



## Short Communication

## The relationship between rejection avoidance and altruism is moderated by social norms

Yuta Kawamura<sup>a,b,\*</sup>, Takashi Kusumi<sup>a</sup><sup>a</sup> Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Yoshida-Honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan<sup>b</sup> Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Tokyo, Japan

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, the relationship between reputation and altruism has gained significant attention. The present study examined whether the relationship between rejection avoidance and altruism differs according to social norms. A total of 320 participants completed an online survey with questions concerning rejection avoidance and altruism in situations where either a prosocial or non-prosocial norm was present. As predicted, people with higher levels of rejection avoidance displayed less altruism only in the context of non-prosocial norms. This result corresponds with previous evidence that suggests that altruism can be evaluated negatively by others when it deviates from social norms. These findings shed a new light on the relationship between reputation and altruism.

## 1. Introduction

Individuals sometimes display altruism, which is the tendency to act on behalf of others, even at one's own expense (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003). Altruism has been shown to be affected by reputation (for a review, see Barclay, 2012). For example, people behave more altruistically when their behavior is being observed by others (Barclay & Willer, 2007). Both laboratory (e.g., Andreoni & Petrie, 2004; Barclay & Willer, 2007) and field (e.g., Lacetera & Macis, 2010) studies have repeatedly shown that situational factors that trigger concern for reputation promote altruism.

Based on these studies, it is probable that individual differences in the sensitivity to reputation (i.e., reputational concern) also relate positively to altruism; in other words, individuals with a high concern for their reputation would display more altruism. However, a recent study has shown that this relationship is not always positive. Kawamura and Kusumi (2018) examined how praise seeking, the tendency to seek a good reputation, and rejection avoidance, the tendency to avoid a bad reputation (Wu, Balliet, & Van Lange, 2016), were related to altruism toward various recipients (i.e., family members, friends/acquaintances, and strangers). As predicted, individuals with higher levels of praise seeking displayed more altruism; however, individuals with higher levels of rejection avoidance displayed less altruism toward strangers.

Given that many studies have shown that reputational cues promote altruism, it is important to explore the contextual factors that negatively impact the relationship between reputational concerns and altruism. One possible explanation of this counterintuitive negative

relationship is related to social norms. Sometimes altruism deviates from what most others do in a group (i.e., social norm). For example, when a group of co-workers are rushing because they are running late for a train, they may not help a stranger who appears to be searching for lost item at the station platform; in this situation, helping the person is regarded as a non-normative behavior in the group. Some studies suggest that altruism can be negatively evaluated when altruistic behavior is not normative. For example, Parks and Stone (2010) demonstrated that a person who excessively contributed more toward public goods than others was negatively evaluated by other group members. This finding is in line with Kawamura and Kusumi (2018) who measured altruism toward strangers, which is less normative compared to altruism toward more familiar recipients. Taken together these studies suggests that, when altruism is not evaluated as normative, people with high rejection avoidance may inhibit altruistic behavior in fear of possible negative evaluation from others.

Thus, individuals who tend to fear rejection from others may inhibit altruism, when altruism was not perceived as normative. However, as Kawamura and Kusumi (2018) did not directly manipulate social norms in their study, this notion needs to be empirically investigated. In the present study, we conducted an online survey to investigate whether the relationship between reputational concern and altruism differed according to social norms. Participants read several vignettes depicting different scenarios, which either provided cues about a prosocial norm or a non-prosocial norm. We predicted that people with high rejection avoidance would inhibit altruism only in the context of non-prosocial norms.

\* Corresponding author at: Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University, Yoshida-Honmachi, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto 606-8501, Japan.  
 E-mail addresses: [kawamura.yuta.83c@kyoto-u.jp](mailto:kawamura.yuta.83c@kyoto-u.jp) (Y. Kawamura), [kusumi.takashi.7u@kyoto-u.ac.jp](mailto:kusumi.takashi.7u@kyoto-u.ac.jp) (T. Kusumi).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

We recruited 320 Japanese participants (118 men and 202 women) online, aged between 20 and 29 years ( $M = 25.5$ ,  $SD = 2.85$ ) via Crowdworks (a crowdsourcing service in Japan). Participants were randomly assigned to read vignettes containing either prosocial ( $n = 162$ ) or non-prosocial norm ( $n = 158$ ). Participants received 100 JPY for participation. This study was approved by the ethics committee of the institution with which the authors are affiliated.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Praise Seeking and Rejection Avoidance Need Scales

Two types of reputational concern were assessed using the 18-item Praise Seeking and Rejection Avoidance Need Scales (Kojima, Ohta, & Sugawara, 2003; sample items were found in Kawamura & Kusumi, 2018). Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = false for me, 5 = true for me). Higher mean scores represented higher levels of reputational concern.

2.2.2. Vignettes

Four short vignettes were created to measure participants' willingness to help a person in need. Each vignette had information about a social norm that was manipulated between groups. An example of one vignette:

“Please imagine that you are chatting with three or four friends in the waiting room of the station. You noticed that one elderly person close to you was looking for something lost. [Your friends also seem to have noticed that, and they were going to help the person looking for lost things (prosocial norm)] or [Although your friends also seem to have noticed that, no one was going to help the person looking for lost things (non-prosocial norm)]. When you are in such a situation, will you [also (prosocial norm)] help to find lost things?”

Thus, the behavior of friends here reflects the social norm manipulation. The other vignettes included situations in which an elderly person was carrying luggage, picking up dropped coins, or picking up fallen bicycles (for details, see Supplementary materials). These situations were adapted from the items of previous self-report altruism questionnaire (Oda et al., 2013). For each situation, participants rated the possibility that they would help the person (1: I will certainly not help, 7: I will certainly help). The responses were averaged and used as a measure of altruism (see Table 1 for  $\alpha$  coefficients).

After answering the questions for each vignette, the sentence related to the norm manipulation was removed and participants were shown the vignettes again. Participants were asked to choose which sentence

they previously saw: 1) prosocial norm sentence, 2) non-prosocial norm sentence, 3) unknown/do not remember. These questions were used as a manipulation check.

2.3. Procedure

Participants answered all questions using a computer. Participants first provided demographic information, and completed the Praise Seeking and Rejection Avoidance Need Scale (Kojima et al., 2003) and Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis, 1980; translated Japanese by Himichi et al., 2017; see Supplementary materials). Then, they read each of the four vignettes and rated their willingness to help. Finally, participants completed the manipulation check questions.

3. Results

Forty-six participants answered at least one manipulation check question incorrectly, choosing non-prosocial norm sentence when they actually read prosocial, or vice versa. Data from these participants were excluded from analyses. The final sample comprised 274 Japanese individuals (91 males and 183 females) aged 20–29 years ( $M = 25.5$ ,  $SD = 2.81$ ) who were exposed to either the prosocial norm ( $n = 150$ ) or non-prosocial norm ( $n = 124$ ).

Descriptive statistics per condition are shown in Table 1.

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses on altruism were conducted (Table 2). In Step 1, control variables, including age and sex, were entered. In Step 2, two types of reputational concern and a dummy variable of norm condition were entered ( $-0.5 =$  non-prosocial norm,  $0.5 =$  prosocial norm). The independent variables explained a significant proportion of the variance in altruism ( $F_{\Delta R^2}(3, 268) = 33.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The effect of norm was positive, indicating that individuals are more likely to help when a prosocial norm is present. We also found that the coefficient of praise seeking was significant, whereas that of rejection avoidance was not significant. Next, in Step 3, we entered interaction terms for the reputational concern and norm condition. The addition of interaction terms yielded a significant increase in explained variance ( $F_{\Delta R^2}(2, 266) = 3.63$ ,  $p = .028$ ). As predicted, the interaction of rejection avoidance and norm was significant. Simple slope analyses revealed that rejection avoidance was negatively related to altruism in the context of non-prosocial norms ( $B = -0.30$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.56, -0.04]$ ,  $\beta = -0.19$ ,  $p = .022$ ), but not prosocial norms ( $B = 0.12$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.10, 0.34]$ ,  $\beta = 0.07$ ,  $p = .283$ ; Fig. 1).

As shown in Fig. 1, many participants scored at the highest levels of the altruism variable; the ceiling effects were considered. Therefore, Tobit regression analyses were conducted on altruism. The results of the linear regression were replicated; the interaction of rejection avoidance and norm condition was significant ( $B = 0.51$ , 95% CI =  $[0.07, 0.95]$ ,  $p = .022$ ). Rejection avoidance was negatively related to altruism in the context of non-prosocial norms ( $B = -0.38$ , 95% CI =  $[-0.71,$

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, coefficient alphas and correlations as a function of norm condition.

Measure	Prosocial		Non-prosocial		$\alpha$	1.	2.	3.
	M	SD	M	SD				
1. Praise seeking	2.82	0.78	2.83	0.76	0.85	–	0.24**	0.15 <sup>†</sup>
2. Rejection avoidance	3.47	0.81	3.57	0.73	0.85	0.05	–	0.15 <sup>†</sup>
3. Altruism	6.28	0.89	5.06	1.28	0.85 <sup>a</sup> /0.86 <sup>b</sup>	0.22 <sup>*</sup>	-0.16 <sup>†</sup>	–

Notes. Intercorrelations for prosocial norm condition ( $n = 150$ ) are presented above the diagonal, and intercorrelations for non-prosocial norm condition ( $n = 124$ ) are presented below diagonal.

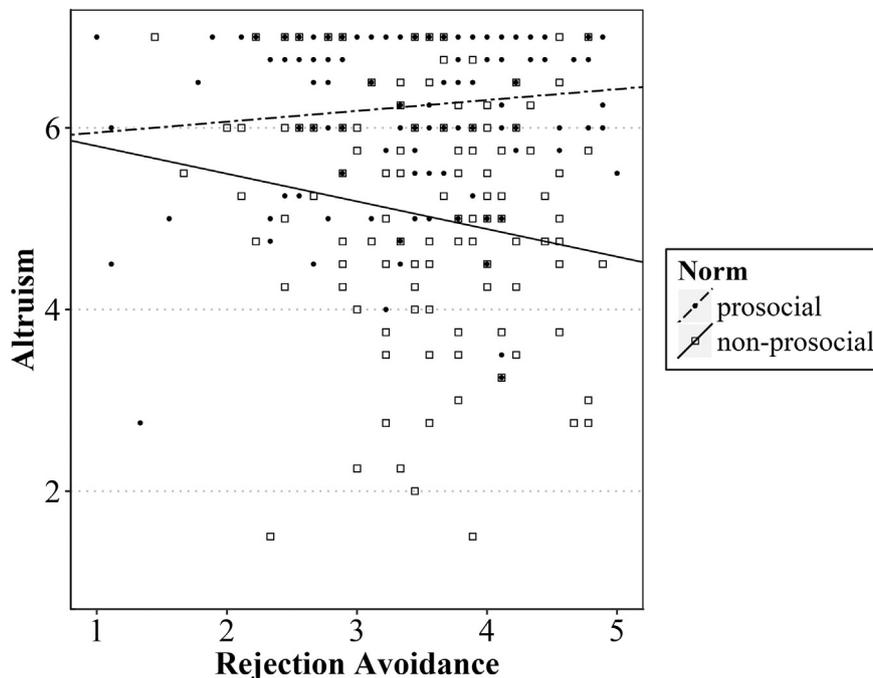
<sup>a</sup>  $\alpha$  at prosocial norm condition.  
<sup>b</sup>  $\alpha$  at non-prosocial norm condition.  
<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .  
<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ .  
<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ .

**Table 2**  
Hierarchical multiple linear regression predicting altruism from age, gender, norm condition, and reputational concern ( $N = 274$ ).

	Step 1				Step 2				Step 3			
	B	95% CI	$\beta$	p	B	95% CI	$\beta$	p	B	95% CI	$\beta$	p
Intercept	5.70	[5.54, 5.85]		< .001	5.63	[5.49, 5.77]		< .001	5.64	[5.51, 5.78]		< .001
Sex <sup>a</sup>	0.20	[-0.11, 0.52]	0.08	.211	0.26	[-0.02, 0.53]	0.10	.064	0.25	[-0.02, 0.52]	0.09	.072
Age	-0.02	[-0.08, 0.03]	-0.06	.361	-0.01	[-0.06, 0.03]	-0.03	.581	-0.01	[-0.06, 0.03]	-0.03	.569
Norm <sup>b</sup>					1.22	[0.96, 1.48]	0.49	< .001	1.22	[0.96, 1.47]	0.49	< .001
Praise seeking					0.27	[0.10, 0.44]	0.17	.002	0.26	[0.09, 0.43]	0.16	.003
Rejection avoidance					-0.07	[-0.24, 0.10]	-0.04	.443	-0.09	[-0.26, 0.08]	-0.06	.289
PS $\times$ norm									-0.23	[-0.57, 0.10]	-0.07	.169
RA $\times$ norm									0.42	[0.09, 0.76]	0.13	.014
$\Delta R^2$					0.27***				0.02*			
R <sup>2</sup>	0.01				0.28***				0.30***			

Notes. CI = confidence interval for B. Every continuous variable is centered.

<sup>a</sup> Male = -0.5, female = 0.5.  
<sup>b</sup> Non-prosocial = -0.5, prosocial = 0.5.  
 \*  $p < .05$ .  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Fig. 1.** Scatter plot of altruism and rejection avoidance in each condition ( $N = 274$ ). These regression lines are controlled for age, gender, and praise seeking.

-0.04],  $p = .027$ ) but not prosocial norms ( $B = 0.14$ , 95% CI = [-0.16, 0.43],  $p = .363$ ).

Hierarchical multiple regression analyses with empathic traits were also conducted as empathic traits are often related to altruism (Kawamura & Kusumi, 2018). The results were mostly replicated except for that the coefficient of praise seeking was not significant (see Table S1, S2).

**4. Discussion**

The present study found that the relationship between rejection avoidance and altruism was moderated by social norms; that is, people who fear rejection from others tend to inhibit altruism only when altruism was not perceived as normative. These findings contribute to explaining the results of a previous study (Kawamura & Kusumi, 2018), which found that rejection avoidance is related to altruism toward strangers.

Our findings are in line with previous work showing that altruism can be negatively evaluated when it deviates from the social norm (Parks & Stone, 2010). This may explain why people with high rejection avoidance display less altruism when non-prosocial norms are present. Although altruism generally leads to a good reputation (Barclay, 2012), people with high rejection avoidance may focus on the possibility that they will be negatively evaluated by others and subsequently refrain from altruistic behaviors when a prosocial norm does not exist.

Overall, the present study provides novel evidence that the relationship between altruism and rejection avoidance is moderated by social norms, and it provides a plausible explanation for the counter-intuitive negative relationship between reputation and altruism. This result suggests the importance of considering the influence of social norms when investigating the relationship between reputation and altruism. However, there are several limitations. First, many participants scored at the highest levels of the altruism variable, indicating a possible ceiling effect was present. Even though the results of linear

regression were replicated in Tobit regression analyses, future studies should focus on situations where a ceiling effect has not occurred. The second limitation concerns the generalizability of our results; as the sample was homogenous (all participants were Japanese and twenties). Future studies should try to replicate the study in more diverse samples. In addition, although the present study focused on altruism, it is worth investigating whether the relationship between rejection avoidance and social norms is found in different behaviors. Finally, and most importantly, the study arguably has poor ecological validity; as hypothetical vignettes and self-report measures were used. As it may not be easy for participants to imagine the situation in enough detail with the short vignettes, the effect size would likely be small. Indeed, a significant relationship between rejection avoidance and altruism was found only after controlling for other variables. Moreover, online data collection may have resulted in the high exclusion rate of participants. Thus, it should be emphasized that our study did not investigate real behavior and that such findings need to be replicated in more ecologically valid conditions.

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### Declaration of interest

None.

### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2018.02.038>.

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