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What You Read Matters: The Role of Fiction Genre in Predicting Interpersonal Sensitivity

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Previous studies have found a positive relationship between exposure to fiction and interpersonal sensitivity. However, it is unclear whether exposure to different genres of fiction may be differentially related to these outcomes for readers. The current study investigated the role of four fiction genres (i.e., Domestic Fiction, Romance, Science-Fiction/Fantasy, and Suspense/Thriller) in the relationship between fiction and interpersonal sensitivity, controlling for other individual differences. Participants completed a survey that included a lifetime print-exposure measure along with an interpersonal sensitivity task. Some, but not all, fiction genres were related to higher scores on our measure of interpersonal sensitivity. Furthermore, after controlling for personality, gender, age, English fluency, and exposure to nonfiction, only the Romance and Suspense/Thriller genres remained significant predictors of interpersonal sensitivity. The findings of this study demonstrate that in discussing the influence of fiction print-exposure on readers it is important to consider the genre of the literature being consumed.

Keywords: reading, fiction, interpersonal sensitivity

Although reading is known to have a number of cognitive benefits (e.g., Mol & Bus, 2011), empirical research has only recently begun to consider the possibility that what is being read might also be important to study. Literary fiction is published in a variety of genres, which differ in both style and the content (Argamon, Koppel, Fine, & Shimoni, 2003). What is not clear is whether these differences may be related to different benefits for readers. The current study investigated whether exposure to different literary genres might be related to diverging reader outcomes with regard to interpersonal sensitivity.

Reading is a process wherein individuals actively engage with a text to create meaning (Stamboltzis & Pumfrey, 2000). An often ignored fact within text-processing accounts is that contextual information can play a role in both the process and outcomes of text comprehension (Zwaan, 1994). One source of context is literary genres. Literary genres are made up of texts that share similarities with respect to their use of language, purpose of communication, and stylistic elements (Janssen & Murachver, 2005; Stamboltzis & Pumfrey, 2000; Zwaan, 1994). These genres provide a framework from which readers can derive meaning from a text (Stamboltzis & Pumfrey, 2000), and this framework is based partly on reader expectations. These expectations can affect read-

ers' strategies for engaging with the text (Zwaan, 1994) as well as anticipated hedonic outcomes as a result of reading (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2005). Although theoretical accounts suggest that exposure to different genres of literature may impact readers in different ways (e.g., romance, Tolmie, 2006; horror, Schneider, 2002), little empirical work has been done to explore this possibility.

Empirical research examining literary genres and reader outcomes has focused on narrative fiction and expository nonfiction as broad conceptualizations of genre. Narrative fiction and expository nonfiction differ with regard to language (Argamon et al., 2003) as well as structure and content (Gardner, 2004). As a result, readers may engage differently with narrative fiction and expository nonfiction texts, both as a function of the textual features (Zabrucky & Moore, 1999; Zabrucky & Ratner, 1992) and different expectations based on the genre (Zwaan, 1994). One intriguing difference between narrative fiction and expository nonfiction is that readers may have the opportunity to engage in simulations of real-world social experiences via fiction but not nonfiction (Mar & Oatley, 2008). Over time, exposure to these simulations could lead to the reinforcement or maintenance of social skills. An initial test of this hypothesis found that lifetime exposure to narrative fiction, but not expository nonfiction, was related to improved performance on measures of interpersonal sensitivity (Mar, Oatley, Hirsh, dela Paz, & Peterson, 2006). A second study replicated this effect and demonstrated that the relationship between exposure to narrative fiction and interpersonal sensitivity could not be explained by personality traits or gender (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009). These studies indicate that exposure to the broad genres of fiction and nonfiction is differentially related to social outcomes, specifically sensitivity to interpersonal cues.

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Narrative fiction, however, encompasses a wide variety of subgenres of literature that differ in language, style, and content (Argamon et al., 2003). These include such genres as romance, suspense/thriller, mystery, and science fiction. Readers are intimately familiar with the concept of literary genres along with the tropes and expectations associated with each (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009), and this familiarity plays a central role in how readers seek out and choose what to read (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2005). Even infrequent readers, for example, can quite successfully categorize books into genres based solely on the book's cover (Piters & Stokmans, 2000; cf. Dixon & Bortolussi, 2005). Empirically, there is notable agreement in how readers think about different literary genres such as science fiction and fantasy, although in the case of romance fiction those with more direct experience with the genre appear to focus on the emotional aspects whereas those less experienced concentrate on the structure of these novels (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009). Our goal in the current research is to explore how these literary genres relate to individual differences in interpersonal sensitivity.

Because each fiction genre is likely to provide a distinctive conceptual framework through which readers construct meaning about the social world (Littlefair, 1992), we expect some variability in how exposure to each genre influences a reader's social orientation. Unfortunately, because there is little empirical work on lifetime exposure to different genres, our hypotheses are necessarily tentative. One possibility is that any genre that focuses on the psychology of its characters as well as their relationships would be associated with greater interpersonal sensitivity. In this case, a genre such as romance, which is oriented around social relationships almost exclusively, would be highly related to social sensitivity. In contrast, it might be that only genres that depict human relationships in a complex and realistic fashion would show such associations. If this is the case, one might expect so called "highbrow" literature (typically drama with serious themes) to predict interpersonal capabilities, but not the romance genre. Furthermore, some genres are characterized as being focused on settings and content, with comparatively less emphasis on interpersonal relationships, such as the focus on science and technology for the science fiction genre (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009). Frequent exposure to these genres may be less likely to predict competence in interpersonal empathy. Some theorists have explicitly argued that it is suspense and mystery novels that are most likely to be associated with empathy, as these genres call upon the reader to infer and monitor the mental states of characters to a greater degree than other genres (Zunshine, 2006). Other evidence predicts a less specific association. When readers discuss their conceptualization of various genres, it appears that these discussions often involve emotions and other mental states across a variety of different genres (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009). This suggests that exposure to any genre of narrative fiction may be related to empathy. The diversity of theoretical indications for how different literary genres might be related to interpersonal sensitivity make specific hypotheses difficult, but also underline the importance of a systematic empirical exploration of these possible relations.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited from the undergraduate research participant pool at a large Canadian university and received partial course credit as remuneration. In total, 368 participants completed the study. Because of this study's focus on literature published in English, individuals who indicated less than 9 years of English fluency ($N = 40$) were removed from analyses. The final sample consisted of 328 participants (258 female) between the ages of 17 and 44, $M = 19.80$, $SD = 3.30$. The study was administered to participants via an online survey.

Measures

Print-exposure. Reading habits were measured using a print-exposure measure, namely an expanded version of the Author Recognition Task-Revised (ART-R) used by Mar and colleagues (2006). Originally developed by Stanovich and West (1989), the ART circumvents the social-desirability pressures associated with self-report assessments of reading habits. Participants are shown a list of names and asked to select those that they recognize as authors. Importantly, participants are informed that some of the names are fake authors (i.e., foils) so that guessing can easily be detected. Scores on the ART are consistent with real world reading behaviors and also daily diary reports of reading (Allen, Cipielewski, & Stanovich, 1992; West, Stanovich, & Mitchell, 1993). In the current version of this measure, the number of authors in four fiction genres (i.e., Domestic Fiction, Romance, Science-Fiction/Fantasy, and Suspense/Thriller) was expanded from 10 names to 25, thus allowing for a print-exposure score to be calculated for each of these genres. The ART-R Fiction category also included 10 Foreign Fiction genre author names (i.e., foreign fiction translated into English), bringing the total number of Fiction items to 110. An additional 50 Nonfiction authors and 40 foil names were included from the original ART-R.

Interpersonal sensitivity. Interpersonal sensitivity was measured using the Reading the Mind in the Eyes Test—Revised (MIE; Baron-Cohen, Wheelwright, Hill, Raste, & Plumb, 2001). For this task, participants are shown black and white images of actors faces, cropped to display only the eye-region, and are asked to select which of four possible mental states is being experienced by the target person. Higher scores reflect increased sensitivity to nonverbal interpersonal cues. Baron-Cohen and colleagues (2001) found that high functioning individuals with Aspergers tend to score lower on the MIE when compared with IQ-matched controls.

Personality. A measure of trait personality was included in this study to serve as a control, to demonstrate that any relation between print-exposure and interpersonal sensitivity could not be attributed to personality traits. Personality was measured using the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The BFI consists of 44 short phrases containing trait adjectives that characterize the core elements of the Big Five personality dimensions: extraversion, conscientiousness, openness, emotional stability, and agreeableness (John, Donahue, & Soto, 2008). Participants rate each phrase on a 5-point Likert scale based on how much they agree that each item describes their personality, from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*).

Results

Scale Scores

Participants selected an average of 7.13 Fiction items ($SD = 7.05$) on the ART (Domestic $M = 2.18$, $SD = 2.63$; Romance $M = 2.20$, $SD = 2.20$; Science-Fiction/Fantasy $M = 1.00$, $SD = 1.61$; Suspense/Thriller $M = 1.34$, $SD = 1.91$). The average number of Nonfiction items selected was 2.81, $SD = 2.92$. Participants selected very few foil items ($M = .54$, $SD = 1.22$), with 95.4% of participants selecting three foils or less. The mean MIE score was 23.26, $SD = 4.88$.

Correlations

Pearson correlations were used to explore the relationships between print exposure, interpersonal sensitivity, and personality (see Table 1). Exposure to Fiction, the Fiction subgenres, and Nonfiction were all related. That is, individuals who had more exposure to one genre also tended to have greater exposure to other genres as well. However, there were diverging patterns of association between print-exposure to certain genres and interpersonal sensitivity scores. Individuals who exhibited more exposure to Fiction tended to have greater interpersonal sensitivity while individuals who had been exposed to more Nonfiction did not show the same relationship. Greater exposure to the genres of Domestic, Romance, and Suspense/Thriller were all related to better scores on our measure of interpersonal sensitivity.

Certain traits were also associated with our measures of print-exposure for the various genres. Specifically, individuals who exhibited more exposure to Fiction, Nonfiction, and Domestic Fiction tended to be higher in trait openness. Furthermore, individuals who had more exposure to Fiction, Nonfiction, Domestic Fiction, Science Fiction/Fantasy, and Suspense/Thriller tended to be more introverted.

In light of the close relationship between exposure to the Fiction and Nonfiction genres, any associations between exposure to the Fiction genres and MIE performance could possibly be the result of variance shared between Fiction and Nonfiction, rather than the unique variance of each Fiction genre. Furthermore, because certain personality traits are related to print-exposure (i.e., openness

and extraversion), it is possible that individual differences in these two traits might also account for the association between Fiction genres and MIE scores. To rule out these possibilities, partial correlations were performed to control for exposure to Nonfiction, trait Openness and Extraversion, and the demographic variables.

Partial Correlations

To examine the presence of a unique relationship between Fiction genres and interpersonal sensitivity, separate partial correlations were performed for each Fiction genre, predicting MIE scores. Before conducting these partial correlations, a composite variable was calculated using the average of age and English fluency to address concerns of multicollinearity because of the high intercorrelation between these variables, $r = .55$, $p < .01$; $M_{\text{composite}} = 18.83$, $SD_{\text{composite}} = 3.18$. This composite, along with gender, trait Openness and Extraversion, and Nonfiction print-exposure were included in the partial correlation as controls. ART foil scores were also included as a control variable to account for patterns of biased responding, such as a low threshold for recognition. These partial correlations are reported in Table 2. To assess which Fiction genres were uniquely associated with interpersonal sensitivity scores, separate partial correlations were also conducted for each Fiction genre, with the remaining three genres included as control variables (see Table 3).

The partial correlations that considered each Fiction genre separately indicated that the genres of Romance and Suspense/Thriller were related to MIE scores after controlling for age, English fluency, gender, trait Openness, trait Extraversion, Nonfiction print exposure, and foil-checking. Domestic Fiction also neared threshold for statistical significance. In fact, when considering the 95% confidence intervals for the observed correlations, Romance and Domestic Fiction do not include 0 for the lower bound, whereas the lower bound for Suspense/Thriller falls just below 0 (see Table 2). A conservative interpretation of this pattern is that the Romance can confidently be seen as associated with interpersonal sensitivity, whereas the existence of such a relationship for Suspense/Thriller and Domestic Fiction is weaker and less certain.

In the partial correlations for each Fiction genre that included the other three genres as control variables, only print-exposure to Romance continued to be significantly associated with MIE scores

Table 1
Correlations Between ART, MIE, and BFI Scores

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1-ART Fiction	—										
2-Domestic	.76*	—									
3-Romance	.64*	.50*	—								
4-SciFi-Fantasy	.48*	.42*	.35*	—							
5-Suspense/Thriller	.58*	.46*	.57*	.41*	—						
6-ART Nonfiction	.54*	.43*	.26*	.31*	.23*	—					
7-MIE	.17*	.20*	.25*	.09	.21*	.11	—				
8-BFI-O	.21*	.19*	.10	.14*	.11	.18*	.15*	—			
9-BFI-C	-.02	-.07	-.03	-.06	.08	-.07	-.04	.19*	—		
10-BFI-E	-.11*	-.18*	-.08	-.16*	-.15*	-.04	-.04	.17*	.17*	—	
11-BFI-A	-.03	-.00	.06	.03	-.00	-.05	-.04	.14*	.29*	.19*	—
12-BFI-Es	-.10	-.13*	-.08	-.10	-.03	-.03	-.01	.05	.27*	.32*	.27*

Note. All correlations are based on two-tailed tests of significance.

* $p < .05$.

Table 2
Partial Correlations Between Fiction Genres and MIE Scores Controlling for Gender, Age, Years of English Fluency, Trait Openness, Trait Extraversion, Nonfiction Print Exposure, and ART-Foils

Genre ^a	Partial <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	95% confidence interval ^b
Romance	.17	<.01	[.08, .25]
Domestic	.10	.08	[.02, .09]
Science-Fiction/Fantasy	-.02	.72	[-.12, .09]
Suspense	.12	.03	[-.01, .23]

^a Corresponding analyses using hierarchical linear regressions, with control variables included in the first block, are reported in Appendix A. ^b 95% confidence intervals were determined using bootstrapping using 1,000 iterations.

(see Table 3). This was true whether one considered the null-hypothesis statistical tests (i.e., *p* values) or the 95% confidence intervals. In other words, when considering all genres included in this study, only exposure to Romance was uniquely related to increased interpersonal sensitivity after controlling for the other genres, age, English fluency, gender, trait Openness, exposure to Nonfiction, and foil-checking.

Discussion

In this study we expanded on past work (Mar et al., 2006, 2009) by investigating the role of genre in the association between exposure to fiction and performance on an interpersonal sensitivity task. Consistent with past findings, exposure to Fiction was found to be positively correlated with performance on a measure of interpersonal sensitivity, whereas print-exposure to Nonfiction was not (Mar et al., 2006, 2009). However, contrary to the findings of Mar and colleagues (2006), there was no negative relationship between print-exposure to Nonfiction and interpersonal sensitivity (cf. Mar et al., 2009). Furthermore, exposure to the genres of Domestic Fiction, Romance, and Suspense/Thriller all had positive correlations with interpersonal sensitivity. Conversely, exposure to Science-Fiction/Fantasy did not predict performance on the interpersonal sensitivity task. Partial correlations indicated that exposure to Romance continued to be significantly associated with interpersonal sensitivity even after controlling for exposure to Nonfiction, foil-checking, age and years of English fluency, gender, trait Openness, and trait Extraversion. Domestic fiction and Suspense were also related to interpersonal sensitivity, but these relations were weaker and less certain. When all genres were considered at once, only Romance was a unique predictor of interpersonal sensitivity.

The results of this study indicate that some genres of fiction, but not all, are related to improved performance on an interpersonal sensitivity task. In particular, Romance was the only fiction genre that predicted greater interpersonal sensitivity after controlling for other forms of print-exposure and various individual differences. It has been suggested that narrative fiction provides a simulation of social relationships and interactions (Mar & Oatley, 2008), which helps to maintain and improve social skills (Mar et al., 2006; 2009; Mar, Tackett, & Moore, 2010). Perhaps Romance is a genre of fiction where the plot, goals, and characters in the narrative might

primarily be driven by the navigation and resolution of interpersonal interactions and relationships. If it is the simulation of interpersonal experience in narrative fiction that best predicts greater performance on interpersonal tasks, then perhaps it is unsurprising that exposure to Romance—a genre of fiction that focuses on interpersonal relationships—is most strongly related to this benefit. Of relevant note is the previous finding that those who read romance novels focus on emotional aspects of the experience (the emotions of the characters as well as their own emotional reactions to the text) whereas those with less exposure to romance novels conceptualize this genre with respect to the plot and structure of the narrative (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2009). It may be that the emotional experiences evoked by romance novels lead to rumination on past relationship experiences (Larsen & Seilman, 1988; Mar, Oatley, Djikic, & Mullin, 2011), perhaps encouraging readers to puzzle out the complexities of their own past romantic relationships. This thoughtful introspection might then be usefully applied to new social interactions. At the moment, however, our data cannot speak directly to putative mechanisms or even causal relations between the constructs examined. Given the exploratory nature of this work, it is necessary to replicate these findings and explore the possible mechanisms that might be at work.

It is important to note that this study is subject to a number of limitations. Because this study is correlational, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions with regard to the nature of exposure to various genres of narrative fiction. That is, we cannot infer that exposure to any specific genre causes greater or less interpersonal sensitivity. Given that narrative genre plays an important role in how and why readers select a narrative text (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2005), it is entirely possible that individual differences may shape both interpersonal sensitivity and selection and exposure to various literary genres. Although we attempted to rule out the role of individual differences by controlling for trait personality and demographic variables, there are other possible individual differences that were not measured and accounted for (e.g., attachment, need for belonging). Follow-up studies should consider experimental manipulation of exposure to different genres of narrative fiction to examine the impact of such exposure on interpersonal skills. Alternatively, future studies might consider priming interpersonal sensitivity and examining how this affects responses to different genres of narrative fiction. Additionally, the differences in the structure, language, and content of different genres

Table 3
Partial Correlations Between Fiction Genres and MIE Scores Controlling for Gender, Age, Years of English Fluency, Trait Openness, Trait Extraversion, Nonfiction Print Exposure, ART-Foils, and Other Fiction Genres

Genre ^a	Partial <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>	95% confidence interval
Romance	.12	.03	[.03, .21]
Domestic	.04	.44	[-.04, .14]
Science-Fiction/Fantasy	-.07	.23	[-.17, .04]
Suspense	.06	.32	[-.09, .18]

^a Corresponding analyses using hierarchical linear regressions, with control variables included in the first block and all four Fiction genres simultaneously included in the second block, are reported in Appendix A.

of fiction need to be clarified through empirical investigation (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2005, 2009). Future studies should empirically investigate the differences between fiction genres to determine which characteristics of each genre might drive associations with social abilities. Finally, follow-up studies should consider investigating the impact of print-exposure to different Nonfiction genres (e.g., business, political commentary, and science) on measures of social ability. In the future, it would also be interesting to investigate the role genres play in additional reader outcomes, such as cognitive reasoning, persuasion, and attitude change.

The empirical study of literature has experienced an exciting growth over the past few decades (Dixon & Bortolussi, 2011; Gerrig, 1993; Oatley, 1999; Zyngier, Bortolussi, Chesnokova, & Auracher, 2008). Researchers have examined a diverse set of topics, including how exposure to narratives can alter our attitudes and beliefs (Green, Strange, & Brock, 2002; Prentice, Gerrig, & Bailis, 1997), how reading can shape our self-perceptions (Gabriel & Young, 2011) and our abilities (Appel, 2011), how readers represent characters (Rapp & Gerrig, 2001) and their perspectives (Özyürek & Trabasso, 1997), and how individual characteristics of readers can influence their engagement with a text (Bortolussi, Dixon, & Sopčák, 2010; Mazzocco, Green, Sasota, & Jones, 2010). A number of these fascinating topics continue to generate promising avenues of research, and such is the case with the observation that narrative fiction is associated with greater social ability. Although this association appears to be a reliable finding, observed across populations (Mar et al., 2010), there is still much mystery regarding how this association might be accounted for and what it represents. The current study extends previous work in this area by exploring the diverging relationships between varying fiction genres and interpersonal sensitivity. Specifically, genres of narrative fiction that highlight interpersonal relationships appear to be particularly relevant for outcomes associated with social ability. Thus, when discussing the relationship between narrative fiction and social ability, it is important to recognize that the genre of fiction can play a role in this association.

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Appendix A

Regressions Showing Prediction of MIE by Fiction Genre Print-Exposure, Controlling for Age, Years of English Fluency, Gender, Trait Openness, Nonfiction Print-Exposure, and ART-Foils

	Variable ^a	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Model 1 ^b					
$R^2 = .06$					
$F(6, 319) = 3.38^*$					
	AgeFluency	.06	.09	.04	0.64
	Gender	.97	.66	.08	1.47
	Openness	1.28	.50	.15	2.58*
	Extraversion	-.20	.38	-.03	-.053
	Nonfiction	.23	.11	.14	1.99*
	ART-Foils	-.80	.27	-.20	-2.99*
Model 2					
$R^2 = .09$					
$F(7, 318) = 4.34^*$					
	AgeFluency	.03	.09	.02	0.28
	Gender	.32	.37	.03	.46
	Openness	1.19	.49	.13	2.41*
	Extraversion	-.18	.38	-.03	-.47
	Nonfiction	.10	.12	.06	0.82
	ART-Foils	-.42	.29	-.11	-1.46
	Romance	.43	.14	.19	3.09*
Model 2					
$R^2 = .07$					
$F(7, 318) = 3.35^*$					
	AgeFluency	.04	.09	.02	0.43
	Gender	.70	.68	.06	1.04
	Openness	1.15	.50	.13	2.28*
	Extraversion	-.09	.39	-.01	-.023
	Nonfiction	.12	.13	.07	0.94
	ART-Foils	-.59	.29	-.15	-2.01*
	Domestic	.22	.13	.12	1.74
Model 2					
$R^2 = .06$					
$F(7, 318) = 2.91^*$					
	AgeFluency	.06	.09	.04	.64
	Gender	.98	.66	.08	1.48
	Openness	1.30	.50	.15	2.60*

(Appendix continues)

(Appendix continues)

Appendix (continued)

	Variable ^a	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>
	Extraversion	-.22	.39	-.03	-0.57
	Nonfiction	.24	.12	.15	1.98*
	ART-Foils	-.85	.30	-.21	-2.82*
	Science-Fiction/Fantasy	-.07	.20	-.02	-0.36
Model 2					
	$R^2 = .07$				
	$F(7, 318) = 3.64^*$				
	AgeFluency	.01	.09	.00	0.06
	Gender	.82	.66	.07	1.24
	Openness	1.18	.50	.13	2.39*
	Extraversion	-.13	.38	-.02	-0.34
	Nonfiction	.15	.12	.09	1.25
	ART-Foils	-.50	.30	-.13	-1.69
	Suspense/Thriller	.35	.16	.14	2.23*
Model 2					
	$R^2 = .10$				
	$F(10, 318) = 3.30^*$				
	AgeFluency	-.01	.09	-.00	-0.06
	Gender	.28	.69	.02	0.40
	Openness	1.16	.50	.13	2.32*
	Extraversion	-.15	.39	-.02	-0.39
	Nonfiction	.09	.13	.05	0.65
	ART-Foils	-.41	.33	-.10	-1.26
	Domestic	.11	.14	.06	0.78
	Romance	.34	.16	.16	2.15*
	Science-Fiction/Fantasy	-.25	.21	-.08	-1.20
	Suspense/Thriller	.18	.18	.07	1.01

^a The strong relationship between print-exposure to Nonfiction and the Fiction genres raises the possibility of multicollinearity. However, collinearity diagnostics indicated that the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values for all regression models were below 2, which fall within acceptable range of guidelines recommended by Belsley (1991). ^b As Model 1 is held constant across multiple regressions, it is only reported once.

* $p < .05$.

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