Can Positivity Outweigh Negativity in Romantic Relationships? Examining Emotional Experiences in Gratitude and Conflict Discussions

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BACKGROUND
- Emotional exchanges between relationship partners are an important determinant of relationship quality
- Research has primarily focused on emotional exchanges during conflict, suggesting that negative emotions are a stronger predictor of relationship quality than positive ones[1]
- Recent research highlights the importance of positive emotions[2] and interactions[3] in relationships
- It is unknown whether positive or negative emotions are most predictive of relationship satisfaction in both positive and negative contexts

OBJECTIVES
Determine the predictive power of both positive and negative emotions on change in relationship quality in both positive (gratitude) and negative (conflict) contexts

METHODS
- **Participants**: 101 cohabitating couples
  - M age = 28.9; M relationship length = 4.46 years; 107 women, 92 men, 3 other genders
- **Procedure**: Turn-taking gratitude and conflict discussions. Ratings of emotion after each conversation. Satisfaction at beginning and end of lab session (see middle-panel graphic)
- **Measures**:
  - Emotion: Adapted version of the Modified Differential Emotions Scale (MDES[4]) used to examine self-reported actor positivity (α=.83-.90) and negativity (α=.79-.88), and actor perception of partner's positivity (α=.88-.90) and negativity (α=.79-.86) on 1-7 Likert scale. Intensity of observed emotion assessed by trained coders
  - Relationship Satisfaction: "Right now, I think our relationship is..." Terrible (1) to Terrific (7)

RESULTS
- Positivity during gratitude was the strongest predictor of increase in relationship satisfaction across self-reported actor (b=.17, p=.013) and coded actor (b=.36, p=.018) emotions as well as actor perceptions of partners' emotions (b=.18, p=.011)
- Perceived partner negativity during gratitude predicted change in relationship satisfaction when entered as a separate predictor (b=-.144, p=.001)
- One's own positivity during conflict as well as negativity during gratitude and conflict did not significantly predict change in relationship satisfaction, all ps > .064

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS
- Due to a desire to end the lab session on a positive note, the conversations were not counterbalanced
- Across contexts, people reported low levels of negativity. Future research should attempt to evoke more negativity
- Future research should examine the predictive power of dyadic emotional experiences—such as positive and negative reciprocity—as well as the behavioral, physiological, and linguistic underpinnings of positivity during gratitude discussions.

Positivity during gratitude discussions is the most potent predictor of increased relationship satisfaction

Table 1

Emotions during dyadic interactions predicting relationship satisfaction

Type of Measure	Descriptives M(SD)	One Model b	SE	t (df)	95% CI	Separate Models b	SE	t (df)	95% CI
Self-Reported Actor Emotions									
Positivity in Gratitude	5.48 (1.28)	.17*	.07	2.51 (130.51)	[.04, .31]	.15*	.05	3.29 (154.18)	[.06, .24]
Positivity in Conflict	4.42 (1.27)	-.02	.06	-.29 (114.68)	[-.14, .10]	.07	.04	1.66 (149.42)	[-.01, .16]
Negativity in Gratitude	1.56 (0.81)	.04	.09	.48 (124.36)	[-.14, .22]	-.08	.07	-1.24 (138.29)	[-.21, .05]
Negativity in Conflict	1.95 (1.01)	-.05	.08	-.58 (117.45)	[-.20, .11]	-.01	.06	-.167(145.21)	[-.12, .10]
Coded Actor Emotions									
Positivity in Gratitude	5.06 (0.75)	.36*	.15	2.39 (122.94)	[.06, .66]	.31*	.10	3.07 (124.06)	[.11, .50]
Positivity in Conflict	3.82 (0.78)	.05	.15	.35 (120.53)	[-.25, .35]	.17	.09	1.87 (126.83)	[-.01, .35]
Negativity in Gratitude	1.93 (0.83)	.09	.13	.64 (121.68)	[-.18, .35]	-.03	.09	-.38 (125.31)	[-.21, .14]
Negativity in Conflict	2.90 (0.95)	.09	.13	.73 (122.69)	[-.16, .35]	.01	.08	.13 (125.98)	[-.15, .17]
Actor Perception of Partner's Emotions									
Positivity in Gratitude	5.51 (1.20)	.18*	.07	2.58 (145.84)	[.04, .31]	.20*	.05	4.11 (164.34)	[.10, .29]
Positivity in Conflict	4.39 (1.30)	-.02	.06	-.35 (149.27)	[-.14, .09]	.08	.05	1.83 (168.14)	[-.01, .17]
Negativity in Gratitude	1.58 (0.77)	-.14	.10	-1.45 (161.18)	[-.34, .05]	-.24*	.07	-3.28 (165.94)	[-.38, -.09]
Negativity in Conflict	2.00 (0.96)	-.01	.08	-.12 (134.53)	[-.16, .14]	-.07	.06	-1.23 (147.88)	[-.18, .04]

*p<.05

PROCEDURE

Relationship Satisfaction — Conflict — Emotion Ratings — Gratitude — Emotion Ratings — Relationship Satisfaction

Results emphasize the potential importance of capitalizing on positive moments in romantic relationships

Self-Reported Actor Emotions
Positivity during gratitude is the strongest predictor of change in satisfaction. Positivity during conflict, negativity during gratitude & conflict not predictive of satisfaction change

Figure 1. Effect sizes for self-reported emotions during dyadic interactions predicting change in relationship satisfaction

$*r = \sqrt{t^2/(t^2 + df)}$
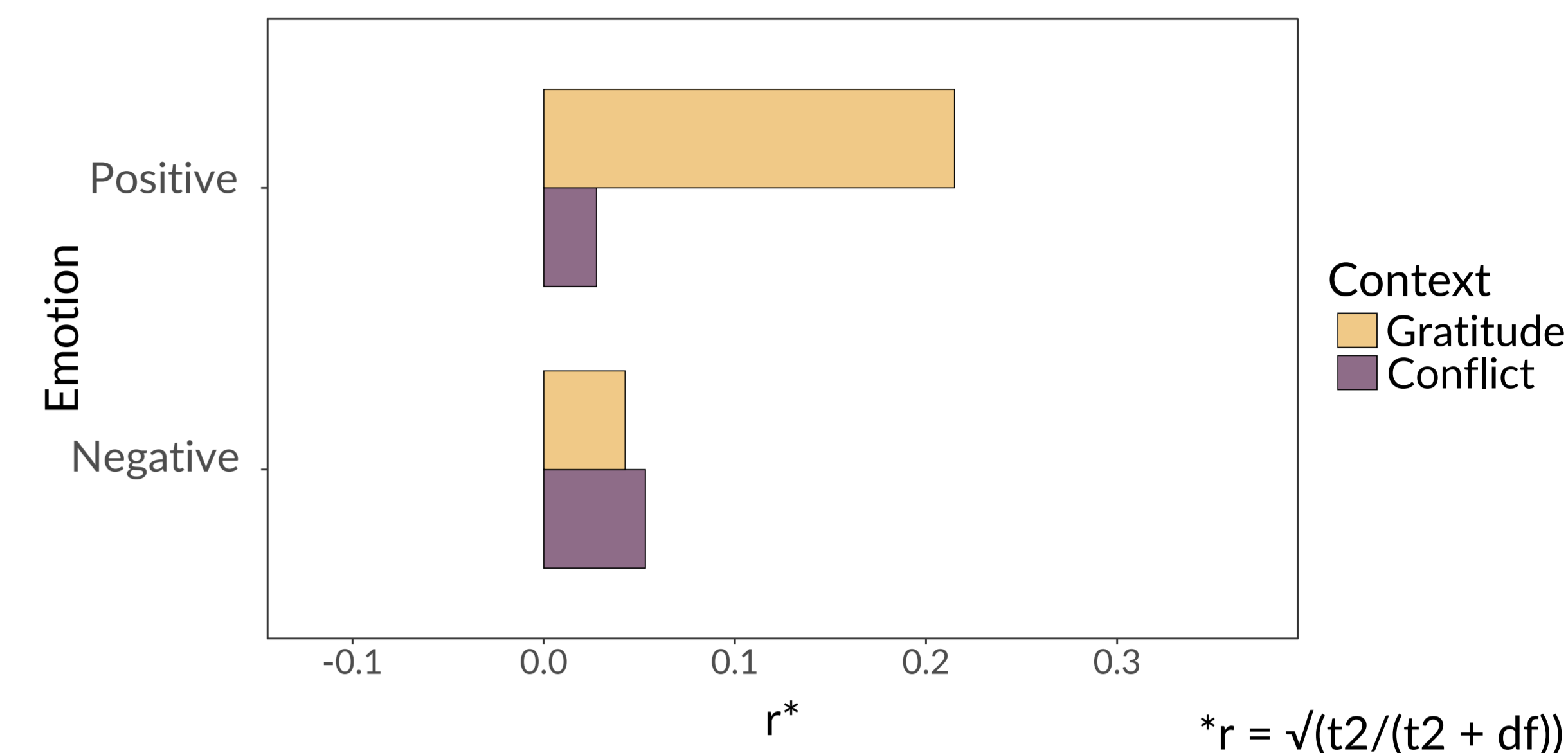
Coded Actor Emotions
Positivity during gratitude is the strongest predictor of change in satisfaction. Positivity during conflict, negativity during gratitude & conflict not predictive of satisfaction change
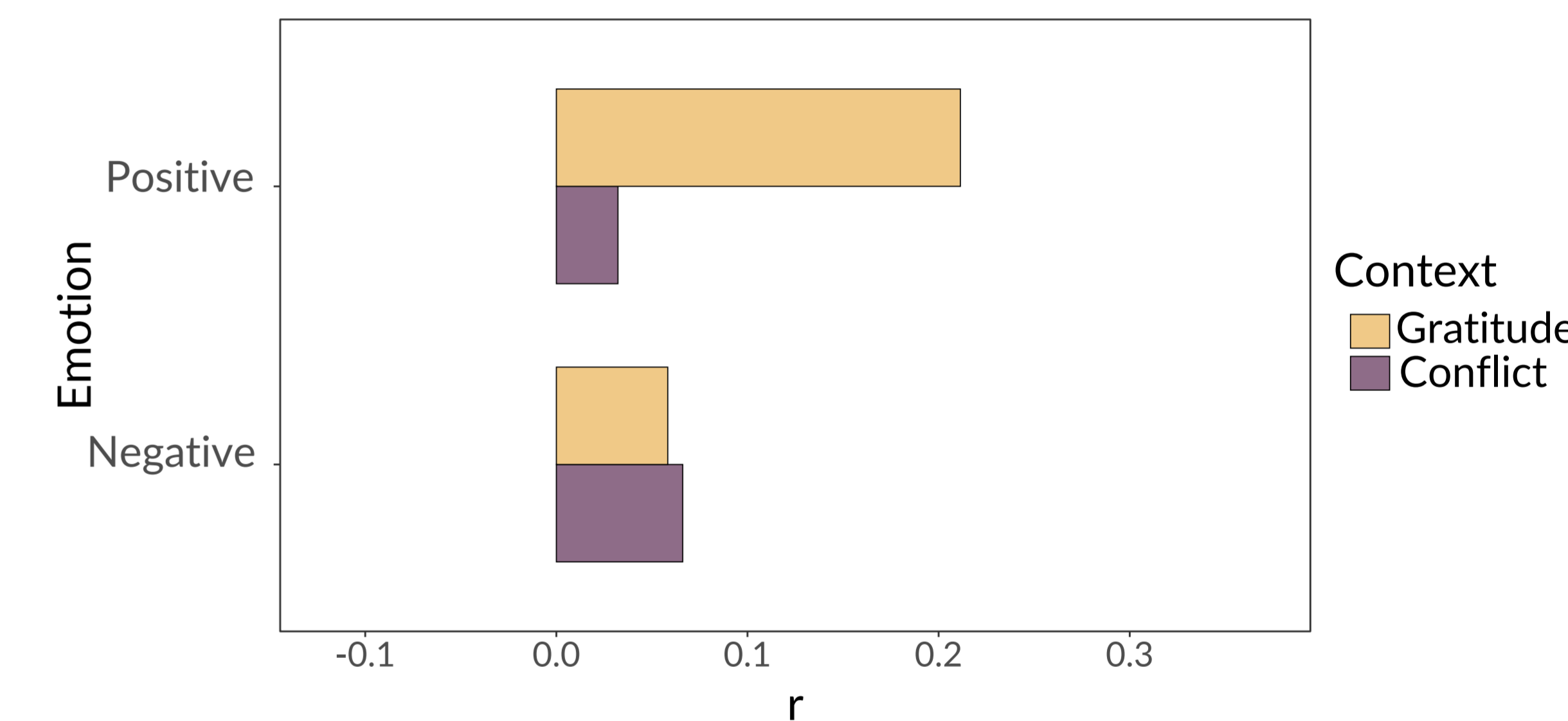

Figure 2. Effect sizes for coded emotions during dyadic interactions predicting change in relationship satisfaction

Actor Perception of Partner's Emotions:
Positivity during gratitude is the strongest predictor of change in satisfaction. Perceived partner negativity also predictive of satisfaction change

Figure 3. Effect sizes for perception of partner's emotions during dyadic interactions predicting change in relationship satisfaction
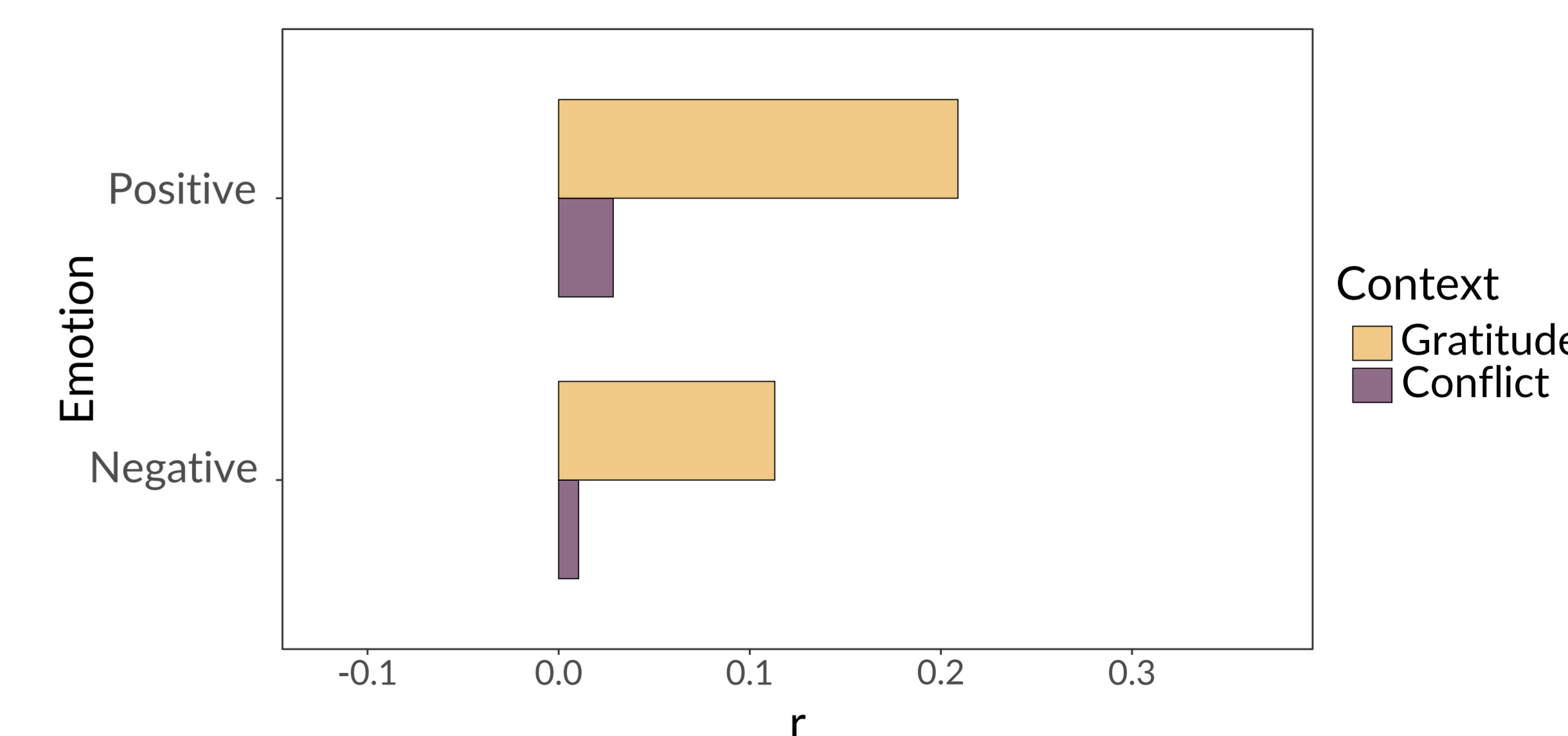
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