

# Harnessing Moral Wiggle Room: Consumers Seek Real World Ambiguity to Feel Prosocial yet Avoid Personal Responsibility

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## Introduction

In general, people want to signal to themselves and others that they are prosocial.<sup>1,2</sup>

Yet in the lab:

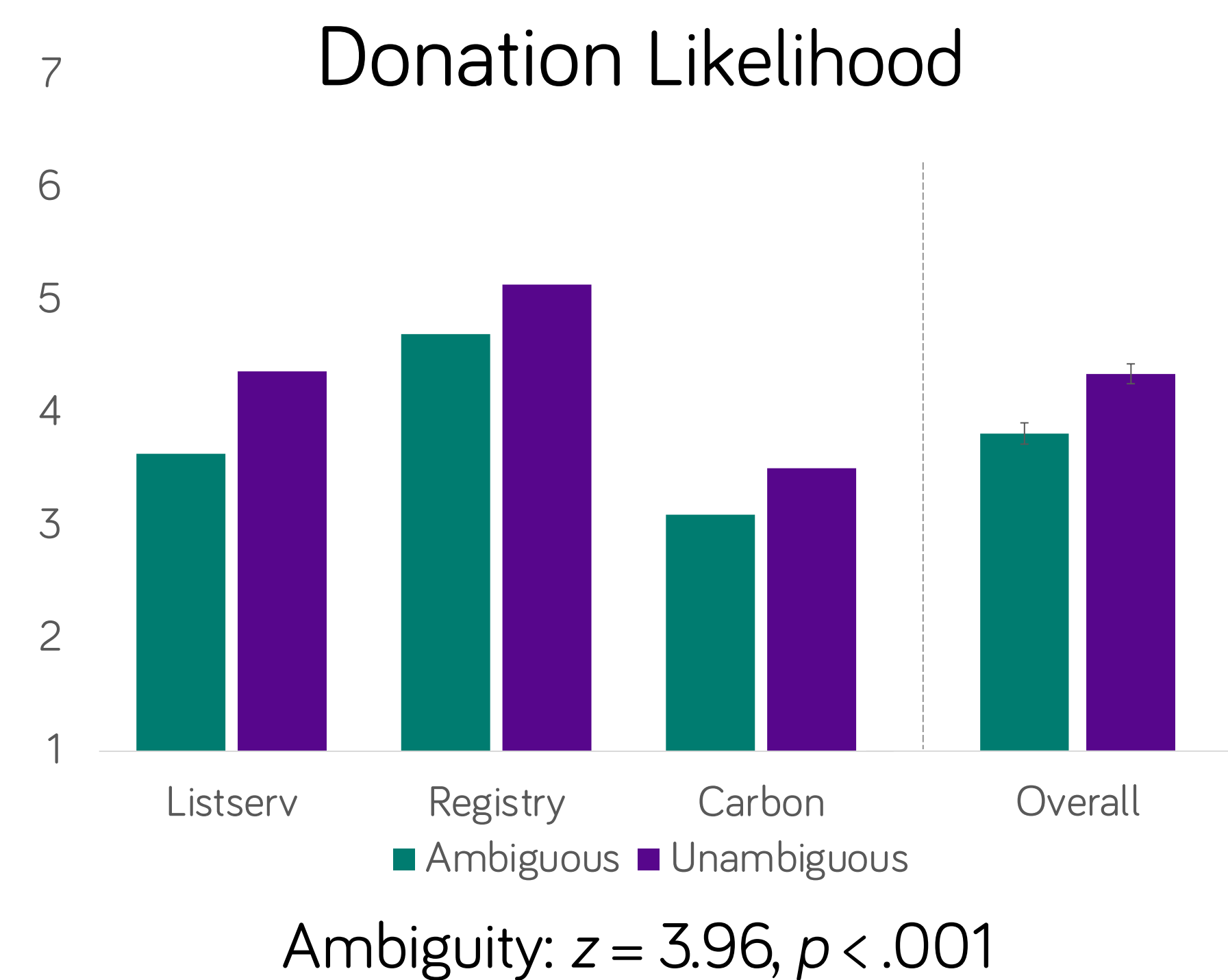
- People are less prosocial under ambiguity in the lab because they can justify selfishness.<sup>3</sup>
- And they may even *seek out* ambiguity to avoid prosociality<sup>4</sup>, violating standard assumptions of ambiguity aversion.<sup>5</sup>

We explore this “moral wiggle room” theory in consumption environments to better understand the effect.

## Study 1 - Ambiguity decreases the likelihood of prosocial behavior (N = 228)

Design: 2 (ambiguity present, absent) between-subjects x 3 (scenario) within-subjects

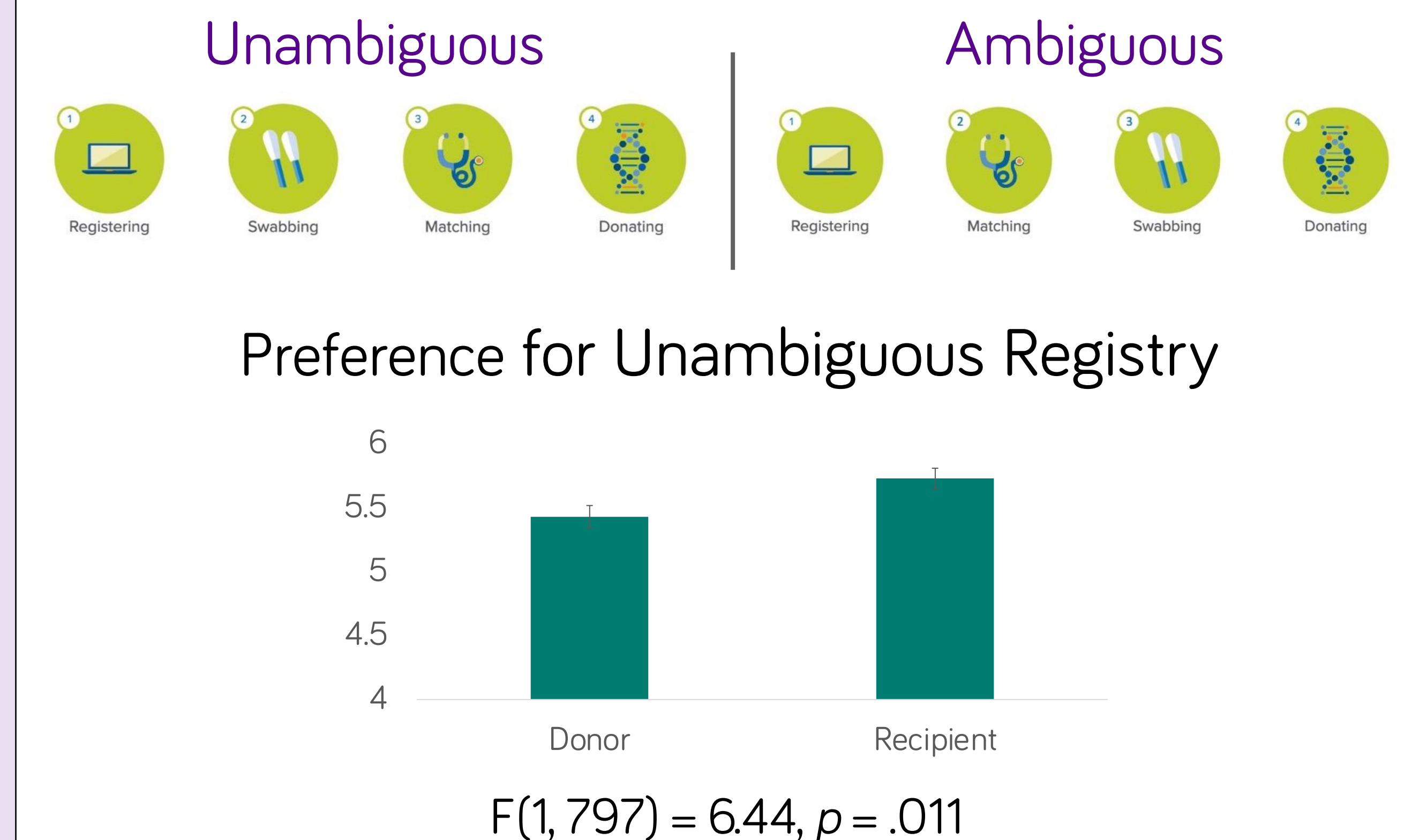
Elicited [monetary/blood] donation likelihood



## Study 2 - Ambiguity aversion is stronger for donors than for receivers (N = 799, preregistered)

Design: 2 (donor, recipient) between-subjects

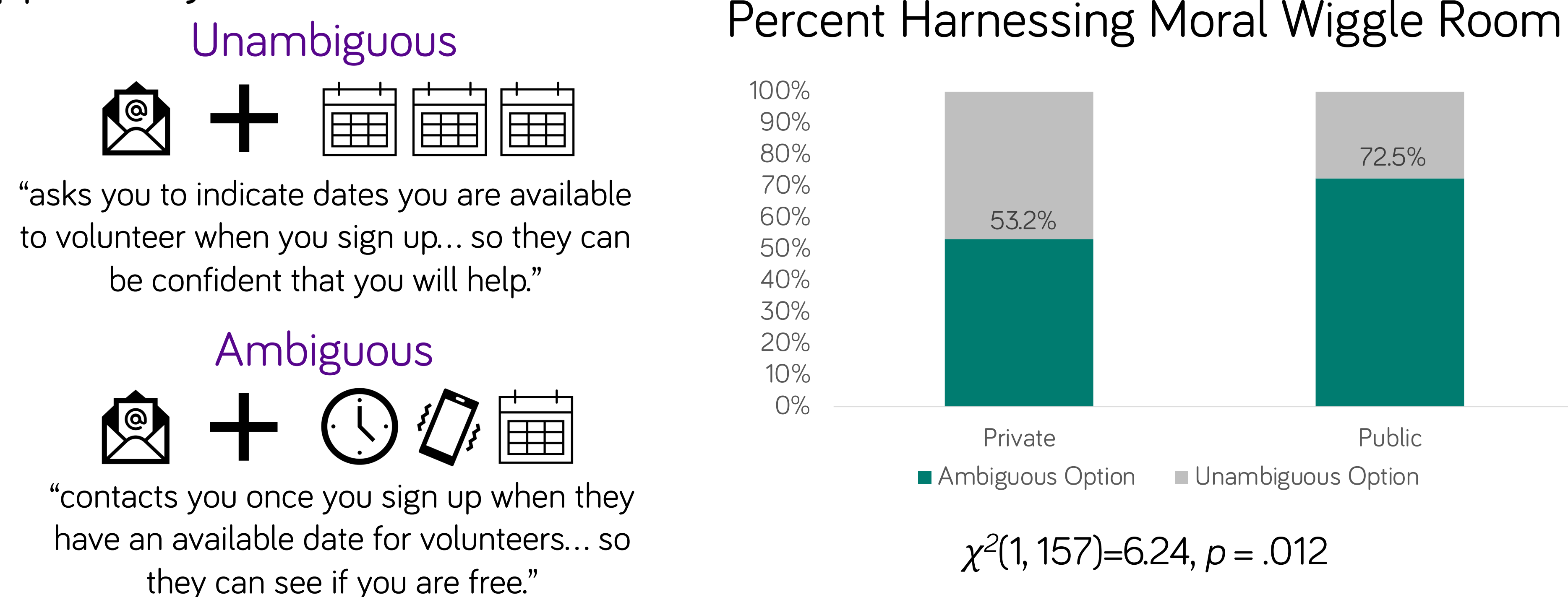
Elicited strength of preference between:



## Study 3a - People are more likely to harness ambiguity in prosocial behaviors when their decision is visible to others (N = 157)

Design: 2 (public  Google Sheets, private  Google Forms)

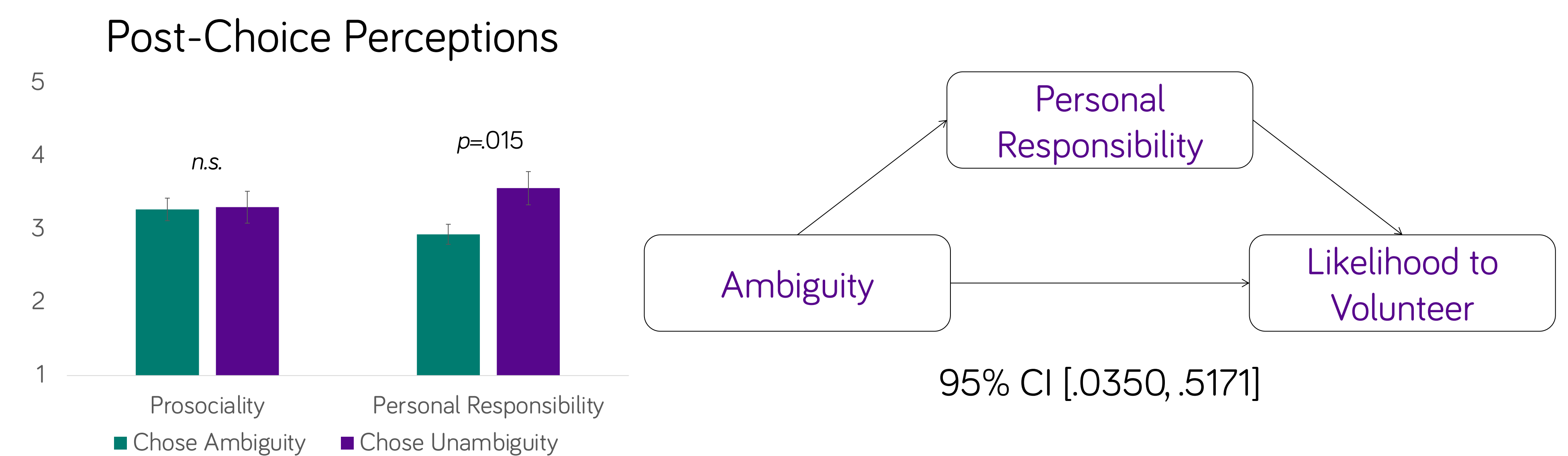
Elicited sign-up choice between a more versus less ambiguous volunteer opportunity.



## Study 3b - Subsequently, they feel *no less* prosocial, but they feel *significantly less* personal responsibility, which leads to lower intentions to volunteer (N = 157)

Design: 2 (chose ambiguity, chose unambiguity)

Elicited feelings of prosociality, feelings of personal responsibility, and likelihood to volunteer when asked.



## References

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3. Dana, J., Weber, R. A., & Kuang, J. X. (2007). Exploiting moral wiggle room: experiments demonstrating an illusory preference for fairness. *Economic Theory*, 33(1), 67-80.
4. Haisley, E. C., & Weber, R. A. (2010). Self-serving interpretations of ambiguity in other-regarding behavior. *Games and Economic Behavior*, 68(2), 614-625.
5. Curley, S. P., Yates, J. F., & Abrams, R. A. (1986). Psychological sources of ambiguity avoidance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 38(2), 230-256.

## Questions?

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