. Therapist	0.26	0.06	0.36	0.15	0.16
	(0.23)	(0.22)	(0.24)	(0.22)	(0.22)
Role: Social Worker	0.96*	1.05*	0.89	1.01*	1.01*
	(0.46)	(0.42)	(0.46)	(0.42)	(0.42)
Role: Other	0.30	0.12	0.24	0.07	0.08
	(0.30)	(0.28)	(0.29)	(0.28)	(0.28)
Shift: Night	0.42*	0.27	0.49*	0.34	0.35
	(0.19)	(0.18)	(0.20)	(0.18)	(0.18)
Shift: Both Day and Night	0.04	0.10	−0.11	−0.0005	0.01
	(0.37)	(0.33)	(0.36)	(0.33)	(0.33)
Days on Duty: Weekdays only	−0.14	−0.25	−0.04	−0.18	−0.18
	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.25)
Full-Time Status: Part-Time	−0.14	−0.23	−0.16	−0.23	−0.20
	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.20)
Full-Time Status: Other	0.79	0.73	0.29	0.33	0.33
	(0.57)	(0.52)	(0.69)	(0.63)	(0.63)
Job Satisfaction		0.30**		0.26**	0.25**
		(0.09)		(0.09)	(0.09)
Stress		−0.03		−0.06	−0.05
		(0.08)		(0.08)	(0.08)
Team Functioning		0.20*		0.21*	0.20*
		(0.08)		(0.08)	(0.08)
Constant	−0.34*	−0.18	−0.39*	−0.22	−0.23
	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Observations	152	151	146	145	145
R^2	0.14	0.31	0.19	0.35	0.35
Adjusted R^2	0.07	0.24	0.12	0.27	0.27
Residual Std. Error	0.96 (df = 139)	0.88 (df = 135)	0.95 (df = 133)	0.87 (df = 129)	0.87 (df = 128)
F Statistic	1.93* (df = 12; 139)	4.10*** (df = 15; 135)	2.63** (df = 12; 133)	4.54*** (df = 15; 129)	4.31*** (df = 16; 128)

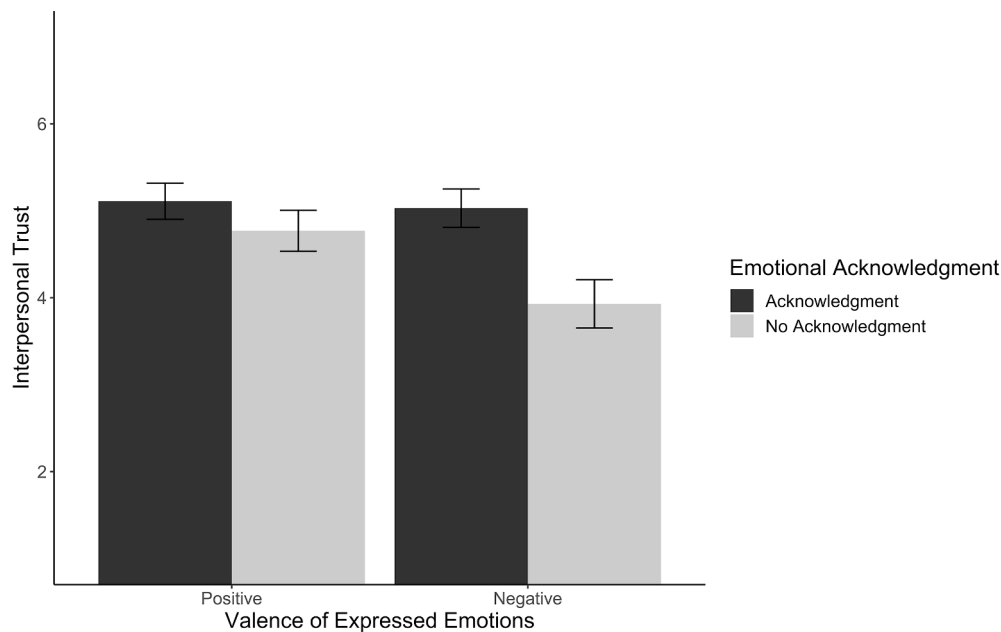Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Fig. 2. Interactive effects of emotional acknowledgment and emotional valence on first-party trust perceptions (Study 2). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

showing that positive emotions make people more trusting than negative emotions (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), we also found a main effect of emotional valence—participants trusted the perceiver more in the positive ($M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.13$) than negative emotion condition ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.29$), $F(1, 370) = 16.73$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$.

In support of H3a, we also found a significant interaction between emotional acknowledgment and valence on trust, $F(1, 370) = 8.96$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, indicating that the effect of emotional acknowledgment depended on the valence of the simulated emotion—see Fig. 2. Participants trusted the perceiver more when the perceiver acknowledged their positive emotion ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.05$) than when they did not ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.19$), $t(200) = 2.00$, $p = .047$, $d = 0.28$. However, in the wake of experiencing negative emotions, differences in trust evaluations were even more pronounced. That is, participants trusted the perceiver to a greater extent when the perceiver acknowledged their negative emotions ($M = 5.03$, $SD = 1.07$) than when they did not ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.29$), $t(170) = 5.70$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$.

4.3.2. Mediation and moderated mediation

Next, we conducted mediation analyses (Hayes, 2013) to test whether perceived costliness mediated the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust (H2), and whether this mediation was moderated by the valence of the expressed emotions (H3b). Using 5000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant mediation pathway from emotional acknowledgment to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness (indirect effect = 0.86, $SE = 0.11$, 95% CI = [0.66, 1.08]), which supports H2. We also found evidence in support of H3b (index of moderated mediation = 0.28, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.08, 0.48]). Specifically, the effect of emotional acknowledgment on interpersonal trust through perceived costliness was stronger for negative (indirect effect = 0.54, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI = [0.38, 0.69]) than positive emotions (indirect effect = 0.25, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.38]).

In sum, Study 2 provides causal evidence in support of H1-H3. Expressers deemed perceivers as more trustworthy when the perceived costs of acknowledging were heightened (i.e., responding to negative rather than positive emotions). Correspondingly, the effect of emotional acknowledgment on trust through perceived costliness was significantly stronger in response to an expresser's negative than positive emotions.

5. Study 3: Comparison of emotional and non-emotional forms of acknowledgment

Studies 1 and 2 leave open the possibility that the results could be attributed to the general act of acknowledgment, as opposed to acknowledgment of *emotions* in particular. In Study 3, we modified our design to compare emotional and non-emotional acknowledgment. That is, we used non-emotional acknowledgment, rather than no acknowledgment, as our control condition. We predicted that perceivers who engage in emotional acknowledgment, which signals openness to emotional self-disclosures from expressers, would be seen as more trustworthy than those who engage in non-emotional acknowledgment. Past research suggests that when people reveal information about their emotions (as opposed to factual or descriptive information), they feel greater intimacy and closeness to their listening partners (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998). Indeed, emotional self-disclosures may foster more social closeness than factual self-disclosures because emotions and feelings tend to be more central to one's own self-definition (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001; Kristjansson, 2010). As such, to the extent that emotional acknowledgment prompts and licenses emotional self-disclosures, we expect emotional acknowledgment to be seen as costlier—and thus increase trust more—than non-emotional acknowledgment. Furthermore, to complement our measure of perceived costliness, which captures the general willingness to expend future resources into the relationship, we explored the specific resource costs that participants anticipate will be expended in the interaction. The design, analyses, and

hypotheses for Study 3 were pre-registered on AsPredicted.org (https://aspredicted.org/i6tz7.pdf).

5.1. Participants, procedures, and measures

The sample included 195 participants recruited through Prolific (53.8% female; $M_{age} = 31.47$, $SD_{age} = 9.78$). The sample was 7.2% African-American, 14.5% Asian, 67.1% Caucasian, 6.2% Hispanic, and 5.1% other.

This experiment used a mixed design, with valence of expressed emotion (positive, negative) manipulated between-subjects and emotional acknowledgment (yes, no) varied within-subjects. Participants read the same scenario stimuli as in Study 2. However, at the end of the scenario, each participant read about two possible responses (i.e., emotional or a non-emotional acknowledgment) from the coworker, presented in random order:

Now, we'd like for you to consider two possible responses from your coworker:
Response 1: Then your coworker says, "You looked upset [happy] after the meeting. How are you feeling about it?"
Response 2: Then your coworker says, "It looked like the meeting went poorly [well]. How are you thinking about it?"

Next, participants answered questions about their perceptions of the coworker based on each of these two responses and then completed a set of demographic questions. We used the same items as Study 2 to measure interpersonal trust ($\alpha_{non\text{-}emotional} = 0.90$; $\alpha_{emotional} = 0.88$) and perceived costliness ($\alpha_{non\text{-}emotional} = 0.95$; $\alpha_{emotional} = 0.92$).

Finally, to complement our general measure of perceived costliness, we also included three items capturing the specific resource costs that participants may anticipate in the interaction. These items asked participants to compare how they thought the conversation would unfold if their coworker engaged in emotional vs. non-emotional acknowledgment. First, we presented participants with a sliding scale ranging from 0 to 30 min and asked, "How much longer (in minutes) would this coworker stay in a conversation with you?" Second, we presented participants with a sliding scale from 0% (minimal attention) to 100% (maximal attention) and asked, "How attentive would this coworker be in the rest of this conversation?" Third, we presented participants with a sliding scale from 0% (minimal effort) to 100% (maximal effort) and asked, "How much effort would this coworker put into the rest of this conversation?"

5.2. Results and discussion

5.2.1. Interpersonal trust

To analyze these data, we conducted a 2 (Acknowledgment: Emotional, Non-Emotional) × 2 (Emotional Valence: Positive, Negative) mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the first factor. As predicted in H1, we found that participants trusted the perceiver significantly more in the emotional acknowledgment ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 0.95$) than the non-emotional acknowledgment condition ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 193) = 117.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.38$. We did not find a main effect of emotional valence—participants did not trust the perceiver more in the positive ($M = 4.93$, $SD = 0.08$) than negative emotion condition ($M = 4.91$, $SD = 0.08$), $F(1, 193) = 0.01$, $p = .91$, $\eta^2 = 0.00$.

As predicted in H3a, we found a significant interaction between emotional acknowledgment and valence on trust, $F(1, 193) = 31.23$, $p = .00$, $\eta^2 = 0.14$, indicating that the effect of acknowledgment depended on the valence of the simulated emotion—see Fig. 3. For the positive emotion condition, participants trusted the perceiver more when the perceiver engaged in emotional ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 1.09$) than non-emotional acknowledgment ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.96$), *paired-t*(96) = 4.23, $p < .001$, $d = 0.43$. However, for the negative emotion condition, differences in trust evaluations were even more
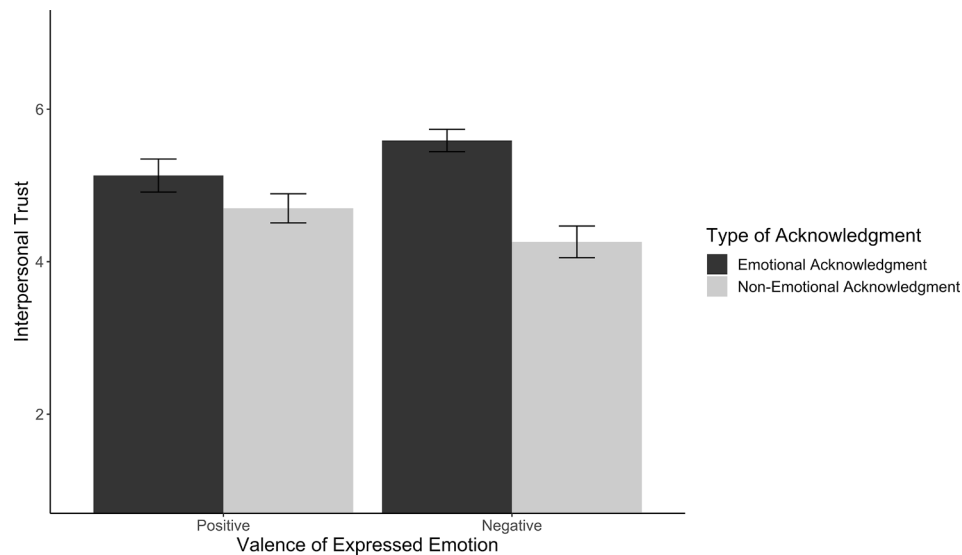
Fig. 3. Interactive effects of type of acknowledgment and emotional valence on first-party trust perceptions (Study 3). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

pronounced—participants trusted the perceiver to a greater extent when the perceiver engaged in emotional ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 0.74$) than non-emotional acknowledgment ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.05$), *paired-t*(97) = 10.50, $p < .001$, $d = 1.06$.

5.2.2. Mediation

Next, we conducted mediation analyses (Hayes, 2013) to test whether perceived costliness mediated the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust (H2). Using 5000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant mediation pathway from emotional acknowledgment to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness (indirect effect = 0.67, $SE = 0.08$, 95% $CI = [0.52, 0.84]$), which supports H2.

5.2.3. Anticipated costs in the interaction

As an exploratory analysis, we examined the specific resource costs participants anticipated from coworkers who engaged in emotional vs. non-emotional acknowledgment. Participants expected the coworker to continue the conversation longer when they engaged in emotional acknowledgment ($M = 10.12$ min, $SD = 6.17$) than non-emotional acknowledgment ($M = 6.96$ min, $SD = 5.15$), *paired-t*(1 9 4) = 8.48, $p < .001$, $d = .61$[1]. Similarly, participants expected the coworker to expend more attention when they engaged in emotional acknowledgment ($M = 67.98\%$, $SD = 24.06$) than non-emotional acknowledgment ($M = 50.46\%$, $SD = 23.33$), *paired-t*(1 9 4) = 10.01, $p < .001$, $d = 0.72$. Finally, participants expected the coworker to expend more effort when they engaged in emotional acknowledgment ($M = 66.71\%$, $SD = 22.46$) than non-emotional acknowledgment ($M = 48.07\%$, $SD = 23.27$), *paired-t*(1 9 4) = 9.75, $p < .001$, $d = 0.70$. In sum, when acknowledgment was emotional in nature (as compared to non-emotional), participants expected their coworker to expend significantly more time, attention, and effort.

Overall, these findings replicate the results from Study 2 and provide evidence that emotional acknowledgment leads to greater levels of trust than non-emotional acknowledgment, because emotional acknowledgment tends to be perceived as costlier for the perceiver.

6. Study 4: Moderation by reputational concern

In Studies 1–3, we found that emotional acknowledgment increased trust because the perceiver was presumably seen as acting in the interests of the expresser, rather than the self. However, reputational concerns may also drive emotional acknowledgment, especially in organizational contexts. In Study 4, we manipulate whether the perceiver has high or low motivation to engage in impression management (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Prior research suggests that people make attributions based on the perceived motives of the actor (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). When impression management motives are salient, we expect that acknowledgment would still be seen as costlier than no acknowledgment. However, the attribution that expressers make about the costs may change. Specifically, expressers may believe that perceivers are willing to bear the costs of acknowledgment in part to serve their own self-interest, not just to help the expresser, thereby weakening the positive relationship between acknowledgment and trust. In sum, we hypothesize that the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust will be attenuated when the perceiver is highly motivated to engage in impression management.

Furthermore, in addition to perceived costliness, we explore two alternative mechanisms in this study: response importance and empathic concern. We consider the possibility that emotional acknowledgment increases trust because, in the eyes of the expresser, this response is more useful for having their emotional needs met. For example, to the extent that expressers experiencing negative emotions require greater social support and intervention, emotional acknowledgment should be a more meaningful response to the expresser because it creates an impression that the perceiver is prepared to meet their needs. We also consider the possibility that acknowledgment increases trust because it signals that the perceiver demonstrates empathic concern, or the tendency to respond to others with tender and compassionate feelings (Batson, Fultz, & Schoenrade, 1987). Although the pathways from emotional acknowledgment to trust are likely to be multiply determined, we hypothesize that perceived costliness will be a stronger mediator than response importance or empathic concern, and that it will still remain a significant mediator even after controlling for these other two mechanisms. The design, analyses, and hypotheses for Study 4 were pre-registered on AsPredicted.org (https://aspredicted. org/if4ij.pdf).

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[1] This analysis was conducted using a log-transformation of this variable to account for positive skew.

6.1. Participants and procedures

Participants included 395 individuals recruited through Prolific (49.6% female; $M_{age} = 34.58$, $SD_{age} = 12.13$). The sample was 7.8% African-American, 13.7% Asian, 65.3% Caucasian, 7.8% Hispanic, and 5.3% other. This experiment employed a 2 (impression management motive: high, low) × 2 (emotional acknowledgment: yes, no) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios, in which they imagined themselves interacting with a coworker. The scenarios were described as follows:

You were working on a presentation for work when your computer crashes. The changes to your presentation were not saved, so you have to start over.
You are feeling angry.
One of your coworkers is sitting nearby.
[In the high impression management condition: This coworker knows that you need to fill out a performance review for them soon. Your performance review will determine whether they get a job promotion. Because of this, they have been acting in ways to get on your good side.]

In the acknowledgment condition, participants then read:

In this moment, your coworker sees you and says, "You look angry. Did something happen?" This coworker has never acknowledged your emotions before.

In the no acknowledgment condition, participants instead read:

In this moment, your coworker sees you, but then goes back to doing their work. This coworker has never acknowledged your emotions.

Next, participants answered questions about their perceptions of this coworker and filled out a set of demographic questions.

6.2. Measures

6.2.1. Interpersonal trust

Interpersonal trust ($\alpha = 0.87$) was measured using the same items as Studies 2 and 3.

6.2.2. Perceived costliness

Perceived costliness ($\alpha = 0.97$) was measured using the same items as Studies 2 and 3.

6.2.3. Response importance

Response importance ($\alpha = 0.90$) was measured using a four-item scale that captured how participants viewed the significance of the perceiver's response ($\alpha = 0.96$): "This coworker's response was [important]/[significant]/[meaningful]/[useful]".

6.2.4. Empathic concern

Empathic concern ($\alpha = 0.87$) was measured using the seven-item scale from Davis (1980; e.g., "This coworker often has tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than him/her.")

6.3. Results and discussion

6.3.1. Interpersonal trust

Replicating results from Studies 1–3, we found a main effect of emotional acknowledgment on trust (H1). Participants trusted the perceiver significantly more in the acknowledgment ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 1.10$) than the no acknowledgment condition ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 1.25$), $F(1, 391) = 130.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.25$. We also found a main effect of impression management: participants trusted the perceiver more in the low ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 1.38$) than high impression management condition ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.33$), $F(1, 391) = 4.24$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = 0.009$.

As hypothesized, we also found a significant interaction between emotional acknowledgment and impression management, $F(1, 391) = 7.19$, $p = .008$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$, indicating that the effect of emotional acknowledgment depended on whether the perceiver had high or low impression management motives (Fig. 4). When the perceiver did not have a salient motive to engage in impression management, participants trusted the perceiver who acknowledged their emotion ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 1.00$) more than the one who did not ($M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(193) = 10.52$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.51$. However, when the perceiver was highly motivated to engage in impression management, these differences were attenuated. Participants still trusted the perceiver who acknowledged their emotions ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.14$) more than the one who did not ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.31$), but the effect was significantly smaller, $t(198) =$
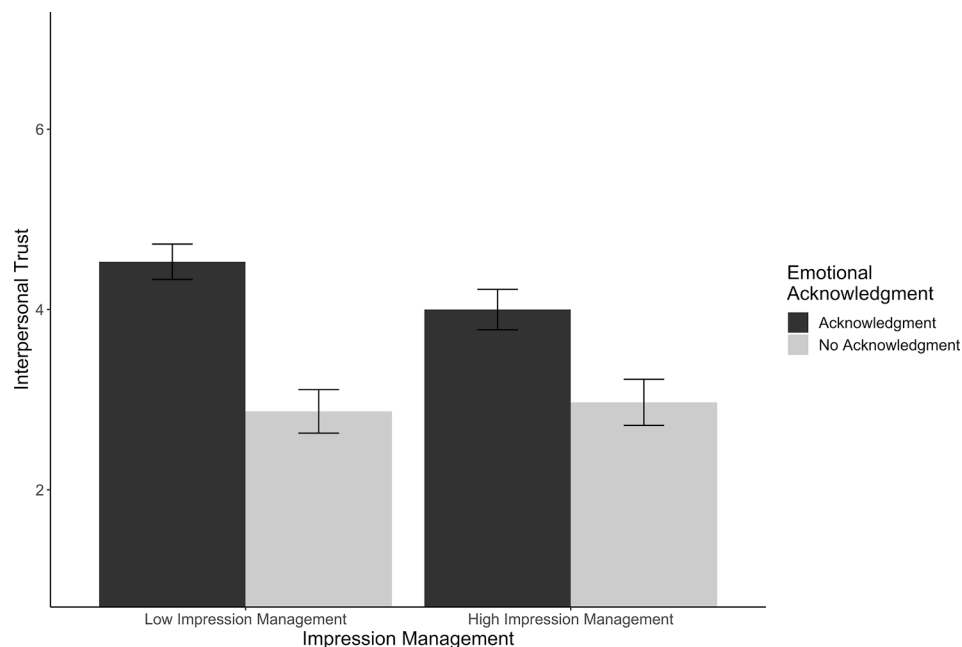
Fig. 4. Interactive effects of emotional acknowledgment and impression management motive on first-party trust perceptions (Study 4). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

5.93, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$.

6.3.2. Mediation including alternative mechanisms

As stated in our preregistration, we conducted our mediation analyses only within the low impression management condition, which more closely resembled the context in our previous studies. Using 5000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant mediation pathway from emotional acknowledgment to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness (indirect effect = 1.47, $SE = 0.16$, 95% CI = [1.16, 1.79]), supporting H2. Furthermore, as expected, we found that when entered into the same model, perceived costliness (indirect effect = 1.19, $SE = 0.17$, 95% CI = [0.87, 1.56]) was a significantly stronger mediator than response importance (indirect effect = 0.08, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI = [−0.07, 0.25]) or empathic concern (indirect effect = 0.31, $SE = 0.10$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.51]). Finally, we hypothesized and found that perceived costliness persisted as a mediator, even after controlling for response importance and empathic concern (indirect effect = 0.36, $SE = 0.13$, 95% CI = [0.14, 0.63]).

The findings from Study 4 suggest that the perceiver's motives influence the interpretation of emotional acknowledgment. When the perceiver was highly concerned with his/her own reputation, the effect of emotional acknowledgment on trust was weakened, but did not fully disappear. This was presumably because the act was perceived as more self-, rather than other-oriented. Additionally, we found that empathic concern, but not response importance, also mediated the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust. However, perceived costliness was a significantly stronger mediator than these alternative mechanisms.

7. Study 5: Experimental tests of H1–H3 from a third-party perspective

Thus far, the studies have demonstrated the potential benefits of emotional acknowledgment on the expresser's perceptions (i.e., first-party perceptions) of interpersonal trust. However, solely examining first-party perceptions of acknowledgment on interpersonal trust may introduce confounds. Past research has documented the effect of various emotional states on trust perceptions (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005; Gino & Schweitzer, 2008). These studies find that emotions affect our cognition (Schwarz & Clore, 2007)—negative emotions, such as anger, decrease trust, whereas positive emotions, such as happiness and gratitude, increase trust (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005). Indeed, in Study 2, we found a main effect of valence: participants trusted the perceiver significantly more in the positive (vs. negative) emotion condition. As such, the first-party perspective makes it difficult to disentangle whether the effects on trust are due to emotional acknowledgment or the subjective experience of the emotion. Additionally, first-party expressers may be particularly sensitive to the costliness of emotional acknowledgment because they stand to receive direct benefits from the act. However, according to Costly Signaling Theory, because emotional acknowledgment is an observable response that signals important underlying qualities, the costs of the act should also be discernable by third-party observers. Moreover, the fact that third-party observers have little or no "skin in the game" may make tests of the hypotheses from a third-party perspective more conservative than a first-party perspective.

Thus, in Study 5, we investigated the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust (H1- H3) from a third-party perspective to mitigate these potential confounds and strengthen our empirical evidence. In particular, we hired two professional actors and created videos of two coworkers interacting in a workplace breakroom. In the videos, one actor played the role of expresser, and the other the role of perceiver. We created a separate video to represent each condition of the experiment—the scene depicted in each video was altered to manipulate emotional acknowledgment and valence. Participants were randomly assigned to watch and respond to questions about one of the videos.

Furthermore, in addition to no acknowledgment, we included

another control to compare against emotional acknowledgment: directing the conversation to a topic unrelated to emotions (i.e., distraction). Past work on interpersonal emotion regulation suggest that people can manage an expresser's emotions by either facilitating engagement or disengagement from the emotional situation (Pauw, Sauter, van Kleef, & Fischer, 2019). Whereas emotional acknowledgment presumably facilitates engagement, distraction should facilitate disengagement from the emotional situation. As such, we included a distraction condition to compare the efficacy of an engagement and disengagement approach. Additionally, the distraction condition facilitates a fairer comparison than the no acknowledgment condition, as the amount of verbal interaction in the distraction and emotional acknowledgment conditions are more similar (Cooper & Richardson, 1986). We hypothesized that emotional acknowledgment would increase trustworthiness more than no acknowledgment or distraction, because engaging with emotions directly should be a costlier signal of the perceiver's willingness to help the expresser.

7.1. Participants and procedures

The sample included 541 participants recruited through Mechanical Turk (38.4% female; $M_{age} = 36.40$, $SD_{age} = 10.24$). Our sample was 25.0% African-American, 4.4% Asian, 63.5% Caucasian, 5.7% Hispanic, and 2.4% other. This experiment employed a 2 (valence of expressed emotions: positive, negative) × 3 (emotional acknowledgment: acknowledgment, no acknowledgment, distraction) between-subjects design.

All participants read the same background story about Daniel and Brandon, who were purportedly two employees working at a publishing company. Then, to provide context, participants were told: "You will see a video of Daniel and Brandon's interaction in the breakroom. Specifically, Brandon receives an email with some good [bad] news when Daniel walks into the breakroom". Next, participants were randomly assigned to watch one of six videos (see Online Supplement), each representing one of the six conditions.

To create the six videos, we hired two professional actors to play two colleagues interacting at work. The actors were instructed to dress in business attire and to thoroughly memorize and rehearse the script before arriving on set. We recorded the videos in a workplace breakroom. All six videos start with Brandon (the expresser) eating lunch and checking his email. As he reads his email, he either displays a happy or angry emotional expression. Then, Daniel (the perceiver), walks into the breakroom, and grabs his lunch. He sits down next to Brandon, looks at Brandon, and pauses for a moment. In the emotional acknowledgment condition, Daniel acknowledges Brandon's emotions by saying, "You seem happy [upset]". In the no acknowledgment condition, Daniel says nothing. In the distraction condition, Daniel redirects attention away from the emotional expression by saying "Did you catch the game last night?" Each video was about 40 s in length. Following the video, participants were asked about their perceptions of Daniel and to fill out demographic questions.

7.2. Measures

7.2.1. Interpersonal trust

Similar to the prior studies, interpersonal trust ($\alpha = 0.89$) was measured using a four-item scale adapted from Mayer and Davis (1999): e.g., "Daniel looks out for what is important to other people".

7.2.2. Perceived costliness

Perceived costliness ($\alpha = 0.95$) was measured using adapted versions of the five items used in Studies 2–4: "Daniel is willing to spend [attention]/[effort]/[time]/[energy]/[personal resources] on the relationship".
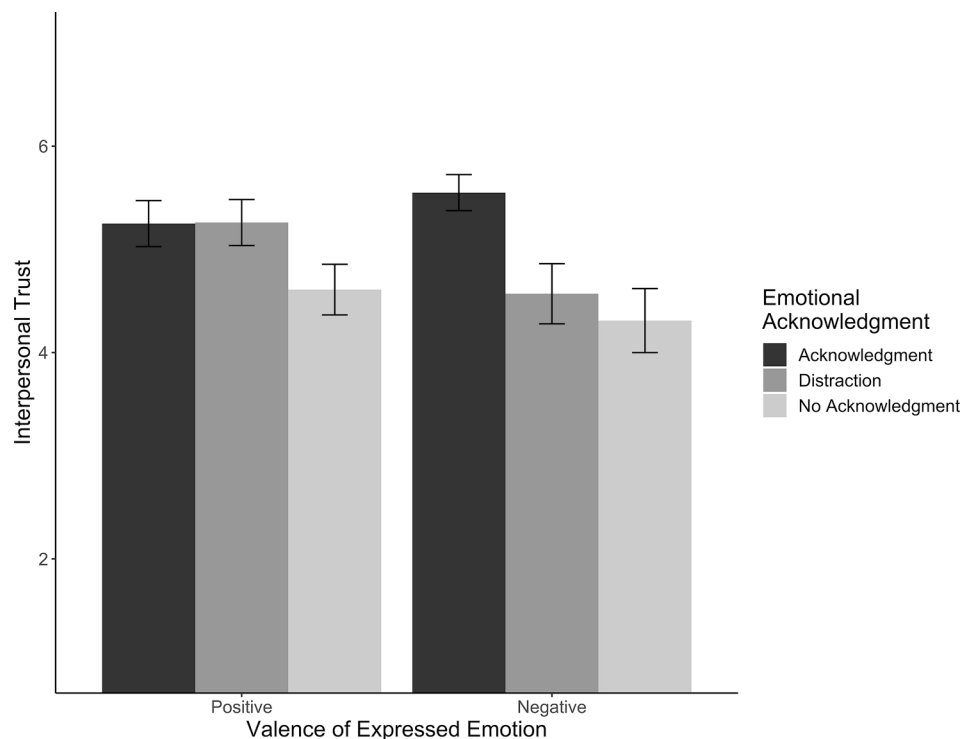
Fig. 5. Interactive effects of emotional acknowledgment and emotional valence on third-party trust perceptions (Study 5). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

7.3. Results and discussion

7.3.1. Interpersonal trust

First, we examined the effect of emotional acknowledgment and valence on interpersonal trust. In line with H1, we found a main effect of emotional acknowledgment on trust, $F(2, 535) = 27.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.09$. Specifically, emotional acknowledgment ($M = 5.39, SD = 1.01$) led to greater perceptions of trust than no acknowledgment ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.34$), $t(363) = 7.51, p < .001, d = 0.79$, and distraction ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.26$), $t(360) = 3.73, p < .001, d = 0.39$. We also found a main effect of emotional valence, $F(1, 535) = 4.34, p = .04, \eta^2 = 0.007$. Participants trusted the perceiver more in the positive ($M = 5.04, SD = 1.19$) than negative emotion condition ($M = 4.83, SD = 1.34$). However, the size of this main effect was relatively small ($\eta^2 = 0.007$), considerably smaller than the equivalent effect size from Study 2 ($\eta^2 = 0.04$). This makes sense, as we would expect the effects of positive and negative emotion on trust found in past research (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005) to be weaker from a third-party than a first-party perspective.

Furthermore, using a two-way ANOVA, we found a significant interaction between emotional acknowledgment and valence on trust (Fig. 5), $F(2, 535) = 7.85, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.03$. Using contrast coding, we probed the interaction by comparing the acknowledgment vs. no acknowledgment, and acknowledgment vs. distraction for the negative and positive emotion conditions. The effect of acknowledgment (vs. no acknowledgment) on trust was significantly greater for negative than positive emotions, $B = 0.59, SE = 0.25, t = 2.37, p = .02$. Tukey-HSD multiple comparisons revealed a significant difference between acknowledgment ($M = 5.55, SD = 0.84$) and no acknowledgment ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.45$) for the negative emotion condition, $p < .0001$. For the positive emotion condition, the difference between acknowledgment ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.12$) and no acknowledgment ($M = 4.61, SD = 1.12$) was significant but weaker than in the negative emotion condition, $p = .0005$.

Likewise, the effect of acknowledgment (vs. distraction) on trust was significantly greater for negative than positive emotions, $B = 0.98, SE = 0.25, t = 3.93, p < .001$. Tukey-HSD multiple comparisons revealed a

significant difference between acknowledgment ($M = 5.55, SD = 0.84$) and distraction ($M = 4.57, SD = 1.32$) for the negative emotion condition, $p < .0001$. In contrast, there was virtually no difference between acknowledgment ($M = 5.25, SD = 1.12$) and distraction ($M = 5.26, SD = 1.12$) for the positive emotion condition, $p = 1.00$. In sum, these results support H3a, as acknowledging negative emotions was a more potent driver of trust than acknowledging positive emotions.

7.3.2. Mediation and moderated mediation

Next, we conducted mediation analyses to test H2 and H3b. Using 5000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant mediation pathway from emotional acknowledgment to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness for acknowledgment vs. distraction (indirect effect $= 0.34, SE = 0.09, 95\% CI = [0.16, 0.53]$), as well as acknowledgment vs. no acknowledgment (indirect effect $= 0.77, SE = 0.10, 95\% CI = [0.57, 0.97]$). These results provide additional support for H2.

Next, we used moderated mediation models to test H3b. When comparing acknowledgment and no acknowledgment, moderated mediation was supported (index of moderated mediation $= 0.55, SE = 0.20, 95\% CI = [0.17, 0.96]$). The effect of emotional acknowledgment (vs. no acknowledgment) on interpersonal trust through perceived costliness was stronger for negative emotion (indirect effect $= 1.06, SE = 0.16, 95\% CI = [0.76, 1.39]$) than positive emotion (indirect effect $= 0.51, SE = 0.13, 95\% CI = [0.25, 0.77]$). These results support H3b. When comparing acknowledgment and distraction, moderated mediation was also supported (index of moderated mediation $= 0.79, SE = 0.18, 95\% CI = [0.43, 1.16]$). The effect of emotional acknowledgment (vs. distraction) on interpersonal trust through perceived costliness was significant for negative emotions (indirect effect $= 0.77, SE = 0.14, 95\% CI = [0.49, 1.05]$), but not positive emotions (indirect effect $= -0.02, SE = 0.12, 95\% CI = [-0.25, 0.22]$).

The results from Study 5 suggest that the effects of emotional acknowledgment on trust posited in H1–H3 replicate when using evaluations of the perceiver from a third-party perspective. Participants rated the perceiver as more trustworthy when they engaged in acknowledgment rather than no acknowledgment or distraction (H1)

because acknowledgment was seen as costlier (H2). Additionally, consistent with Studies 2 and 3, we found that the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust was moderated by the valence of the expresser's emotions (H3a). The effect of emotional acknowledgment was stronger when the expresser displayed negative than positive emotion, because participants perceived acknowledging negative (vs. positive) emotions as costlier (H3b). Interestingly, in the case of positive emotions, perceivers who engaged in distraction were seen as equally trustworthy as perceivers who acknowledged the emotion. However, in the case of negative emotions, distraction was less effective—participants rated perceivers who distracted as less trustworthy than those who acknowledged the emotion directly. These results highlight that third-party observers may be more vigilant of how perceivers respond to emotions in the wake of witnessing negative, as opposed to positive, emotional displays. This may be because responses to negative emotions, which come at a greater cost to the perceiver's self-interest, are more diagnostic of the perceiver's benevolent motives.

Until this point, the language and design of our studies have implied that when perceivers acknowledged the expressers' emotions, they are accurate in their assessment of expressers' emotions. However, people differ widely in their abilities to accurately perceive emotions (Mayer & Salovey, 1997), and even people relatively high in emotional intelligence still make mistakes. Because we have only explored accurate forms of emotional acknowledgment, it is unclear whether accuracy is a necessary condition to reap the benefits of emotional acknowledgment. In Study 6, we explore this potential boundary condition by examining how acknowledgment accuracy influences perceptions of trust. In so doing, we address the possibility that our results were driven solely by the perceiver's ability to accurately infer others' emotional states (Ickes, 1993), rather than the perceiver's decision to acknowledge the emotion.

8. Study 6: Examination of the role of accuracy

In Study 6, we compare the effects of accurate, inaccurate, and no emotional acknowledgment. We used a similar paradigm and set of video stimuli as Study 5, but we built on the prior studies with the intention of accomplishing three goals.

First, whereas our prior studies examined the decision to acknowledge (or not), here we also tested the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of emotional acknowledgment. Overall, we predicted accurate acknowledgment would increase trust more than inaccurate acknowledgment because accuracy signals greater attentiveness, thereby indicating a willingness to expend resources, as well as a greater capacity to provide helpful support to the expresser. Following a similar logic, we also expected inaccurate acknowledgment to foster greater trust than no acknowledgment, because inaccurate acknowledgment, although misdirected, would still signal greater effort by the perceiver (Goldstein, Vezich, & Shapiro, 2014). Thus, we still expected perceived costliness to mediate the relationship between inaccurate acknowledgment and trust, but we also expected the effects to be stronger overall for accurate than inaccurate acknowledgment.

Hypothesis 4. When individuals acknowledge others' emotions accurately, they are seen as more trustworthy than when they acknowledge inaccurately.

Hypothesis 5. The relationship between emotional acknowledgment accuracy and interpersonal trust is mediated by perceptions of costliness.

Consistent with the logic of H3, we expected the advantage of accuracy over inaccuracy to be especially strong when the emotion expressed is negative (as opposed to positive). Inaccurately acknowledging an expresser's positive emotions (by verbally labeling them as negative), signals an eagerness and readiness to provide resources to the expresser, even when the expresser's needs are relatively low. However, inaccurately acknowledging an expresser's negative emotions (by

labeling them as positive), should signal a lack of ability or will to provide for the expresser, even when the expresser's needs are relatively high. As such, inaccurately acknowledging an expresser's negative emotions should receive a greater penalty than inaccurately acknowledging an expresser's positive emotions.

Hypothesis 6a. The relationship between emotional acknowledgment accuracy and interpersonal trust is moderated by the valence of the expresser's emotion, such that the relationship is stronger when the emotions expressed are negative as opposed to positive.

Hypothesis 6b. This moderation occurs because negative emotions are seen as costlier to acknowledge than positive emotions.

Our second goal was to explore whether empathic accuracy—the ability to infer the thoughts and feelings of others (Ickes, 1993)—could serve as an alternative theoretical account for our findings. Because perceivers in our previous studies accurately acknowledged the expresser's emotions, it is plausible that the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and trust was driven not by the costly act itself, but by the perceiver's accurate identification of the emotion. However, if a perceiver acknowledges an expresser's emotions inaccurately, then the predictions made by costly signaling and empathic accuracy diverge, thereby allowing us to more clearly delineate the mechanism. By comparing the effects of inaccurate, accurate, and no acknowledgment, we were able to compare costly signaling against empathic accuracy.

Our third goal was to test whether results held across different negative and positive emotions, complementing the focus on anger and happiness in Studies 2–5. Thus, in Study 6, we used a different pair of discrete emotions: anxiety and excitement. We selected these emotions because anxiety and excitement are comparable on arousal level, but opposing in valence (Russell, 1980). Furthermore, because the behavioral and physiological manifestations of anxiety and excitement are similar (Brooks, 2014), it would be more plausible for perceivers to mistake one emotion for the other.

8.1. Participants, procedures, and measures

Participants included 581 individuals who were recruited through Mechanical Turk (37.6% female; $M_{age} = 38.36$, $SD_{age} = 11.92$). The sample was 10.0% African-American, 10.3% Asian, 69.7% Caucasian, 6.9% Hispanic, and 3.1% other.

This experiment employed a 2 (valence of expressed emotions: positive, negative) × 3 (emotional acknowledgment: accurate, inaccurate, no acknowledgment) between-subjects design. As in Study 5, participants were randomly assigned to watch a video of two colleagues interacting in a breakroom at work. However, in these videos, Brandon either shows anxiety or excitement. Daniel responds by saying, "You seem anxious [excited]" in the acknowledgment conditions, or nothing at all in the no acknowledgment condition. Still shots of the videos are shown in Fig. 6, and links to the full videos are in the Online Supplement. We operationalized accurate acknowledgment as a match between the expresser's emotions and the perceiver's verbal acknowledgment, and inaccurate acknowledgment as a mismatch. Specifically, we coded acknowledgment as inaccurate if Brandon looked anxious, but Daniel said, "You seem excited", or if Brandon looked excited, but Daniel said, "You seem anxious". We used the same items as Study 5 to measure interpersonal trust ($\alpha = 0.89$) and perceived costliness ($\alpha = 0.96$).

8.2. Results and discussion

8.2.1. Interpersonal trust

First, we examined how the accuracy of emotional acknowledgment and emotional valence influenced perceptions of trust. We found that the three acknowledgment conditions (accurate, inaccurate, no) significantly

Fig. 6. Still shots from video stimuli (Study 6).

differed in ratings of trust, $F(2, 575) = 29.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Consistent with H1 and Study 5, accurate emotional acknowledgment ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.06$) led to significantly higher ratings of trust than no acknowledgment ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(391) = 7.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.77$. In support of H4, we also found that accurate emotional acknowledgment led to significantly higher ratings of trust than inaccurate emotional acknowledgment ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.20$), $t(382) = 3.55$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$, and that inaccurate acknowledgment led to significantly higher ratings of trust than no acknowledgment, $t(383) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.39$. In contrast to Study 5, we did not find a significant main effect of emotional valence on trust, $F(1, 575) = 1.79$, $p = .18$, $\eta^2 = 0.003$. Participants did not trust the perceiver significantly more in the positive ($M = 4.67$, $SD = 1.17$) than negative emotion condition ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(579) = 1.25$, $p = .21$, $d = 0.10$. Given that the size of this main effect was fairly small in Study 5 ($\eta^2 = 0.007$), it is not surprising that the equivalent main effect was not significant in Study 6 ($\eta^2 = 0.003$). As expected, both of these main effects were much smaller compared to that of the first-party perspective in Study 2 ($\eta^2 = 0.04$).

Using a two-way ANOVA, we found a significant interaction between emotional acknowledgment and valence on trust (Fig. 7), $F(2, 575) =$

13.44, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. To test H3a in the same fashion as Study 5, we conducted planned contrasts. When comparing accurate vs. no acknowledgment, the effect of acknowledgment on trust was significantly greater for negative than positive emotions, $B = 0.73$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = 3.19$, $p = .001$. Tukey-HSD multiple comparisons revealed a significant difference between accurate acknowledgment ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.00$) and no acknowledgment ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.21$) for the negative emotion condition, $p < .001$. The difference between accurate acknowledgment ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.07$) and no acknowledgment ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.24$) was also significant but weaker for the positive emotion condition, $p = .005$. These results provide additional support for H3a.

Next, consistent with H6a, the advantage of accurate (vs. inaccurate) acknowledgment in increasing trust was significantly greater for negative than positive emotions, $B = 1.19$, $SE = 0.23$, $t = 5.13$, $p < .001$. Tukey-HSD multiple comparisons revealed a significant difference between accurate and inaccurate acknowledgment ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.22$) for the negative emotion condition, $p < .001$. In contrast, we did not find a significant difference between accurate and inaccurate acknowledgment for the positive emotion condition ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 1.07$), $p = .78$. These results support H6a.
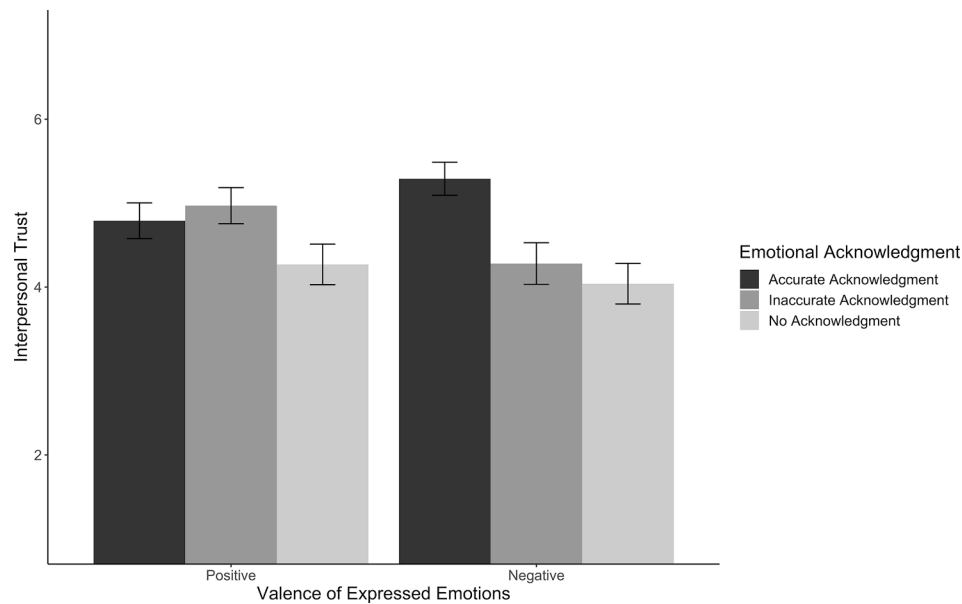
Fig. 7. Interactive effects of acknowledgment accuracy and emotional valence on third-party trust perceptions (Study 6). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

As exploratory analyses, we also compared the inaccurate and no acknowledgment conditions by valence. In the negative emotion condition, the difference between inaccurate and no acknowledgment was not significant, $p = .44$. However, in the positive emotion condition, inaccurate acknowledgment led to higher perceptions of trust than no acknowledgment, $p < .001$.

In sum, these results suggest that accuracy mattered more in response to negative than positive emotions. When negative emotions were expressed, perceivers needed to acknowledge accurately in order to reap a significant benefit. However, when positive emotions were expressed, perceivers benefitted from acknowledgment regardless of whether it was accurate or not. This is consistent with a costly signaling explanation. When the needs of the expresser were higher, as was the case for negative emotions, participants may have looked for costlier signals that the perceiver was willing to allocate resources to the expresser, and thus acknowledgment had to be accurate in order to

increase trust. However, when the needs of the expresser were lower, as was the case for positive emotions, the less costly signal of inaccurate acknowledgment was enough to significantly increase trust.

8.2.2. Mediation and moderated mediation

We conducted mediation analyses to test H2 and H5. Using 5000 bootstrapped samples, we found a significant mediation pathway from emotional acknowledgment (accurate vs. no) to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness (indirect effect = 0.80, $SE = 0.10$, *95% CI* = [0.62, 1.00]). This replicates the results for H2 from Study 5. Furthermore, we also found a significant mediation pathway from acknowledgment accuracy (accurate vs. inaccurate) to interpersonal trust through perceived costliness (indirect effect = 0.30, $SE = 0.09$, *95% CI* = [0.13, 0.49]). These results support H2 and H5, respectively.

Next, we tested H3b and H6b. When comparing accurate and no acknowledgment, moderated mediation was supported (index of
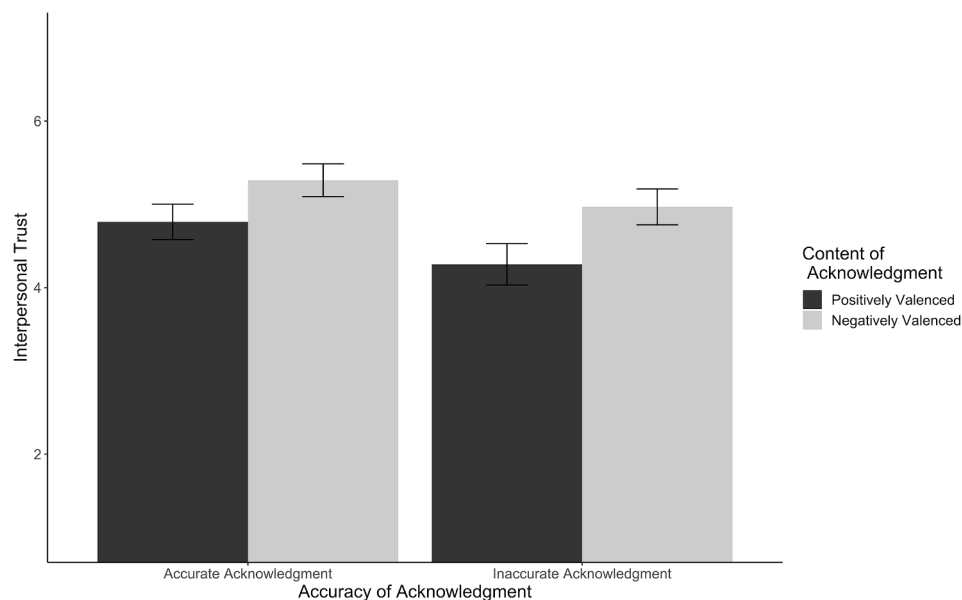

Fig. 8. Additive effects of content and accuracy of emotional acknowledgment on third-party trust perceptions (Study 6). Note: The depicted bars represent mean values of interpersonal trust, and error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. The interaction was not significant.

moderated mediation = 0.54, *SE* = 0.18, *95% CI* = [0.17, 0.89]). Replicating previous findings, the effect of emotional acknowledgment on interpersonal trust through perceived costliness was stronger for negative (indirect effect = 1.06, *SE* = 0.13, *95% CI* = [0.82, 1.32]) than positive emotions (indirect effect = 0.52, *SE* = 0.13, *95% CI* = [0.26, 0.79]), supporting H3b. When comparing accurate and inaccurate acknowledgment, moderated mediation was also supported (index of moderated mediation = 0.70, *SE* = 0.18, 95% CI = [0.35, 1.04]). The effect of acknowledgment accuracy on interpersonal trust through perceived costliness was significant for negative (indirect effect = 0.65, *SE* = 0.13, *95% CI* = [0.40, 0.89]), but not positive emotions (indirect effect = −0.05, *SE* = 0.12, *95% CI* = [−0.28, 0.20]), supporting H6b.

8.2.3. Examining empathic accuracy as an alternative theoretical account

Finally, we wanted to examine whether empathic accuracy could serve as an alternative explanation. According to an empathic accuracy account, accurate acknowledgment should lead to higher levels of trust than inaccurate acknowledgment, regardless of emotional valence, because perceivers are generally evaluated more favorably when they are able to take the perspective of others (Goldstein et al., 2014; Ickes, 1993; Klein, 2019). However, our results suggested otherwise. Inaccurate acknowledgment incurred a penalty only for negative, but not positive emotions. To shed insight into why that might be the case, we recoded our manipulations to focus on the content of the acknowledgment itself (i.e., the words that the acknowledger used), rather than the valence of the expresser's emotional displays. According to a costly signaling account, acknowledgment using negatively-valenced content (i.e., "You seem anxious") should lead to higher levels of trust than acknowledgment of positively-valenced content (i.e., "You seem excited), even if the acknowledgment is inaccurate—acknowledgment of negatively-valenced content should still imply an eagerness and willingness to expend resources on the expresser. Therefore, by examining the content of the acknowledgment, we can distinguish the effects of empathic accuracy from costly signaling.

To test this, we excluded the no acknowledgment condition because it could not be coded for accuracy or content. Then, we examined how the accuracy and content of the acknowledgment influenced trust perceptions (Fig. 8). As aforementioned, accurate acknowledgment led to higher ratings of trust than inaccurate acknowledgment, $F(1, 380) = 28.41, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.03$. However, acknowledgment using negatively-valenced content ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.05$) also led to higher ratings of trust than using positively-valenced content ($M = 4.54, SD = 1.17$), $F(1, 380) = 28.4, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.07$. The interaction between accuracy and content was not significant, $F(1, 380) = 0.79, p = .38, \eta^2 = 0.002$.

Overall, these results suggest that empathic accuracy is necessary, but insufficient, in explaining our results. Inaccurately acknowledging others' emotions signals inattention, but inaccurately acknowledging positive emotions (by saying, "You seem anxious") may not incur a penalty because the perceiver is still demonstrating a willingness to provide resources to the expresser, even if the expresser does not have a need for them. On the other hand, inaccurately acknowledging negative emotions (by saying, "You seem excited") incurs a significant penalty because the perceiver appears ill-prepared to meet the expressers' heightened needs. As such, empathic accuracy and costly signaling appear to have additive effects on perceptions of trust.

By examining the role of accuracy in emotional acknowledgment in Study 6, we found support for H4–H6, as well as additional support for H1–H3, that bolsters our costly signaling account. Differences in trust levels between acknowledging inaccurately (vs. accurately) was stronger for negative emotions than positive emotions. In line with our theorizing, we also found that acknowledgment containing negatively-valenced content led to higher ratings of trust than acknowledgment containing positively-valenced content, even when the acknowledgment was inaccurate. These results suggest that empathic accuracy alone could not explain our pattern of results. Finally, our findings were consistent with those in Study 5, even though we substituted happiness

and anger for excitement and anxiety, respectively. This hints that the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and valence may not be confined to specific emotions, but rather, may generalize across multiple positive and negative discrete emotions.

9. General discussion

Despite the importance of responsiveness and using verbal language in emotional communication, the topic of emotional acknowledgment has received relatively scarce attention. We utilize Costly Signaling Theory to posit that emotional acknowledgment increases interpersonal trust by acting as a costly signal that demonstrates the willingness of perceivers to expend personal resources to meet the needs of expressers. We found convergent support for our hypotheses across six studies. Our results suggest that costlier forms of emotional acknowledgment (i.e., acknowledging negative rather than positive emotions) increased trust to a greater extent. When positive emotions were expressed, even inaccurate emotional acknowledgment was better for fostering trust than no acknowledgment. But when negative emotions were expressed, emotional acknowledgment needed to be accurate to increase trust.

9.1. Theoretical contributions

This research makes key contributions to theory and research on emotions and relationships in organizations. First, existing work on social emotions predominantly highlights how the emotions of expressers affect the inferences drawn by perceivers (e.g., EASI; van Kleef, 2009). Our investigation extends social theories of emotions by focusing on the inferences that are made *about* perceivers based on their responses to the emotion of expressers. We contend that this perspective is critical to understanding the role of emotions in social interactions and relationships. Existing social theories of emotions conceptualize the influence of emotions as unidirectional (i.e., expresser → perceiver; van Kleef, 2009, 2016). Building on this view, we suggest that emotional communication requires sensemaking by both parties, and may be better conceptualized as bidirectional (i.e., expresser ⇄ perceiver). We focus on this perspective by illuminating how responding verbally to emotions shapes interpersonal relationships.

Second, we integrate Costly Signaling Theory with social theories of emotions to elucidate the process by which emotional acknowledgment shapes social relationships. This novel perspective illuminates why perceivers reap asymmetric rewards for the acknowledgment of negative and positive emotions. Signaling a willingness to attend to others' needs, especially if it comes at a greater personal expense, helps foster the development of trust. Costly Signaling Theory sheds light on how people infer relationship quality using acknowledgment and offers new predictions in social emotions that diverge from existing theories, such as empathic accuracy (Ickes, 1993) and self-verification theory (Swann, 2012). These theories suggest that people seek information that accurately validates their thoughts and feelings, whereas our results suggest that emotional acknowledgment can increase trust even when it is inaccurate (as was the case for positive emotions). Thus, Costly Signaling Theory offers a new and valuable framework for understanding how people draw inferences about one another in emotional communication.

Third, this research extends previous work on emotional labeling that focuses almost exclusively on using language to express or manage one's own emotions at work (e.g., Brooks, 2014; Wolf et al., 2016). Although interpersonal emotion labelling techniques are used in psychotherapy and clinical settings (Greenberg, 2004), our research documents the effects of verbally acknowledging *others'* emotions on important relational outcomes in the workplace (i.e., interpersonal trust). Furthermore, the asymmetric costs of inaccurately acknowledging negative versus positive emotions suggest that when perceivers are uncertain about what emotions are being expressed, it may be strategically advantageous for them to use negatively-valenced ("You

seem upset") than positively-valenced ("You seem happy") forms of acknowledgment. This prescription stands in contrast to research on labeling one's own emotions, which suggests that relabeling negative emotions as positive emotions leads to more favorable outcomes (Wolf et al., 2016). In this way, our research highlights the importance of distinguishing between emotional labeling at the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels.

Fourth, we extend research on active listening and partner responsiveness by focusing on acknowledgment of nonverbal displays. This complements prior research, which relies heavily on analyzing conversations, and thus, focuses predominantly on responses to what was explicitly and verbally communicated by the speaker (Jones, 2011; Maisel, Gable, & Strachman, 2008; Weger, Bell, Minei, & Robinson, 2014). Our research highlights the importance of distinguishing between responses to nonverbal displays and verbal remarks. Because nonverbal displays tend to be more ambiguous and diffuse than verbal remarks, acknowledgment of nonverbal displays may be perceived as riskier and more volitional, and thus a better indicator of the perceiver's benevolent intent. Whereas responses to verbal remarks are well-documented, future research may benefit from organizing and classifying responses to nonverbal displays.

Lastly, we contribute to the literature examining how and when people draw inferences about others' trustworthiness in the workplace (Schilke & Huang, 2018; van der Werff & Buckley, 2017). By identifying emotional acknowledgment as a previously unexplored behavioral indicator of trust, we heed the call by previous researchers to further explore the role of emotions in trust formation (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). Whereas scholars have found positive associations between trust and emotional expressivity (Boone & Buck, 2003), positive emotion (Dunn & Schweitzer, 2005), and situationally appropriate expression of emotion (Kang & Schweitzer, 2020), we extend beyond the role of emotional states and expressions to examine the role of *labeling* emotions on the formation of trust.

9.2. Limitations and future directions

Our investigation into the relationship between emotional acknowledgment and interpersonal trust can be strengthened in several ways. First, our experimental studies focus on immediate judgments formed about those who acknowledge others' emotions. However, emotional acknowledgment can also foster trust, not only directly through the act itself, but also indirectly through self-disclosure. Specifically, we theorize (but do not directly test) that when perceivers acknowledge the emotions of expressers, it is likely to prompt the expresser to disclose information about their internal affective states. As past research suggests, engaging in self-disclosure of emotions may be more influential for closeness and social connection than self-disclosure of facts (Laurenceau et al., 1998). Future research could examine the extent to which emotional acknowledgment licenses expressers to talk about their emotions, and whether this emotional self-disclosure shapes downstream perceptions of trust.

In our experimental studies, it is possible that when perceivers fail to acknowledge others' emotions, participants infer a lack of ability to encode others' emotional expressions. Research suggests that perceived deficits in emotional intelligence and empathic accuracy may lead to negative social consequences (Elfenbein, Barsade, & Eisenkraft, 2015; Zickfeld, Schubert, Seibt, & Fiske, 2017). As such, differences in trust between acknowledgment and no acknowledgment may be attributed to this lack of ability, rather than the decision to verbally call out the emotion. Future research can more explicitly delineate the effects of noticing versus acknowledging others' emotions by exploring contexts in which perceivers are able to make accurate judgments about the other person's emotions but choose not to acknowledge it verbally.

The current investigation only examines one type of acknowledgment inaccuracy—perceivers mislabeling the valence of the expresser's emotions. However, there are many other ways in which emotions can

be inaccurately acknowledged. For example, perceivers may misidentify a specific discrete emotion (i.e., mistaking anger for disgust) or over- or under-estimate the intensity of the displayed emotions (Klein, 2019). Future research can examine whether various forms of inaccuracy differentially impact trust perceptions.

In Study 4, we explore reputational concern as it pertains to the perceiver's relationship with the expresser. However, perceivers may strategically engage in emotional acknowledgment as a way to bolster how they are viewed, not only by the expresser, but by third-party observers. For example, perceivers may choose to acknowledge in the presence of others rather than in private. Similar to Study 4, we expect public acknowledgment to be viewed less favorably than private acknowledgment, because people may have difficulty distinguishing whether the act was motivated by self- or other-interest. A promising avenue for future research may be to explore how reputational concerns involving third-parties affect perceptions of acknowledgment.

In our studies, we examine contexts where the expresser and perceiver already have an established relationship. However, past research suggests that people are more likely to express and share negative emotions with friends and family (Fischer & Manstead, 2008). As such, when a perceiver and expresser already have a standing history, the normative expectation may be for perceivers to acknowledge the expresser's negative emotions. This may help to explain why we found a greater penalty for not acknowledging negative emotions than a reward for doing so. However, if the expresser and perceiver are merely acquaintances or strangers, the normative expectations may shift such that perceivers would not be expected to acknowledge negative emotions. But if they do, we suspect that they might receive a greater reward for acknowledging negative emotions than penalty for not acknowledging. Future research can explore how the nature of the relationship may change expectations around emotional acknowledgment.

Although our studies portray emotional acknowledgment in a largely positive light, many contextual and individual factors may increase the risks associated with emotional acknowledgment. For example, organizations often impose display rules that encourage positive emotional expressions and discourage negative ones (Hochschild, 1983; Van Maanen, 1991). We suspect that in organizations with strong norms to suppress negative emotions, acknowledgment of negative emotions may backfire because it may be seen as insensitive or inappropriate, preventing the expresser from "saving face". For example, if a coworker has an inadvertent outburst of emotion during a meeting, it may actually be more beneficial to feign ignorance than call greater attention to it (Elfenbein, 2007). Indeed, one study finds that employees with a higher ability to "eavesdrop" on others' negative emotions received worse performance ratings from peers, presumably because people prefer to keep their negative emotions hidden at work (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002). As such, unpacking organizational norms on emotional expressivity may be critical for understanding the influence of emotional acknowledgment.

An expresser's willingness to accept the perceiver's interpretation of their emotion may also heighten the risk of emotional acknowledgment. Employees may feel ambivalent (Rothman & Melwani, 2017) or wear expressions that differ from their internal feeling states (Hochschild, 1983). As a starting point, our studies portray a simplistic view of an expresser's emotions—the emotions they display are congruous with how they feel. How might the consequences of acknowledgment change when expressers' internal states and external displays are misaligned, or when they experience ambivalent emotions? We suspect that the self-presentational goals of the expresser may be important to consider. For example, if a coworker attempts to conceal their grief by looking cheerful, perhaps acknowledging their negative emotions may lead to negative consequences because it conflicts with the coworker's self-presentational goals. We also suspect that when expressers are unaware of their own nonverbal displays or internal feelings, they are more likely to challenge the perceiver's acknowledgment, potentially viewing it as threatening or offensive. As such, future research may benefit from

examining how the preferences, goals, and abilities of the expresser shape perceptions of emotional acknowledgment.

Finally, although we focus on emotional acknowledgment from the perspective of expressers and third-party observers, it is also important to consider the factors contributing to a perceiver's decision to acknowledge. Research suggests that people choose not to ask sensitive questions because they (inaccurately) predict that they will make others feel uncomfortable and harm their own interpersonal reputations (Hart, VanEpps, & Schweitzer, 2021). As such, although acknowledging negative emotions leads to greater increases in trust, perceivers may be less willing to do so because negative emotions are presumably more sensitive in nature. Future studies can examine the contexts and processes under which perceivers acknowledge others' emotions.

10. Practical implications and conclusion

Our research illuminates how emotional acknowledgment may serve as a useful tool for individuals to build and strengthen connections with others. Given the prevalence of emotions in everyday life, employees and managers likely have numerous opportunities to acknowledge others' emotions in a typical workweek. Our research helps unpack the potential benefits and risks of acting on these opportunities. Although emotional acknowledgment may be riskiest in response to negative emotions, people also stand to benefit the most from (accurately)

acknowledging others' negative emotions. Contrary to the view that emotions should be downplayed, constrained, and concealed (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995), our research highlights the value of acknowledging emotions openly and explicitly at work. Moreover, our work suggests that expressers and third-party observers are sensitive to the capacity of perceivers to attend to others' emotional needs. This hints that emotional acknowledgment may produce benefits beyond the focal dyad—acknowledging others' emotions may help build trust with those witnessing the interaction as well. Broadly, this research sheds new light on emotional acknowledgment as a powerful informational signal that shapes the construction and understanding of our social relationships.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Alisa Yu: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Investigation, Resources, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Visualization. **Justin M. Berg:** Conceptualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing, Supervision. **Julian J. Zlatev:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing - review & editing.

Appendix A. Validation study of emotional acknowledgment scale

We conducted a pre-registered study (https://aspredicted.org/qw2qc.pdf) to demonstrate convergent and discriminant validity of our emotional acknowledgment scale, which was originally devised using our conceptual definition of the construct.

As stated in our preregistration, we hypothesized that emotional acknowledgment would show convergent validity with facets of emotional intelligence that are relevant to noticing and responding to others' emotions (i.e., perception, understanding, and management of others' emotions), as well as empathy, warmth, interpersonal responsiveness, and agreeableness. We also hypothesized that emotional acknowledgment would show discriminant validity with less relevant facets of emotional intelligence (i.e., use of emotions, management of one's own emotions), as well as emotional expression, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and competence.

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations for the convergent and discriminant constructs are shown below. As expected, the correlations between emotional acknowledgment and the convergent constructs were relatively stronger (r's ranged from 0.31 to 0.61), and correlations between emotional acknowledgment and the discriminant constructs were relatively weaker (r's ranged from -0.07 to 0.44). There were, however, two minor exceptions. Contrary to what we expected, emotional acknowledgment correlated relatively strongly with positive affect ($r = 0.44$, $p < .001$) and use of emotions ($r = 0.42$, $p < .001$), but these two correlations were lower than all but one of the correlations for the convergent constructs (EI – Understanding), which was $r = 0.31$. Thus, the emotional acknowledgment scale generally performed as expected.

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations with convergent measures.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional Acknowledgment	4.62	1.35	(0.90)							
2. EI - Perception	4.73	0.93	0.48***	(0.68)						
3. EI - Understanding	4.59	1.35	0.31***	0.49***	(0.92)					
4. EI – Managing of others' emotions	4.71	1.21	0.49***	0.59***	0.51***	(0.84)				
5. Empathy	4.74	0.88	0.60***	0.63***	0.48***	0.70***	(0.90)			
6. Warmth	5.48	1.09	0.49***	0.54***	0.47***	0.69***	0.74***	(0.86)		
7. Responsiveness	5.02	1.13	0.53***	0.58***	0.52***	0.70***	0.69***	0.78***	(0.95)	
8. Agreeableness	4.95	1.23	0.55***	0.56***	0.46***	0.69***	0.79***	0.71***	0.70***	(0.86)

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and zero-order correlations with discriminant measures.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional Acknowledgment	4.62	1.35	(0.90)							
2. EI – Use of Emotions	4.08	0.84	0.42***	(0.46)						
3. EI - Managing one's own emotions	4.85	1.18	0.14**	−0.03	(0.81)					
4. Positive Affect	5.22	0.87	0.44***	0.25***	0.36***	(0.87)				
5. Negative Affect	2.75	1.06	−0.13**	0.03	−0.58***	−0.30***	(0.90)			
6. Competence	5.58	0.93	0.21***	0.00	0.45***	0.61***	−0.43***	(0.82)		
7. Conscientiousness	4.99	1.14	0.14**	0.00	0.45***	0.49***	−0.43***	0.56***	(0.76)	
8. Neuroticism	3.24	1.10	−0.07	0.01	−0.64***	−0.22***	0.61***	−0.30***	−0.33***	(0.72)

Note: *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2021.02.002.

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