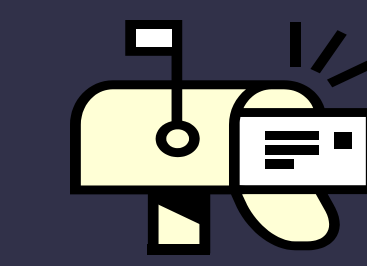


Look at me, I'm Happy and Creative: On Social Desirability in Social Presence

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Introduction

“Social facilitation” is the effect of social presence (passive observers) on performance. A recent meta-analysis of the social facilitation literature has revealed that for the individual who is being observed it is an ambiguous social condition, and that some individuals are better able than others to manage it (Uziel, in press). One trait that has not been studied in this context before is Social Desirability. Individuals scoring high on this trait seek to create and maintain a positive self-presentation. The existing literature suggests that under ambiguous social conditions, high Social Desirability individuals will adopt a positive orientation (e.g., Kline, Blackhart, & Joiner, 2002). This orientation is expected to express in positive thinking patterns, greater effort, and improved performance. Testing this suggestion was the goal of this study, which included two laboratory experiments.

Method of the Experiments

Experiment 1

Participants

168 students from the Hebrew University (62.5% females, mean age = 24): 78 participants were in the experimental group and 90 in the control group.

Materials

Personality. EPQ-R short scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) was used to measure Social Desirability ($\alpha=.73$) and Neuroticism ($\alpha=.85$).

Story-Writing Task. Following Smith and Petty (1995), the participants were asked to write a story based on a TAT picture. The stories were judged for *pleasantness* and *creativity*.

Single-Word Association Task. Following Madigan and Bollenbach (1982), the participants were asked to respond as quickly as possible with the first word that comes to mind to each of 15 stimulus words. Their responses were judged for *pleasantness* and *originality*.

Experiment 2

Participants

167 students from the Hebrew University (55% females, mean age = 24): 83 participants were in the experimental group and 84 in the control group.

Materials

Personality. EPQ-R short scale (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985) was used to measure Social Desirability ($\alpha=.72$) and Neuroticism ($\alpha=.87$).

Use of Objects Task. Following Getzels and Jackson (1962), the participants were asked to find as many uses as possible for three objects within 7½ minutes. The number of usage categories indicates level of *creativity*.

Sentence-Completion Task. The participants were asked to respond as quickly as possible with the first sentence that comes to mind to each of 30 stimulus sentences (18 had a neutral content, and 12 referred to the participant's “self”). The responses were judged for *pleasantness* and *originality*.

Judgment Task. Following Uziel (2006), the participants were asked to evaluate the level of *positivity* of each of 18 everyday positive, neutral, and negative events.

Procedure of Experiments 1 & 2

The participants in the control group performed the tasks while being alone, and the participants in the experimental group performed the tasks while being in the presence of a passive observer. The observer was a male or a female, randomized across participants. In addition, in both experiments, task order was randomized across participants.

ABSTRACT

Two experiments (N's=168, 167) explored the hypothesis that the trait of Social Desirability moderates the social facilitation effect (i.e., the effect of passive social presence on performance). According to the hypothesis, individuals with a high Social Desirability score are at their best under conditions of social presence.

In Experiment 1, the participants performed two tasks: a story-writing task and a single-word association task. Their responses on both tasks were judged for pleasantness and creativity. In Experiment 2, the participants were asked to perform a “use of objects” task (creativity), a sentence-completion task (creativity and pleasantness), and a judgment task (positivity).

The results supported the hypothesis. In both experiments, only in social presence, Social Desirability was associated with creative performance, optimistic judgments, and a positive thinking pattern. These effects were enhanced for emotionally stable (i.e., low on neuroticism) individuals.

This study promotes an interpretation of Social Desirability as a trait that represents a unique adaptation to ambiguous social conditions, and therefore as a trait that serves important psychological functions. The study also demonstrates the substantial role that personality has in moderating the social facilitation effect.

Results

Experiment 1

Stories

In the presence of an observer, Social Desirability (SD) was associated with more pleasant and creative stories.

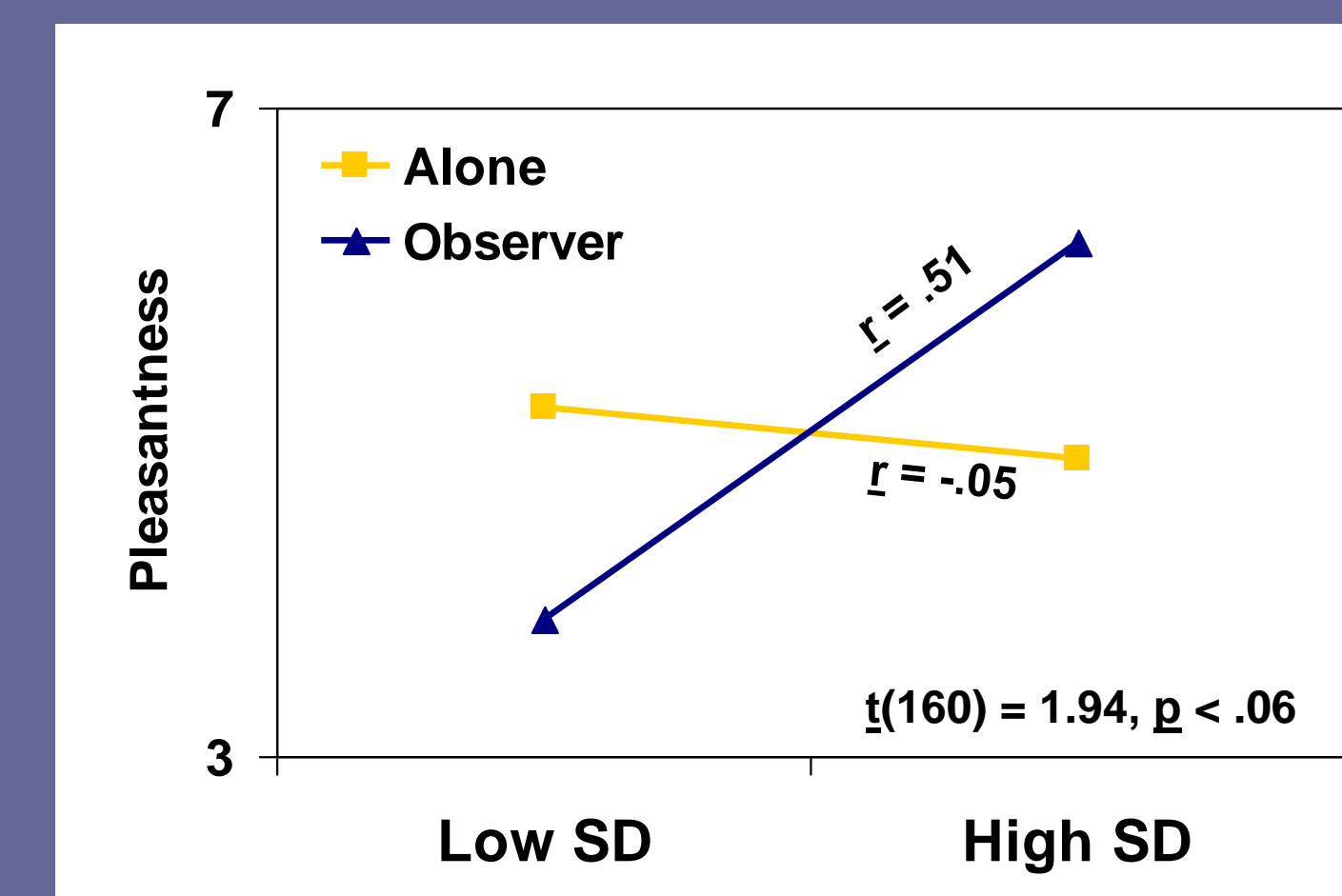


Figure 1. Pleasantness of stories.

[for emotionally stable participants]

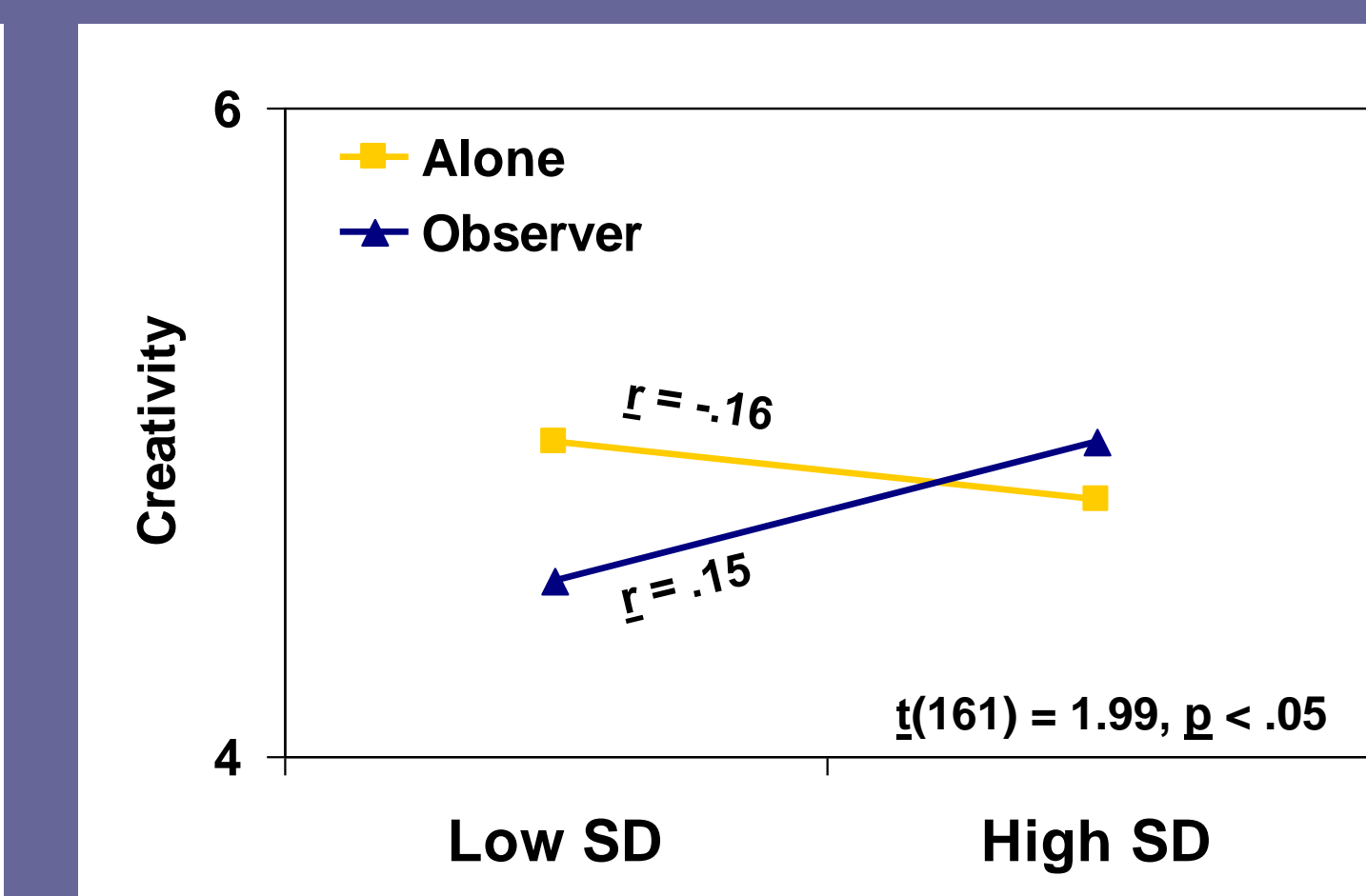


Figure 2. Creativity of stories.

Single-Word Associations

In the presence of an observer, Social Desirability (SD) was associated with more pleasant and original single-word associations.

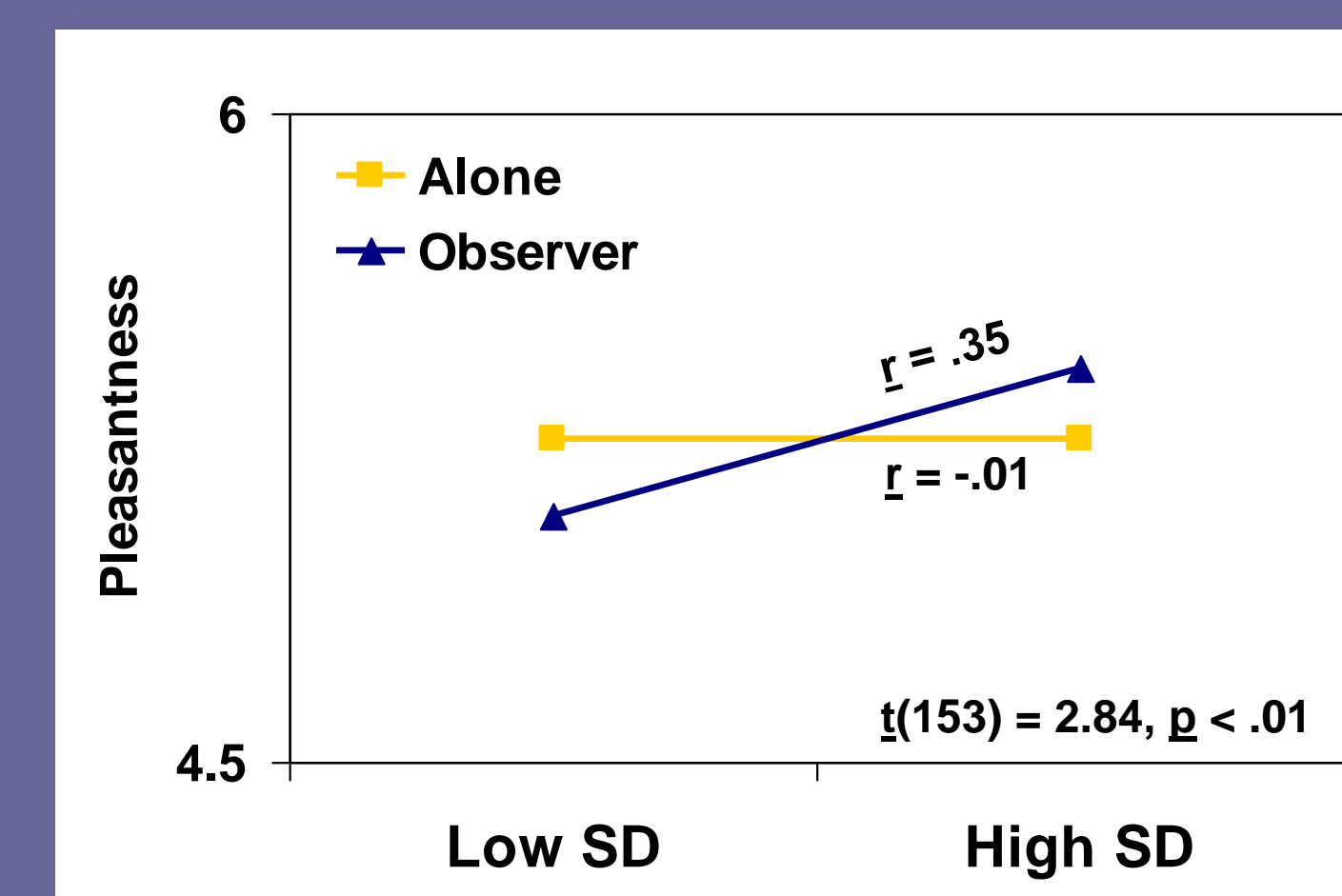


Figure 3. Pleasantness of associations.

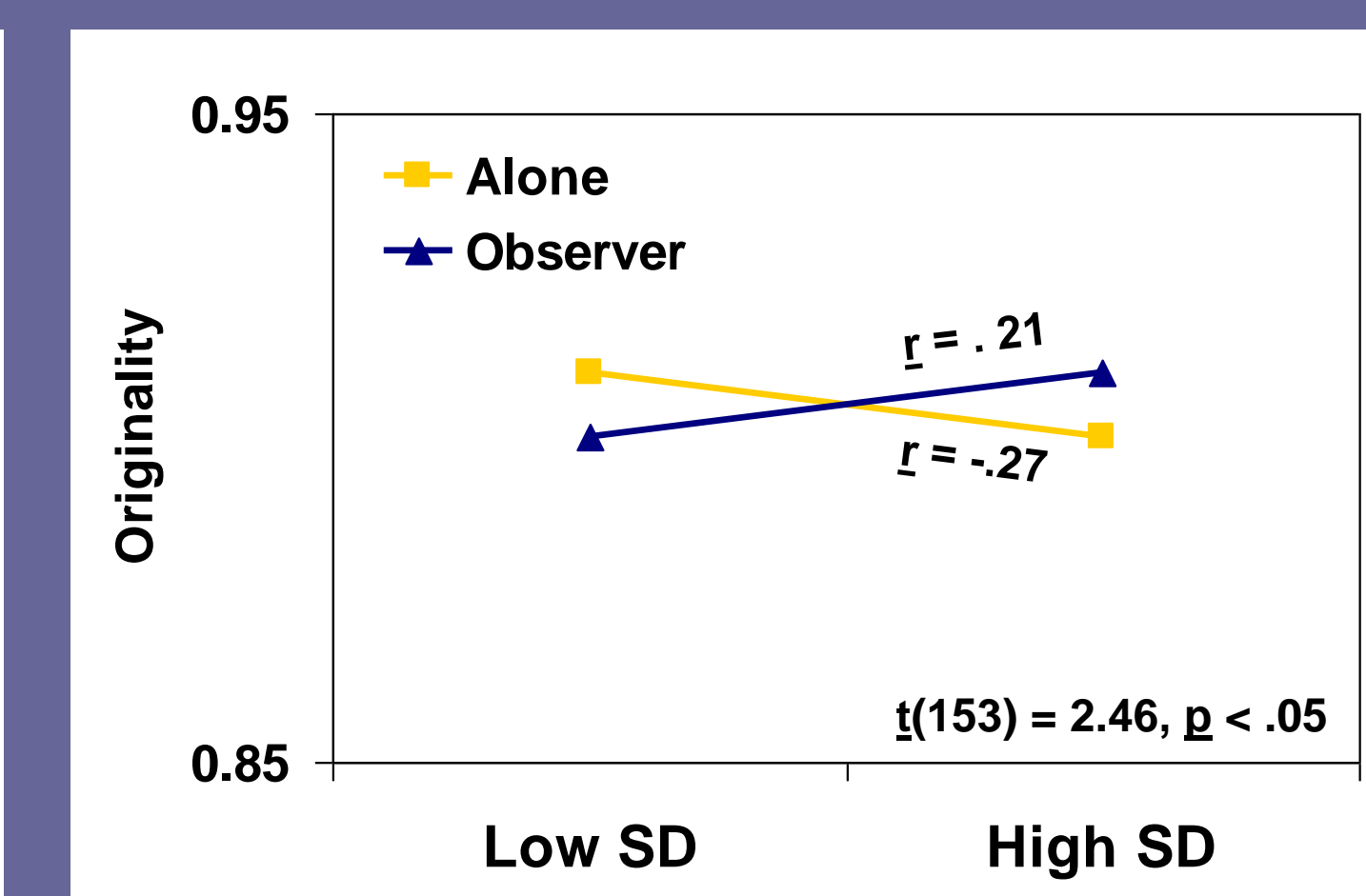


Figure 4. Originality of associations.

[for emotionally stable participants]

Experiment 2

Use of Objects

Individuals with a high Social Desirability score (high SD) suggested a larger number of usage categories when working in the presence of an observer than when working alone.

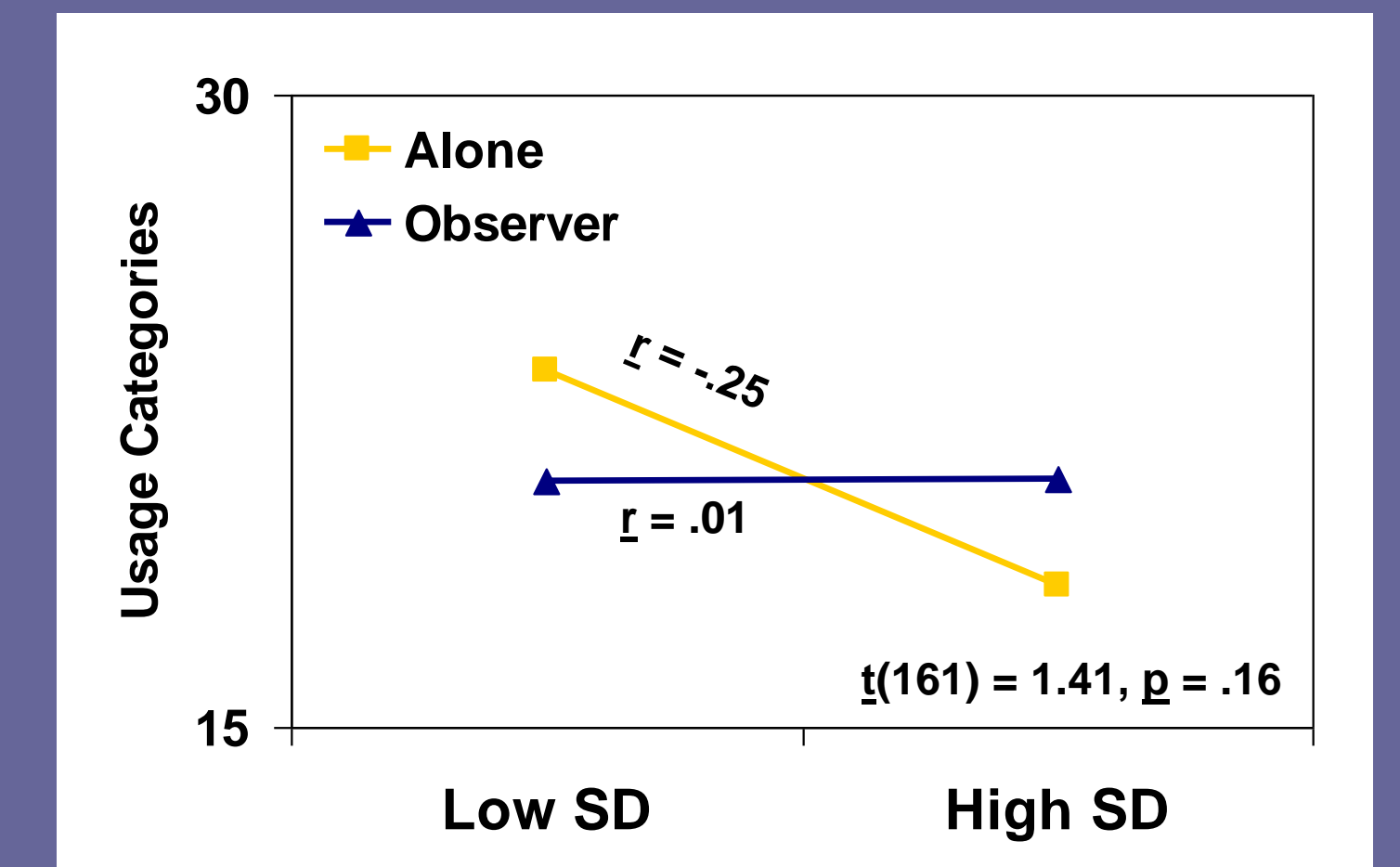


Figure 5. Number of usage categories.

Sentence-Completion

In the presence of an observer, when the sentences focused on the participant's “self”, Social Desirability (SD) was associated with more pleasant and original responses.

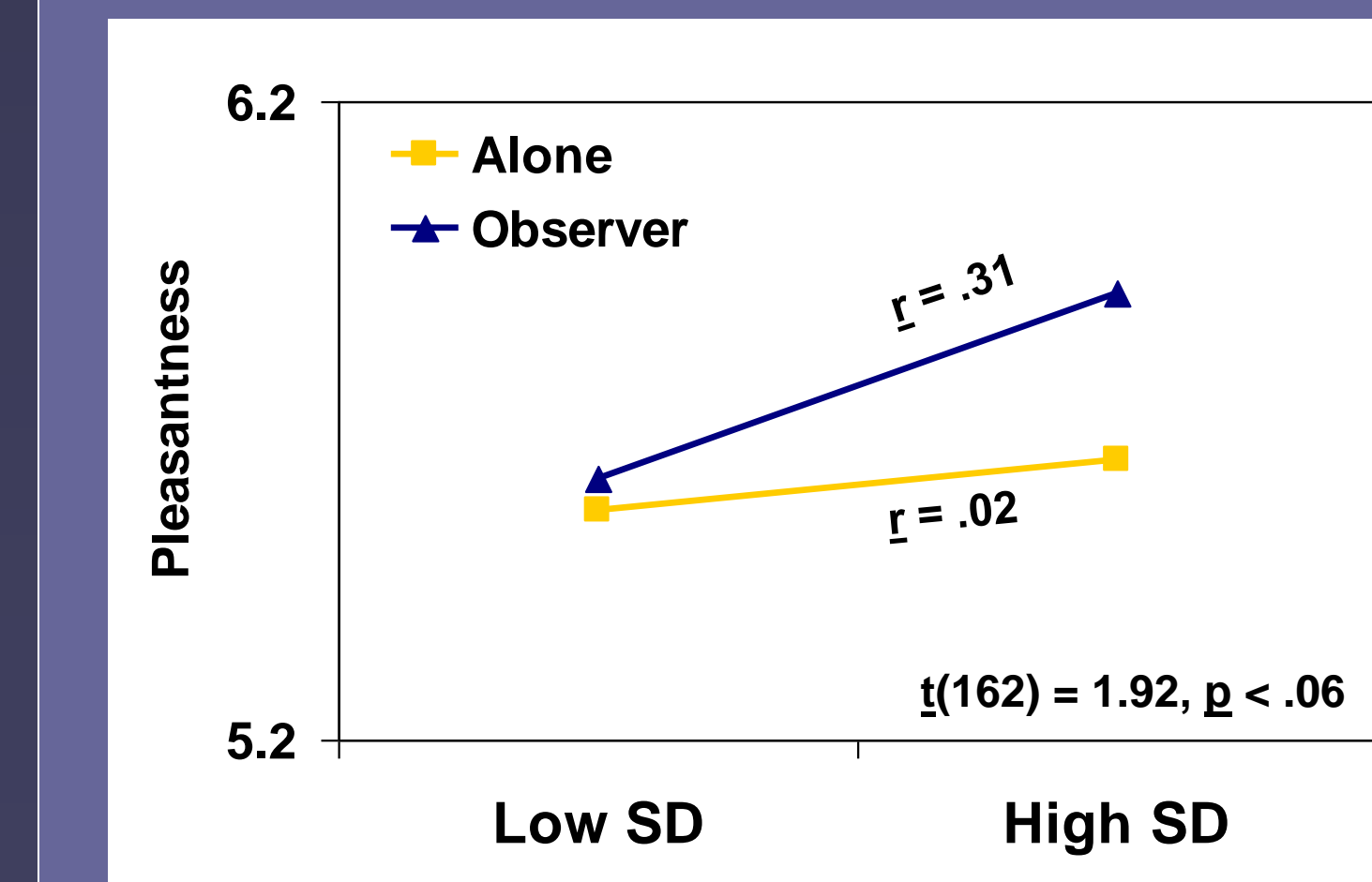


Figure 6. Pleasantness of responses.

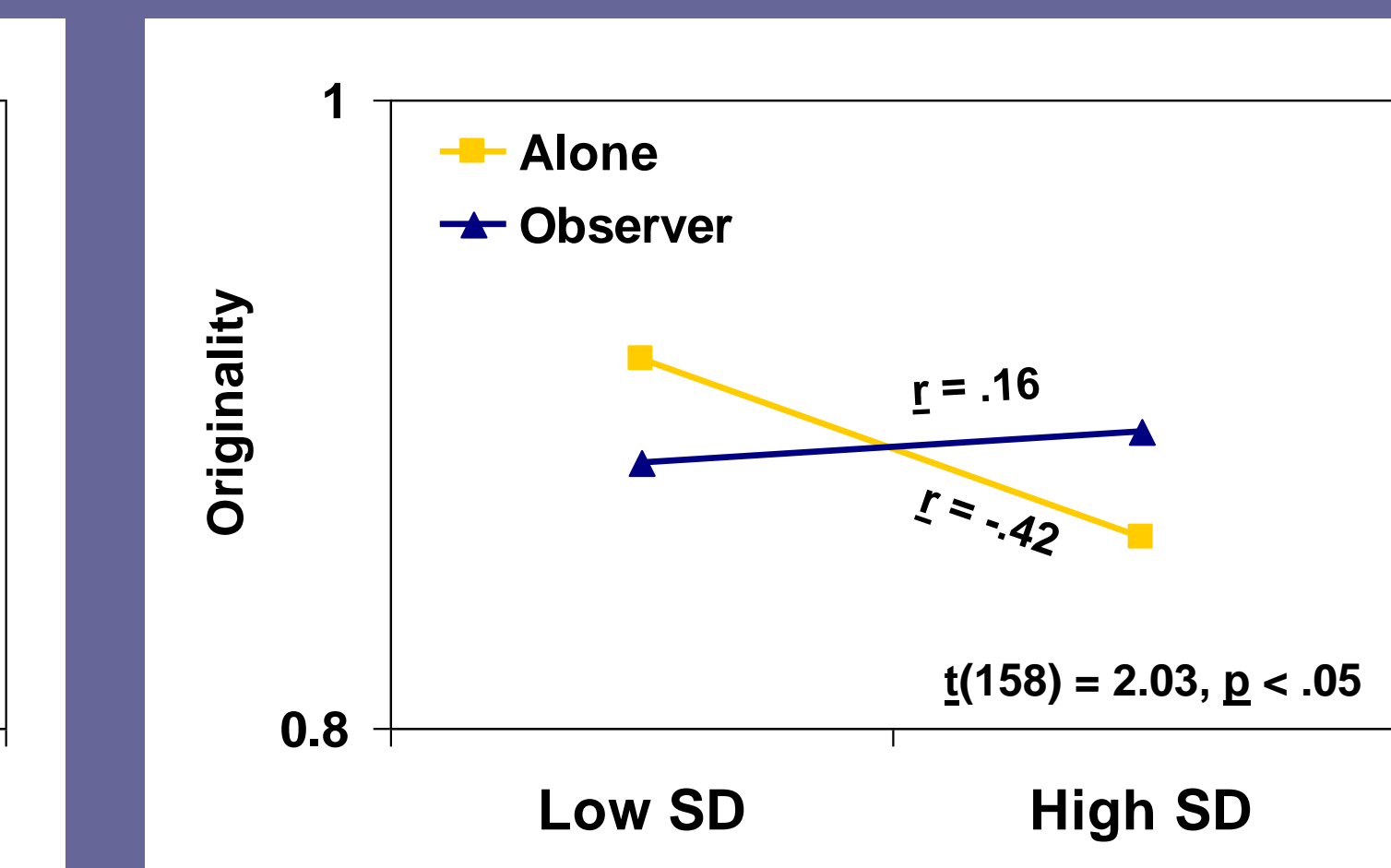


Figure 7. Originality of responses.

[for emotionally stable participants]

Judgment of Everyday Events

In the presence of an observer, Social Desirability (SD) was associated with more positive judgments of everyday events.

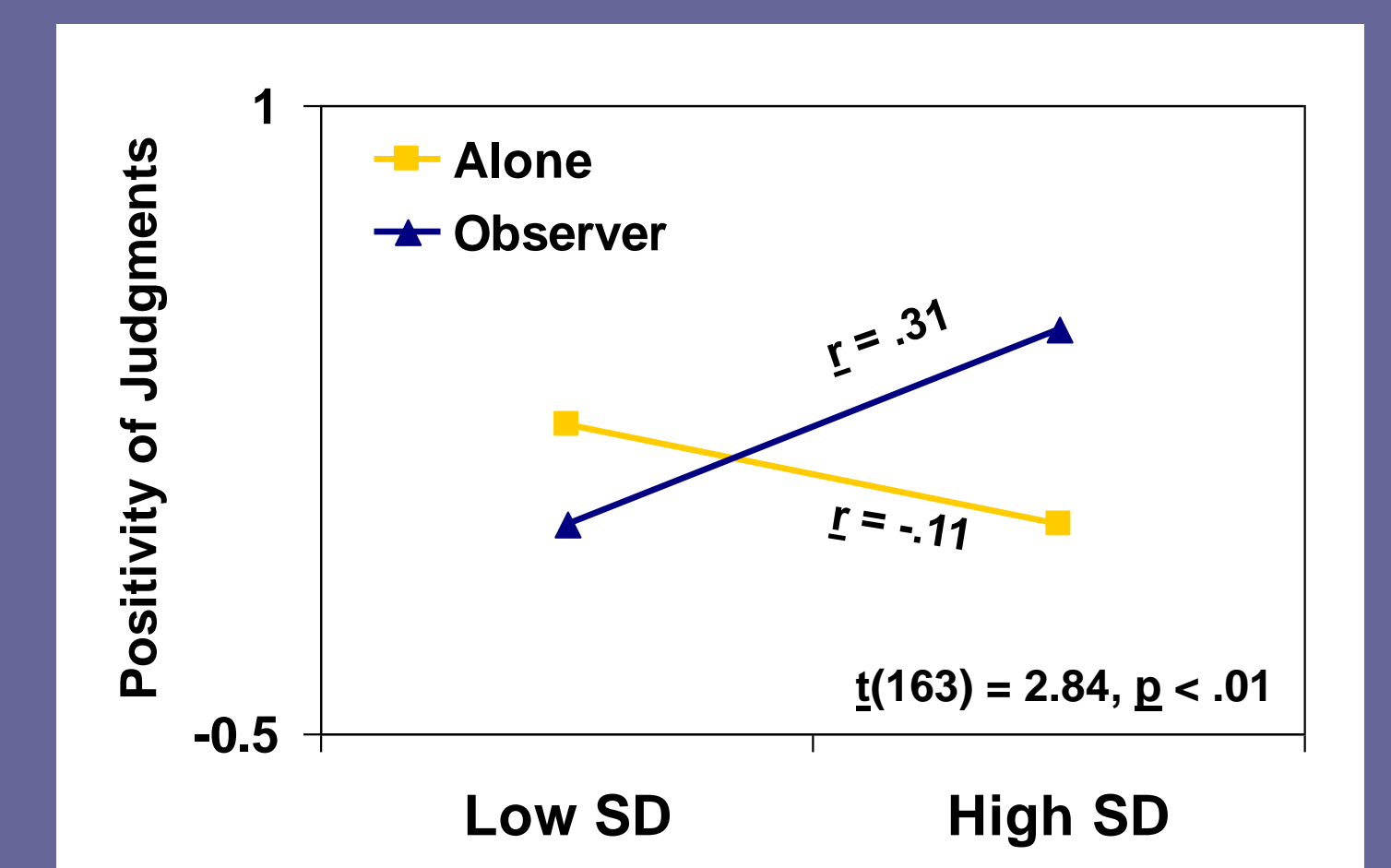


Figure 8. Positivity of Judgments.

Conclusions

- In the presence of a passive observer, Social Desirability was associated with pleasantness and creativity, the former not excluding the latter.
- Social Desirability appears to represent a unique adaptation to ambiguous social conditions, and therefore appears to serve important psychological functions.
- Individual differences were proven, once again (cf. Uziel, in press), to be an important moderator of the social facilitation effect.