

How Cartoons Shape Children's Views on Disability: The Impact of Social Model of Disability in Children's Media



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Introduction

- Children tend to adopt a medical model of disability, attributing challenges to personal deficits rather than systemic barriers (Federici et al., 2017; Meloni et al., 2015).
- The social model of disability (UPIAS, 1976) reframes challenges as the result of environmental and societal barriers, not the individual.
- Targeted exposure to disability, especially through inclusive, narrative-based interventions, can foster more inclusive attitudes (Bogart et al., 2022; Cameron & Rutland, 2006).
- Can children's media promote social model attitudes and reduce bias?**

Methodology

- 53 children (ages 6–8, $M = 7.6$) + comparison sample of university students
- 1:1 Zoom sessions (Qualtrics survey for adults)

Social Model Condition (n = 26)

Neutral Condition (n = 27)

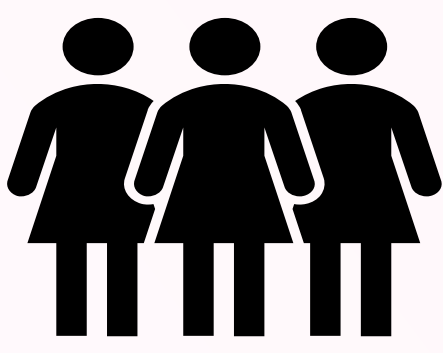
A character who uses leg braces is unable to access a playground slide due to stairs, prompting the community to work together to build a ramp.



Episode from Daniel Tiger that displayed no themes of disability or inequality



Measures and Hypotheses



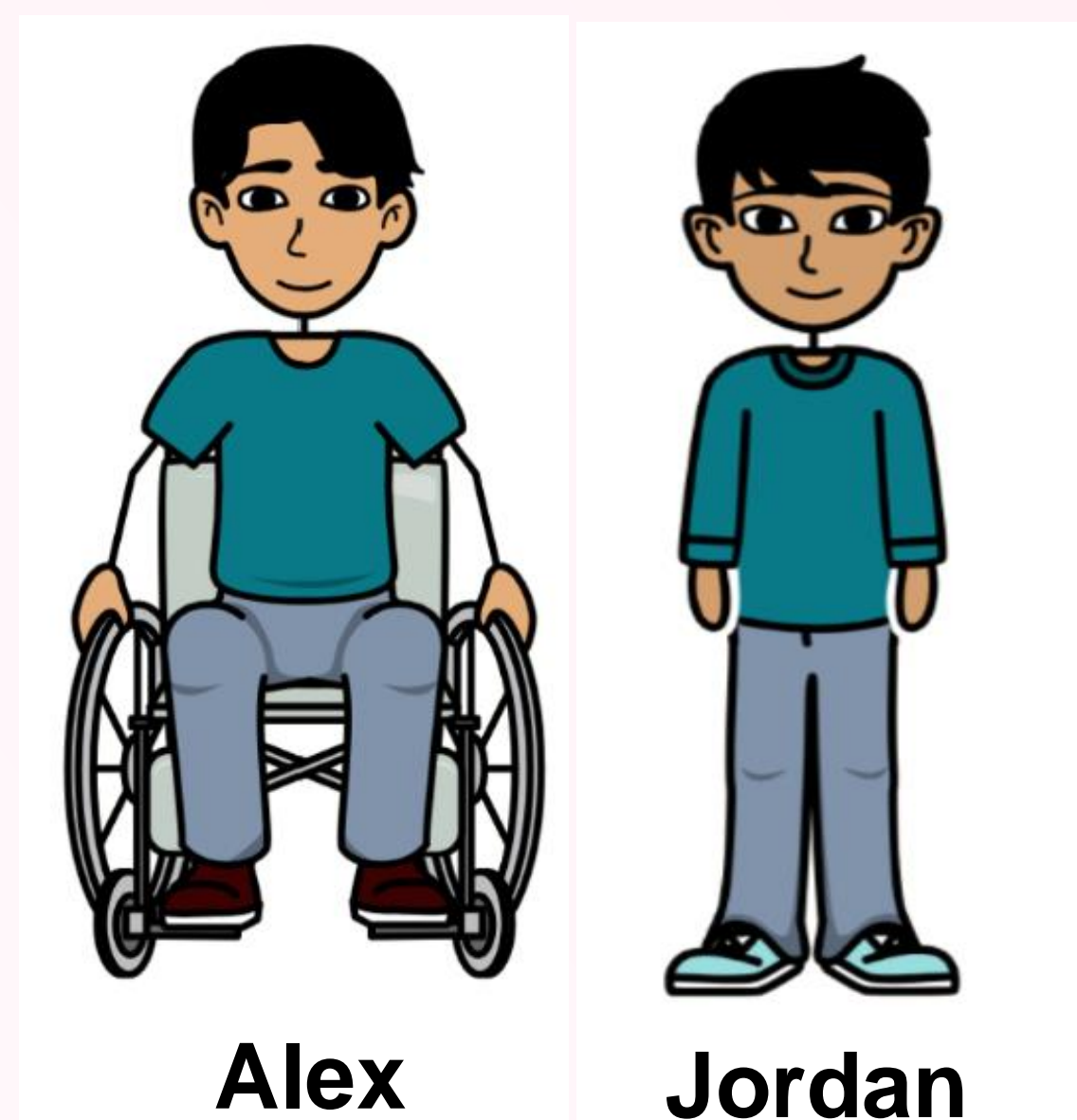
Intended behavior: Assessed willingness to engage with a disabled vs. a non-disabled character

- H1a:** Children will generally prefer the non-disabled peer.
- H1b:** Children exposed to the social model video will show greater willingness to interact with the disabled peer compared children in the neutral condition.



Trait attributions: Children were asked to attribute a set of traits to either Alex or Jordan.

- H2a:** Children will attribute more positive and fewer negative traits to the non-disabled peer.
- H2b:** Children in the social model group will attribute more positive and fewer negative traits to the disabled peer than children in the neutral condition.



Fairness and Okayness Judgments: Children evaluated whether it was fair or okay that Alex could not access the toy store due to a physical barrier.

- H3a:** Children in the experimental condition will be less likely to rate the scenario as fair/okay.



Beliefs About Disability-Related Inequality (Open-Ended Scenario Responses): Children were given a scenario and asked to identify causes of exclusion, propose solutions, and describe their reactions.

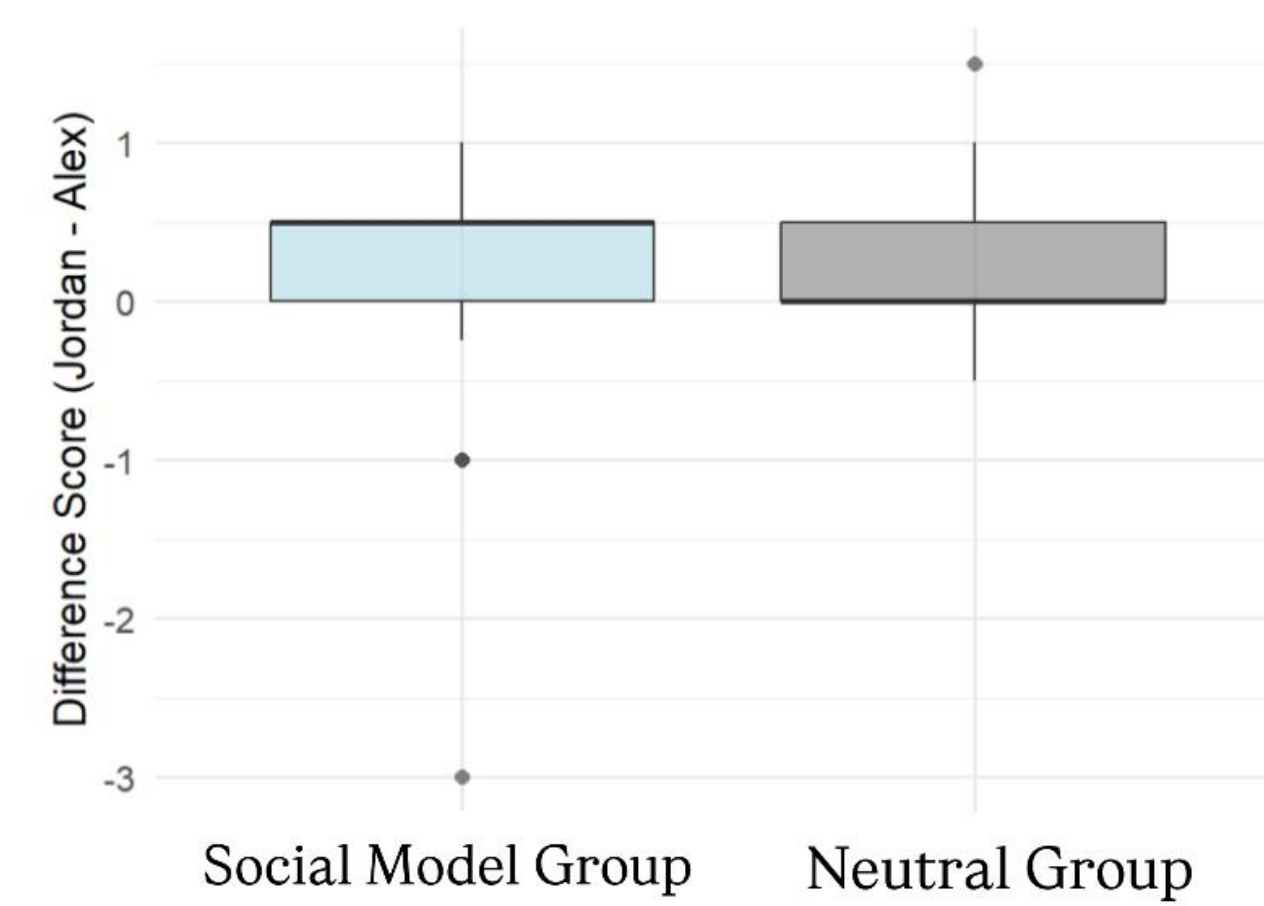
- H3b:** Children in the experimental condition will be more likely to identify external (structural) reasons and suggest external (structural) solutions.



Lastly, children responded to statements aligning with either the medical or social model and then answered open-ended questions about the causes of disability.

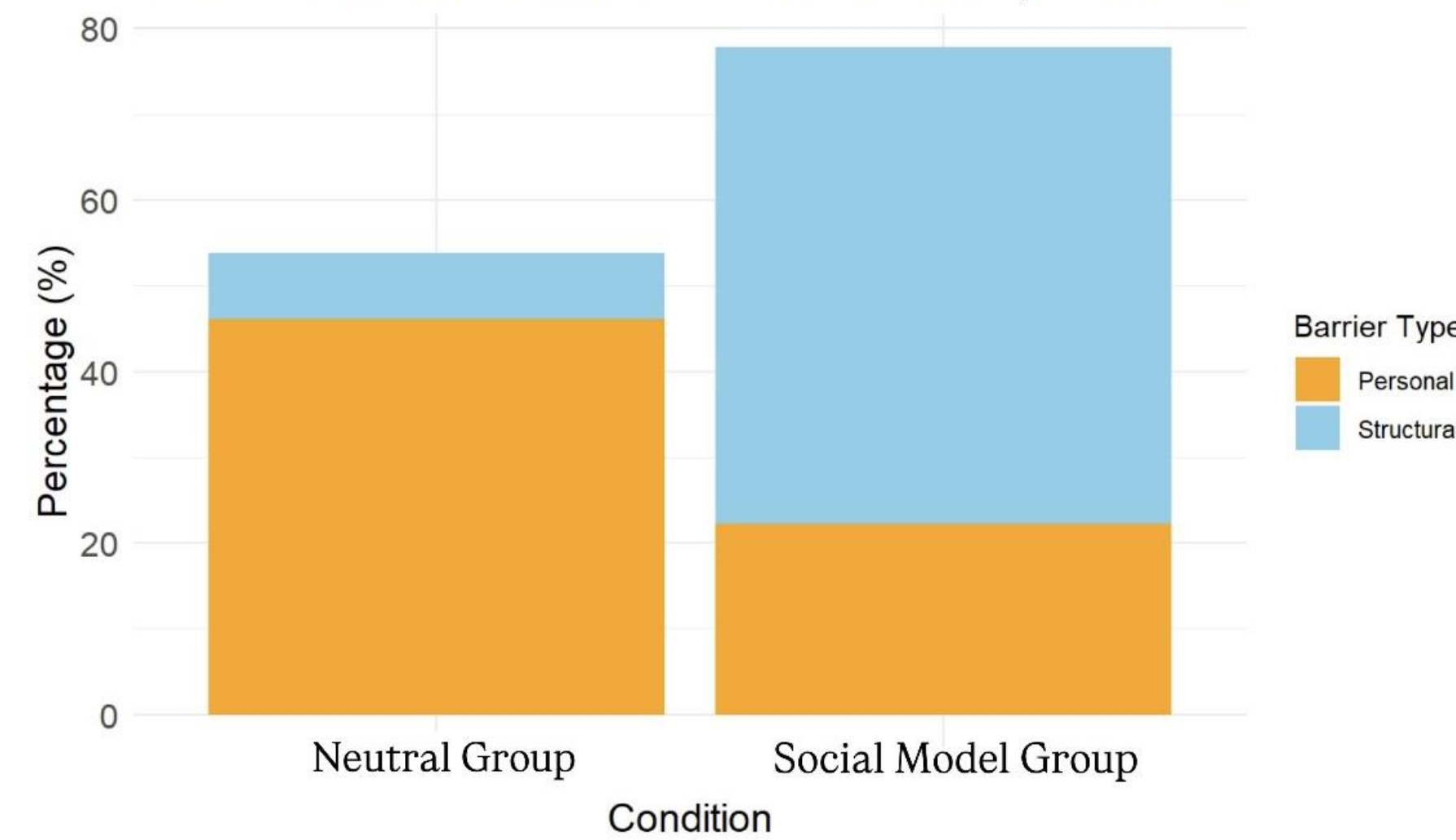
Results

Difference in Intended Behavior Ratings (Jordan - Alex)



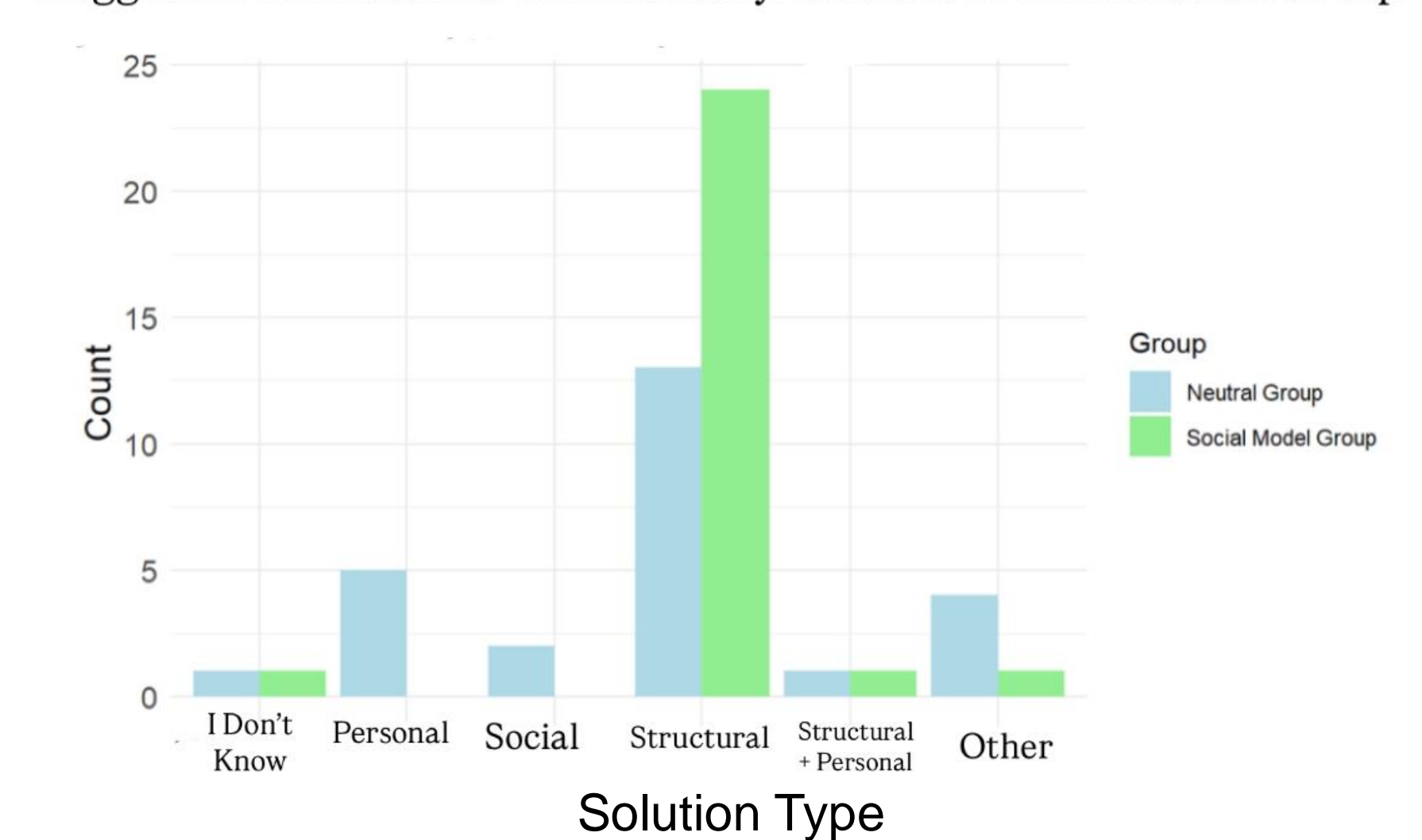
Children in the social model group showed significantly reduced bias in intended behavior: they expressed more equal interest in interacting with the disabled and non-disabled characters compared to the control group ($p = .007$).

Barrier Attribution: Structural vs. Personal by Condition



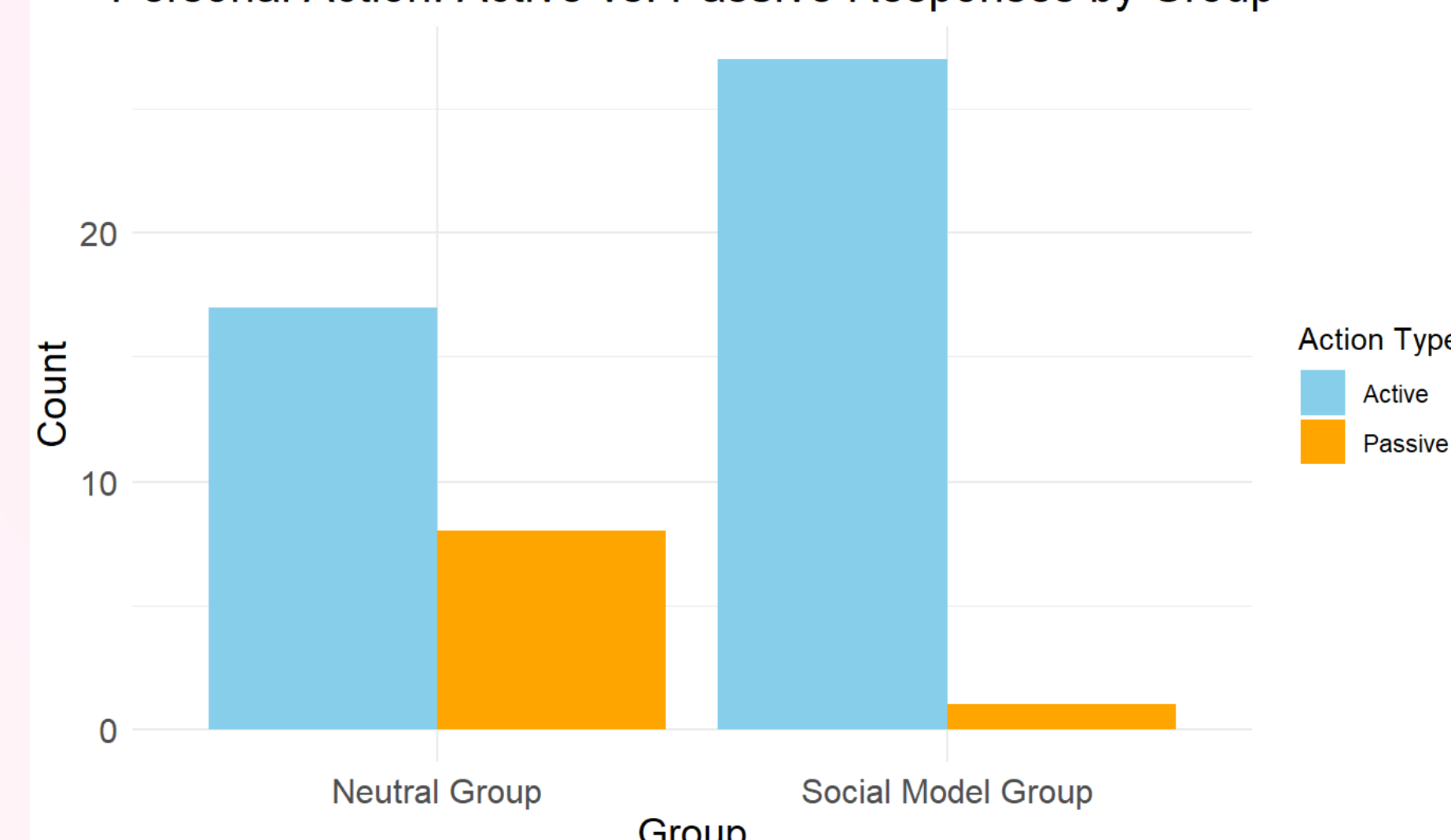
Children exposed to the social model video were significantly more likely to identify structural barriers (e.g., stairs, lack of ramps) as the reason Alex could not enter the store ($X^2(3) = 8.66, p = .034$).

Suggested Solutions for Accessibility: Neutral vs Social Model Group



When asked what could be done, experimental group participants overwhelmingly proposed structural solutions, while the control group included more personal or unclear suggestions ($X^2(11) = 127, p < .001$).

Personal Action: Active vs. Passive Responses by Group



Children in the social model group suggested more active, advocacy-based, and environment-changing responses ($X^2(19) = 71.18, p < .001$), compared to more passive or general help responses in the control group.

- A marginal trend also emerged for **fairness/okayness judgments**, with the social model group judging exclusion as less acceptable ($p = .055$).
- No significant differences were found in **trait attribution or friend preference**.

Conclusion & Significance

- Children who watched the social model video were more likely to attribute exclusion to structural barriers rather than personal limitations.
- Quantitative results showed reduced bias in behavior toward disabled peers and a marginal increase in perceived unfairness of exclusion.
- These findings highlight children's capacity to adopt more inclusive views when exposed to social model messaging. This suggests that schools, programs, and public spaces can foster empathy and equity by incorporating this framing early in development.
- Additionally, our findings show potential value of presenting disability through a social model lens in children's media.**

References

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