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Repetition Legitimizes

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Consistent Behavior as a Motivated Reward-Driven Process

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INTRODUCTION

Research question: It is often observed that people act consistently across time. Surprisingly, it is not yet well understood where this tendency to stick to one's past behavior comes from.

Reasoning: We propose that people *strategically behave consistently* (i.e. a motivated process); *anticipating* consistent behavior will lead to *beneficial evaluations* by others and *social rewards*.

STUDY 1

Goal: In Study 1, we take the first step in examining the reasoning presented above. We investigate whether people expect consistent behavior to result in being *perceived as more reliable, trustworthy, and competent* and lead to *larger social rewards* than inconsistency.

Scenario study: 6 scenarios about a subject who behaves *consistently/inconsistently* (between-subjects; see Figure 1).

Sample: 352 Prolific participants (36% female, $M_{age} = 27.05$)

Measures – Each participant assesses for all 6 scenarios (1 – Strongly disagree, 5 – Strongly agree):

- 1) how other people in the scenario would respond to the instances of (in)consistent behavior,
 - 3 items measuring *anticipated beneficial evaluations* (competence, trustworthiness, reliability)
 - 1 item measuring *anticipated social rewards*
- 2) whether they personally think the subject in the scenario behaved consistently.

Figure 1. Example of a scenario used in Study 1 and the accompanying social reward item

You are on a first date and the conversation shifts to the importance of donating to different causes. You state that you see immigration to be the most pressing social issue and so you donate most of your money to organizations that help immigrants. Later that evening, you and your date are discussing the upcoming 2020 US presidential elections and you say that, given the available choices, you would definitely vote for Joe Biden over Donald Trump (*consistent condition*) / Donald Trump over Joe Biden (*inconsistent condition*).

Social reward item: I think my date is likely to go on another date with me.

People anticipate consistent behavior to signal competence, reliability, and trustworthiness and result in larger social rewards than inconsistency.

Figure 2. Mean anticipated positive evaluations (left) and social rewards (right) in consistent and inconsistent condition summed across different scenarios with standard deviation estimates (Study 1)

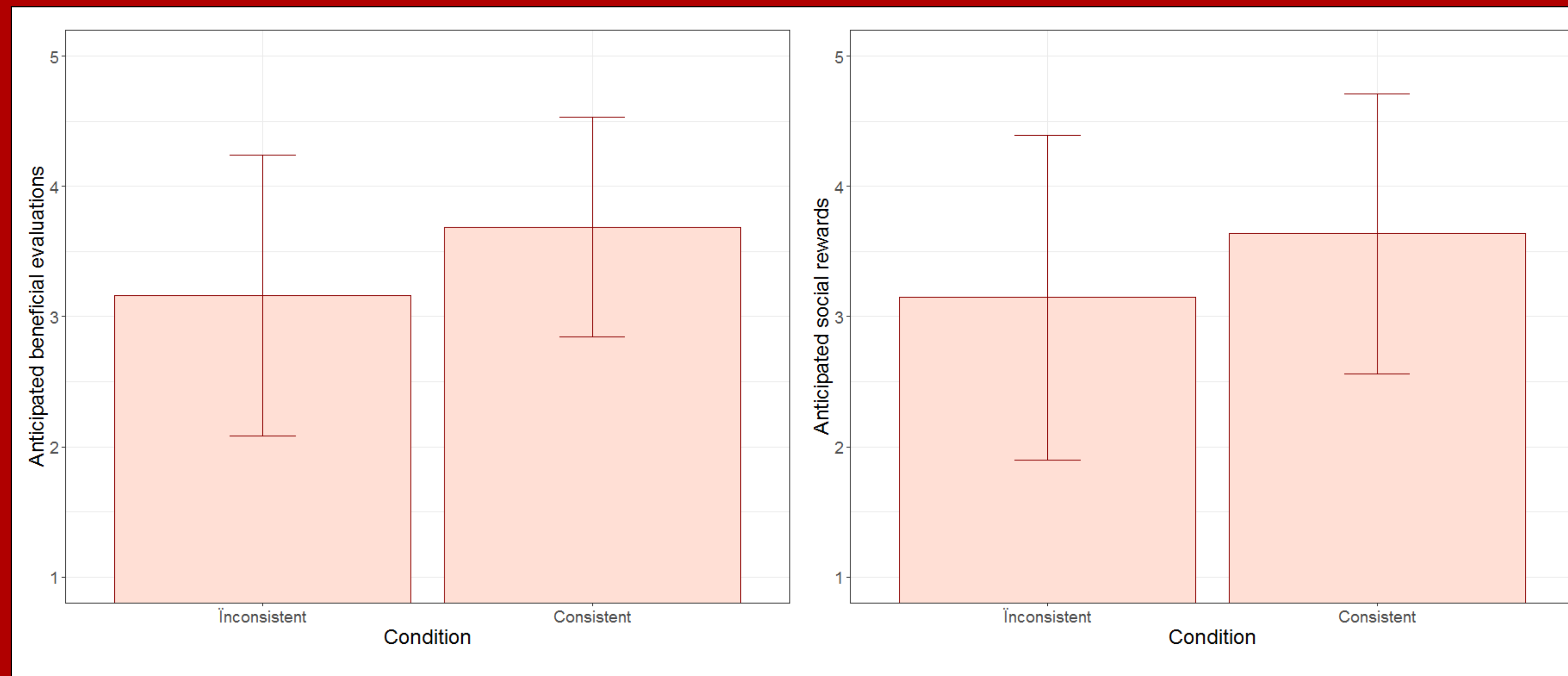


Figure 3. Mean anticipated beneficial evaluations in consistent and inconsistent condition per scenario with standard deviation estimates (Study 1)

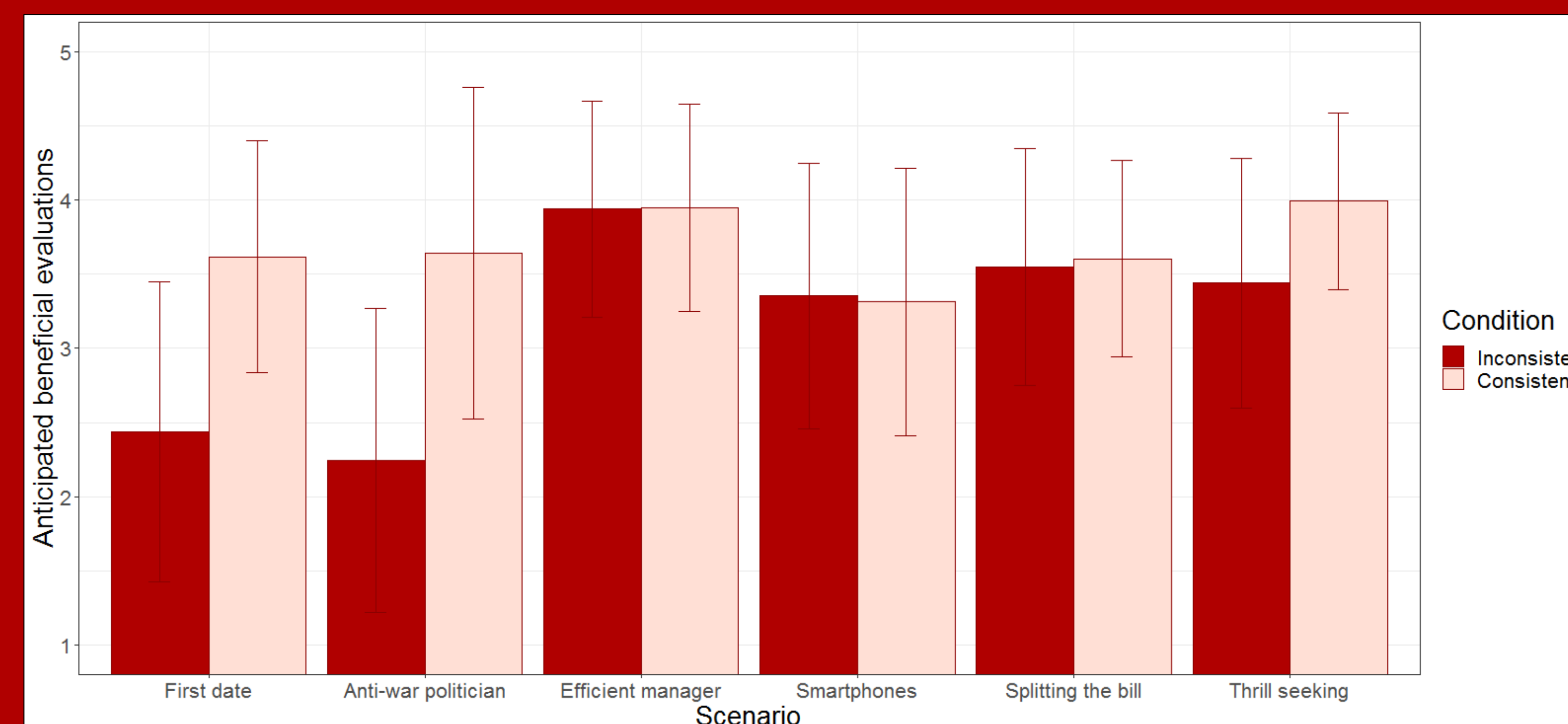
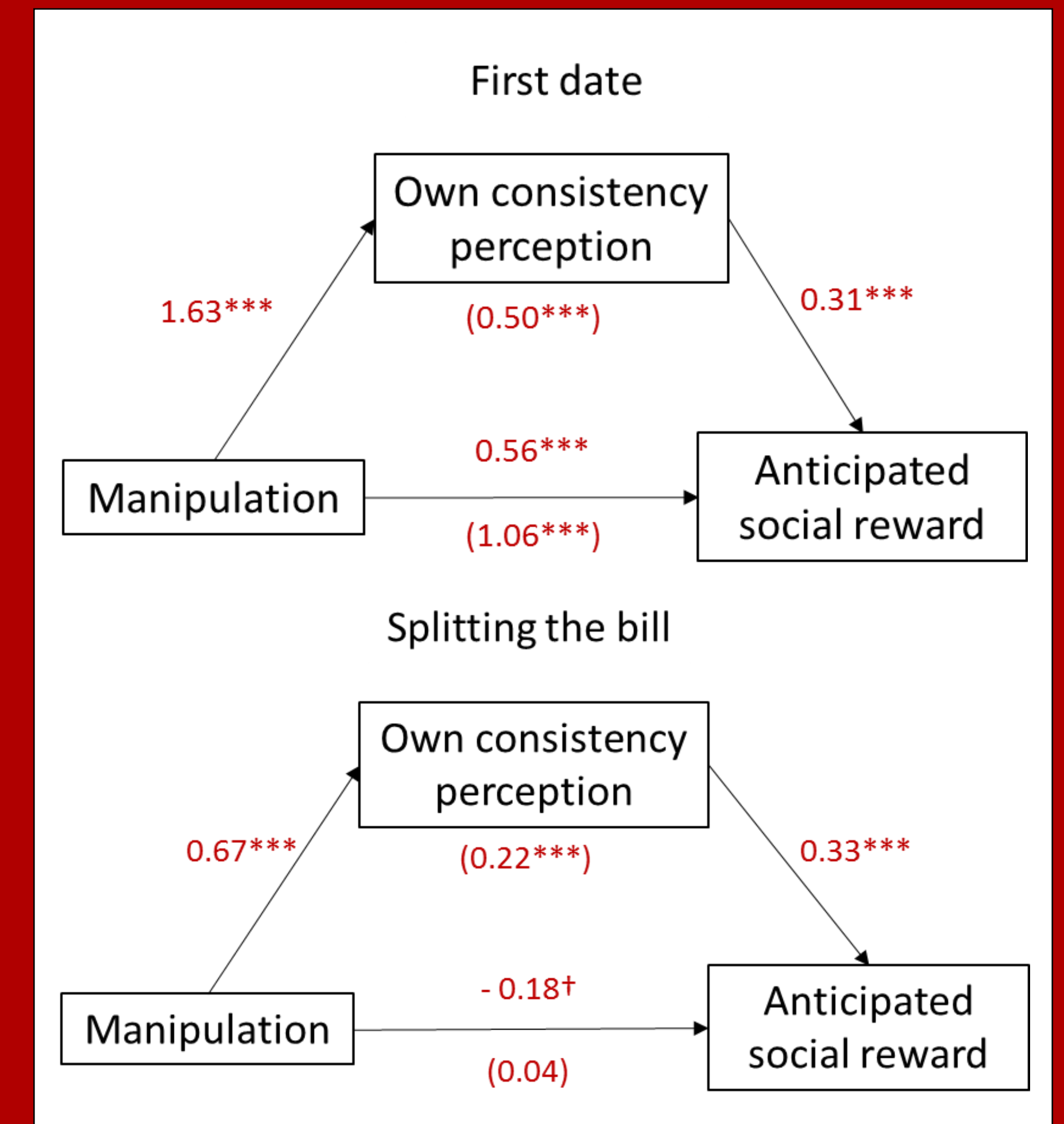


Figure 4. Examples of two typical mediated effects discovered in Study 1, each in half of the scenarios (***) $p < .001$; † $p < .10$



NEXT STEPS

Study 1 discussion: The results support the notion that people have a generalized anticipation that *consistent behavior leads to beneficial impressions and social rewards*.

Study 2: Given that people anticipate consistent behavior to be rewarded, do they *strategically behave more consistently when trying to impress others?*

Study 3: Is *consistent behavior rewarded* to the extent people expect it to be?

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