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Short Replies as Partial Ostracism: How Receiving Bare-Minimum Engagement Threatens Basic Needs

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ABSTRACT

Conversation is a shared activity that requires both people to stay engaged. If one person replies with unexpectedly short answers, that mutual engagement can break down, making the interaction feel less inclusive. We propose that receiving these short replies can be experienced as a form of partial ostracism and threaten basic psychological needs. Across three studies, short replies consistently reduced need satisfaction: even when delivered in a warm tone (Study 1, $N = 441$), even when they came from an acquaintance or a close other (Study 2, $N = 444$), and even when an external reason for brevity was available (Study 3, $N = 740$). This effect was mediated by perceived relational devaluation. These findings suggest that unexpectedly short replies can function as a subtle yet robustly hurtful form of ostracism and may be difficult to confront, given that sources can easily deny engaging in fully exclusionary behaviour.

1 | Introduction

Conversations are central to building and maintaining relationships. A smoothly flowing conversation creates a sense of connection and belonging (Koudenburg et al. 2017), and even brief exchanges with a stranger can foster feelings of social connection (Van Lange and Columbus 2021; Sandstrom and Dunn 2014). But conversations do not always create this sense of connection, and feeling connected usually requires mutual participation. When one person puts in effort but the other responds with only a one- or two-word reply, the interaction might no longer feel mutual. The present research tests whether receiving unexpectedly short replies is experienced as a subtle form of partial ostracism and threatens basic psychological needs.

1.1 | Ostracism and Its Different Forms

Ostracism—being ignored or excluded—has significant negative psychological consequences (Williams 2009; Nezlek et al. 2012). It operates on a continuum from complete to subtle forms (Williams 1997). *Partial ostracism* lies toward the subtler end: The person is still acknowledged, but with noticeably reduced attention, leaving them neither fully included nor fully excluded (Williams 1997). Despite being common in everyday interactions (DeSouza et al. 2017) and having important consequences (Ren et al. 2016), partial ostracism has received little systematic attention in daily contexts (Dvir 2026). Exclusion conveyed through language—such as short replies—represents one such understudied everyday form.

Across these different forms of ostracism, the immediate threat to basic needs is consistent. Need satisfaction drops after both explicit exclusion and subtle cues, whether the source is a computer (Zadro et al. 2004; Jauch et al. 2022), a disliked outgroup (Gonsalkorale and Williams 2007; Fayant et al. 2014), or someone expressing minimal nonverbal signals such as averted eye gaze or phone use (Wirth et al. 2010; Hales et al. 2024).

The temporal need–threat model outlines how people experience and respond to ostracism (Williams 2009). When people first detect exclusion, they enter a reflexive stage involving immediate distress and threats to fundamental needs, such as belonging,

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self-esteem, control, certainty, and meaningful existence (Chen et al. 2025; Williams 2007). These need threats occur regardless of contextual or individual differences (Zadro et al. 2004). Later, in the reflective stage, people try to restore threatened needs (Williams 2009). Here, we examine short replies as a form of partial ostracism that threaten basic needs during the reflexive stage, anticipating relatively quick recovery during the reflective stage.

1.2 | Short Replies as Violations of Conversational Engagement

Conversations require shared effort from both partners (Clark 1996; Grice 1975), which is reflected in behaviours like asking follow-up questions (Huang et al. 2017), replying promptly (Templeton et al. 2022), and offering content-relevant responses (Davis and Perkowitz 1979). When this mutual effort is present, conversations feel good. But when it breaks down, even in small ways like brief silences, awkward turn-taking, or perceived distraction, people feel less connected and socially validated (Koudenburg et al. 2011, 2013b, 2017; Nguyen and Fussell 2016).

People generally expect conversation partners to stay involved, and these expectations come from shared social norms rather than personal preferences. One important norm is conversational reciprocity, which means that partners should match one another's effort and engagement (Grice 1975). Reciprocity can be evaluated based on the expectations created by the conversation so far. So, recipients may use their partner's prior messages as a reference point for response length (see Freedman et al. 2016). A sudden and disproportionately brief reply can violate this reciprocity norm, creating an expectancy violation, even when its content is neither wrong nor irrelevant. Our studies, therefore, first establish an expectation of engaged exchange before the short replies begin. Throughout this article, *short replies* refer to responses that are disproportionately brief relative to what the conversation calls for.

Expectancy violation alone is not sufficient to threaten basic needs. Many unexpected behaviours are not necessarily threatening (an unusually warm reply may also violate expectations without causing rejection). So, expectancy violation may be necessary for short replies to disrupt conversational harmony, but not sufficient. What matters is what the reply implies about the relationship. When conversational norms are violated, people often draw inferences beyond the literal content (Grice 1975). A short reply signals low investment in the interaction, which itself could threaten basic psychological needs. We therefore treat violated expectations as a necessary boundary condition for short replies to be experienced as threatening and concentrate on situations in which short replies are not just short, but *shorter than one would probably expect*. The proposed mechanism is perceived relational devaluation, which, unlike surprise itself, logically links short replies to ostracism.

1.3 | The Mediating Role of Perceived Relational Devaluation

Perceived relational value is the extent to which people believe others care about them and value the relationship (Leary and Baumeister 2000). When people sense someone no longer sees the relationship as important, they experience relational devaluation (Leary et al. 1998). According to sociometer theory, people are highly sensitive to cues about how much others value them and the relationship (Leary and Baumeister 2000; Leary 2005). Short replies may serve as such a cue by implying reduced effort, attention, or care, helping explain why they lower need satisfaction. Likewise, overly brief rejections may cause the rejector to appear callous and unconcerned with the recipient's feelings (see Freedman et al. 2016). Similar processes appear in prior ostracism research on averted eye gaze and phone-induced exclusion, where need threat is plausibly carried by lowered perceived relational value (Hales et al. 2018; Wirth et al. 2010).

What makes short replies feel like signs of lower relational value? Communication accommodation theory provides a useful framework. People often adjust their communication to match their partner's level of engagement, and these adjustments communicate attention, involvement, and respect (Giles et al. 1991; Soliz et al. 2021). This framework distinguishes accommodative strategies, such as convergence (adapting toward others to signal closeness), and nonaccommodative strategies, such as divergence (emphasizing differences) and underaccommodation (providing less engagement than the interaction requires). These communication patterns carry relational meaning, so failing to match a partner's engagement can make the interaction feel less connected and warm (Soliz and Giles 2014). A short reply to an engaged partner can be seen as a form of underaccommodation: It offers less engagement than the partner contributes, and that mismatch can lead the recipient to feel less valued.

1.4 | Potential Moderating Factors: Relationship Closeness and Causal Attributions

We expect short replies to threaten basic needs much like other forms of partial ostracism. However, an important question is whether they follow the same reflexive-stage pattern predicted by the temporal need–threat model or whether the ambiguity of partial ostracism allows contextual factors to shape immediate responses. We tested two potential moderators.

1.4.1 | Relationship Closeness

Existing theories make conflicting predictions about whether the source of exclusion shapes its immediate impact. Sociometer theory suggests signals from close others matter more for self-esteem and belonging (Leary and Baumeister 2000), whereas the temporal need–threat model holds that immediate need–threat occurs regardless of source, with relationship factors mattering during the reflective stage (Williams 2009). Empirical findings reflect this tension. Some studies suggest that the excluder's identity does not change the immediate impact of exclusion (Wood et al. 2026; Böckler et al. 2021; Arriaga et al. 2014; Smith and Williams 2004), whereas others find exclusion by close others can hurt more (Nezlek et al. 2012; Sacco et al. 2014). We, therefore, made no directional prediction and explored whether short replies' effects on need satisfaction differed between close others and acquaintances in Study 2.

1.4.2 | Causal Attributions

Causal attributions represent another potential moderator. Attribution research suggests external explanations for another's negative behaviour can reduce negative emotional reactions (Mroz and Allen 2020; Weiner et al. 1987). Thus, knowing that someone gives short replies because they are busy may lessen the impact on need satisfaction. The temporal need–threat model, however, suggests attributions matter mainly during reflective processing. Empirical findings here are again mixed: External attributions sometimes soften (but rarely eliminate) ostracism's immediate impact (Yaakobi 2021; McDaniel and Wesselmann 2021), whereas other work finds no buffering effect, including conversational research where technical-issue alerts did not reduce the negative effects of disruptions on connection and solidarity (Goodwin et al. 2010; Koudenburg et al. 2013a). Guided by attribution theory and prior ostracism research, in Study 3 we tested whether a plausible external explanation (the sender being busy) would attenuate short replies' effects.

1.5 | The Present Research

The present research investigates whether receiving short replies—responses offering noticeably less conversational effort than the exchange calls for—functions as a subtle form of ostracism that threatens basic psychological needs. Study 1 tested whether short replies increase feelings of ostracism and threaten needs relative to longer replies. Study 2 conceptually replicated this effect with a subtler manipulation, explored relationship closeness as a moderator, and tested relational devaluation as a mediator. Study 3 tested whether an external attribution (the sender being busy) attenuates the effect and examined relational devaluation and attributional reasoning as mediators. Studies 1 and 3 also measured perceived expectancy violation to confirm that the short replies were experienced as unexpectedly brief.

2 | Study 1

The first study tested whether short conversational replies elicit feelings of ostracism and lower need satisfaction. We also manipulated the tone of short responses (warm vs. cold) because tone can influence how messages are perceived (Vergis and Pell 2020; LaPlante and Ambady 2003), and people can also accurately detect emotional tone of a message (Pollmann and Roos 2025). We, therefore, predicted that even a warm short reply would be less satisfying than a longer reply, with a cold short reply producing the most negative reactions.

Using a between-subjects design, participants received either a long, detailed response or a relatively short reply with a warm (Thank you!) or cold (Noted) tone. We also examined whether brief replies violate conversational expectations.

2.1 | Method

2.1.1 | Participants and Design

Sensitivity power analyses showed that our obtained sample size ($N = 441$) provides approximately 80% power to detect mean differences of $d = 0.3$ or greater between conditions for our planned contrasts (all planned contrasts were one-tailed as preregistered, $\alpha = 0.05$).

Participants were recruited via the SONA subject pool. We preregistered a target sample of 470 participants, excluding those who failed the attention check (score > 3) or did not complete the writing task. Data collection stopped once 470 responses were completed. Of 516 who started (including incomplete responses), following the preregistered exclusion criteria, 75 were excluded from analysis (35 incomplete writing tasks, 40 failed the attention check), leaving 441 participants (79% women, 84% White, $M_{age} = 18.79$, SD = 2.25). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions.

2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants were asked to imagine a scenario where they had stayed at an Airbnb. They first saw a photo of the property along with two previous guest reviews, each followed by a detailed, warm host reply. These examples were shown to set the expectation of receiving elaborate responses (the full guest reviews and host responses are available in the Supporting Information). Then, they were asked to write their own review. To ensure sufficient effort, participants were instructed to write 40–50 words, and the survey would not continue with fewer. As preregistered and noted above, participants who left the writing task blank were excluded from analysis.

After submitting their review, participants were randomly assigned to receive one of three host replies: a long, detailed appreciative response similar to those given to prior guests (e.g., Thank you so much for your thoughtful comment! We're delighted that you noticed those details…); a short warm response (Thank you!), or a short cold response (Noted). Following the host's reply, participants completed measures about their experience.

2.1.3 | Measures

We assessed three dependent variables: basic need satisfaction, expectancy violation, and perceived ostracism. Basic needs were measured twice: immediately after receiving the host's reply (reflexive) and after a short filler task (reflective). Expectancy violation and perceived ostracism were measured once.

2.1.3.1 | Reflexive and Reflective Basic Needs Satisfaction. Following the temporal need–threat model of ostracism (Williams 2009), we assessed basic needs twice to capture both immediate reactions and recovery (as planned, this was treated as a within-subjects factor in the design). Reflexive need satisfaction was measured immediately after participants read the host's reply, using a 15-item scale (Leckfor et al. 2023) covering five basic needs: belonging, control, self-esteem, meaningful existence, and certainty (three items each; nine reverse-scored; e.g., 'I felt rejected', 'My self-esteem was high', 'I felt unsure about what to do'; $\alpha = 0.93$). Because the temporal need–threat model proposes that ostracism produces a simultaneous threat to fundamental needs during the reflexive stage (Williams 2009), and because the need subscales were highly intercorrelated (Büttner et al. 2025)

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among key variables in Study 1.

Variable	*M*	SD	Reflexive need satisfaction	Reflective need satisfaction	Expectancy violation
Reflexive need satisfaction	4.44	1.40	—		
Reflective need satisfaction	5.03	1.12	0.15**	—	
Expectancy violation	4.03	2.13	−0.81***	−0.07	—
Perceived ostracism	3.15	2.02	−0.72***	−0.13**	0.79***

Note: $N = 441$.
***$p < 0.001$. **$p < 0.01$.

and showed high overall reliability, we analysed the five needs as a single composite measure in all studies. After a filler task (Big Five Inventory), participants completed the same items in the present tense to assess reflective need satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.91$). Higher scores indicated greater need satisfaction.

2.1.3.2 | Expectancy Violation. Expectancy violation was assessed with a seven-item scale (four reverse-scored) adapted from Burgoon et al. (1989). Participants rated to what extent the host's reply violated their expectations of conversational behaviours (e.g., 'The host acted in a way I didn't expect', 'The host behaved the way I would expect most people to behave'; $\alpha = 0.96$). Higher scores indicated greater violation. This measure served as a secondary dependent variable to confirm the assumption that short replies are perceived as violating conversational norms.

2.1.3.3 | Perceived Ostracism. Finally, to directly assess feelings of ostracism, participants rated two items measuring whether they felt ignored or excluded ('I was ignored', 'I was excluded'; $r = 0.78$).

2.1.3.4 | Manipulation Check Questions. After the main measures, participants reported how they perceived the host's reply. They rated its length ('How would you rate the length of the host's response?'; 1 = very short, 7 = very long) and its tone ('How would you describe the tone of the host's response?'; 1 = very cold, 7 = very warm).

2.2 | Results

2.2.1 | Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the key variables are presented in Table 1. Reflexive need satisfaction was strongly and negatively associated with both expectancy violation ($r = -0.81$) and perceived ostracism ($r = -0.72$), and expectancy violation and perceived ostracism were themselves strongly correlated ($r = 0.79$). Reflective need satisfaction was weakly associated with perceived ostracism ($r = -0.13$) and with reflexive need satisfaction ($r = 0.15$). We note that several of these correlations reached $r = 0.70$ or higher (also in the next two studies), which we address in Discussion Section 5.

2.2.2 | Manipulation Checks

The response length manipulation was successful, $F(2, 435) = 343.10$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.61$. Long responses were rated as significantly longer ($M = 3.91$, SD = 1.06) than both 'Noted' ($M = 1.34$, SD = 0.96, $p_{tukey} < 0.001$, $d = 2.56$) and 'Thank you!' ($M = 1.31$, SD = 0.86, $p_{tukey} < 0.001$, $d = 2.71$). As expected, the two short conditions did not differ ($p_{tukey} = 0.96$, $d = 0.03$).

Additionally, the tone of these short responses was perceived as intended, $F(2, 435) = 297.80$, $\eta^2 = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$. 'Noted' was rated significantly colder ($M = 1.88$, SD = 1.44) than both 'Thank you!' ($M = 3.41$, SD = 1.63, $p_{tukey} < 0.001$, $d = 1.00$) and long responses ($M = 6.30$, SD = 1.61, $p_{tukey} < 0.001$, $d = 2.91$). Moreover, 'Thank you!' was colder than long responses ($p_{tukey} < 0.001$, $d = 1.79$).

2.2.3 | Reflexive and Reflective Basic Need Satisfaction

The primary result is shown in Figure 1: Short answers had a large immediate effect on basic needs (shown in the left panel), and people appeared to recover fully by the time of the reflective measure (shown in the right panel).[1]

As planned, we conducted a 3 × 2 mixed ANOVA (between: condition × within: stage), which revealed significant main effects of condition, $F(2, 435) = 51.17$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.19$, and stage, $F(1, 435) = 62.79$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.13$, and a significant interaction, $F(2, 435) = 69.62$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.24$.

The message condition had a substantial and significant effect in the reflexive stage, $F(2, 436) = 118.31$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p{}^2 = 0.35$, but, indicating full recovery, no detectable effect following delay in the reflective stage, $F(2, 437) = 0.04$, $p = 0.965$, $\eta_p{}^2 < 0.001$.

Follow-up analyses confirmed that, as predicted, short answers led to lower need satisfaction, even when the tone was warm. For reflexive needs, the preregistered directional (one-tailed; Hales 2024) planned contrasts indicated that reflexive needs were higher in the long condition than the warm short-answer condition, $t(436) = 9.74$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 1.22$, and higher in the warm short-answer condition than the cold short-answer condition, $t(436) = 5.57$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $d = 0.59$.

At the reflective stage, no differences emerged between long and 'Thank you!', $t(437) = 0.24$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} = 0.405$, $d = 0.03$, or between 'Thank you!' and 'Noted', $t(437) = -0.02$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} = 0.507$, $d < 0.01$, indicating complete recovery.

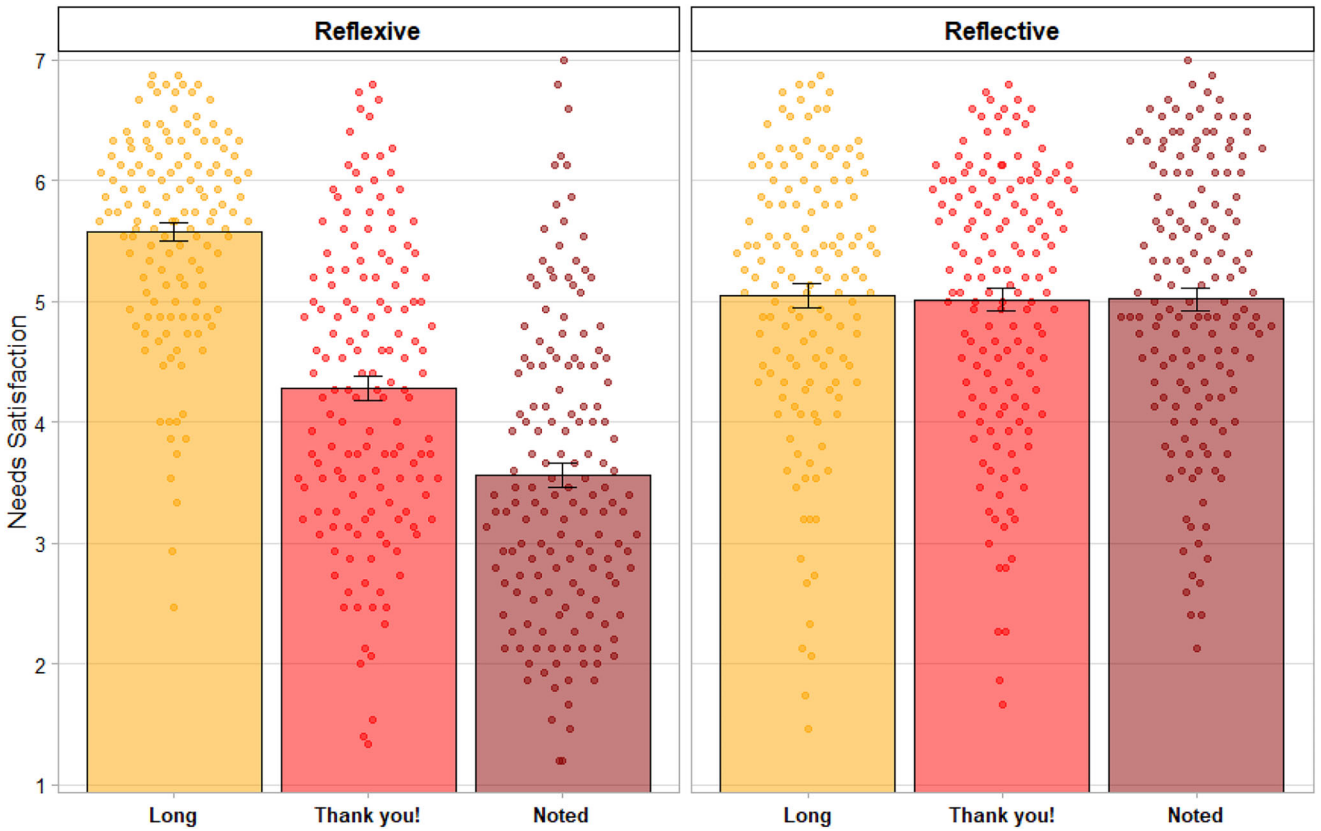


FIGURE 1 | Basic need satisfaction by response condition and stage in Study 1 ($N = 441$). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

TABLE 2 | Condition means, standard deviations and sample sizes for Study 1.

	Response condition		
	Long response ($n = 139$)	**Thank you! ($n = 149$)**	**Noted ($n = 153$)**
Reflexive need satisfaction	5.58 (0.85)	4.28 (1.22)	3.56 (1.24)
Reflective need satisfaction	5.05 (1.13)	5.02 (1.11)	5.02 (1.12)
Expectancy violation	1.94 (1.05)	4.15 (1.76)	5.81 (1.38)
Perceived ostracism	1.62 (1.08)	3.15 (1.73)	4.53 (1.96)

Note: $N = 441$. Standard deviations in parentheses.

2.2.4 | Perceived Ostracism

Perceived ostracism also differed by condition, $F(2, 435) = 113.42$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.34$. Participants in the 'Thank you!' condition reported greater ostracism than those in the long condition, $t(435) = 7.84$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $d = 1.05$. Participants in the 'Noted' condition also reported greater ostracism than those in the 'Thank you!' condition, $t(435) = 7.30$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $d = 0.75$.

2.2.5 | Expectancy Violation

Expectancy violation differed strongly by condition, $F(2, 434) = 262.65$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.55$ (see Table 2 for means/SDs). Planned contrasts showed that participants in the warm short-reply condition reported greater expectancy violation than those in the long condition, $t(434) = 13.03$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $d = 1.51$, and those in the cold short-reply condition reported greater violation than 'Thank you!', $t(434) = 9.97$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $d = 1.05$.

2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 provides preliminary support for our hypothesis that short replies can lead to lower need satisfaction and increase feelings of ostracism. It also confirms that, as intended, this operationalization involved not just short answers, but *surprisingly* short answers, as indicated by responses to the expectancy violation measure. An unexpectedly short reply, even when it was warm in tone, was enough to cause feelings of ostracism and threaten basic needs. Consistent with the temporal need–threat model, these effects appeared only at the reflexive stage, with recovery by the reflective stage.

3 | Study 2

Study 2 aimed to (1) conceptually replicate the effect of short answers on need–threat using a different and more subtle manipulation, (2) test these effects across different levels of relationship closeness, probing them as a possible moderator, and (3) examine relational devaluation as a mediating variable. Relational devaluation captures participants' perceptions of how the *other* person feels about them (Leary and Baumeister 2000), whereas need satisfaction reflects how participants feel about *themselves*.

Study 2 used a mixed 2 (response type: short vs. longer answer) × 2 (relationship type: close vs. acquaintance) × 2 (ostracism stage: reflexive vs. reflective) design, with stage as a within-subjects factor and response type and relationship type as between-subjects factors.

3.1 | Method

3.1.1 | Participants and Design

We designed the study primarily to have strong power for the main effect of the response-type factor. Given that a more subtle treatment was used in this study, we did not use the (extremely large) effect sizes from Study 1 in the power analysis. Instead, an a priori power analysis indicated that our target sample size of $N = 400$ would provide strong power (>99%) for detecting a main effect under reasonable assumptions (assuming a 'partial knockout' interaction pattern, Giner-Sorolla 2018, with effects of $d = 0.36$ for one subgroup, $d = 0.72$ for the other). Power for detecting an interaction under these assumptions was more modest (approximately 44%); given this modest power, we did not make strong predictions about significant interaction effects (see preregistration). Although the power for the interaction is low, this N is capable of detecting the effect within each relationship condition, with power for simple effects of approximately 82% to detect $d = 0.36$ (i.e., typical effect size in social psychology; Lovakov and Agadullina 2021).

Anticipating exclusions, following our preregistration, we sought a total sample size of 470. Because data collection occurred near the end of the semester, we first used the SONA subject pool to recruit as many participants as possible and then completed the remaining sample through Prolific (US representative sample). We did not analyse any data until the full target of 470 completed responses was reached.

A total of 553 accessed the survey (127 SONA, 426 Prolific). Following preregistered criteria, 109 were excluded (41 failed the attention check, 68 did not complete the study). This produced a total sample of 444 participants (55% women, 66% White; $M_{age} = 38.67$, SD = 18.01). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions.

3.1.2 | Procedure

The study used a 2 (relationship type: close vs. acquaintance) × 2 (response length: longer vs. short)× 2 (stage: reflexive vs. reflective) design. Relationship type was manipulated through the study instructions. Before watching a 2-min recorded text conversation, participants were asked to imagine themselves as the sender, interacting with another person in the conversation (Person B). In the close relationship condition, they imagined this person as someone they deeply care about, such as a romantic partner, close friend or family member. In the acquaintance condition, they imagined this person as someone they know but are not close to, such as a coworker, classmate or neighbour. To strengthen this manipulation, participants also wrote 2–3 sentences describing who this person was, how they met and what kind of relationship they had.

Response length was manipulated through the replies of the imagined conversation partner. In both conditions, the conversation partner initially gave relatively longer responses to establish the expectation of a more engaged conversation (based on our theorizing, above, that only unexpectedly short communications signal lower relational value). Then, partway through the interaction, the response pattern changed depending on condition. In the short-answer condition, the conversation partner began using brief, one-word replies (e.g., 'Yes', 'Cool'). In the longer-answer condition, the conversation partner gave slightly longer replies with the same meaning but no additional information (e.g., 'Yes, I've tried it', 'That sounds cool'). The full conversation script is in Table 3, with the longer responses italicized. Importantly, the explicit content of the replies was identical across conditions; the only difference was the number of words used to express the same response, which was very subtle. For example, in response to the question 'Have you tried that before?', the longer reply 'Yes, I've tried it' provides no more explicit information than the shorter reply 'Yes'.

3.1.3 | Measures

Next, participants reported basic need satisfaction at both reflexive and reflective stages of ostracism, and relational value as a potential mediator.

3.1.3.1 | Reflexive and Reflective Basic Need Satisfaction. As in Study 1, reflexive need satisfaction was measured with a 15-item scale ($\alpha = 0.93$) immediately after participants read the conversation. Following a filler questionnaire (the Big Five Inventory), participants completed the reflective scale to assess recovery ($\alpha = 0.94$).

3.1.3.2 | Relational Value. To examine whether relational devaluation mediated the effect of short replies on need satisfaction, participants completed a three-item bipolar scale ($\alpha = 0.94$) assessing the importance and value of the imagined relationship (e.g., 1 = 'I felt worthless to that person', 7 = 'I felt valuable to that person'). To avoid potentially influencing responses to the dependent variables, this measure appeared after the needs scales; however, to tap into feelings of devaluation specifically during the conversation itself, instructions directed them to 'think back on Person B's responses' and respond retrospectively based on 'how you felt at that moment'.

3.1.3.3 | Manipulation Check Questions. Finally, participants completed manipulation checks for response length and relationship type. Response length was assessed with the item: 'Later in the conversation, Person B gave just one-word answers'

TABLE 3 | Conversation script manipulating response length in Studies 2 and 3.

Beginning Conversation script Continued	
Conversation partner: Hi, how are you?	**Conversation partner**: No./*No, I haven't heard about that*
Participant: Hey, I'm good. How's your day going?	**Participant**: They say it'll make commuting much safer
Conversation partner: It's going well, thanks. Anything new?	**Conversation partner**: Maybe./*Maybe, I suppose*
Participant: I heard about that new restaurant downtown. Have you been there yet?	**Participant**: Have you heard any details about when construction might start?
Conversation partner: No I haven't. What kind of food do they serve?	**Conversation partner**: No./*No, I haven't picked up anything on that*
Participant: I think it's a fusion place. They combine Asian and Mediterranean flavours. Have you tried that before?	**Participant**: Oh, okay. Well, how's work been lately?
Manipulations begin here	**Conversation partner**: Fine./*It's been fine*
Conversation partner: Yes/*Yes, I've tried it*	**Participant**: Well, I should get going. Thanks for chatting!
Participant: They also have an interesting dessert menu	**Conversation partner**: Bye./*Bye, see you later*
Conversation partner: Cool./*That sounds cool*	
Participant: Speaking of downtown, did you see the news about those new bike lanes they're planning to add?	

Note: Response length manipulation is shown for both conditions: short responses (regular text) and longer responses (italicized). In the short-response condition, the conversation partner gave one-word replies, whereas in the longer response condition, the conversation partner gave extended replies that had the same meaning with a few extra words but no new information.

TABLE 4 | Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among key variables in Study 2.

Variable	*M*	SD	Reflexive need satisfaction	Reflective need satisfaction
Reflexive need satisfaction	3.97	1.34	—	
Reflective need satisfaction	5.04	1.30	0.38***	—
Perceived relational value	2.90	1.76	0.67***	0.23***

Note: $N = 444$. Higher scores indicate feeling more valued.
***$p < 0.001$.

(1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely). Relationship closeness was assessed with a single bipolar item rating the imagined person (1 = 'this person is an important part of my life', 7 = 'this person is a relatively less important part of my life') with higher scores indicating acquaintance and lower scores indicating closeness.

3.2 | Results

3.2.1 | Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 4. Perceived relational value was positively associated with both reflexive ($r = 0.67$) and reflective ($r = 0.23$) need satisfaction, and the two need measures were moderately correlated ($r = 0.38$).

3.2.2 | Manipulation Checks

Manipulation checks indicated that both manipulations were perceived as intended. For perceived response shortness, participants in the short-answer condition agreed more that 'Person B gave just one-word answers' ($M = 6.22$, SD = 1.61) than those in the longer-answer condition ($M = 3.91$, SD = 1.88), $t(422.71) = -13.85$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.32$. For perceived relationship closeness, participants in the close-relationship condition rated the person as more important ($M = 2.14$, SD = 1.76) than those in the acquaintance condition ($M = 5.35$, SD = 1.74), $t(437.33) = 19.33$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.84$. Note that lower scores on this item reflect greater perceived importance of the person.

3.2.3 | Reflexive and Reflective Basic Need Satisfaction

The primary result is shown in Figure 2. Replicating Study 1, short answers led to lower basic need satisfaction at the reflexive stage, which had dissipated after a delay by the time of the reflective measure. This pattern was highly similar for both the close other condition (left panel) and acquaintance condition (right panel).

The planned 2 × 2 × 2 mixed ANOVA (stage × relationship × response type) showed a main effect of response length,

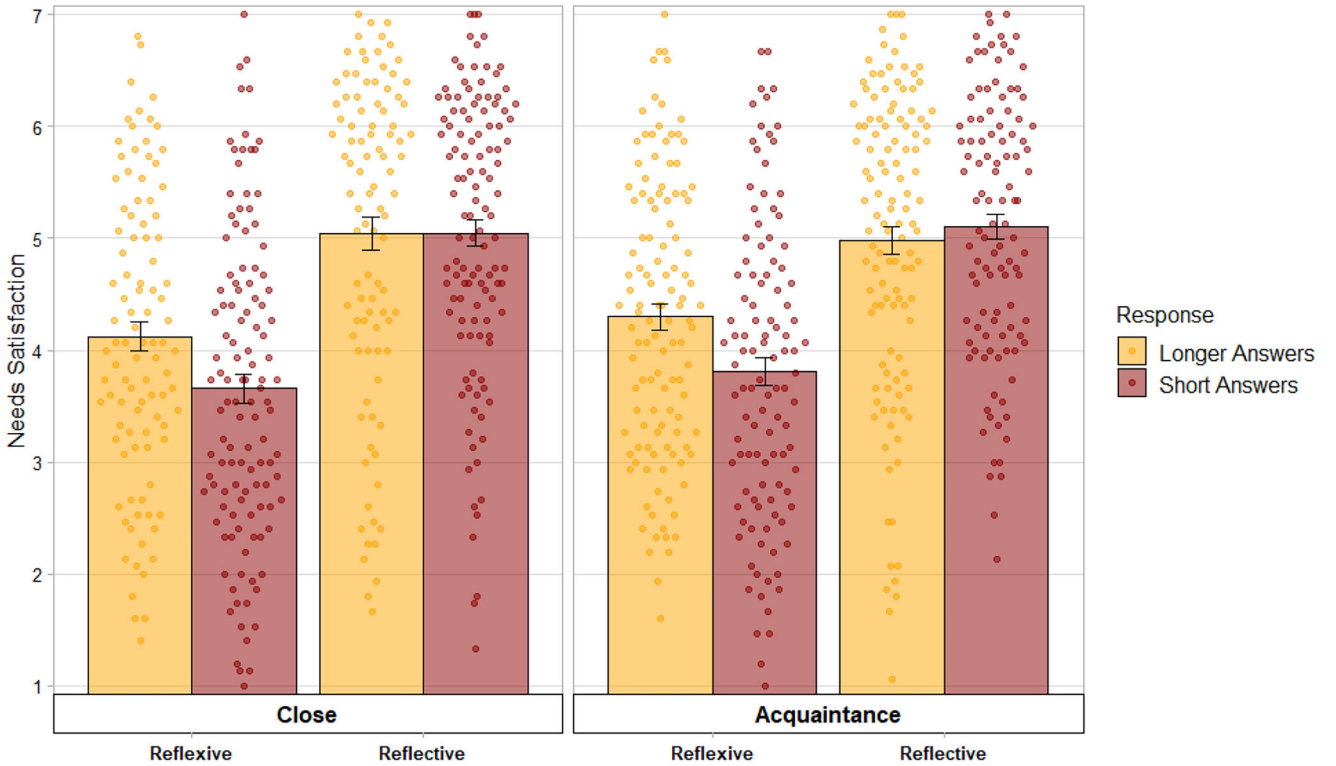


FIGURE 2 | Basic need satisfaction by response type, relationship type and stage in Study 2 ($N = 444$). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

$F(1, 437) = 4.01$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.023$, $\eta^2_p = 0.01$, indicating that, overall, need satisfaction was lower following short replies than longer replies. There was also a significant response type × stage interaction, $F(1, 437) = 15.84$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.04$, indicating stronger effects at the reflexive stage. As expected, there was also a main effect of stage, $F(1, 437) = 239.92$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.35$, with higher need satisfaction at the reflective stage than the reflexive stage. No effects involving relationship type were significant (all $ps \geq 0.25$), and the three-way interaction was also not significant, $F(1, 437) = 0.30$, $p = 0.587$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$.

Follow-up 2 × 2 ANOVAs showed a significant response type × stage interaction within both the close relationships conditions (left panel), $F(1, 212) = 5.77$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.009$, $\eta^2_p = 0.03$, and the acquaintances conditions (right panel), $F(1, 225) = 10.49$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.05$.

Simple effects analyses confirmed that need satisfaction was lower following short answers than longer responses during the reflexive stage for both close relationships, $t(214) = 2.52$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.006$, $d = 0.34$, and acquaintances, $t(226) = 2.85$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.002$, $d = 0.38$. No differences emerged in the reflective stage for either relationship type (both $ps \geq 0.51$), indicating recovery from initial negative effects (see Table 5 for means/SDs).

3.2.4 | Moderated Mediation

To examine whether relational devaluation mediated the effect of short replies on reflexive need satisfaction, as planned, we conducted a moderated mediation using PROCESS Model 59 (Hayes 2022). In this model, response type (short = 1 vs. longer = 0) was the independent variable, relational value was the mediator, and relationship type (close = 1 vs. acquaintance = 0) was tested as an exploratory moderator.

The overall moderated mediation index was not significant, index = 0.23, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.57], indicating that the strength of indirect effects did not detectably differ between the close versus acquaintance conditions. Because the moderation was not significant, we report the overall mediation collapsed across relationship conditions. Overall, short answers significantly reduced perceived relational value (i.e., increased relational devaluation), $b = -0.53$, SE = 0.17, $p = 0.002$, 95% CI [−0.85, −0.20], which in turn predicted lower need satisfaction, $b = 0.50$, SE = 0.04, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.42, 0.58]. The overall indirect effect was significant, indirect effect = −0.27, 95% CI [−0.44, −0.10] (Figure 3).

3.3 | Discussion

Study 2 offers further evidence that receiving short responses in conversation leads to feelings of exclusion. As hypothesized, need satisfaction was significantly lower following short answers than longer responses. These effects were stronger during the reflexive (immediate) stage and showed recovery during the reflective stage. This pattern held for both close and acquaintance relationships, consistent with the temporal need–threat model, which suggests that people are highly sensitive to, and quick to detect, even subtle indicators of ostracism (Williams 2009).

TABLE 5 | Condition means, standard deviations and sample sizes for Study 2.

	Close other		Acquaintance	
	Longer answer (n = 98)	**Short answer (n = 118)**	**Longer answer (n = 119)**	**Short answer (n = 109)**
Reflexive need satisfaction	4.12 (1.31)	3.66 (1.38)	4.30 (1.24)	3.81 (1.34)
Reflective need satisfaction	5.04 (1.44)	5.05 (1.26)	4.98 (1.36)	5.10 (1.17)

Note: $N = 444$. Standard deviations in parentheses.

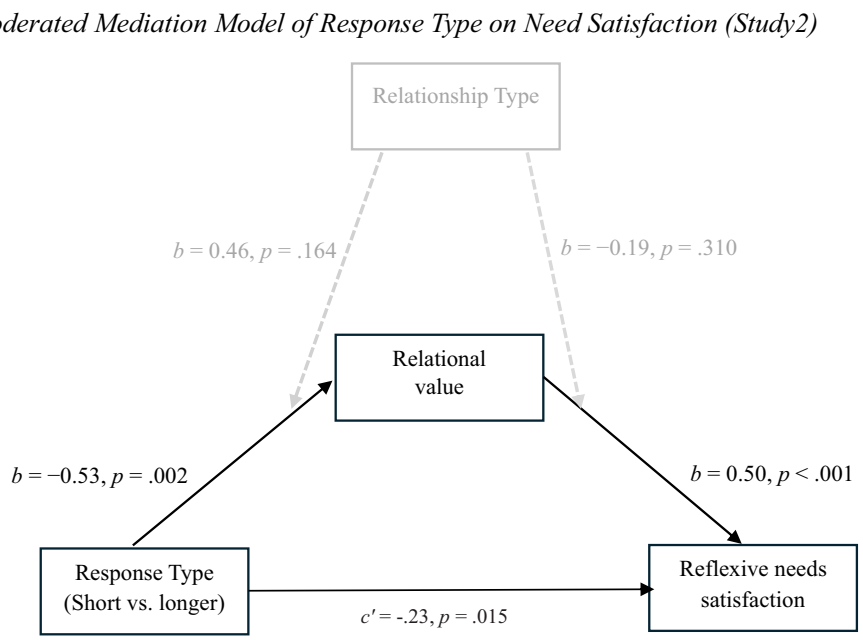


FIGURE 3 | Moderated mediation model of response type on need satisfaction (Study2). Indirect effect of response type on reflexive need satisfaction through relational devaluation. Relationship type (close vs. acquaintance) was tested as a moderator (PROCESS Model 59), but the index of moderated mediation was not significant (0.23, 95% CI [−0.12, 0.57]). Because the moderation was not significant, bolded path coefficients represent overall effects collapsed across relationship conditions. Grey paths indicate non-significant moderator effects.

Mediation analyses showed a pattern of correlations consistent with feelings of relational devaluation as a mechanism that helps explain why short responses cause lower need satisfaction: these short answers overall cause people to feel like they are not valued by their partner, which predicts lower levels of basic needs satisfaction.

4 | Study 3

Study 3 replicated Study 2 and additionally tested whether providing a possible external attribution for brevity, that is, the sender being busy, lowers the negative impact of short replies on feelings of exclusion. Study 3 used a 2 (response type: short vs. longer) × 2 (attribution availability: external reason available vs. not available) between-subjects design. Unlike Study 2, this study was explicitly powered to detect an interaction effect.

We hypothesized that, as in earlier studies, short replies would lower need satisfaction compared to longer replies when no external reason was available, but that this effect would be attenuated when an external attribution for brevity was provided. According to attribution theory, people try to understand the causes behind others' behaviour (Weiner 1985). We expected that when short replies seem due to disinterest or low effort, they signal devaluation. But when they can be explained by external reasons (like being busy), they seem more benign. We further predicted that the effects of short replies on ostracism would be mediated by both relational devaluation and external attributions about the sender's responses, and that these indirect effects would be weaker when an external reason was available.

4.1 | Method

4.1.1 | Participants and Design

We conducted an a priori power analysis based on the effect sizes observed in Study 2 ($d \approx 0.36$ for short-answer effects when averaging across relationship types). We planned for a 'knockout' pattern, with short-answer effects expected in the not-busy condition but attenuated to zero when an external attribution was available. Under these assumptions (short-answer effect of $d = 0.36$ in the not-busy condition and $d = 0$ in the busy

condition), a target sample of $N = 700$ provides approximately 76% power to detect the predicted interaction (one-tailed) and 95% power to detect the simple effect of short answers in the not-busy condition (one-tailed). Anticipating exclusions, we recruited 750 participants.

Participants were recruited via Prolific (US representative sample). Of 872 who began the survey, 132 were excluded following preregistered criteria (31 failed the attention check and 101 did not complete the study), leaving a final sample of 740 participants (49% women, 62% White; $M_{age} = 45.70$, SD = 15.48). Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: short answer from a busy sender (external attribution available), short answer from a not busy sender (no external attribution), longer answer from a busy sender, and longer answer from a not busy sender.

4.1.2 | Procedure

The procedure closely followed Study 2, with one key modification. Instead of manipulating relationship type, we manipulated attribution availability. After describing the person they had chosen to imagine as their conversation partner, participants in the attribution-available condition were informed: 'Before starting the conversation, you should know that this person is currently in a Zoom meeting … They need to keep track of the meeting and answer any questions if needed. While they are in this situation, the following conversation with you occurs'. Participants in the no-attribution condition received no such information. As in Study 2, participants then viewed the same conversation exchange, with response length manipulated in the same way.

4.1.3 | Measures

4.1.3.1 | Reflexive Need Satisfaction. As in the previous studies, reflexive basic need satisfaction was measured immediately after the conversation using a 15-item scale assessing five basic need satisfaction ($\alpha = 0.95$). Unlike earlier studies, reflective needs were not measured in this study (to keep the study short enough to allow us to use limited resources to achieve a larger sample size).

4.1.3.2 | Relational Value. Following Study 2, perceived relational value was measured as a potential mediator. Participants completed the same three-item bipolar scale assessing how valued they felt during the interaction ($\alpha = 0.96$).

4.1.3.3 | Attributions. To assess participants' causal attributions for their conversation partner's behaviour, we adapted Russell's (1982) Causal Dimension Scale, focusing on locus of causality ($\alpha = 0.89$)[2]. Participants first explained why they thought their conversation partner responded as they did, then rated whether those responses were due to *internal factors* about themselves or *external circumstances* affecting their conversation partner. Participants answered three seven-point scale items with opposite endpoints (e.g., 'Is the reason Person B responded this way: 1 = reflects something about you, 7 = reflects something about Person B's situation'). Higher scores indicated greater external attributions. This measure served as a mediator in our analysis.

4.1.3.4 | Expectancy Violation. Expectancy violation was assessed with a single item adapted from Study 1: 'Person B acted in a way I didn't expect' (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree). This item was chosen for its high face validity and greater reliability compared to other items from the Study 1 expectancy violation scale. It served as a secondary dependent variable to confirm the assumption that short responses elicited greater expectancy violation than longer ones.

4.1.3.5 | Manipulation Check Questions. Two items assessed whether participants perceived the intended manipulations. For response length, participants rated 'Later in the conversation, Person B gave just one-word answers' (1 = Not at all, 7 = Extremely). For attribution availability, they rated 'During your conversation, Person B was in a Zoom meeting' (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree).

4.2 | Results

4.2.1 | Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations are presented in Table 6. Perceived relational value was strongly and positively associated with reflexive need satisfaction ($r = 0.73$). Expectancy violation was moderately and negatively associated with both need satisfaction ($r = -0.57$) and relational value ($r = -0.57$), and external attributions were weakly associated with need satisfaction ($r = 0.14$).

4.2.2 | Manipulation Checks

Independent-samples t-tests confirmed the effectiveness of the manipulations. For response length, participants in the short answer condition perceived the replies as substantially shorter ($M = 6.52$, SD = 0.95) than those in the longer answer condition ($M = 3.48$, SD = 1.95), $t(537.30) = -26.83$, $p < 0.001$, $d = -1.97$, 95% CI [−2.15, −1.79].

For perceived sender busyness, participants in the busy condition rated the sender as substantially busier ($M = 6.53$, SD = 1.12) than those in the not-busy condition ($M = 2.10$, SD = 1.54), $t(680.63) = 44.44$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 3.27$, 95% CI [3.05, 3.49].

4.2.3 | Reflexive Need Satisfaction

The primary result is shown in Figure 4. Replicating earlier studies, short answers induced reflexive need–threat and did so comparably when an external attribution was available (left bars) and when it was not available (right bars).

To test our hypotheses, we conducted a 2 (response type: short vs. longer) × 2 (attribution availability: busy vs. not busy) ANOVA that revealed the predicted key main effect of response type, $F(1, 736) = 33.18$, $p_{one\text{-}tailed} < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.04$, with lower need satisfaction in the short answer condition than the longer answer condition. There was also a main effect of attribution availability, $F(1, 736) = 4.04$, $p_{two\text{-}tailed} = 0.045$, $\eta^2_p = 0.01$, with higher need satisfaction in the busy condition than the not busy

TABLE 6 | Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among key variables in Study 3.

Variable	*M*	SD	Reflexive need satisfaction	Perceived relational value	Expectancy violation
Reflexive need satisfaction	4.31	1.46	—		
Perceived relational value	3.45	1.80	0.73***	—	
Expectancy violation	4.44	2.07	−0.57***	−0.57***	—
External attributions	5.37	1.50	0.14***	0.03	0.05

Note: $N = 740$. Higher scores indicate feeling more valued and higher expectancy violation. Missing data occurred on perceived relational value, expectancy violation and external attributions.
***$p < 0.001$.

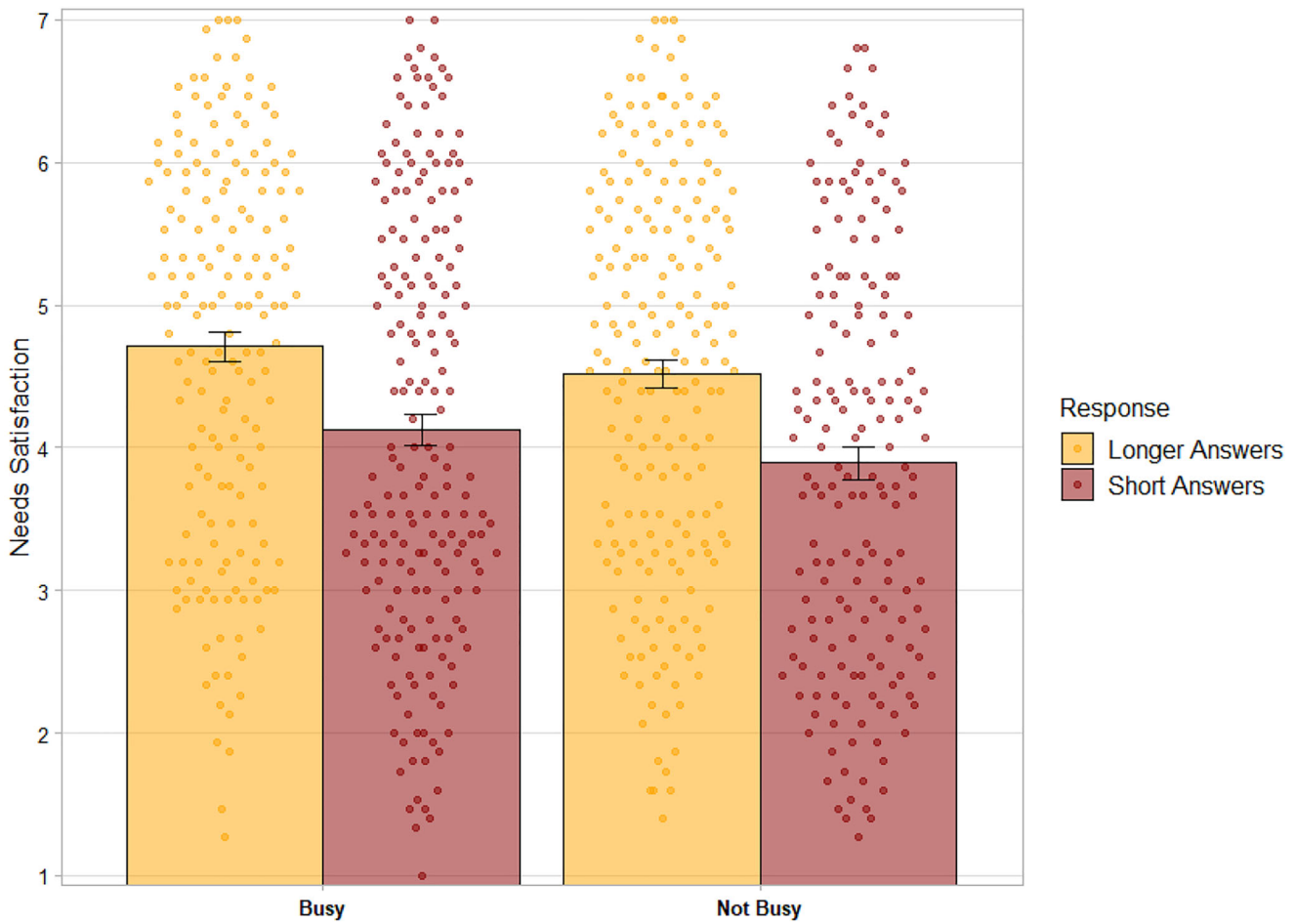


FIGURE 4 | Reflexive needs satisfaction by response type and attribution availability in Study 3 ($N = 740$). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

condition. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 736) = 0.05$, $p_{\text{one-tailed}} = 0.414$, $\eta^2_p < 0.001$.

Simple effects analyses (one-tailed) showed that short answers lowered need satisfaction compared to longer answers significantly within both attribution conditions. In the busy condition, need satisfaction was higher following longer answers than short responses, $t(736) = 3.89$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.41$, 95% CI [0.20, 0.61]. Similarly, in the not-busy condition, need satisfaction was higher for longer answers than short answers, $t(736) = 4.27$,

TABLE 7 | Condition means, standard deviations and sample sizes for Study 3.

	Busy (attribution available)		Not busy (no attribution)	
	Longer answer (n = 171)	**Short answer (n = 192)**	**Longer answer (n = 203)**	**Short answer (n = 174)**
Reflexive need satisfaction	4.71 (1.37)	4.13 (1.50)	4.52 (1.39)	3.89 (1.45)
Expectancy violation	3.62 (1.98)	4.45 (2.14)	4.31 (2.04)	5.36 (1.74)

Note: $N = 740$. Standard deviations in parentheses.

$p < 0.001$, $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.24, 0.65] (see Table 7 for means/SDs).

4.2.4 | Moderated Mediation

As planned, we also tested whether relational devaluation and measured attributions about the sender's busyness statistically mediated the effect of response type on need satisfaction, with attribution availability as a moderator, using PROCESS Model 59 (5000 bootstrap samples). Response type was the predictor (0 = longer answers, 1 = short answers), relational devaluation and external attributions as mediators, attribution availability as the moderator (0 = not busy, 1 = busy) and basic need satisfaction as the outcome variable.

Neither the overall index of moderated mediation through relational devaluation (index = 0.06, 95% CI [−0.24, 0.36]) nor through external attributions (index = −0.001, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.05]) was significant, showing that the availability of an external attribution did not detectably moderate either mediation pathway. Given that moderation was not significant, we report the overall indirect effects collapsed across attribution conditions.

4.2.4.1 | Mediation Through Relational Value. As hypothesized, short answers significantly reduced perceived relational value compared to longer answers, $b = -0.73$, SE = 0.13, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [−0.98, −0.47]. Perceived relational value in turn strongly predicted basic need satisfaction, $b = 0.58$, SE = 0.02, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.54, 0.62]. The overall indirect effect through relational devaluation was significant, indirect effect = −0.42, 95% CI [−0.58, −0.27].

4.2.4.2 | Mediation Through External Attributions. Response type was not significantly associated with external attributions, $b = 0.08$, SE = 0.11, $p = 0.485$. External attributions predicted basic need satisfaction, $b = 0.12$, SE = 0.02, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.17]. Moreover, the overall indirect effect through external attributions was not significant, indirect effect = 0.01, 95% CI [−0.02, 0.04].

In sum, results show consistent evidence for indirect pathways through relational devaluation, but not for mediation by external attributions as measured, and not for moderation by external attribution as manipulated (Figure 5).

4.2.5 | Expectancy Violation

Analyses of the expectancy violation measure confirmed that people perceived short answers as expectation-violating. A 2 (response type: short vs. longer) × 2 (attribution availability: busy vs. not busy) ANOVA showed a main effect of response type, $F(1, 730) = 40.85$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.053$, with short answers eliciting greater expectancy violation than longer answers. The main effect of attribution condition was also significant, $F(1, 730) = 29.62$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.039$, with higher expectancy violation in the not-busy condition than the busy condition. The interaction was not significant, $F(1, 730) = 0.65$, $p = 0.422$.

4.2.6 | Exploratory Parallel Mediation

To address the conceptual role of expectancy violation in our framework, we additionally conducted an exploratory parallel mediation (PROCESS Model 4) with both relational devaluation and expectancy violation as simultaneous mediators of the effect of short replies on reflexive need satisfaction. Both pathways were significant. Short replies led to lower need satisfaction by lowering perceived relational value (indirect effect = −0.35, 95% CI [−0.48, −0.22]) and by increasing expectancy violation (indirect effect = −0.14, 95% CI [−0.20, −0.08]). The indirect effect through relational value was significantly larger than the indirect effect through expectancy violation, indirect effect difference = −0.21, 95% CI [−0.35, −0.09] (Hayes 2022, 168–172). The direct effect of response type, controlling for both mediators, was not significant, $b = -0.11$, $p = 0.149$. Full results are reported in the Supporting Information.

4.3 | Discussion

Short answers led to lower need satisfaction compared to longer ones, regardless of whether an external reason was provided. Though not entirely expected (we anticipated moderation by the availability of an external attribution), present findings align with the conversational research literature showing that even when people are given external explanations for conversational disruptions (such as a visual alert for a poor internet connection), they still report lower feelings of belonging (Koudenburg et al. 2013a). That the results were not moderated by the availability of external attribution appears to speak to the robustness of the tendency for short answers to elicit need–threat.

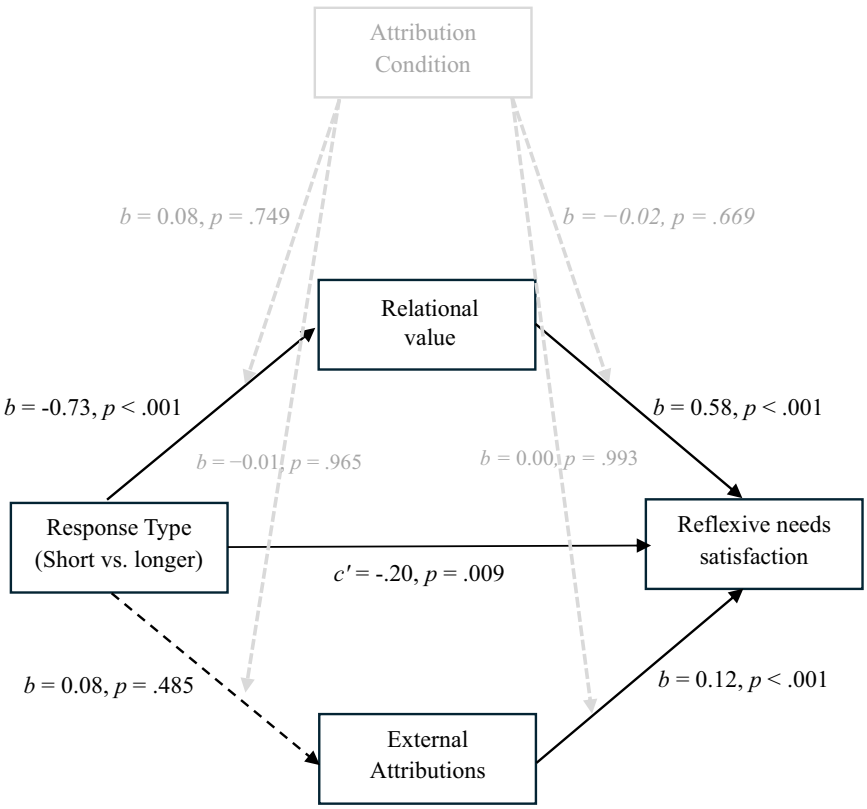


FIGURE 5 | Moderated mediation model of response type on need satisfaction (Study 3). Parallel mediation of the effect of response type on basic need satisfaction through relational value and external attributions. Attribution availability was tested as a moderator (PROCESS Model 59), but neither index of moderated mediation was significant (relational value: 0.06, 95% CI [−0.24, 0.36]; external attributions: −0.001, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.05]). Because the moderation was not significant, bolded path coefficients represent overall effects collapsed across attribution conditions. Grey paths indicate non-significant moderator effects.

5 | General Discussion

The present work examined whether short conversational replies function as a subtle form of ostracism. Across three experiments, short replies consistently led to lower need satisfaction. This effect appeared immediately at the reflexive stage, but participants largely recovered by the reflective stage. It was not eliminated by any of the contextual factors we tested, including tone, relationship closeness and the availability of an external explanation.

This work extends the ostracism literature by establishing short replies as subtle, language-based ostracism that could be common in everyday conversation. Overall, all of these findings are consistent with the temporal need–threat model of ostracism. Short replies were also perceived as violating conversational expectations: a conceptually necessary boundary condition for short replies to be interpreted as relationally devaluating. Finally, the damaging effect of short replies is plausibly attributable to short replies' capacity to convey that the recipient is not valued, as relational devaluation was consistently induced by short replies and predicted the degree of need–threat.

5.1 | Implications

The robustness of these effects across the contextual factors we tested closely matches the temporal need–threat model's postulation that immediate reactions to ostracism are relatively resistant to moderation (Williams 2009). Here, we see that the harmful effect of short replies was not eliminated by a warm tone, relationship closeness or an external explanation. Prior studies show that basic needs are threatened immediately even when exclusion comes from a computer (Jauch et al. 2022; Zadro et al. 2004) or a disliked out-group (Gonsalkorale and Williams 2007; Fayant et al. 2014). Our findings show the same pattern of robustness for this new form of *partial* ostracism.

The effect of short replies on reflexive need satisfaction was nearly identical whether the sender was a close other or an acquaintance in Study 2. This can suggest that even strong, well-established relationships may not protect people from the immediate sting of social exclusion. This is also consistent with prior work showing that although people expect rejection from a romantic partner to hurt more than rejection from a friend, the source of the exclusion does not actually change their anticipated or experienced needs satisfaction (Wood et al. 2026).

Regardless of relationship type, short replies consistently led recipients to feel relationally devalued, and this may carry costs not just for the recipient, but for the sender as well. When recipients feel devalued, they may begin to view the sender more negatively, and research on ostracism suggests these reactions can escalate. People who feel excluded come to view their excluders as less human (Bastian and Haslam 2010) and may even take pleasure in the excluder's misfortunes (Mohammadi and Hales 2025). Short replies often come without any explanation and might trigger similar negative reactions toward the sender over time, gradually weakening how recipients perceive and want to interact with them.

In addition, short replies were consistently perceived as violating conversational expectations, which we consider a necessary boundary condition for them to be experienced as threatening. However, violating expectations alone does not fully explain the threat to needs. In Study 1, both warm and cold short replies violated expectations more than long replies. Yet even the warm short reply (which violated expectations less) still caused substantial need–threat. Study 3 showed a related pattern: When participants knew the sender was busy, they reported significantly less expectancy violation, yet this lowered need–threat only slightly and did not eliminate the effect of short replies. Together, these patterns are consistent with our framework: Violated expectations are necessary, but the primary driver of the threat is the inference that the partner does not value the recipient. Exploratory analyses in Study 3 showed that though most of the impact still comes from feeling devalued, expectancy violation also carried a smaller indirect effect.

5.2 | Short Answers and Uncertainty

Short replies are a form of ostracism with unique and interesting properties. Unlike complete ostracism, where someone is ignored, short replies allow plausible deniability. The sender can claim they responded, which makes it hard for the recipient to challenge the rejection. Even though the sender has replied, the recipient still feels shut out, creating a subtle kind of exclusion that targets may find difficult to confront.

This deniability creates an ambiguous situation. When people receive short replies, they may wonder whether the partner is uninterested, bored, upset or simply distracted. This causal uncertainty and motivational ambiguity that short answers create heightens uncertainty, which is a core feature of ostracism and makes it more painful (Chen et al. 2025; Hales 2026). So, although short replies maintain minimal contact, they signal disengagement. Although not directly addressed in these studies, an important implication is that recipients may feel unable to clearly confront the exclusion they feel, given that they are at least receiving minimal responses. Future research can investigate this directly by measuring how—if at all—recipients choose to behaviourally respond.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Directions

Although our results show that short replies can feel excluding, they are unlikely to be interpreted as ostracism in every situation. The goal of the interaction may matter here. When someone is clearly trying to engage, such as during an ongoing exchange or after asking an open-ended question, a brief reply may be more likely to feel hurtful. This was also true of the situations we studied, where participants were trying to engage in the interaction, whether by writing a review for the host or by imagining themselves trying to keep the conversation going with their conversation partner. However, in lower-stakes situations, such as quick check-ins or specific information requests, short replies may be more accepted and therefore less likely to feel harmful. Similarly, if someone expects to receive short replies (say, because that is the rhythm of the conversation and they are sending short messages themselves), then receiving a short reply is unlikely to signal relational devaluation.

More broadly, the harmful effect of short replies may depend on the conversational or group norms that define what counts as an engaged response. If brevity is more normative within a particular relationship or group, short replies may be less likely to violate expectations and, therefore, less likely to signal exclusion. This could be true in settings where a more concise communication style is common, such as workplace teams. In those contexts, short replies may be less likely to be interpreted as signs of disengagement. This is consistent with findings that the impact of ostracism is often norm-dependent (Rudert and Greifeneder 2016). Group identities such as gender may matter as well, given their links to communicative stereotypes and to accommodation or divergence. Future research should directly examine when short responses are expected and whether such norms reduce their negative impact.

Our studies examine how short replies are experienced from the recipient's perspective. But they do not speak to whether senders intentionally use short replies to ostracize. Whether short replies are deliberate exclusion, an unintended result of distraction or low investment, or something senders even recognize as potentially hurtful remains an important question for future research.

Another limitation is the discriminant validity of our self-report measures. In Study 1, reflexive need satisfaction, perceived ostracism, and expectancy violation were highly correlated (rs = 0.72–0.81). Relational value also correlated strongly with reflexive need satisfaction in Study 2 (r = 0.67) and Study 3 (r = 0.73). These correlations suggest that the measures may partly capture a common construct rather than fully distinct ones. Given the conceptual closeness of these constructs (especially need satisfaction and relational value), we cannot fully show that the measures are empirically distinct. Future work should test discriminant validity more directly, for example, with confirmatory factor analysis or with experimental manipulations tailored to specific components of the negative experience.

Finally, our studies were powered a priori for the primary experimental effects rather than the indirect effects or moderated-mediation indices; although the mediation analyses were preregistered, the non-significant moderated-mediation results should be interpreted with caution as they may reflect limited power for higher order effects.

6 | Conclusion

The present work suggests that short conversational replies can sometimes function as a subtle form of ostracism. Our results do not suggest that short replies are always harmful; however, they do suggest that short responses can be perceived as ostracism when engagement is expected. Thus, being mindful of how we respond may help foster smoother communication and maintain positive relationships in everyday life.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Ethics Statement

All procedures were approved by the University of Mississippi Institutional Review Board (Protocol #25x-049).

Consent

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All data, analysis code and research materials used in this research have been made publicly available at Research Box (https://researchbox.org/4659&PEER_REVIEW_passcode=IUYQDU). The studies were preregistered, and the preregistration documents are available at the same link.

Endnotes

[1] We also measured mood at both the reflexive and reflective stages in Studies 1 and 2, with results replicating the basic needs findings reported here. For brevity, the mood analyses are reported in entirety in the Supporting Information and show the same pattern as need satisfaction.

[2] In Study 2, we also included a different 5-item attribution measure as an exploratory variable, but due to low reliability ($\alpha = 0.66$ for external attribution), we did not report results for this measure.

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