

Hostile or Non-Hostile: Do Black Americans Infer the Worst from White Americans' Ambiguous Behaviors?

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INTRODUCTION

Background: Marginalized racial groups may attribute negative feedback from White people to prejudice toward their racial group (Crocker et al., 1991) and positive feedback to motives of appearing non-prejudiced (Major et al., 2016), thus experiencing attributional ambiguity.

Current Study: Assessed whether such attributions affect Black American participants’ spontaneous inferences of hostile (nonhostile) traits from White Americans’ behaviors and their mental health in interracial interactions.

Research Questions: **(1)** Does attributional ambiguity affect Black individuals’ self-esteem? **(2)** Does attributional ambiguity affect Black individuals’ spontaneous impressions from ambiguous behaviors performed by White individuals?

Hypotheses:
(H1) Black participants who experience attributional ambiguity in the avatar (vs. no avatar) condition will experience a drop in self-esteem
-We also explore whether the feedback type (positive or negative) will differentially affect the hypothesized relationship in H1.

(H2) We expect that Black people’s experience of attributional ambiguity will result in spontaneous impressions of hostility from White people’s ambiguous behaviors.

METHODS

Participants: 157 (105 women, 52 men, $M_{age} = 30.42$, $SD_{age} = 11.29$; 100% Black American)

Materials & Procedure

Part 1: First participants reported their initial self-esteem. Next, they were randomly assigned to one of two **race visibility conditions (avatar vs. no avatar)**. In the avatar condition participants selected an emoji to make their race visible to a fictional White evaluator, while in the no avatar condition participants’ race was invisible. Thereafter, participants completed a **personality questionnaire**, and an **essay prompt on campus parking**. Finally, participants were randomly assigned to receive **feedback (negative vs positive)** given by the ostensible White evaluator on their essay response.

Part 2: Participants completed a False Recognition Task (adopted from Gunsoy et al., 2024), testing spontaneous inferences of hostility from (gender-matched) others’ behaviors. Then, they reported their self-esteem and demographic information.

Measured variables:

- Attributional ambiguity (Crocker et al., 1991)
- Self-esteem (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991)
- False recognition rates (Gunsoy et al., 2024)
- Demographics

Black participants experienced a general drop in self-esteem after being evaluated by an (ostensible) White evaluator. The highest drop in self-esteem was among those who received positive feedback and experienced attributional ambiguity.

Those individuals, compared to other tested groups, were also most likely to spontaneously infer hostility from White people’s ambiguous behaviors.

Spontaneous inferences of hostility from White people’s behaviors were weakly but significantly associated with the drop in Black participants’ self-esteem.

RESULTS

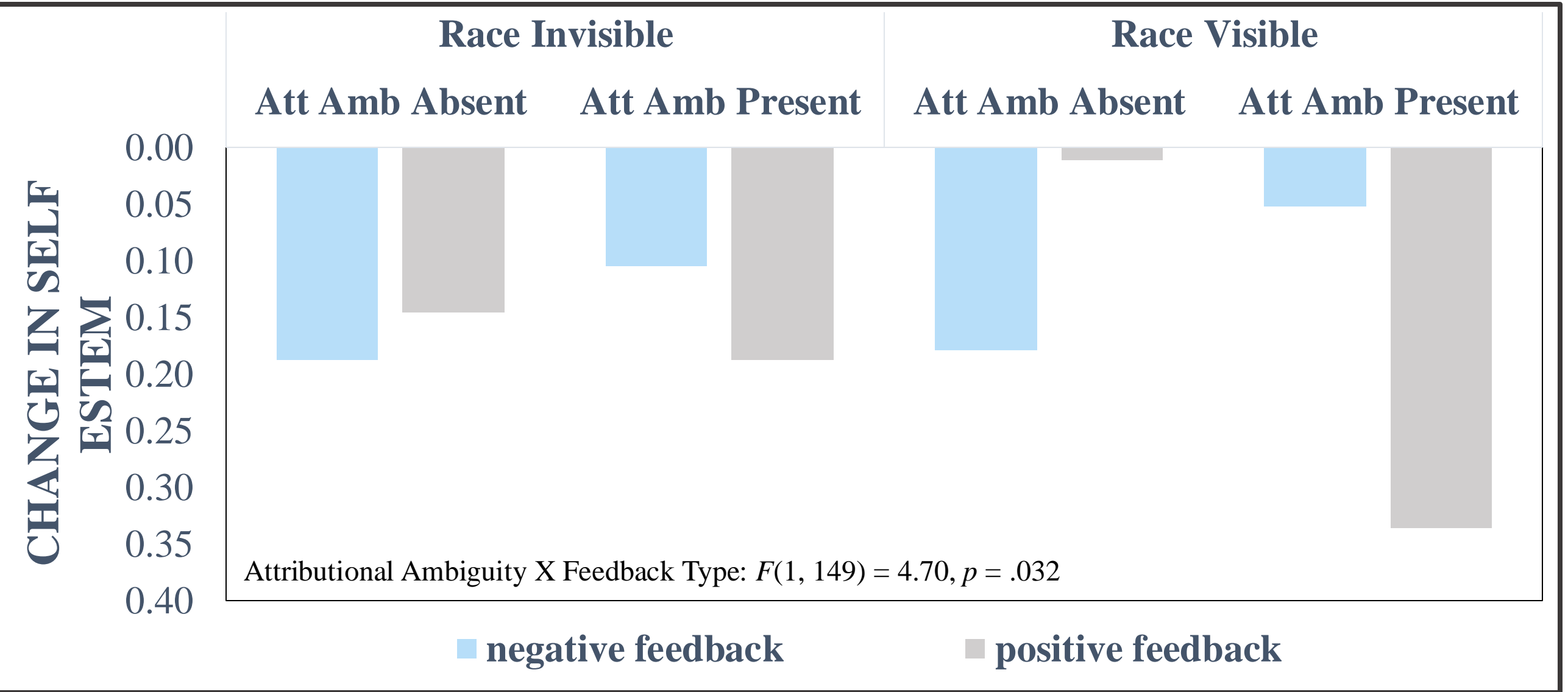


Figure 1. The change in Black participants’ self-esteem (post-pre) based on their assigned race visibility (avatar vs. no avatar), received feedback (negative vs. positive) and reported experience of attributional ambiguity (present vs. absent)

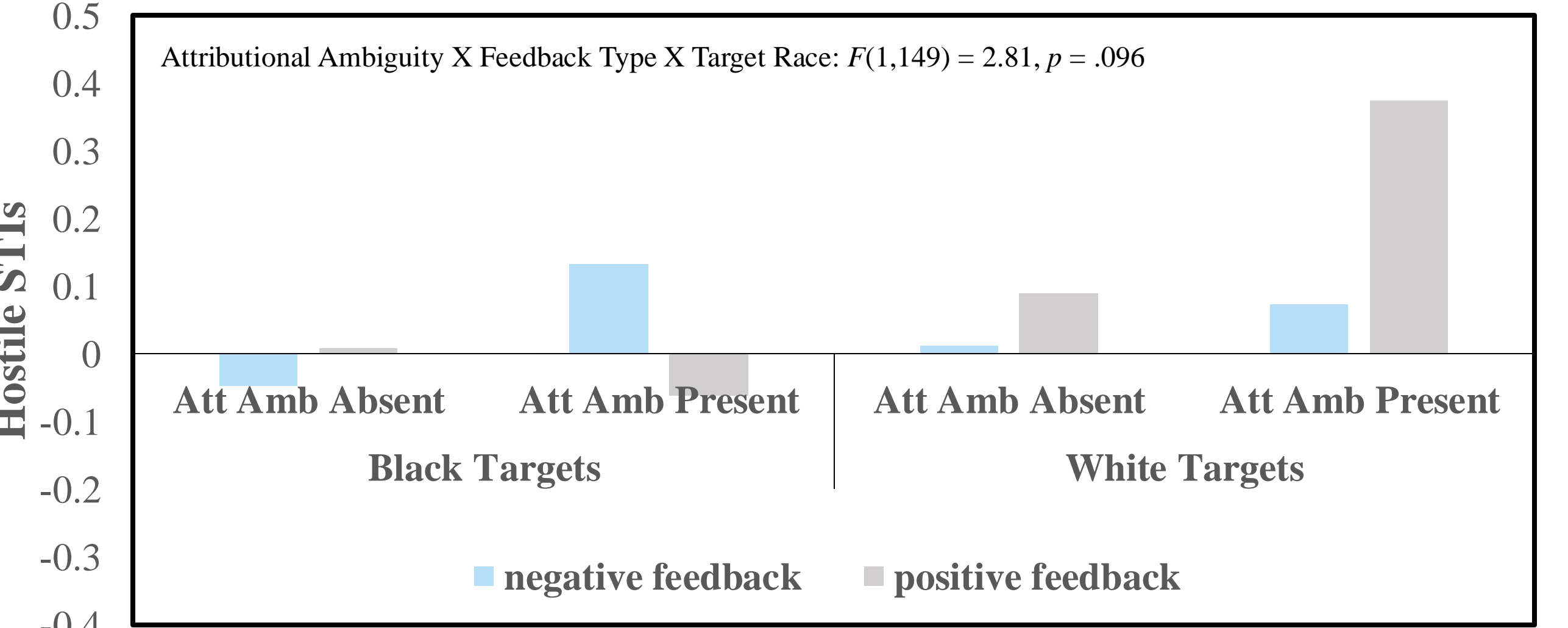


Figure 2. Black participants’ spontaneous inferences of hostile (vs. nonhostile) trait words based on their reported experience of attributional ambiguity (present vs. absent) and received feedback (negative vs. positive). Hostile STIs (y axis) indicate the difference between false recognition rates for hostile and nonhostile traits (negative values indicate more nonhostile inferences)

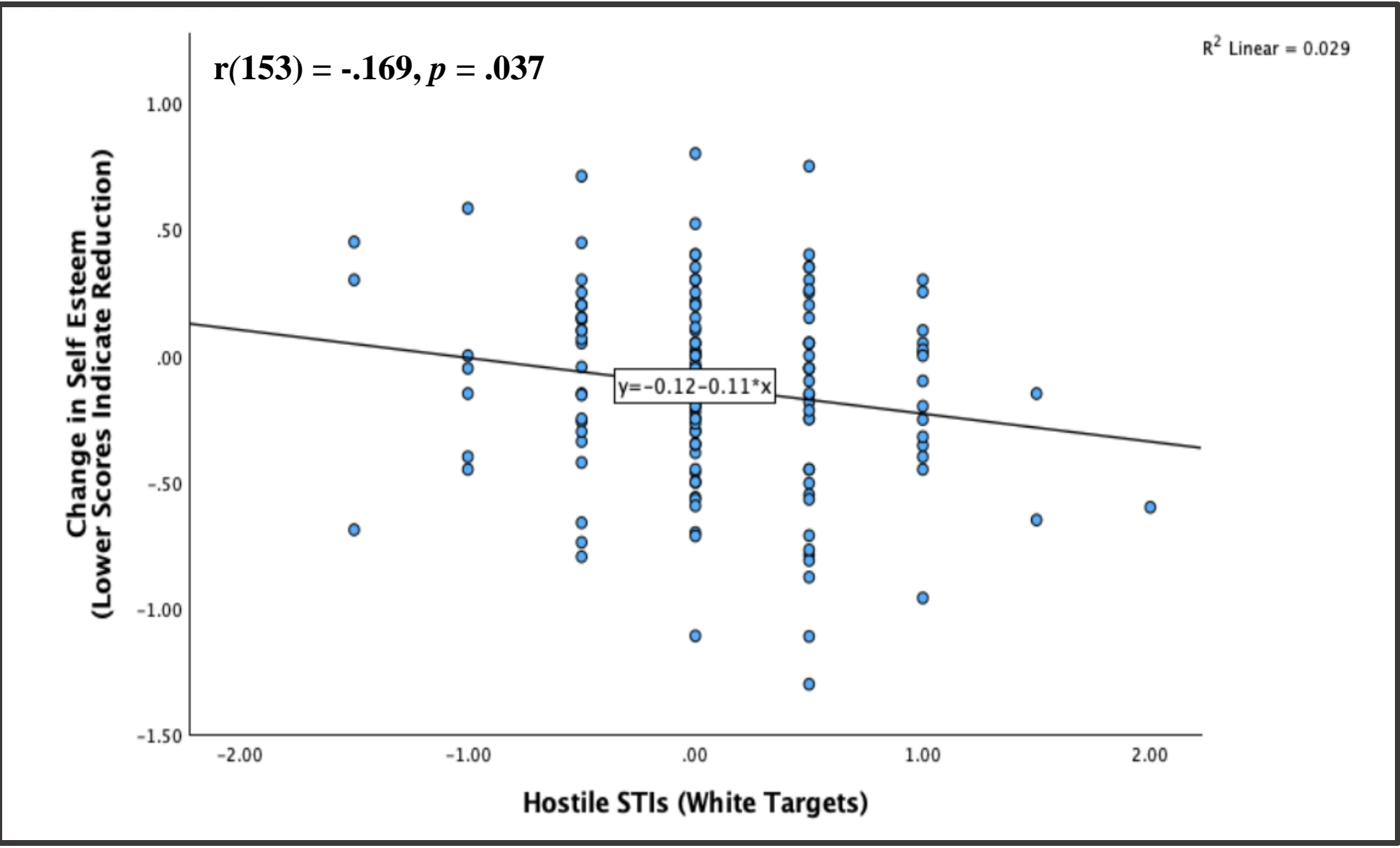


Figure 3. The model demonstrates a correlational relationship between hostile STIs from white targets and the change in self esteem.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

The current research supports previous findings on attributional ambiguity’s negative impact on Black American’s self-esteem.

The current research extends previous work by demonstrating the downstream consequences of experiencing attributional ambiguity on interracial impression formation.