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Dominance Without Status:
The Social Trade-Offs of Bullying

By

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Abstract

Why do adults engage in bullying despite its moral and social risks? Whereas prior research frames bullying as a strategic behavior, little is known about its social consequences for the bullies, specifically, how observers perceive bullies. Through two experimental studies ($N_1 = 183$; $N_2 = 375$), we examined how workplace bullying shapes perceptions of dominance, status, and competence in competitive versus non-competitive contexts. Participants evaluated each context in vignettes where a bully either succeeded (unchallenged aggression), failed (victim confronts the aggression), or engaged in neutral interaction. Results showed that successful bullying attempts significantly increased perceived dominance, while perceived status remained unchanged. In contrast, failed bullying attempts significantly reduced perceived status without influencing perceptions of dominance. Notably, perceived competence decreased regardless of whether the bullying attempt was successful. Additionally, participants did not distinguish between Competitive and Non-Competitive context conditions in their evaluations. Our findings demonstrate that while bullying may be an effective strategy for gaining dominance, it carries reputational trade-offs, including diminished perceptions of competence, warmth, morality, and a potential risk to social status. These findings offer insight into how observers perceive bullying behavior and may help explain why workplace bullying persists.

Dominance Without Status: The Social Trade-Offs of Bullying

Bullying, defined as “aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance” (Volk et al., 2014), has long been recognized as a pervasive issue across various social settings, ranging from schools to workplaces. A meta-analysis across various countries revealed that approximately 15% of employees report being bullied at work (Nielsen et al., 2010). Although widely recognized as a harmful and socially undesirable behavior, bullying remains common. Why does it persist? One possible explanation lies in its reputational implications. Research suggests that bullying behaviors often stem from the bully’s desire to acquire dominance, status, or resources within a social hierarchy (Sanders et al., 2021). If people bully in order to raise their social standing at work, then examining how others evaluate bullies in terms of dominance, status, and competence can shed light on whether such behaviors are socially strategic or ultimately counterproductive, which may explain why workplace bullying persists. However, the effectiveness of bullying in achieving these reputational gains remains unclear. This study aims to examine the social consequences of bullying behavior, particularly its impact on perceived dominance, social status, and competence, to further our understanding of how observers interpret bullying and the social perceptions that may drive individuals to engage in such behavior.

Characteristics of Bullies

Workplace bullies frequently exhibit negative personality traits such as narcissism (Penney & Spector, 2002), anger (Hershcovis et al., 2007), vengefulness (Douglas & Martinko, 2001), and anxiety (Fox & Spector, 1999). In terms of position, though bullying behaviors can originate from anyone at work, more often than not, the perpetrator has more power or perceived power than the target (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002). Research also found that individuals in

positions of power who perceive themselves as incompetent are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviors, such as bullying, as a means to assert control (Fast & Chen, 2009).

Furthermore, there is speculation that bullying may stem from lower core self-evaluations and diminished organization-based self-esteem (Ferris et al., 2011; Ferris et al., 2012).

For school bullying, researchers also found bullies hold significantly more power than their victims due to friend group, physical size, strength, age, or social dominance (Hawkins et al., 2001). Yet, school bullies often face peer rejection (Warden & MacKinnon, 2003), suggesting that school bullies can simultaneously be disliked while maintaining high visibility and social impact (Estell et al., 2008; Rodkin et al., 2006). A study in English in middle school shows bullies are less likely to belong to popular groups (Boulton & Smith, 1994). Other research points out that this association between rejection and bullying varies across contexts, such as class dynamics (Sentse et al., 2007).

Understanding these characteristics is essential for identifying who engages in bullying and why. Examining individual traits and social dynamics helps us move beyond a purely behavioral definition of bullying and toward a deeper understanding of the motives behind it.

Motivations for Bullying

Literature points out that bullying is primarily driven by desires for dominance, social status, resource acquisition, revenge, justice, belonging, romance, identity, well-being, and entertainment (Sanders et al., 2021). Among them, past studies consider dominance as one of the most important bullying motives (Volk et al., 2014). School bullies, particularly among males, self-report goals of gaining dominance through bullying, and wish to be perceived as more dominant (Björkqvist et al., 1982).

The pursuit of status is also central to many theoretical frameworks in interpreting

bullying behavior (Sanders et al., 2021; Pellegrini, 2002; Salmivalli & Peets, 2009). In school, aggression is often rewarded with popularity (Caravita et al., 2009; Juvonen et al., 2003), though this varies by context (Boulton & Smith, 1994). School bullies also express a desire to be respected and admired, and to gain power (Björkqvist et al., 1982; Sitsema et al., 2009). Workplace bullying similarly reflects competition for promotions or influence, with bullies targeting vulnerable colleagues to signal power (Einarsen et al., 2020).

Although no research explicitly states that bullies are motivated by the desire to increase their perceived competence, there is evidence that bosses at work who feel incompetent are more likely to engage in bullying (Fast & Chen, 2009).

Despite these theoretical motivations, there remains limited empirical evidence on whether bullying actually produces the social rewards bullies may seek. This gap motivates the present thesis and seeks to test whether bullying indeed delivers the social advantages its perpetrators may hope for, or whether it incurs hidden social costs that undermine those same goals. In other words, this study investigates whether bullying is a successful strategic behavior for gaining dominance, status, and competence.

Bullying as Strategic Behavior

Resource Control Theory reframes social dominance and aggressive behaviors such as bullying as strategic behaviors in both children and adults to achieve resource control and social status (Hawley, 2007). Contrary to some stereotypes of bullies, this theory associates bullying with high social competence, suggesting that bullying is an effective strategic behavior to maintain high-position social hierarchies and to attain desired resources or status, rather than being solely seen as maladaptive behavior.

Supporting this theory, naturalistic observation on elementary school children found that

bullying often occurs in the presence of peers, and that bullies may derive power from social dominance or peer group backing (Hawkins et al, 2001). Sutton et al. (1999) proposed that certain bullies may possess above-average theory of mind abilities, that they are “skillful manipulators” who know how to use their social ability for their own benefit, as bullies tend to target individuals with low-quality friend groups (Hodges et al., 1999). Supporting this notion, research on Dutch school children found that bullies often employ both coercive and prosocial strategies to achieve their goals, indicating a deliberate and socially strategic use of bullying behavior (Olthof et al., 2011).

Similarly, in workplace settings, bullying behavior has been analyzed through the lens of organizational politics. Leading bullying is described as “strategically selected tactics of influence by leaders designed to convey a particular image and place targets in a submissive, powerless position whereby they are more easily influenced and controlled, in order to achieve personal and/or organizational objectives”(Ferris et al., 2007). Individuals who bully others at work are strongly correlated to high social competence and positive job evaluations (Treadway et al., 2013). These individuals strategically target coworkers with lower social competence, utilizing bullying as a political skill (Treadway et al., 2013). Moreover, workplace bullies tend to choose the most vulnerable targets, demonstrating social acuity in identifying people who are less likely to receive support or retaliation (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002).

Social Perception of Bullying Behavior

This strategic nature of bullying is demonstrated by its benefits in social perception. In the school setting, bullying is associated with both explicit and implicit forms of social power (LaFreniere & Charlesworth, 1983). This is no surprise as both school and workplace bullies usually hold more power than the victims (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Hawkins et al, 2001).

For school bullying, evidence supports the notion that bullying can enhance peer status, as aggressiveness in children is often perceived as cool, powerful, and popular even in mainstream peer groups (Caravita et al, 2009; Juvonen et al, 2003; Rodkin et al, 2006; Vaillancourt et al, 2003). A research on Canadian students found that they associate bullies with positive qualities like competencies, wealth, and attractiveness (Vaillancourt et al., 2003). Vaillancourt groups bullies in different subtypes based on perceived power, and finds that only high-power bullies are associated with these positive qualities, while low-power bullies face peer rejection (Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

Although the literature on school bullying provides some evidence that aggression may function as a social strategy, research on adult or workplace bullying is far more limited. In contrast to academic research, popular media often attributes workplace bullying to character flaws such as envy, low self-esteem, or a need for control (Gordon, 2023). Yet it remains unclear whether observers actually perceive bullies as insecure or flawed, or whether they sometimes attribute positive social qualities to them, as children do with high-power bullies.

Understanding these perceptions is critical for explaining the persistence of bullying in adult environments. If observers view bullying as a pathway to social dominance or status, then the behavior may persist because it appears to work. On the other hand, if bullying leads to reputational damage, it may reflect underlying insecurity rather than strategic behavior. Clarifying these interpretations can inform more effective intervention strategies. Therefore, this study seeks to determine whether adult observers see bullying as a socially rewarding tactic or as a costly signal of dysfunction by examining perceived dominance, status, and competence of the bully.

Present Study

Despite extensive research on bullying, most prior work has focused on the experiences and outcomes of victims, with far less attention paid to the bully's experience. Specifically, it remains unclear whether bullies can accrue reputational benefits such as appearing more dominant, competent, and higher status. While previous research suggests bullies carefully select their victims to ensure the victims are vulnerable (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), it is not yet known if this is because observers would perceive the bully differently if the victim pushes back. Does bullying enhance a person's social dominance regardless of the outcome, or is dominance only conferred when the bully is successful in overpowering their target? Moreover, how does the broader social context in the workplace shape evaluations of bullying behavior? Might bullying be viewed as more legitimate or strategic in a competitive setting where aggressive tactics may be more acceptable?

The present research seeks to address these questions by examining how observers evaluate the bully's dominance, competence, and status across different bullying outcomes and social contexts. Understanding the social outcome for bullies is crucial, as the reputational consequences of bullying may tell us why people engage in such behavior in the first place. If bullying is seen as a way to gain dominance or status, it may be used as a strategic social tool. On the other hand, if observers view bullying as socially costly, this would challenge the idea that bullying is adaptive. Clarifying how observers interpret bullying behavior can shed light on the social mechanisms that sustain it and inform the design of more effective interventions.

Across two studies, we focused on how bullying behavior influences observers' perceptions of the bully's dominance. In Study 1, we manipulated the outcome of the bullying encounter—whether the bully succeeded, failed, or refrained from bullying (baseline). We

hypothesized that the bully would be perceived as most dominant when the bullying was successful, followed by when the bullying failed, and that refraining from bullying altogether would be associated with the lowest dominance ratings. If supported, this would suggest that dominance is conferred through the act of bullying itself, regardless of the outcome, potentially explaining the persistence of bullying even in the face of victim resistance. Conversely, if only successful bullying enhances perceived dominance, this would imply that bullies may purposefully target individuals they believe they can overpower. In addition to examining perceptions of dominance, this study also explored how observers evaluated the bully's social status and competence in order to assess whether bullying behavior involves a reputational trade-off, where gains in dominance may come at the expense of other valued social traits.

In Study 2, we extended this work by adding a second manipulation: the social context in which the bullying took place. Specifically, we varied whether the bully and victim were in a competitive context (e.g., rival firms) or a non-competitive context (e.g., same firm). We hypothesized that bullying would result in higher perceived status and competence when it occurred in a competitive environment, where aggression may be viewed as more instrumental or justified. This design allowed us to test whether the reputational consequences of bullying are moderated by the broader social context. If the hypothesis were supported, it would suggest that environmental factors play a crucial role in shaping the perceived social outcomes of bullying, with competitive contexts potentially mitigating some of the reputational costs typically associated with such behavior. This would imply that interventions aimed at reducing bullying should focus on modifying workplace environments. If the hypothesis were not supported, it would suggest that the reputational consequences of bullying are not significantly moderated by context, implying that intervention should be focused on individuals.

Understanding how people perceive bullies is critical for addressing the root causes of bullying and its persistence. If bullying provides tangible social rewards, such as increased dominance or status, it becomes easier to see why such behaviors persist despite their negative moral and social implications. If a competitive context would raise the bully's status and competence, it would support the finding that situational factors such as environmental pressures or organizational dynamics is a key predictor of workplace bullying (Bowling & Beehr, 2006). This study aims to advance our understanding of the social rewards and costs associated with bullying behavior. This, in turn, may advance our understanding in why bullying behavior persists despite its generally negative social evaluations and inform the development of targeted interventions.

Study 1

This study examined observers' perceptions of a bully in a workplace setting, with a primary focus on perceived dominance. In addition, we explored how bullying behavior influenced evaluations of the bully's social status, competence, warmth, and morality. These exploratory variables were included to assess whether bullying leads to reputational trade-offs—such as gains in dominance at the cost of other socially desirable traits. To do so, we presented participants with three different workplace scenarios involving two colleagues: the bully (Frank) and the victim (Jamie). These vignettes were designed to test how people's perceptions of the bully vary based on whether the bully's comment goes unchallenged (Bully Win condition) or is confronted by the victim (Bully Lose condition). By exploring these dynamics, this study aims to investigate whether bullying behaviors are socially beneficial to the bully, even with the risk of losing to the victim.

We hypothesized that the bully would be perceived as more dominant in both the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions compared to the Baseline (where no bullying occurred). While we expected dominance ratings to be higher when the bully “won,” we also predicted that dominance would remain elevated even when the bully was challenged and lost, suggesting that the potential social reward may motivate bullying despite possible pushback.

Method

Participants

We recruited $N = 183$ young adults aged 18 years or older from Prolific, an online research platform. To be eligible for the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be located in the USA, (2) be at least 18 years old, (3) demonstrate proficiency in English, and (4) have completed 100 or more studies with a 95% approval rating. Our pre-registered goal was to recruit $N = 180$ viable participants, with $n = 50$ per condition and an extra 20% of participants to account for exclusions.

There was a bot check at the beginning of the survey, and participants were required to complete two attention check questions to see if they paid attention to the vignette before reporting demographic information. Participants who failed the bot check or attention check question were excluded from data analysis. Of the 180 participants who passed the bot check and completed the survey, 10 failed at the two attention checks and were thus excluded from analysis. We analyzed data from 170 participants, 57% were women, 40% were men, and 3% self-reported as nonbinary. The mean age of participants was $M = 38.73$ years ($SD = 11.71$); 1.2% were American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native, 8.8% were Black or African American, 8.8% were Asian, 69.4% were White or Caucasian, 9.4% were Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, or Latine, and 2.4% reported “other.” Participants were compensated \$0.60 for their

participation, which corresponded to an approximate rate of \$13.42 per hour.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey administered via Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three vignette conditions (Bully Win, Bully Lose, and Baseline) between-participants design (see Appendix A). Each vignette described a workplace scenario involving two colleagues in the same company. In the Bully Win condition, the bully makes a mean-spirited comment about the victim's tie, which goes unchallenged, leading the group to chuckle at the victim. The Bully Lose condition is similar, except the victim confidently challenges the bully's mean remark, and the group laughs at the bully instead. We also included a Baseline condition, in which no bullying occurs. The colleagues have a neutral interaction (they exchange polite greetings). This condition allows us to isolate the effect of bullying itself, as Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions both involve bullying, while the Baseline does not.

After reading the vignette, participants rated both the bully and the victim on several dependent measures. Our primary variable of interest was dominance, so participants responded to this measure first. Then, in a randomized order, participants would rate the status, competence, and warmth each character appeared, in addition to evaluating the morality of the bully. These ratings served as secondary dependent variables. All responses were recorded on 7-point Likert scales, with 1 indicating the character was low in a particular trait (i.e., "not at all") and 7 indicating the character was high in a particular trait (i.e., "extremely").

After completing all dependent measures, participants completed some basic attention check questions. We also included a manipulation check question to ensure participants perceived the differences in our conditions (Bully Win, Bully Lose, and Baseline) as we intended. We asked "How would you describe the outcome of the interaction?" to which

participants could indicate “Frank came out ahead”, “James came out ahead”, “Neither came out ahead; it was a draw”, or “There was no conflict in the interaction”. A complete list of questions can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Data were analyzed using R version 4.4.3. According to our pre-registered plan, and using the car package 3.1.3, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare mean ratings across the three conditions (Bully Win, Bully Lose, and Baseline) for the dominance variable, focusing on the bully in the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions compared to Baseline. Significant main effects or interactions in the ANOVA were followed by t-tests to investigate specific contrasts. The following t-tests were conducted to explore differences between conditions: (1) comparing the bully’s dominance ratings in the Bully Win condition versus the Baseline condition, (2) comparing the bully’s dominance ratings in the Bully Win condition versus the Bully Lose condition, and (3) comparing the bully’s dominance ratings in the Bully Lose condition versus the Baseline condition. We had an a priori directional prediction that dominance ratings in the Bully Lose condition would be higher than in the Baseline condition. Bonferroni corrections were applied to control for multiple comparisons, setting the critical alpha level to $p = .017$. We conducted the same analysis for other exploratory variables. The same analytic approach was applied to exploratory outcome variables. Results for status and competence are reported in the main text. Results for the manipulation check, warmth, and immorality ratings are presented in Appendix C.

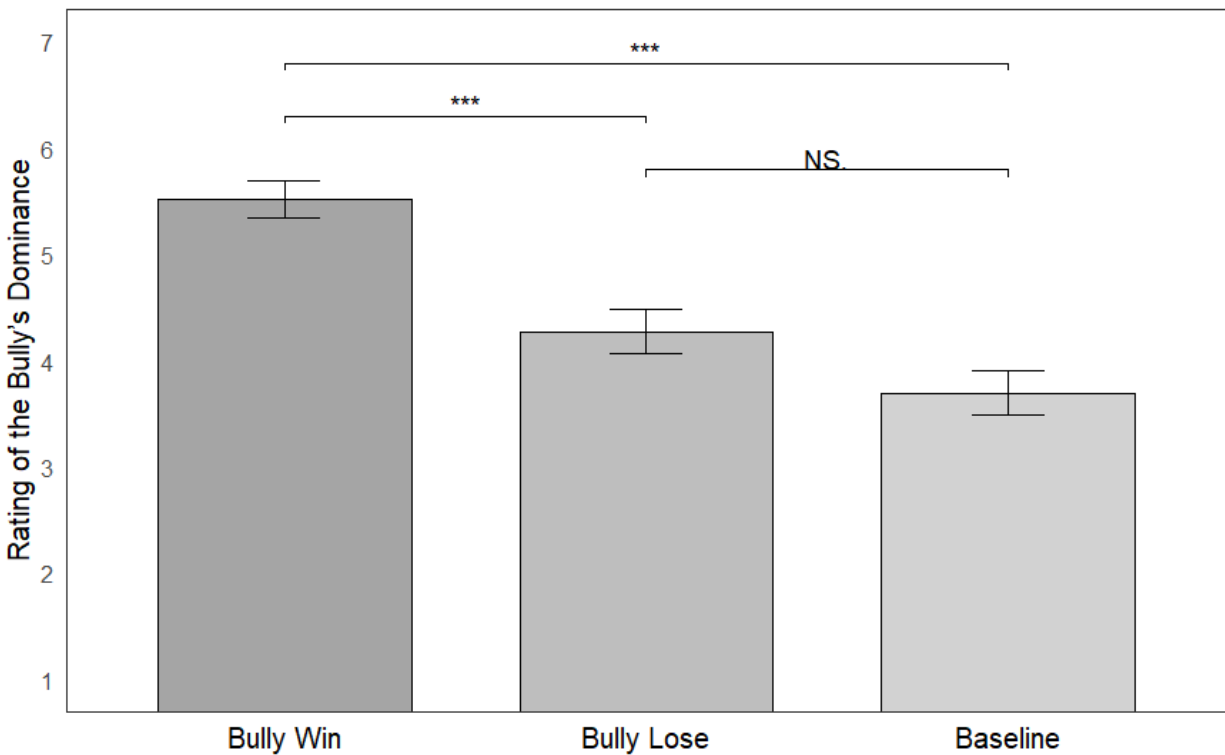
Dominance

The findings indicated that bullying significantly influenced perceptions of dominance. A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on perceived dominance, $F(2, 167) =$

22.27, $p < .001$ (see Figure 1). Specifically, participants in the Bully Win condition rated the bully as significantly more dominant ($M = 5.52$, $SD = 1.97$) than in the Baseline condition ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(111) = 6.67$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.93$. In addition, participants also rated the bully's dominance to be significantly higher in the Bully Win condition than in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 2.39$), $t(106) = 4.56$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.56$. In contrast, the Bully Lose condition was not significantly different from Baseline in perceived dominance ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 2.39$), $t(112) = 1.98$, $p = .051$, $d = 0.26$. These results suggest that although only successful bullying enhances perceived dominance, failed attempts do not lead to a penalty in dominance rating.

Figure 1.

Rating of the Bully's Dominance Across Conditions in Study 1



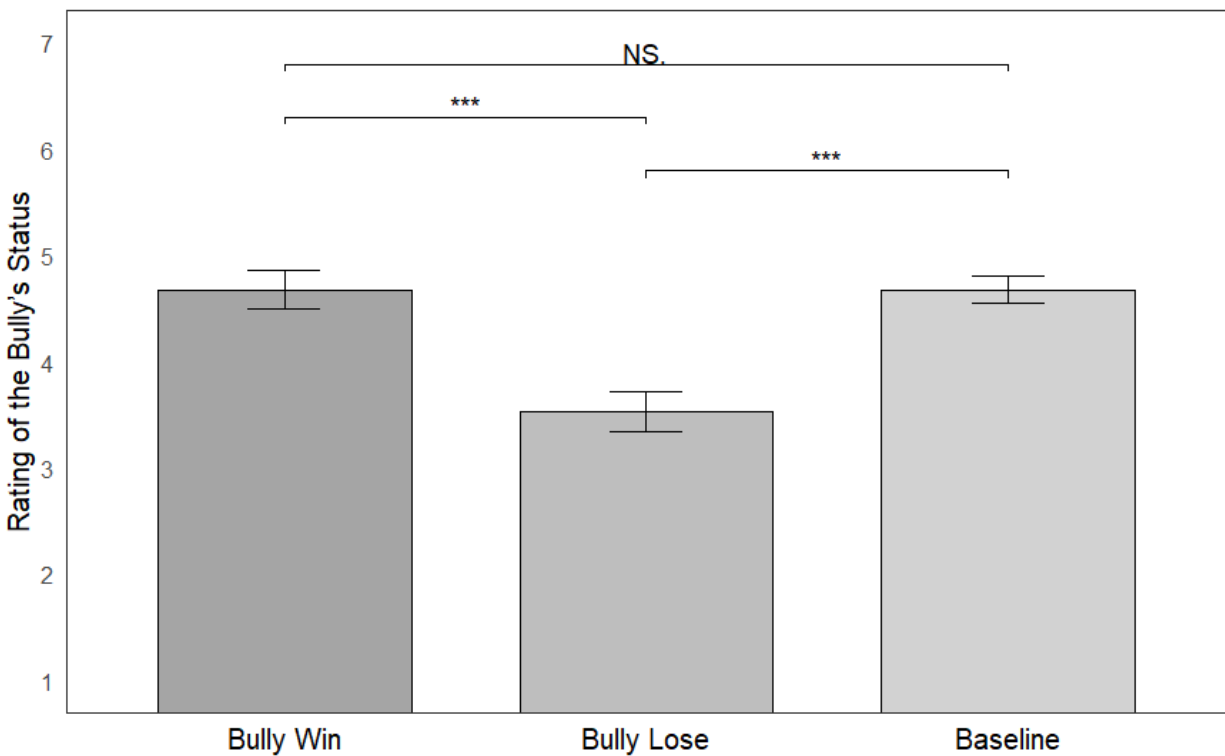
Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Social Status

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on perceived status, $F(2, 165) = 13.99, p < .001$ (see Figure 2). Specifically, participants in the Bully Lose condition rated the bully as significantly lower in status ($M = 3.51, SD = 1.71$) than those in the Baseline condition ($M = 4.68, SD = 0.94$), $t(94) = -5.16, p < .001, d = -.68$ and the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.65, SD = 1.59$), $t(109) = 4.48, p < .001, d = 0.61$, while status rating in the Bully Win condition was not significantly different from the Baseline, $t(99) = 0.00, p = .998, d = -0.02$. These results suggest that while successful bullying does not boost perceived status, failed attempts result in a reputational cost.

Figure 2.

Rating of the Bully's Social Status Across Conditions in Study 1



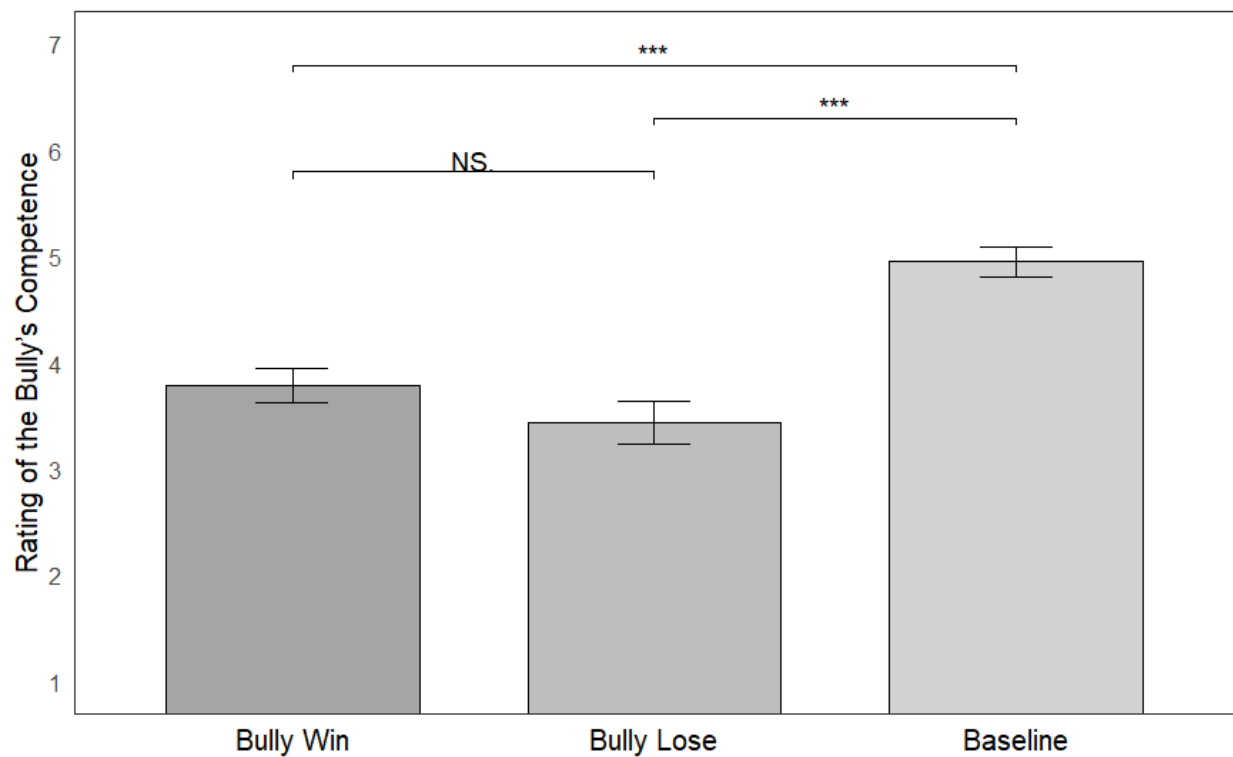
Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Competence

A one-way ANOVA revealed a main effect of condition on perceived competence, $F(2, 167) = 19.84, p < .001$ (see Figure 3). Compared to Baseline ($M = 4.95, SD = 1.12$), competence ratings were lower in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 3.54, SD = 2.13$), $t(99) = -6.00, p < .001, d = -0.66$, and in the Bully Win condition ($M = 3.80, SD = 1.56$), $t(112) = -5.40, p < .001, d = -0.74$. The difference between Bully Win and Bully Lose was not statistically significant, $t(102) = 1.35, p = .181, d = 0.17$. These findings indicate that bullying, regardless of success or not, undermines perceived competence for the bully.

Figure 3.

Rating of the Bully's Competence Across Conditions in Study 1



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Discussion

Dominance

The results from Study 1 indicate that bullying significantly increased perceptions of the bully's dominance—but only when the bullying attempt was successful. This suggests that dominance is attributed not simply to the act of aggression, but to the outcome of establishing a clear power imbalance. This suggests dominance is contingent on demonstrable control rather than the mere act of aggression itself.

Social Status

Interestingly, the bully's perceived status did not improve even after a successful act of bullying. When the bullying attempt failed, however, the bully was perceived as significantly lower in status. This pattern suggests that simply overpowering a victim does not signal high status to observers. Instead, failing to do so seems to damage one's social standing. In this context, status appears more sensitive to failure than to dominance displays, highlighting a potential social cost for bullying.

Competence

Perceptions of the bully's competence declined in both the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions, indicating that engaging in bullying undermines perceived competence regardless of outcome. These findings suggest that observers may associate bullying with poor judgment, insecurity, or a lack of skill— things that hint at incompetence.

The Social Trade-Offs of Bullying

Together, these results reveal a complex social trade-off. A successful act of bullying may boost perceived dominance, but it comes at a clear cost: lowered competence, warmth, and morality (See Appendix C). Moreover, status does not increase with dominance gains and may even decline if the bullying attempt fails. These trade-offs suggest that bullying may yield specific short-term advantages (e.g., dominance) while simultaneously undermining other valued social traits, potentially limiting the bully's broader social appeal.

Study 2

Research has shown that workplace bullying tends to occur more often in stressful work environments and highlights that environmental factors are key contributors to the occurrence of bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2010). This raises an important question: in a highly competitive environment, where individuals are expected to outperform others and where aggressive behavior may seem more justifiable, could bullying enhance perceptions of the bully's social status and competence?

To explore this question further, we conducted Study 2, which tested whether bullying in a competitive setting, where confrontational behavior might be perceived as more strategic or justified, would enhance social perceptions of the bully. Specifically, we examined whether bullying behavior influenced perceptions of the bully's status and competence in competitive versus non-competitive contexts. Participants read scenarios describing two colleagues: the bully (Frank) and the victim (James). These scenarios varied along two dimensions: (1) whether the context was competitive (the two individuals represented rival companies competing for the same client) or noncompetitive (they worked for the same company), and (2) whether the

bullying attempt was unchallenged by the victim (Bully Win condition), challenged by the victim (Bully Lose condition), or did not occur (Baseline condition).

It was hypothesized that in competitive contexts, bullying would be perceived as more acceptable and strategic, leading to higher ratings of status and competence for the bully, particularly when the bullying was successful. Additionally, this study aimed to replicate the findings from Study 1 to assess the robustness of the observed effects.

Methods

Participants

We recruited $N = 375$ young adults aged 18 years or older from Prolific, an online research platform. To be eligible for the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be located in the USA, (2) be at least 18 years old, (3) demonstrate proficiency in English, (4) have completed 100 or more studies with a 95% approval rating, and (5) exclude participants who participated in Study 1. Our pre-registered goal was to recruit $N = 360$ viable participants, with $n = 50$ per condition and an extra 20% of participants to account for exclusions.

There was a bot check at the beginning of the survey and participants were required to complete two attention check questions (similar to Study 1) before reporting demographic information (see Appendix E). Participants who failed the bot check or attention check questions were excluded from data analysis. Of the 361 participants who passed the bot check and completed the survey, 9 failed at the two attention checks and were thus excluded from the analysis. We analyzed data from 352 participants. Of these, 59% identified as female, 40% as male, and 1% self-reported as nonbinary. The mean age of participants was 41.34 years ($SD = 13.23$); 0.3% identified as American Indian/Native American or Alaska Native, 11.4% as Black

or African American, 7.7% as Asian, 70.7% as White or Caucasian, 4.8% as Hispanic, Latino, Latinx, or Latine, and 3.1% reported “Other.” Participants were compensated \$0.75 for their participation, which corresponded to an approximate average reward of \$12 per hour.

Procedure

Study 2 was conducted online using Qualtrics. Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (Outcome of Bullying: Bully Win, Bully Lose, Baseline) by 2 (Context: Competitive, Non-competitive) between-subjects design (see Appendix D).

The Non-competitive vignettes were similar to Study 1, the two characters were described as colleagues within the same company. We also added a competitive condition. To make the context competitive, we framed the bully and the victim as representatives of rival companies competing for the same client. The three bullying interaction outcome conditions replicated those used in Study 1. In the Bully Win condition, the bully’s aggressive comment went unchallenged, resulting in group laughter at the victim. In the Bully Lose condition, the victim challenged the comment, shifting the group’s reaction to laugh at the bully. In the Baseline condition, the characters exchanged neutral, polite greetings. This condition allowed us to isolate the effect of bullying itself, as both the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions involved bullying, while Baseline did not.

After participants read the vignette they were randomly assigned to, they rated both the bully and the victim on several dimensions, including status, competence, dominance, warmth, and likeability. Only the bully was rated on morality. Like in Study 1, these ratings were provided using 7-point Likert-type scales, with 1 indicating the character was low in a particular trait (i.e., “not at all”) and 7 indicating the character was high in a particular trait (i.e., “extremely”). In addition, Study 2 included two new exploratory questions: “if one of them will

get a promotion, who is more likely to get it?” in both conditions, and “who is more likely to give a better pitch presentation?” in the Competitive condition.

After completing all dependent measures, participants completed some basic attention check questions similar to those in Study 1 to ensure attentiveness. Then we included two manipulation check questions to ensure participants perceived the differences in our conditions (Bully Win, Bully Lose, and Baseline) as we intended. At the end of the study, an open-ended question, “What is your favorite TV show?” was included to detect bots. A full list of questions for Study 2 can be found in Appendix E.

Results

All analyses were conducted in R version 4.4.3. Following our pre-registered analysis plan, we conducted two 2 (Context: Competitive vs. Non-Competitive) by 3 (Outcome: Bully Win, Bully Lose, Baseline) between-subjects ANOVAs using the car package 3.1.3. The two primary dependent variables of interest were status and competence ratings of the bully. Significant main effects or interactions in the ANOVA were followed by t-tests to investigate specific contrasts. Bonferroni corrections were applied to control for multiple comparisons, setting the critical alpha level to $p = .0125$. Results for dominance are reported in the main text. Results for other exploratory outcome variables, including warmth, immorality, likeability, likelihood of promotion, and pitch presentation, are reported in Appendix F.

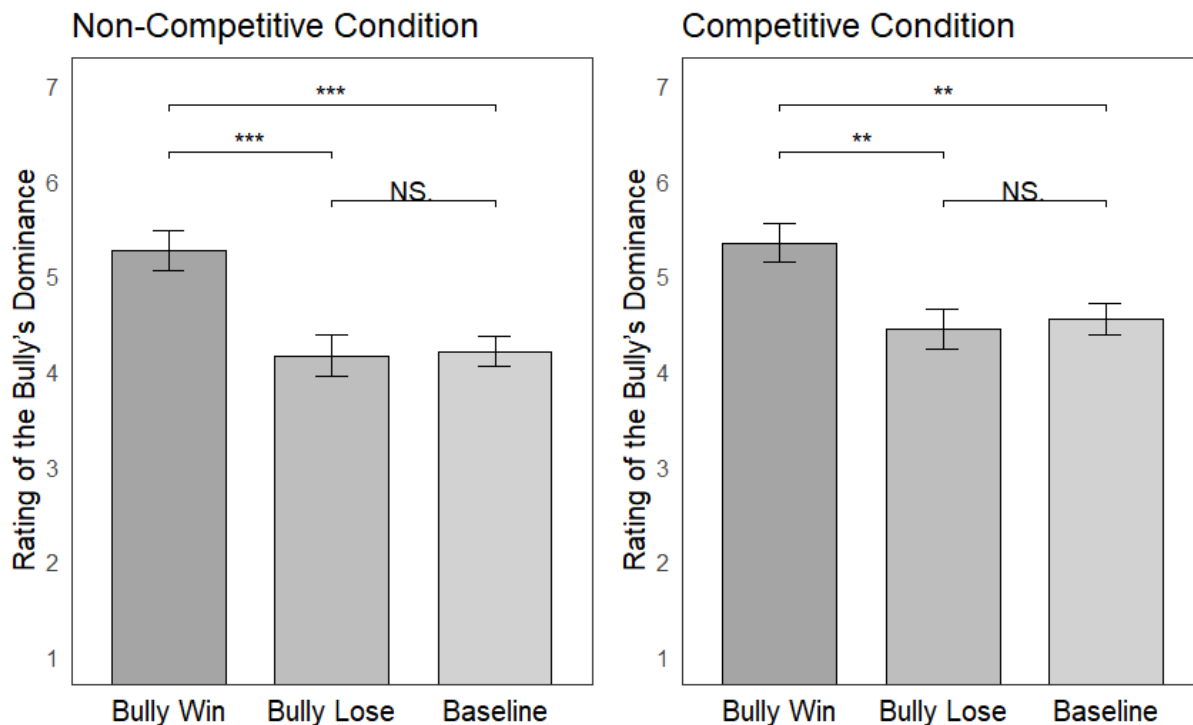
Dominance

A two-way ANOVA revealed no significant effect of context on perceived dominance, $F(1, 346) = 2.09, p = .15$, indicating that dominance ratings were similar across the Competitive ($M = 4.78, SD = 1.54$) and Non-Competitive ($M = 4.56, SD = 1.59$) conditions (see Figure 4). The main effect of bullying outcome on dominance ratings remained significant, $F(2, 346) =$

16.38, $p < .001$, replicating the findings from Study 1. Participants rated the bully's dominance highest in the Bully Win condition ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 1.60$), followed by the Baseline condition ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.28$), and lowest in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.62$). No interaction between outcome and context was found, $F(2, 346) = 0.24$, $p = .79$.

Figure 4.

Rating of the Bully's Dominance Across Non-competitive and Competitive Conditions in Study 2



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

In the non-competitive condition, the bully was perceived as significantly more dominant in the Bully Win condition ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.79$) compared to the Baseline ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.22$), $t(110) = 4.01$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.55$. In contrast, the Bully Lose condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 2.18$) did not significantly differ from the Baseline, $t(99) = -0.16$, $p = .875$, $d = 0.00$. In the

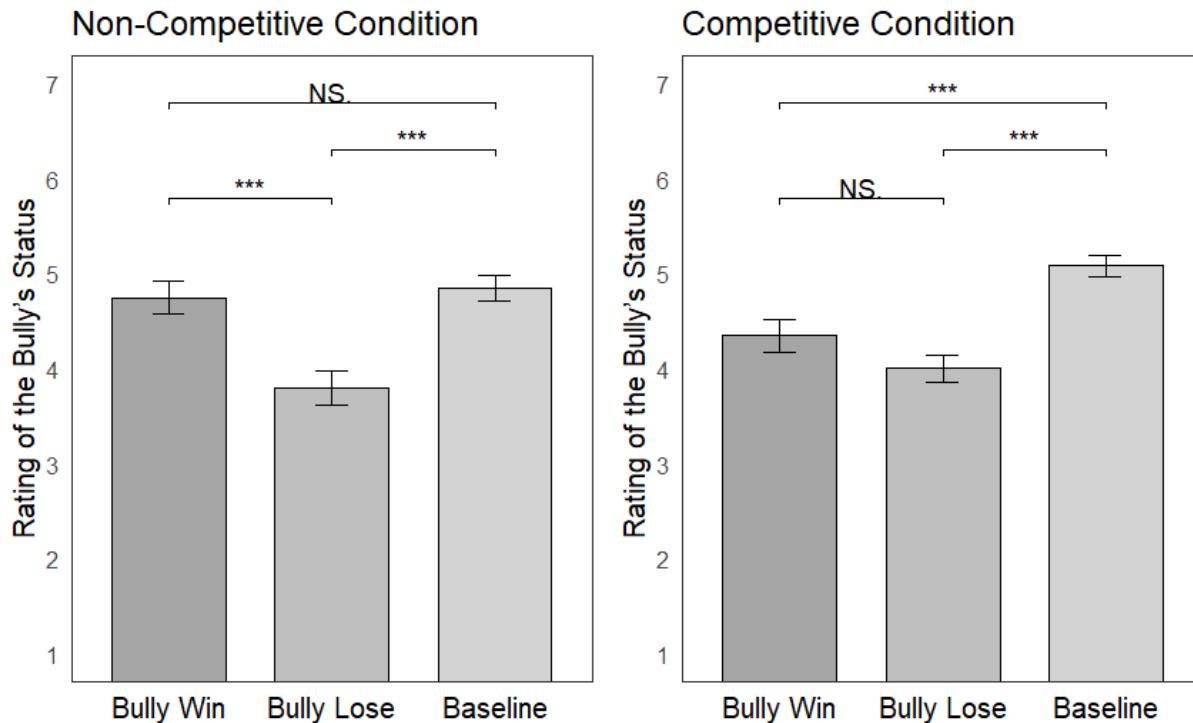
competitive condition, the same pattern emerged. Participants rated the bully as significantly more dominant in the Bully Win condition ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.63$) relative to the Baseline ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.31$), $t(115) = 3.04$, $p = .003$, $d = 0.40$, while the Bully Lose condition ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 2.36$) did not significantly differ from the Baseline, $t(109) = -0.41$, $p = .684$, $d = -0.12$. These results reinforce the conclusion that dominance is attributed to bullies only when they succeed, not when they are defeated. This effect appears robust across competitive contexts.

Social Status

Like dominance, a two-way ANOVA was conducted on participants' status ratings of the bully (See Figure 5). The main effect of bullying outcome remained significant, $F(2, 346) = 23.95$, $p < .001$, such that participants rated the bully highest in the Baseline condition ($M = 4.97$, $SD = 0.97$), lower in the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.36$), and lowest in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 1.18$)(see Figure 5). Context did not have a significant effect on perceived status, $F(1, 346) = 0.00$, $p = .95$. Participants rated the bully's status similarly in the Competitive ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.20$) and Non-Competitive ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.31$) contexts. The interaction between outcome and context was marginally significant, $F(2, 346) = 2.73$, $p = .066$, but did not reach the adjusted alpha threshold of $p = .0125$. While this suggests a possible moderation effect of context, it may reflect noise, particularly given that similar interactions were tested across multiple variables. We therefore acknowledge it but interpret it with caution.

Figure 5.

Rating of the Bully's Social Status Across Noncompetitive and Competitive Conditions in Study 2



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

In the Non-competitive condition of Study 2, the results closely replicated those from Study 1. Like in Study 1, Perceived status in the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.64$) did not differ significantly from the Baseline ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.01$), $t(109) = -0.43$, $p = .667$, $d = -0.06$; and the bully's perceived status was significantly lower in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.36$) compared to the Baseline ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(113) = -5.98$, $p < .001$, and compared to the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(113) = 3.81$, $p < .001$, suggesting that failed bullying attempt results in a significant loss of perceived status.

In the Competitive condition of Study 2, bullying itself, regardless of outcome, led to significant reductions in perceived status. Compared to the Baseline ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 0.93$), the bully's status declined in both the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.64$), $t(104) = -3.47$, $p =$

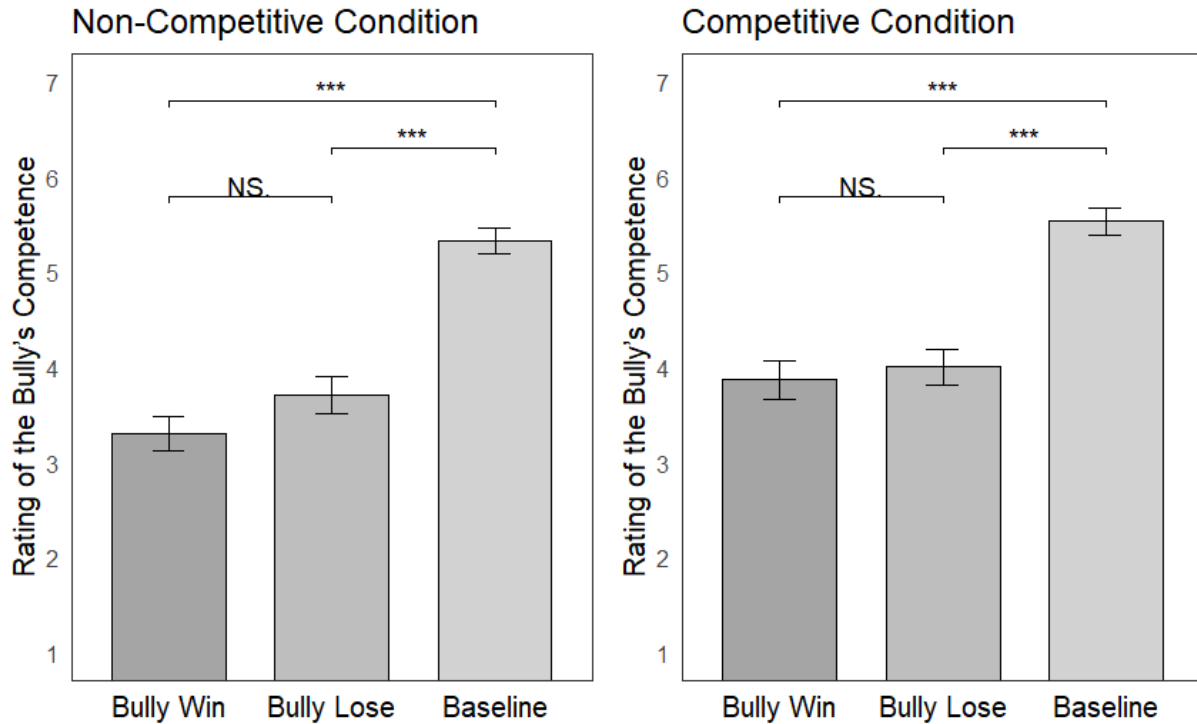
.001, $d = -0.42$, and in the Bully Lose condition ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.36$), $t(113) = -5.98$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.83$. The difference between the Bully Win ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 1.35$) and Bully Lose ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.04$) conditions was not statistically significant, $t(110.14) = 1.58$, $p = .118$. This suggests that the mere act of bullying, rather than its outcome, contributes to the loss of perceived status in the Competitive context. One possible explanation for this finding is that individuals who are high in status or confidence might not resort to bullying as a strategic move to tackle the opponent, implying that the use of bullying as a strategy may signal insecurity and low status rather than power in the Competitive context.

Overall, in the non-competitive context, the decrease in the bully's status is specifically linked to failure in bullying the victim, with no significant change in status when the bully wins. In contrast, in competitive environments, the mere engagement in bullying damages social status, regardless of the outcome.

Competence

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of outcome on competence ratings, $F(2, 346) = 66.06$, $p < .001$ (see Figure 6). Competence ratings varied across outcome levels, with the highest ratings for the Baseline condition ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.07$), followed by the Bully Lose condition ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.43$), and the lowest in the Bully Win condition ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.50$). Unlike dominance and status, context also had a significant main effect, $F(1, 346) = 6.22$, $p = .013$, such that participants rated the bully as less competent in the Non-Competitive condition ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.60$) than in the Competitive condition ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 1.53$). However, the interaction between outcome and context was not significant, $F(2, 346) = 0.60$, $p = .55$.

Figure 6.

Rating of the Bully's Competence Across Non-competitive and Competitive Conditions in Study 2

Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

In both the Non-Competitive and Competitive conditions of Study 2, the results closely replicated those from Study 1. Regardless of context, bullying consistently led to diminished perceptions of competence of the bully.

In the Non-Competitive condition, bullying significantly reduced competence ratings compared to baseline, but no significant difference was found between the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions. Specifically, the Bully Win condition ($M = 4.21$, $SD = 1.60$) and Bully Lose condition ($M = 4.15$, $SD = 1.56$) both showed significantly lower competence ratings compared to baseline ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(101) = -4.23$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.42$ and $t(104) = -4.56$, $p <$

.001, $d = -0.47$, respectively. The difference between the two bullying outcomes was not significant, $t(103) = 0.33$, $p = .741$.

The Competitive condition showed the same pattern. Both Bully Wins ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.96$) and Bully Loses ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.69$) conditions led to significantly lower competence ratings compared to baseline ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(106) = -6.91$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.86$ and $t(107) = -6.75$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.93$, respectively. The difference between the two bullying outcomes was not significant, $t(108) = 0.34$, $p = .737$.

These findings suggest that bullying consistently results in diminished perceptions of competence, regardless of the outcome (winning or losing) and context (Non-Competitive and Competitive contexts). An independent t-test comparing the competence ratings of the bully between the Competitive and Non-Competitive conditions for the Bully Win outcome revealed a marginally significant difference, $t(117.41) = 2.09$, $p = 0.038$. Participants rated the bully as more competent in the Competitive condition ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 1.60$) than in the Non-Competitive condition ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 1.55$) in the Bully Win condition. This suggests that a competitive context may be able to improve perceptions of the bully's competence when they engage in bullying. However, regardless of context, bullying still resulted in lower competence ratings compared to Baseline, demonstrating that bullying diminishes the perpetrator's competence.

Discussion

In the Non-Competitive condition, we successfully replicated the effects across the measures from Study 1. We found little influence of Competitive context on most of the exploratory variables (see Appendix F). Below, we review the findings for each of the primary constructs in turn.

Dominance

The findings in both the Non-Competitive and Competitive conditions indicate that the bully was perceived as significantly more dominant in the Bully Win condition compared to the Baseline, whereas the Bully Lose condition did not show a significant difference from the Baseline. This suggests that dominance is attributed to the bully when they succeed, but not when they fail, reinforcing the idea that dominance is perceived as a byproduct of creating a power imbalance, rather than merely the act of bullying itself. Moreover, no differences were observed between the Competitive and Non-Competitive contexts, indicating that the perception of the bully's dominance is not context-dependent but rather driven by the power dynamics between the bully and the victim. One possible explanation for this is that participants may perceive the bully's dominance as a result of their success in establishing control over another individual, signaling assertiveness and power. The focus, therefore, may be less on the aggressiveness of the bully and more on the perceived power imbalance between the bully and the victim.

Social Status

In the Non-Competitive condition, the Bully Lose condition led to a significant reduction in the perceived status of the bully. However, this is the one spot where we saw an interaction between conditions. In the Non-competitive context and in Study 1, the Bully Lose condition would result in lower social status than Bully Win condition. However, in the Competitive condition, Bully Win condition and Bully Lose condition did not differ significantly in perceived status as they were both lower than Baseline, suggesting that bullying in Competitive contexts inherently signals a loss of status. This was the opposite of what we had first thought and we caution too strong of an interpretation from these results (given that it was only one interaction

and it was marginal), but one possible explanation for this finding is that in Competitive contexts, participants may view bullying as a strategic move to win over a rival, while in Non-Competitive contexts, the motive behind the bullying behavior is less clear. Individuals who are confident or possess high status may not resort to bullying as a business strategy to gain an advantage. This implies that bullying behaviors signal insecurity or a lack of social dominance when it is considered a strategic and calculated move. The use of bullying as a tactical maneuver may feel uncomfortable, as individuals with high status are less likely to engage in such tactics, given that doing so could imply insecurity or emotional immaturity. However, this is highly post-hoc and we should first see if this result replicates before speculating further.

Competence

Across both Non-Competitive and Competitive conditions, bullying consistently led to diminished perceptions of competence, with no significant difference between the Bully Win and Bully Lose conditions. This highlights that the act of bullying itself is negatively associated with competence.

Unlike dominance and status, here we observed a significant main effect of context. Participants rated the bully as more competent in the Competitive context than in the Non-Competitive one, especially when the bullying attempt was successful. This suggests that a competitive environment may slightly buffer the negative impact of bullying on perceptions of competence. The lack of a significant interaction between outcome and context indicates that this contextual effect was consistent across different bullying outcomes.

These findings imply that bullying behavior generally signals a lack of competence, although when interpreted as a strategic or calculated move in a competitive setting, it may slightly soften that negative perception. Still, this interpretation is highly post hoc, and future

research is needed to determine whether this result replicates. Overall, participants consistently viewed bullying as a socially maladaptive behavior that undermines perceived competence.

General Discussion

Why do people bully? The current study addresses this question by examining the potential reputational benefits of bullying. Across two studies, we find that bullying increases perceptions of dominance. But this comes with a trade-off: in general, bullying decreases perceptions of social status and competence. Thus, people may choose to bully depending on their reputational goals. If a person wants to signal dominance, then bullying will achieve that goal. However, if a person wants to signal social status or competence, that person may want to try a different tactic.

Of course, what if things do not go according to plan, and the victim fights back? We explored this question by comparing perceptions of a bully who is challenged by the victim to a) a condition in which the bully is unchallenged by the victim and b) a baseline condition in which no bullying occurs. As expected, when the victim fights back, the bully is perceived as less dominant compared to when the victim does not resist. But perhaps more interestingly, the bully is not perceived as any less dominant than a person who does not bully at all. Therefore, if the bully's goal is to appear more dominant, bullying is an effective strategy as it carries no real risk of reducing perceived dominance and has a high potential to increase it. But people who choose to bully may not have the singular goal of enhancing others' perceptions of their dominance. That is, it may be important to them that people perceive them as dominant, but not at the expense of their status and competence. This led us to question whether people may condone bullying more (i.e., if bullying is perceived as more justifiable) within certain contexts. Therefore, in Study 2, we manipulated whether the bully was bullying a competitor from a rival

firm (which could be more justified), or a coworker who was not a competitor (which could be less justified). We found that, even when the bully's actions were framed as potentially justified, people still did not evaluate the bully positively in terms of status and competence, while dominance increased as before when the bullying was unchallenged. These findings support our hypothesis that bullying signals dominance but challenge our hypothesis that it also comes with other reputational benefits in competitive contexts.

One interesting result from this work is the distinction between dominance and status. Although bullying increased perceptions of dominance, it did not enhance the bully's status. These results align with prior research that distinguished between dominance and prestige as separate pathways for status (Cheng et al., 2010; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). While dominance through aggression may elevate perceived control or fear-based influence, it does not necessarily increase admiration or moral respect—traits more aligned with prestige (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). These results suggest that bullying is a means of gaining power, rather than status. While these terms are similar and co-occur, it has been argued that power is enacted, whereas status is taken (Fiske et al., 2016). Here, it is possible that power and status come apart because taking power may signal that status has not been conferred by others. Hence, if the goal is to be admired or respected, then bullying appears to be a poor strategy.

Across two studies, we find that bullying enhances perceptions of dominance but diminishes perceptions of many other qualities. Why might someone still engage in such overtly negative social behavior? One possibility is that bullies prioritize appearing dominant above all else, even if it comes at the expense of being perceived well in other domains. What are the benefits of appearing dominant? In an adult group setting, individuals high in trait dominance were perceived by their peers as more competent across both creative and analytical tasks

(Anderson & Kilduff, 2009). Dominance can motivate others to offer gifts or services (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001), but does this run deeper than having someone volunteer to pick up your dry cleaning for you? One benefit of dominance is that it deters people from challenging you (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Individuals high in dominance tend to wield greater influence within groups (Judge et al., 2002) and are more likely to emerge as leaders (Lord et al., 1986), suggesting that dominance can be a socially advantageous trait even if it does not make someone well-liked.

Another possibility is that bullying may be a viable social strategy for people who are already perceived as low in traits like status and competence. In this case, there is no “trade-off” because the bully was already perceived as low in these qualities, and bullying can only result in an increase in dominance.

This leads to the third possibility that bullies might miscalculate the social impact of their behavior. They may believe that by appearing powerful or controlling others, they will thus raise their own status and perception of competence. This false sense of increased status or competence might be caused by the relative drop in the victim’s standing. However, this remains a speculative explanation, and further research is needed to examine whether bullies tend to overestimate the positive social impact of their actions.

Whereas the current study’s results offer valuable insight into how bullying behavior shapes social perceptions, its strengths and limitations must also be considered. It remains unclear whether observers genuinely view bullying as maladaptive social behavior or whether they are simply reluctant to express any approval of bullies due to social desirability or moral concerns. To address this limitation, in the future, we will ask participants how they think third

parties perceive the bully. This indirect approach might reveal whether people privately disapprove of bullying while still recognizing its potential to influence group dynamics.

Finally, we aim to explore the generalizability of these findings across different social contexts and situations in which the bully and victim occupy varying social roles. While our current studies suggest that bullying may be perceived as a display of dominance, it is also possible that observers interpret such behavior as overcompensation for underlying insecurity. How might perceptions shift if a coworker delivers aggressive feedback on someone's work? What if the bullying occurs face-to-face versus behind someone's back? Future research should examine these nuances to better understand the complex social costs and benefits of engaging in bullying behaviors.

We believe that these results offer important insight into bullying behavior and its underlying social rewards. While bullies may gain dominance, they do not necessarily earn higher status or competence in the eyes of observers. So, does being a bully pay off reputationally? Only if your goal is to appear super dominant—at the cost of perceived competence. These findings lay the groundwork for a deeper understanding of when and why bullying is socially rewarded, and they can inform more effective interventions to reduce such behavior and foster healthier workplace dynamics.

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Appendix A

Study 1 Vignettes

Baseline

Frank and Jamie both work as analysts for a consulting firm. They are not particularly close, and they haven't had any arguments before. Today is the big team meeting. All the analysts and managers will be there.

Before the managers arrive, Frank asks, "How was everyone's weekend?"

Jamie smiles politely and responds, "Mine was fine, thanks. How was yours?"

Frank nods. "Good, good," he replies, and the meeting begins.

Bully Win Scenario

Frank and Jamie both work as analysts for a consulting firm. They are not particularly close, and they haven't had any arguments before. Today is the big team meeting. All the analysts and managers will be there.

Before the managers arrive, Frank asks, "How was everyone's weekend?" He then glances at Jamie, notices his tie and loudly remarks, "Whoa, Jamie, what's up with that tie, did you dig that out of your grandpa's closet before heading to the "early-bird-special"?"

Jamie tries to brush off the comment, but his shoulders tense and he visibly withdraws.

The other analysts chuckle at Jamie. Frank looks proud and smiles.

Bully Lose Scenario

Frank and Jamie both work as analysts for a consulting firm. They are not particularly close, and they haven't had any arguments before. Today is the big team meeting. All the analysts and managers will be there.

Before the managers arrive, Frank asks, "How was everyone's weekend?" He then glances at

Jamie, notices his tie and loudly remarks, “Whoa, Jamie, what’s up with that tie, did you dig that out of your grandpa’s closet before heading to the “early-bird-special”?”

Jamie pauses, then replies with a calm smile, “Well, Frank, it may be old-fashioned, but I think it adds a bit of character. Besides, I’d rather stand out than blend in.”

The other analysts chuckles at Frank, with a few saying, “Good one, Jamie.” Frank looks defeated.

Appendix B

Study 1 Questions

All questions below use a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents the lowest rating (e.g., "Not at all") and 7 represents the highest rating (e.g., "Extremely").

Dominance Ratings

- How dominant is Frank?
- How dominant is Jamie?

Social Status Ratings

- How high is Frank's social status?
- How high is Jamie's social status?

Competence Ratings

- How competent do you perceive Frank to be?
- How competent do you perceive Jamie to be?

Morality Ratings

- How immoral was Frank's behavior?

Warmth Ratings

- How warm or friendly does Frank seem?
- How warm or friendly does Jamie seem?

Study 1 Attention Check Questions

Where did the story take place?

- A. A business meeting
- B. A surgical consultation
- C. A statistics lecture

D. A restaurant

What is happening in the story?

A. Characters will play golf

B. Characters will sing in a pageant

C. Characters will present in a meeting

D. Characters will decide what to do over the weekend

Study 1 Manipulation Check Questions

How would you describe the outcome of the interaction?

A. Frank came out ahead

B. James came out ahead

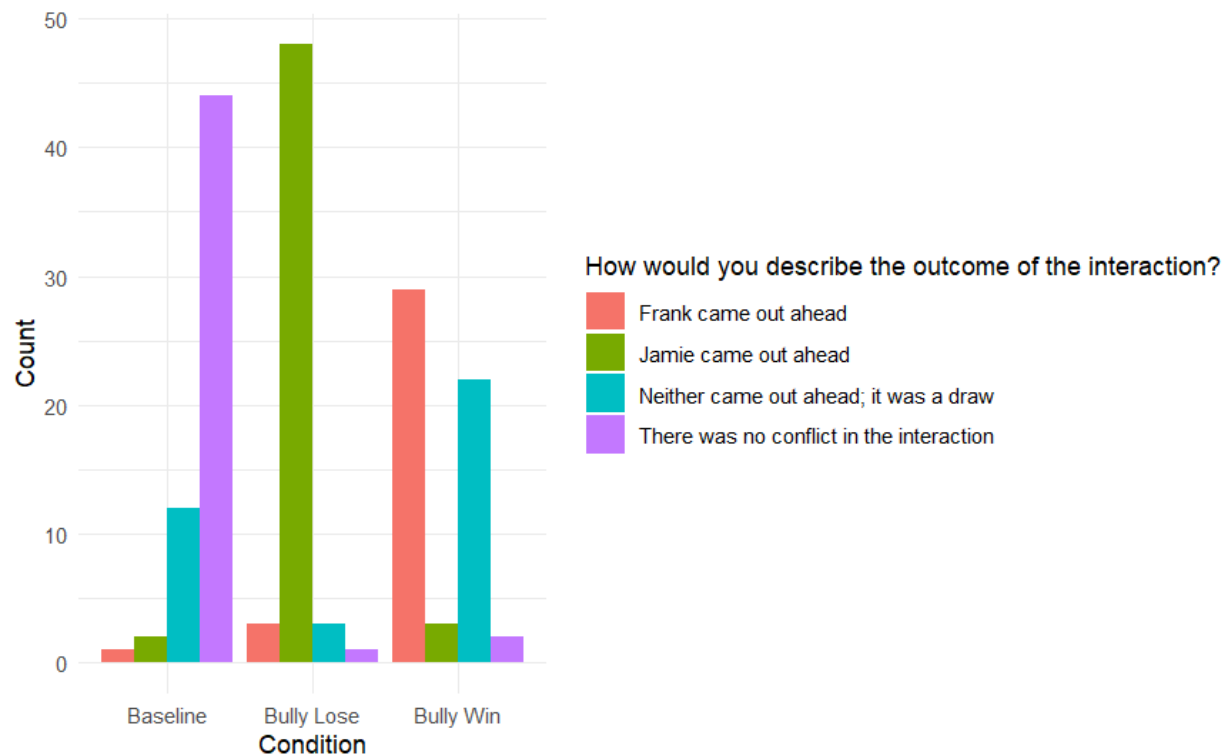
C. Neither came out ahead; it was a draw

D. There was no conflict in the interaction

Appendix C

Study 1 Supplementary Results

Figure 8.

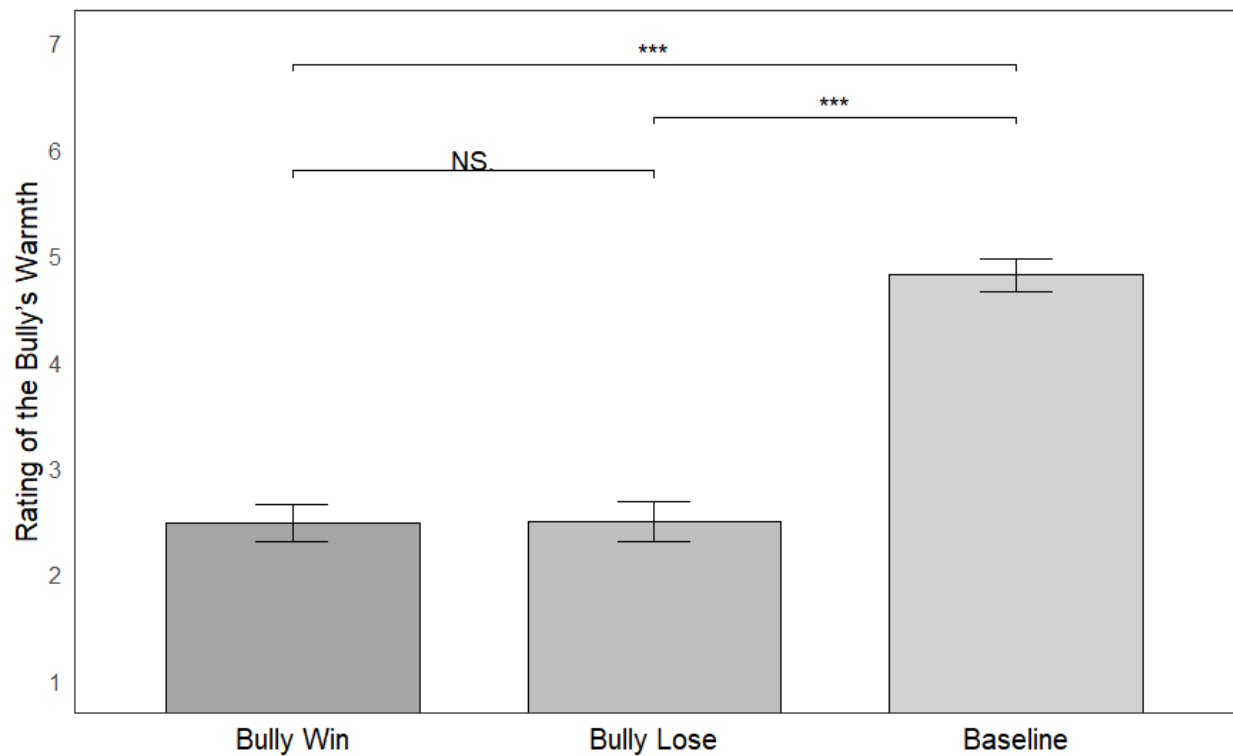
Study 1 Manipulation Check Question Result

Note. Participant responses in the Baseline and Bully Lose conditions aligned with expectations, indicating that the manipulations were effective in these groups. In the Bully Win condition, the majority of participants indicated that Frank came out ahead, as intended. However, a notable proportion selected “Neither came out ahead; it was a draw,” despite the vignette depicting Frank as the aggressor who delivered an unprovoked insult to the victim’s tie. This suggests that, while the manipulation largely succeeded, some participants may have perceived the interaction as more ambiguous or were reluctant to attribute a favorable outcome to an individual engaging in bullying behavior. These findings support the notion that workplace bullying is generally viewed

negatively, and that individuals may hesitate to regard a bully as having “win” the interaction, even when the scenario is designed to imply so.

Figure 9.

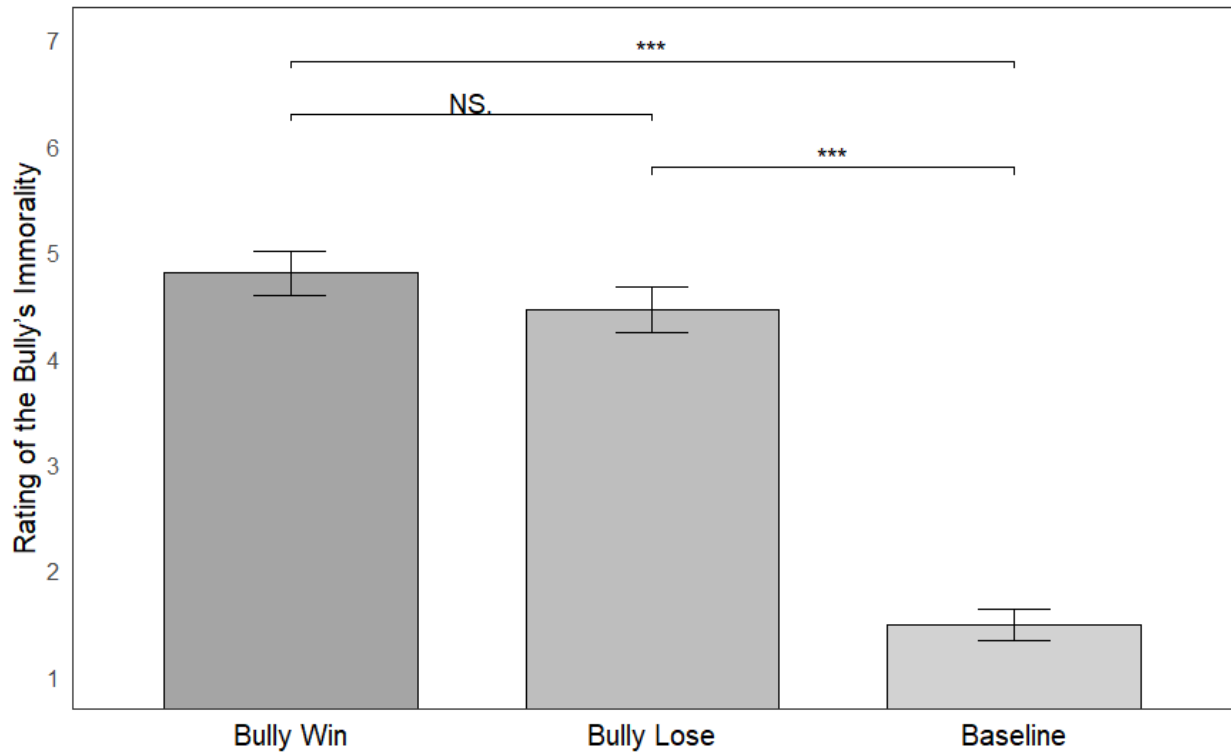
Rating of the Bully’s Warmth Across Conditions in Study 1



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Bullying, regardless of outcome, significantly diminished the bully’s warmth perception.

Figure 10.

Rating of the Bully’s Immorality Across Conditions in Study 1



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Bullying, regardless of outcome, significantly makes the bully more immoral.

Appendix D

Study 2 Vignettes

Competitive Baseline:

Frank and James are two consultants from rival consulting firms. They have met before but they do not know each other well. They are both here today with their respective sales teams, competing for a high-profile client at a pitch meeting.

Before the client arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?”

James smiles politely and responds, “Mine was fine, thanks. How was yours?”

Frank nods. “Good, good,” he replies. The client enters the room and the pitch meeting begins.

Competitive Bully Win

Frank and James are two consultants from rival consulting firms. They have met before but they do not know each other well. They are both here today with their respective sales teams, competing for a high-profile client at a pitch meeting.

Before the client arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?” He then glances at James, from the rival firm. He notices James’s tie and loudly remarks, “Whoa, James, what’s up with that tie? Did you dig that out of your grandpa’s closet before heading to the “early-bird-special”?”

James tries to brush off the comment, but his shoulders tense and he visibly withdraws.

Frank looks proud and smiles while James looks defeated. The other consultants laugh, with a few saying, “Good one, Frank.” The client enters the room and the pitch meeting begins.

Competitive Bully Lose

Frank and James are two consultants from rival consulting firms. They have met before but they do not know each other well. They are both here today with their respective sales teams, competing for a high-profile client at a pitch meeting.

Before the client arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?” He then glances at James, from the rival firm. He notices James’s tie and loudly remarks, “Whoa, James, what’s up with that tie? Did you dig that out of your grandpa’s closet before heading to the “early-bird-special”?”

James pauses, then replies with a calm smile, “Well, Frank, it may be old-fashioned, but I think it adds a bit of character. Besides, I’d rather stand out than blend in.”

James looks proud and smiles while Frank looks defeated. The other consultants laugh, with a few saying, “Good one, James.” The client enters the room and the pitch meeting begins.

Non-Competitive Baseline:

Frank and James both work as consultants at a consulting firm. They have met before but they do not know each other well. Today is the big team meeting. All the consultants and the manager will be there.

Before the manager arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?”

James smiles politely and responds, “Mine was fine, thanks. How was yours?”

Frank nods. “Good, good,” he replies. The manager enters the room and the meeting begins.

Non-Competitive Bully Win

Frank and James both work as consultants at a consulting firm. They have met before but they do not know each other well. Today is the big team meeting. All the consultants and the manager will be there.

Before the manager arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?” He then glances at James, notices his tie and loudly remarks, “Whoa, James, what’s up with that tie? Did you dig that out of your grandpa’s closet before heading to the “early-bird-special”?”

James tries to brush off the comment, but his shoulders tense and he visibly withdraws.

Frank looks proud and smiles while James looks defeated. The other consultants laugh, with a few saying, “Good one, Frank.” The manager enters the room and the meeting begins.

Non-Competitive Bully Lose

Frank and James both work as consultants at a consulting firm. They have met before but they do not know each other well. Today is the big team meeting. All the consultants and the manager will be there.

Before the manager arrives, Frank asks, “How was everyone’s weekend?” He then glances at James, notices his tie and loudly remarks, “Whoa, James, what’s up with that tie? Did you dig that out of your grandpa’s closet before heading to the “early-bird-special”?”

James pauses, then replies with a calm smile, “Well, Frank, it may be old-fashioned, but I think it adds a bit of character. Besides, I’d rather stand out than blend in.”

James looks proud and smiles while Frank looks defeated. The other consultants laugh, with a few saying, “Good one, James.” The manager enters the room and the meeting begins.

Appendix E**Study 2 Questions**

All questions below use a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 represents the lowest rating (e.g., "Not at all") and 7 represents the highest rating (e.g., "Extremely").

Dominance Ratings

- How dominant is Frank?
- How dominant is James?

Social Status Ratings

- How would you rate Frank's social status?
- How would you rate James' social status?

Competence Ratings

- How competent do you perceive Frank to be?
- How competent do you perceive James to be?

Morality Ratings

- How immoral was Frank's behavior?

Warmth Ratings

- How warm or friendly does Frank seem?
- How warm or friendly does James seem?

likeability Ratings

- How much do you like Frank?
- How much do you like James?

Result Oriented Questions

Between Frank and James, who is more likely to give a better pitch presentation?

7-Point Likert Scale Response (1 = Frank, 7 = James)

Between Frank and James, if one of them will get a promotion, who is more likely to get it?

7-Point Likert Scale Response (1 = Frank, 7 = James)

Attention Check Question

Where did the story take place?

- A. A business meeting
- B. A surgical consultation
- C. A statistics lecture
- D. A restaurant

What is happening in the story?

- A. Characters will play golf
- B. Characters will sing in a pageant
- C. Characters will present in a meeting
- D. Characters will decide what to do over the weekend

Study 2 Manipulation check question

How would you describe the interaction between Frank and James?

- A. Frank was mean to James. James did not stand up for himself.
- B. Frank was mean to James. James stood up for himself.
- C. Nobody was mean. Everyone was polite to each other.
- D. Both were mean.

How would you interpret the interaction between Frank and James?

- A. Frank came out ahead.
- B. James came out ahead.

C. Neither came out ahead; it was a draw.

D. There was no conflict in the interaction.

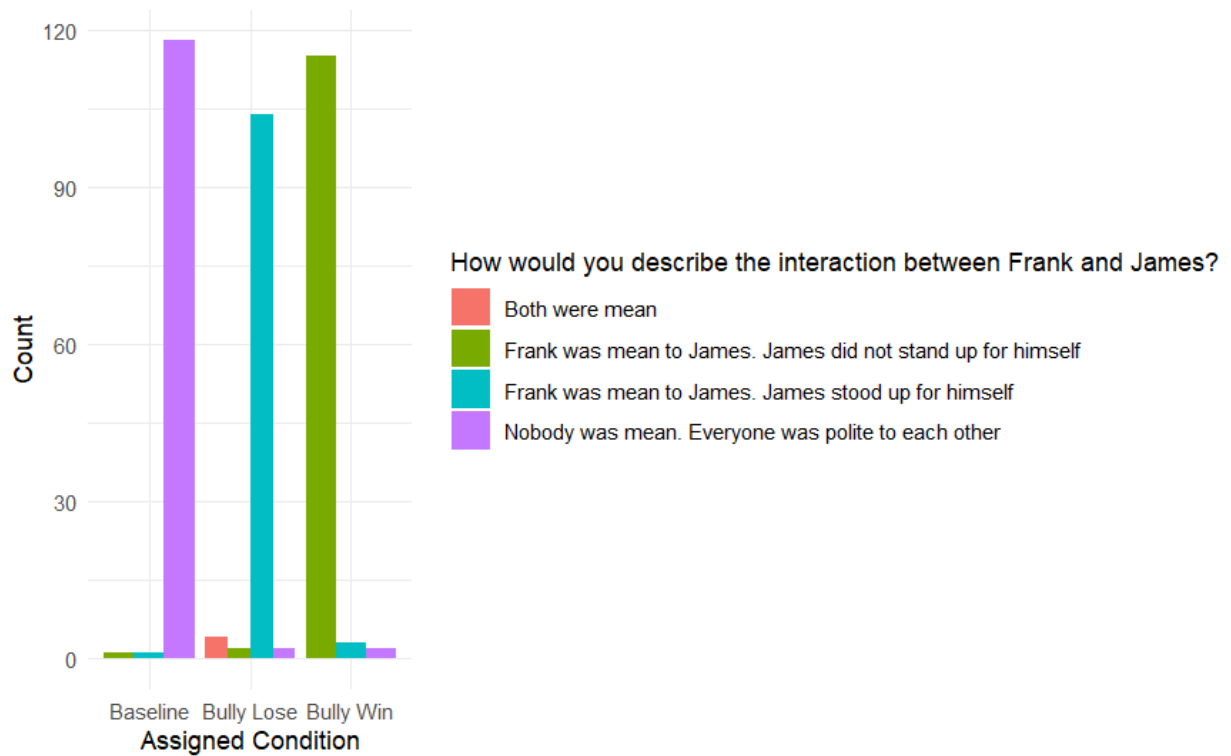
What's your favorite TV show? (fill in the blank)

Appendix F

Study 2 Supplementary Results

Figure 11.

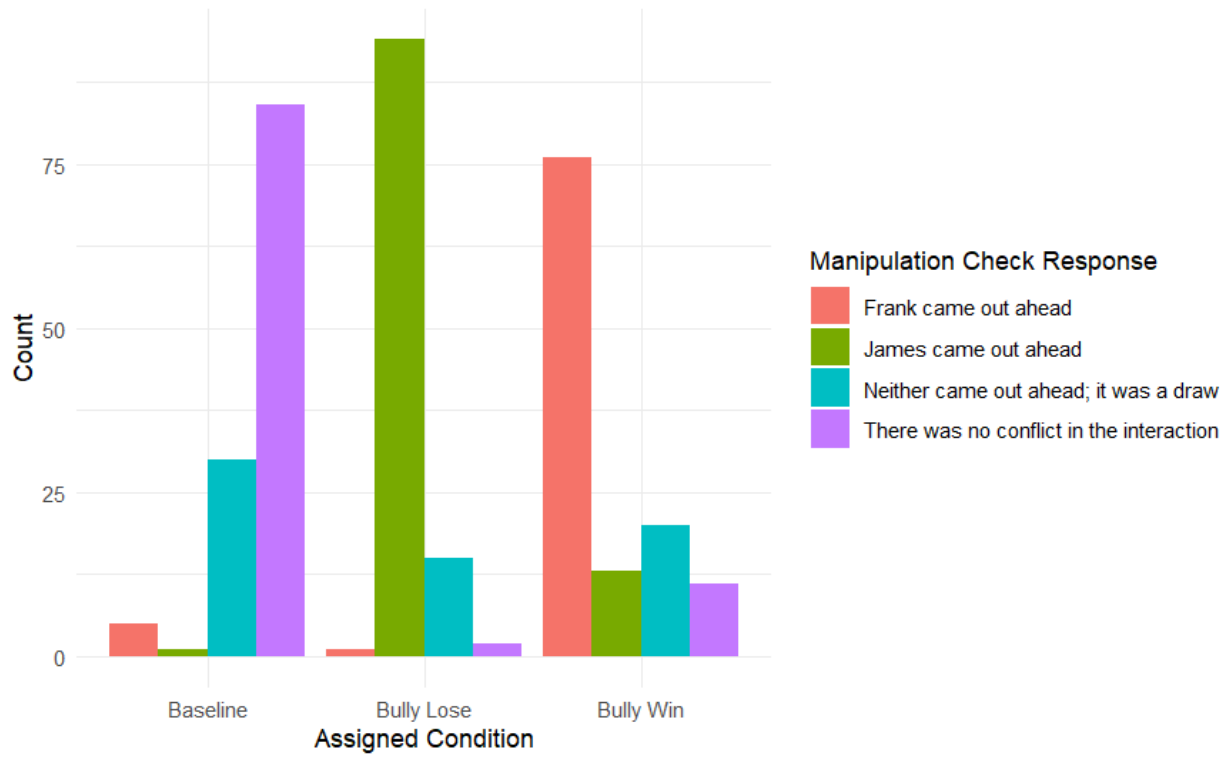
Study 2 Manipulation Check Question 1 Result



Note. Participant responses in all conditions aligned with our expectations, indicating that the manipulations were effective.

Figure 12.

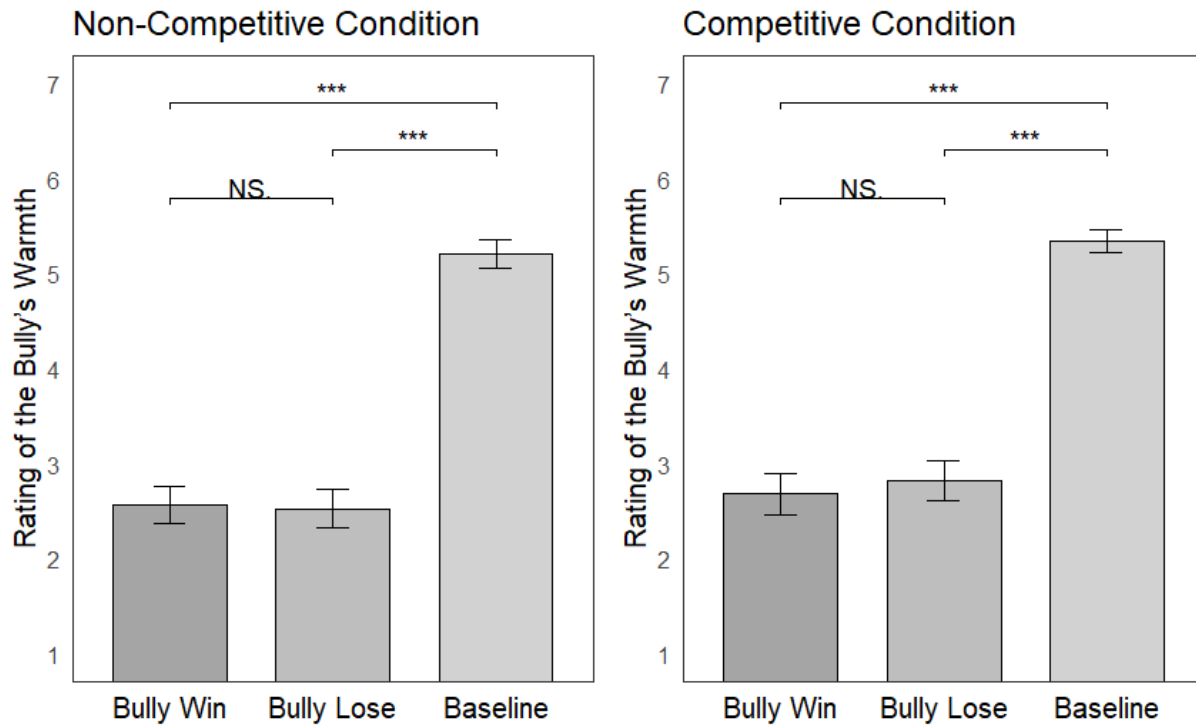
Study 2 Manipulation Check Question 2 Result



Note. Participant responses in all conditions aligned with our expectations, indicating that the manipulations were effective.

Figure 13.

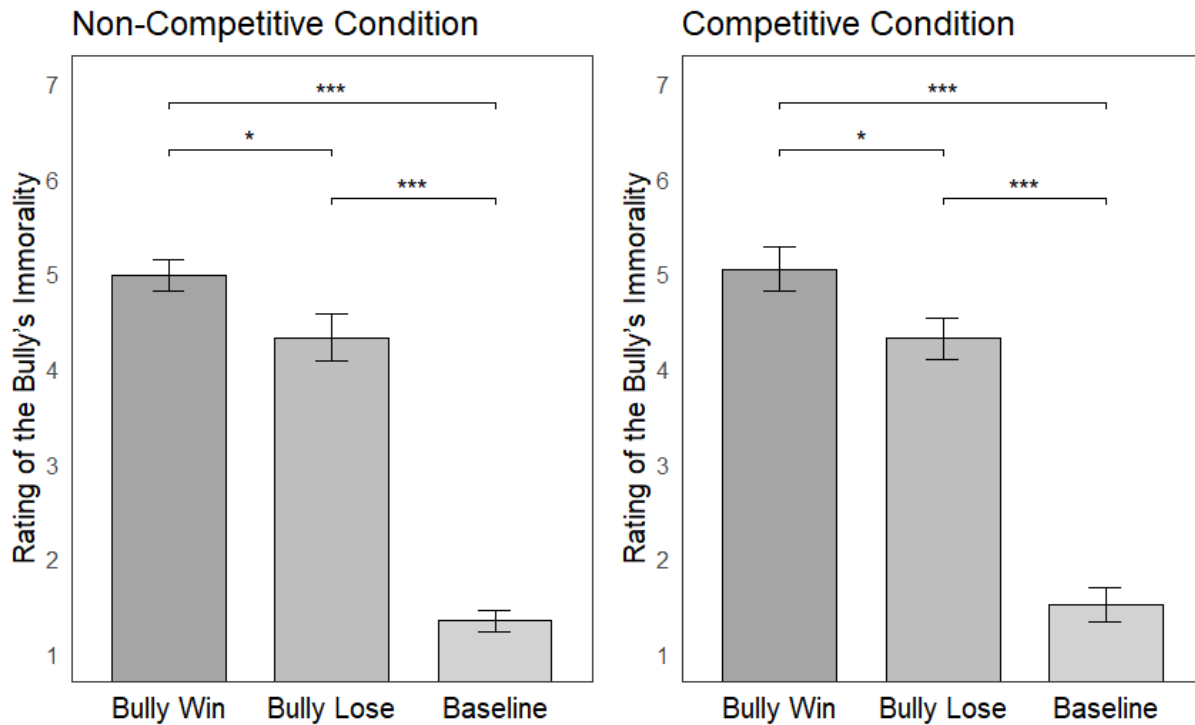
Rating of the Bully’s Warmth Across Conditions in Study 2



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. As in Study 1, bullying, regardless of outcome, significantly diminished the bully's warmth perception.

Figure 14.

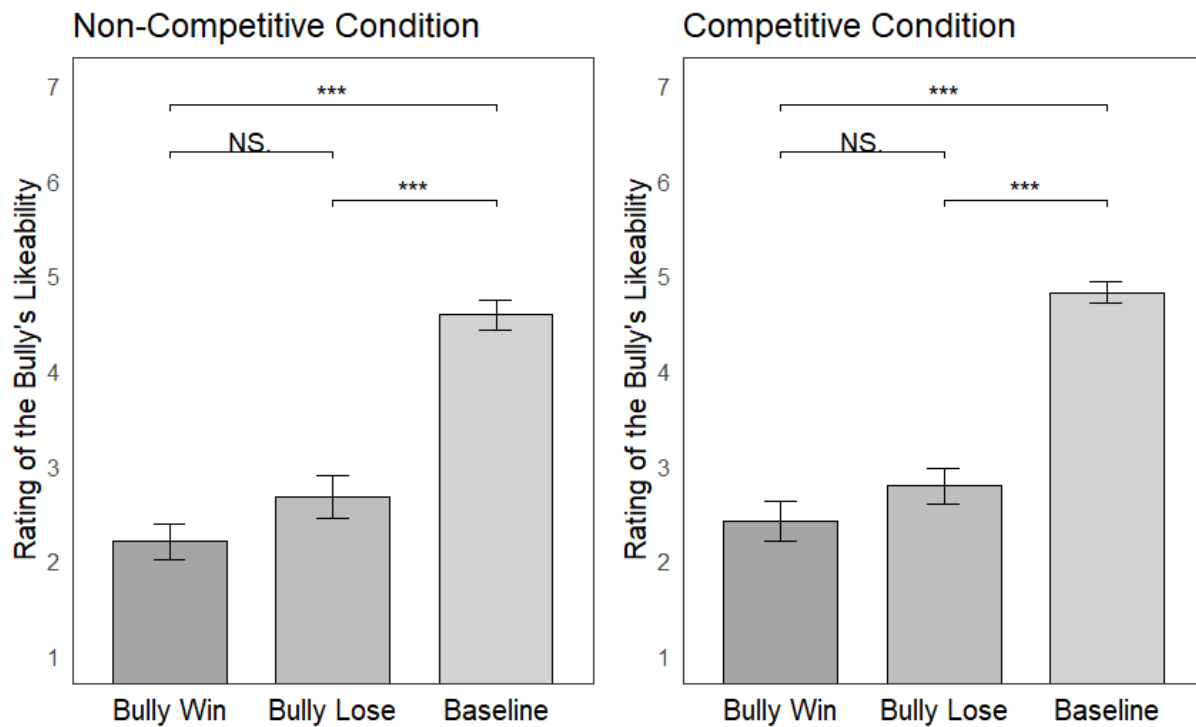
Rating of the Bully's Immorality Across Conditions in Study 2



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Bullying increased perceptions of the bully's immorality, with a significantly stronger effect in the Bully Win condition. There was no main effect of context.

Figure 15.

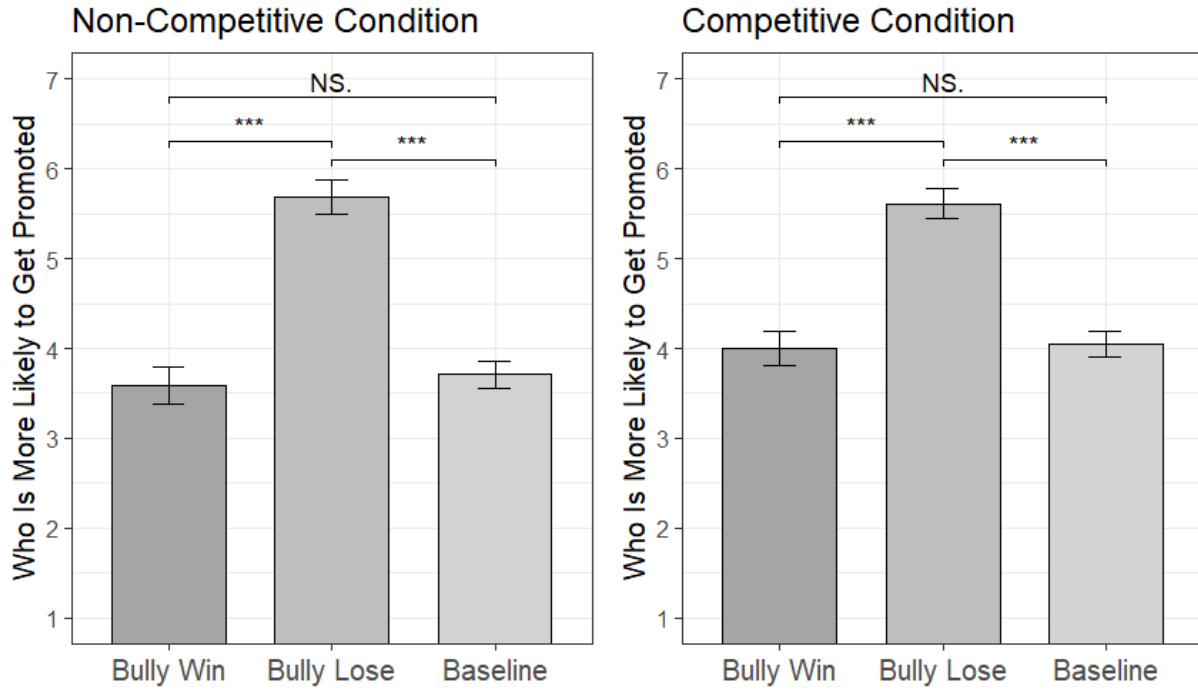
Rating of the Bully's Likeability Across Conditions in Study 2



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Bullying decreased the bully's likeability. There was no significant effect of context or outcome.

Figure 16.

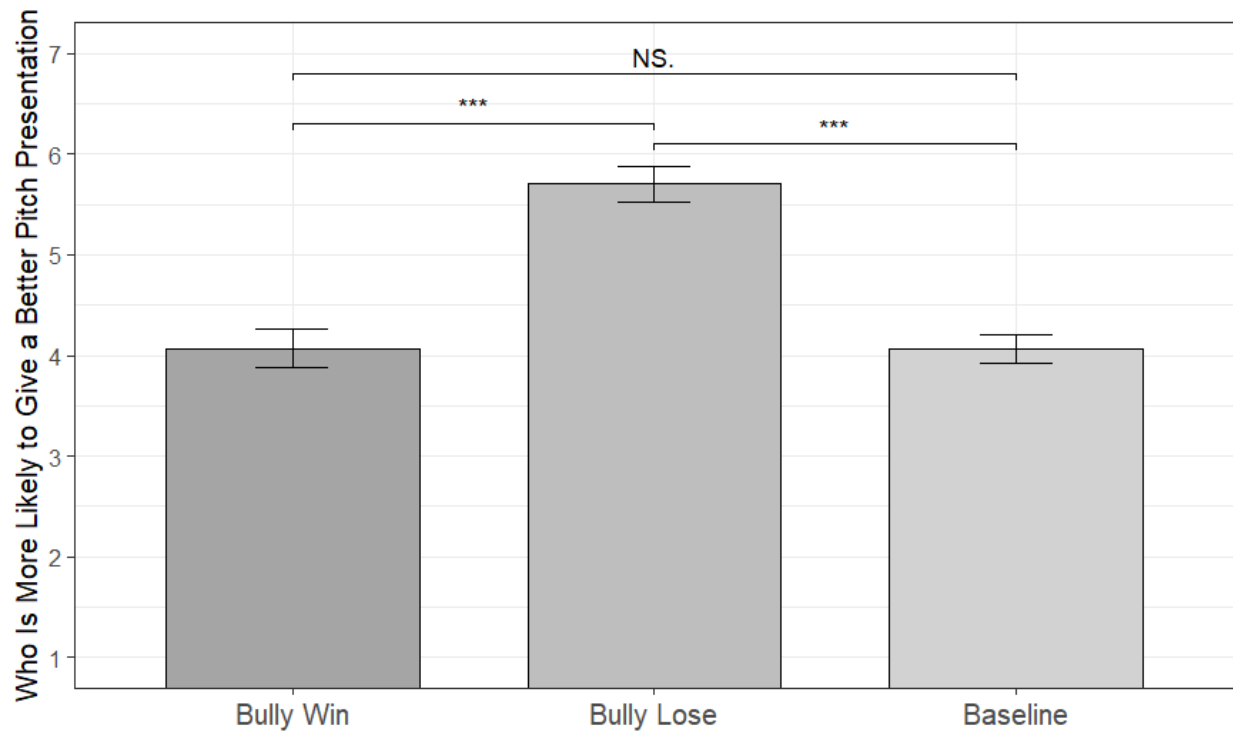
Likelihood of Getting a Promotion Between Frank and James Across Conditions (1 = Frank, 7 = James)



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Successfully bullying did not increase perceptions that the bully would be promoted. However, when the bully lost, observers clearly expected the victim to receive the promotion.

Figure 17.

Likelihood of Giving a Better Pitch Presentation Between Frank and James in the Competitive Condition (1 = Frank, 7 = James)



Note. NS. = not significant; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean. Successfully bullying did not increase perceptions that the bully would give a better pitch presentation. However, when the bully lost, observers clearly expected the victim to give the better presentation.