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The conversations we seek to avoid

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ABSTRACT

The current work presents the first inquiry into the conversations people seek to avoid. We introduce the Topic Avoidance Process Model, proposing two distinct processes when an interaction partner brings up a topic one wishes to avoid. When topic avoidance is motivated by concern for creating a conflict, one is more likely to leave the conversation, through increased activating emotions (e.g., annoyance). When motivated by concern for privacy, one is more likely to remain quiet, through increased inhibiting emotions (e.g., anxiety). In addition, these pathways predicted whom individuals focused on during the conversation (others vs. the self) as well as authenticity felt during conversations in the workplace. Three data-driven studies identified people's experiences with unwanted conversation topics, yielding the present model, then supported by five studies (N_{total} = 3200) using multiple methods, including retrospective recall, live conversations, and studies online and in the field as well as text analysis and machine learning.

1. Introduction

The success of an organization depends, in part, on the ability of organization members to work harmoniously together. Beyond efficient delegation of tasks and effective communication surrounding those tasks, interpersonal relationships matter a great deal. With repeated encounters, organization members become acquainted with one another through repeated conversations and reciprocal disclosures, such as talking about one's family and hobbies. Self-disclosures lead to liking (Collins & Miller, 1994), as does eliciting other's self-disclosures (Huang, Yeomans, Brooks, Minson, & Gino, 2017). Yet, self-disclosure does not always have positive effects on workplace relationships (Gibson, Harari, & Marr, 2018). People may have concerns about disclosing sensitive personal information to others (Slepian & Moulton-Tetlock, 2019). In addition, employees, particularly minority members, can have concerns about the effects of disclosing to others in the workplace (Arnett & Sidanius, 2018; Phillips, Rothbard, & Dumas, 2009; Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2020).

Where workplace climates have norms that discourage the informal and intimate social interactions reserved more for friends, managing how much to disclose during conversations is a difficult process. Every day, people speak approximately 16,000 words (Mehl, Vazire, Ramírez-Esparza, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007), and one-third of one's adult life is spent at work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). The complexity of conversations is compounded by its rapid turn-taking nature (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1978). During this process, whether speaking to colleagues, friends, family, or even one's romantic partner, there may be qualities about oneself that one seeks to *not* reveal during a conversation (John, Barasz, & Michael, 2015; Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017). An interaction partner might bring up a topic that one does not wish to discuss, which might prompt feelings of awkwardness (McLaughlin & Cody, 1982). Or, if interaction partners disagree on some issue, a heated argument or conflict can result (Kennedy & Pronin, 2008).

The tendency to engage in topic avoidance with other people has been generally linked to lower relationship quality (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Golish, 2000). Much of the research on topic avoidance has been conducted within the context of romantic relationships (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009; Merrill & Afifi, 2012). For instance, relationship dissatisfaction can prompt topic avoidance with one's partner, which can further increase relationship dissatisfaction (Merrill & Afifi, 2012). Topic avoidance has also been studied in families (Bevan, Rogers, Andrews, & Sparks, 2012; Golish & Caughlin, 2002). For example, children seek to avoid discussing certain topics with their parents, which has also been linked to reduced relationship quality (e.g., Afifi, 2003; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002).

In addition to being mostly confined to studying romantic and family relationships, this prior work has been confined to the study of people deciding whether or not to bring up a conversation topic. That is, prior work in this domain has examined the participant as the arbiter of what to bring up in conversation. In contrast, prior work has yet to examine what happens when someone else brings up a topic one wishes to avoid talking about.

In sum, conversations have the potential to create awkwardness and even conflict, and thus it makes good sense that people, therefore, will seek to not bring up things they do not wish to talk about. If only it was that easy. The topics of a conversation are not up to one person. Other people will introduce topics into a conversation, including topics one

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may wish to avoid. What happens when *someone else* brings up an unwanted conversation topic? The current work presents the first empirical examination of the experience of an unwanted topic being introduced into a conversation by someone else. We ask, how do people think, feel, and behave when an unwanted topic comes up in conversation.

1.1. The topic avoidance process model

We first conducted three data-driven studies (Studies 1–3) to understand the experiences people have when someone introduces a topic into conversation, which one seeks to avoid. Study 1 identified the conversation topics people seek to avoid, emotions most commonly reported in response to unwanted topics, and strategies most often deployed in response, collecting data on 20,000 unwanted conversations. Study 2 then measured per each recently avoided conversation (among the 10 most common topics identified in Study 1), the extent to which the most commonly reported emotions (from Study 1) were experienced. A two-factor model emerged from the emotions.

In Study 3, we additionally collected another 4000 responses to the question of why people seek to avoid such conversations. We submitted this corpus of text responses to a machine learning algorithm to identify the underlying semantic structure of participants' motivations. The commonly avoided topics, motivations, emotions, and behavioral responses to topic avoidance identified in Studies 1–3 formed the basis of our Topic Avoidance Process Model. Specifically, after these studies provided a picture of what topic avoidance looks like, we then proposed and tested our model.

We predicted two independent sets of interrelated processes would fit an indirect effect model—from *motivational* contexts for topic avoidance to *behavioral responses*—through *distinct emotional reactions* to unwanted conversation topics. Our model is based in the vast body of literature that demonstrates there are two core systems for behavioral regulation, one centered on *inhibiting* behaviors that could result in negative outcomes (the behavioral inhibition system), and one centered on *taking action* either to bring about positive outcomes or to avoid undesired outcomes (the behavioral activation system; e.g., Carver & White, 1994; Fowles, 1980; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997). We predicted an approach-based pathway and also an avoidance-based pathway in the context of topic avoidance.

Specifically, our model predicted two distinct processes in response to a conversation partner introducing an unwanted topic into a conversation. If one is concerned for privacy, they would be more likely to experience inhibitive emotions (such as anxiety) and decide to remain silent. On the other hand, if one is concerned for creating a conflict, they would be more likely to experience activating emotions (such as anger) and decide to leave the conversation. Studies 4–6 tested this model. Study 4a found the predicted pathways from motivation to emotion in anticipated conversations with known individuals sitting together in a group. Study 4b also found the same predicted pathways in live instant-message conversations with strangers. Study 5 then examined recalled conversations, and provided evidence that these pathways continued to predict behavioral outcomes.

Finally, Studies 6a and 6b found that these pathways had implications for individual's feelings of authenticity, both self-awareness and self-expression. The inhibition pathway that begins with seeking to avoid a conversation topic out of concern for privacy predicted focusing on the self (e.g., thinking about what one said, and how one felt), and thereby increased levels of authentic self-awareness. The activation pathway that begins with seeking to avoid a conversation topic out of concern for creating a conflict, in contrast, predicted focusing on the other or others in the conversation (e.g., thinking about what the other person/people said, thinking about how they felt), and thereby reduced levels of authentic self-expression.

1.2. Motivations for topic avoidance

Prior work has looked at which topics people avoid bringing up in specific settings (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). For example, a parent may not want to bring up a financial issue with their child, an employee may not want to talk about an ongoing work conflict at home, and a woman who recently had a miscarriage may not want to talk about pregnancy until some time has passed. In contrast to this work, we examined the psychological experience of having an unwanted topic brought up by *someone else* in a conversation. Choosing to not bring something up in a conversation should be quite different from having someone else bring up an unwanted conversation topic. For example, one may not want to talk about sex at work, and thus not bring it up. Yet, having a coworker bring up the topic of sex is quite a different situation. Now, one must decide how to handle being in a conversation that one does not want to have. We propose that how one feels and acts in response to an unwanted conversation topic will depend on one's motivations for avoiding that conversation topic. Studies 1–3 were deliberately data-driven so that we could let the participants tell us about their motivations for topic avoidance (rather than impose any top-down). As will be demonstrated, two broad motivations emerged (in Study 3), concern for privacy and concern for creating a conflict.

1.2.1. Privacy

In everyday life, people seek to establish some degree of privacy by setting a boundary between the self and others. A completely permeable boundary between the self and others means that any internal thought or feeling a person has would be freely shared with others, whereas an impermeable boundary would mean complete secrecy (Petronio, 2000). People's personal preference for privacy falls somewhere between the two extremes of total transparency and total secrecy (Petronio, 2000).

For employees, managing privacy is complicated given that people on average spend 90,000 hours at work over 40 years of 40-hour work weeks. The average U.S. full-time worker works 8.56 hours every day (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017), spending one-third of their time with their coworkers. With so much time at work, managing privacy and maintaining work-life balance is not easy. Employees seek privacy at work for good reasons; work home-life separation has emotional benefits (Sonnentag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010) and sharing of private information can harm relationships at work when employees come from different backgrounds and have different value systems (Phillips et al., 2009).

Organizations often have a larger diversity of people than one might typically encounter in their friend groups and families, and hence this might heighten concern for privacy. A large body work has studied how employees try to separate their work identity from their private identity (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). Not only do people try to avoid bringing work home, which only serves to increase a sense of exhaustion (Sonnentag et al., 2010; Sonnentag, Binnewies, & Mojza, 2010), but people also try to avoid bringing their self to work, for fear that one's true self may not belong in the workplace (Hewlin, 2003, 2009).

In the workplace, there is surely at least one domain where an employee feels to be in the minority (whether it is one's hobbies, preferences, personality, prior experiences, upbringing, social network, or other demographic variables; Slepian & Jacoby-Senghor, 2020). In particular, if one's personal life attributes seem inconsistent with what makes for a good or professional employee, self-expression at work can feel fraught with risks and uncertainties. Mothers will avoid talking about their family as a family-orientation may be seen as at odds with work (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Similarly, other minority group members will conceal invisible social identities such as sexual orientation and multi-racial backgrounds when people feel that these identities will not fit in, or that the expression of these identities may lead to unwarranted assumptions (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Ragins, Singh, & Cornwell, 2007). Thus, the stakes

might feel especially high in the workplace; staying quiet may be the preferred option, rather than taking a risk and saying the wrong thing. From the literature on privacy and work-life separation, we thus predicted that the more one is concerned for privacy, the more one will inhibit and stay quiet in response to an unwanted topic introduced into a conversation.

1.2.2. Conflict concern

Understanding the processes of topic avoidance will bring not only new theoretical insights, but also practical benefits. For instance, understanding how to foster more effective communication in the workplace should help increase employee satisfaction (Abugre, 2011; Orpen, 1997; Pincus, 1986). That said, reducing barriers to such free communication must be done carefully. When communicators come to the table with different perspectives and values, especially in diverse environments like the workplace, it is likely that those perspectives and values will conflict with one another.

Conflicts between interaction partners often arise when there are differences in values, education, and social backgrounds (Galinsky et al., 2015; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Montalvo & Reynal-Querol, 2005). Having different values can increase relationship conflict and process conflict, and thereby decrease workgroup performance and worker morale (Jehn et al., 1999). Different belief structures can create interpersonal friction, and subsequent conflicts can hurt job performance (Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999). Furthermore, conflicts hurt personal relationships (Collins & Read, 1990; Saavedra, Chapman, & Rogge, 2010) and make professional relationships difficult to manage (DiBenigno, 2017; Petriglieri, 2015).

What happens when a conflict arises? Research seeking an answer to this question has focused on different styles of conflict resolution (Xie, Song, & Stringfellow, 1998). Overt and significant conflicts more often prompt active styles of conflict resolution, whereas more covert and subtle conflicts prompt passive styles of conflict resolution (Leung, 1988; Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994). Thus, the more a conflict clearly presents itself, the more people are inclined to take action to resolve that conflict. We thus predicted that to the extent someone is concerned with creating a specific conflict with an interaction partner (e.g., stemming from opposing viewpoints), they will be more inclined to take action in response to an unwanted conversation topic (e.g., leave the conversation).

1.3. Reactions to unwanted conversation topics

We propose that concern with the integrity of one's privacy is an inhibiting motivation, prompting inhibiting responses to unwanted conversation topics. If the reason one is worried about saying the wrong thing is out of concern for privacy, then not saying anything at all might be the preferred response.

In contrast, we propose that concern with creating conflict is an activating motivation, prompting activating responses to unwanted conversation topics. That is, if the reason one seeks to avoid a conversation topic is the concern for creating a conflict about the conversation topic, staying quiet may not be preferred as it still could lead the interaction partner to ask for a response. Taking action, such as exiting the conversation may be the more effective strategy to prevent a conflict.

1.3.1. Emotional reactions

An unwanted conversation topic is likely to lead to some discomfort, yet no prior work has explored the emotional reactions people have to a conversation partner bringing up an unwanted conversation topic.

There are some hints in the prior literature that topic avoidance is associated with some level of negative affect. For instance, the more people seek to avoid bringing up topics in a conversation, the lower their relationship satisfaction. Both within the context of parent-child dyads and heterosexual dating couples, topic avoidance has been associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Thus, at least with respect to not wanting to introduce a topic into a conversation oneself, negative affective judgments seem to follow. Yet, rather than looking at global negative responses to unwanted conversation topics, we seek to understand the more nuanced emotional reactions people have to someone else bringing up an unwanted topic, and how these, in turn, relate to motivations and behaviors.

Gathering all common emotional reactions participants reported in an initial free-response survey, we created a scale that we introduced to a new set of participants based on 1000 participants' free responses. This scale was found to have two factors, one which aligned with the behavioral inhibition system (anxiety, nervousness, and embarrassment), and one which aligned with the behavioral activation system (annoyance, irritation, frustration).

1.3.2. Behavioral reactions

Prior work on topic avoidance has examined which topics participants introduce or seek to not introduce in a conversation, rather than the experience of being in a conversation when someone else brings up a topic that one does not want to talk about. Accordingly, prior work has yet to examine how people respond to unwanted conversation topics arising.

When someone starts talking about something one does not want to talk about, what happens next? When the conversation has many people, one option is simply staying quiet, waiting for the topic to change. Yet, if the conversation is a dyad only, simply staying quiet will not be a particularly feasible option. Perhaps instead the person can seek to change the subject. Another option might be to exit the conversation. We theorized that these potential reactions would fall under two categories: inhibitive reactions such as staying quiet and more active reactions such as leaving the conversation.

1.3.3. Felt authenticity

Finally, if during a conversation, one's conversation partner brings up a topic that one wishes to not talk about, whatever the response, it seems likely that feelings of authenticity will come to mind. While interest in authenticity has recently grown, its roots can be traced back to work on private and public self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975). That is, one can focus on one's private self (who one truly is), or how one appears to others (how one responds to others and is seen in their eyes). We propose that this self vs. other focus distinction underlies a distinction found in the literature on authenticity. Authenticity has been considered by many as a multi-dimensional construct, composed of authentic self-awareness and authentic self-expression (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Knoll, Meyer, Kroemer, & Schröder-Abé, 2015; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). We examined whether these distinctions align with our two pathways for topic avoidance, specifically in the workplace domain.

We predicted that finding oneself in unwanted conversations at work would predict feelings of both authentic self-awareness and authentic self-expression. Authentic self-awareness involves understanding oneself and being aware of who one truly is, whereas authentic self-expression is the inverse of accepting others' external influence (i.e., not simply saying what others want to hear, not letting oneself be influenced by others; Knoll et al., 2015).

We predicted that because a concern with privacy should enhance a self-focus, topic avoidance motivated by privacy should predict increased authentic self-awareness (i.e., an understanding of one's true self and what one feels comfortable discussing). In contrast, we predicted that because a concern with conflict with another should enhance a focus on that other, topic avoidance motivated by conflict should predict accepting others' external influence (i.e., reduced authentic self-expression to avoid creating a conflict).

Table 1
Frequency of topics reported by participants, Study 1.

Topic word in bold	Total	Family	Friends	Romantic Partners	Co-workers	Topic Word
polit, trump	2152	557	600	287	708	2056
problem, person, issu, health, abort, alcohol, weight	2084	625	442	386	631	526
money, salari, pay, financ, bill	1981	519	520	454	488	1410
work, job, cowork, boss, worker	1310	244	294	331	441	831
religion	1289	301	367	142	479	557
famili, kid, parent, children, mother	1144	155	302	391	296	805
relationship, partner, romant, girl, women, marriag, men	1136	338	272	409	117	585
sex	1065	367	259	127	312	1065
past, previous	510	92	69	319	30	448
friend	356	68	138	106	44	356

1.4. The current work

The first three studies use a bottom-up approach that examined the topics people seek to avoid in conversation, emotions experienced to unwanted conversation topics, and motivations for avoiding them. The later studies use a top-down approach that tested our dual pathway model (developed based off the results of Studies 1–3). Throughout the studies, we used a range of methods and participant populations. We collected data on multiple conversations per participant, and analyzed thousands of conversations with multilevel modeling. We treated conversation topic as a random factor in our analyses, and estimated fixed effects of interest that were not attributable to any particular unwanted conversation topic, thus allowing our results to generalize to unsampled conversation topics.

We also collected a large corpus of texts responses, which we submitted to a machine learning algorithm to uncover the latent semantic structure of the motivations people have for topic avoidance. Additionally, we conducted studies with a large diversity of participants, with diverse ages across the U.S. (and the world), both online and in the field, and we examined topic avoidance in general as well as in the workplace.

Finally, we examined past experiences with topic avoidance, anticipated reactions to an upcoming unwanted conversation, and live conversations where an unwanted topic was introduced. Across the studies, in addition to examining motivations for topic avoidance and emotional reactions, we also explored a range of outcomes including behavioral reactions, focus of attention during the conversation, and feelings of authenticity. Implications for topic avoidance, workplace authenticity, and employee and managerial practices are discussed.

2. Study 1: The conversation topics people seek to Avoid, emotional reactions and behavioral responses

Missing from prior work is a broad and systematic overview of the common topics people seek to avoid talking about in their daily life, the motivations for such topic avoidance, the emotional reactions experienced when unwanted topics come up in conversations, and the subsequent behavioral responses. In introducing a process model of conversation topic avoidance, the current work sought to fill this research gap. Study 1 first examined the conversation topics people avoid in everyday life, across a range of contexts, through a large online study.

2.1. Participants and design

We recruited 1000 participants via Amazon Mechanical Turk (M_{age} = 36.27 years, SD = 11.64, range = 18–80, 637 women, 360 men, 3 other).

2.1.1. Conversation topics

Participants were asked to list five topics they seek to avoid talking about with four different groups (order randomized), *friends*, *family*, *romantic partner*, and *coworkers*. Participants were allowed to list the same topic across multiple social groups.

2.1.2. Emotions and behavioral strategies

After having listed the 20 topics, participants were asked two additional open-ended questions: 1) how they would feel and 2) what they might do when any of the topics (they listed above) come up during a conversation.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Unwanted conversation topics

Free response data was analyzed via R statistical software (version 1.2.1268). We identified the most frequent topics across the four categories. Using a standard dictionary from the R-package *tm* (Meyer, Hornik, & Feinerer, 2008), we removed "stop words" (i.e., common function words that do not have content such as "the," "to," "a," etc.) and stemmed the words (i.e., "finance" and "financial" will be counted towards the same stem of "financ"). Subsequently, we combined the synonyms (following a recent paper that identified the most common secrets people keep; Slepian et al., 2017) and counted the frequency of all words, presented with frequency tables. We selected the top 10 unwanted conversation topics identified with this approach, and use these for the remainder of the paper (see Table 1).

People most commonly seek to avoid talking about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends (the SOM presents the less common responses).

2.2.2. Emotional experiences

The goal of identifying the emotions experienced was to create a scale for later studies, and thus it was desirable to not combine synonyms (i.e., emotion scales typically include several adjectives that could be considered synonyms, but have important and meaningful differences). We identified the ten emotion words that were most frequently reported as experienced when unwanted topics came up in conversation (see Table 2). Participants reported (in order of decreasing frequency) commonly feeling uncomfortable, anxious, nervous, annoyed,

Table 2
Frequency of emotions reported by participants, Study 1.

uncomfortable	299
anxious	166
nervous	146
annoyed	139
awkward	88
irritated	69
angry	63
uneasy	58
embarrassed	49
frustrated	39

awkward, irritated, angry, uneasy, embarrassed, and frustrated (see SOM for less common responses).

2.2.3. Behavioral strategies

Unlike conversation topics which were commonly reported using single words and short phrases, and emotion adjectives which were single words, the behavioral strategies were full sentences that required a different text analysis. We thus calculated the frequency of bi-grams to reduce this complexity while still maintaining more nuance than a single word could represent. As before, stop words were removed and the words were stemmed. We combined similar bi-grams, arriving only at three common strategies implemented when unwanted topics came up (Table 3; see SOM for the less common response).

When an unwanted topic came up in conversation, people commonly reported (in order of decreasing frequency) that they sought to change the subject, leave the conversation, and stay quiet (other words were specific ways to achieve those aims; e.g., making an excuse, listening).

2.2.4. Unwanted conversations questionnaire

Study 1 recruited a sample of 1000 participants across the U.S., and found that across a range of contexts, a set of conversation topics are commonly sought to be avoided. People often do not want to talk about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends. From these responses, we created the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, presented in Appendix A. In subsequent studies, we provide participants with this questionnaire to examine their specific experiences with seeking to avoid these conversation topics, when introduced by others, and their motivations for not talking about these topics.

In Study 1, we also found a set of emotions people frequently experience in response to unwanted conversation topics as well as common strategies deployed in response to unwanted conversation topics. In Studies 2–3, we explore the relationships between the emotions and strategies people deploy in encountering these conversation topics as well as the motivations participants have for avoiding these topics.

3. Study 2: Inhibiting and activating emotions, and behavioral responses

Study 1 revealed that people commonly sought to avoid talking about politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends. When these topics were introduced into conversation, people reported feeling uncomfortable, anxious, nervous, annoyed, awkward, irritated, angry, uneasy, embarrassed, and frustrated. Finally, in response to these unwanted conversation topics being introduced, people reported changing the subject, leaving the conversation, and staying quiet.

We created a scale from the most commonly experienced emotions. We predicted that in reporting one's experience with an unwanted conversation topic, participants' responses to the emotion scale would fall into two factors, inhibition- and activation-oriented emotions. Moreover, we predicted that inhibition-oriented emotions would predict staying quiet (an inhibition response), whereas activation-oriented emotions would predict leaving the conversation (an action-oriented response). We were agnostic as to whether trying to change the subject would be more linked to inhibition or activation as this could be in service of trying to stay quiet about a topic, or might be one trying to take action and change the course of the conversation. In other words, this goal may be common to all contexts in which an unwanted topic enters a conversation.

The number of people in a conversation might also predict the strategy utilized when an unwanted conversation arises. A conversation with more than two parties differs in numerous ways from a dyadic conversation (for a review, see Cooney, Mastroianni, Abi-Esber, & Brooks, 2019). Of particular relevance to the current work, in a multi-party conversation, as compared to conversation composed of only a dyad, each individual will have less airtime. Thus, staying quiet should be more difficult in a conversation of two people, whereas this is far more feasible in a conversation composed of more people. Likewise, leaving a conversation of only two people is quite different from leaving a conversation with many people. In a multi-party conversation, when one individual exits, this does not necessarily mean the end of the conversation, whereas in a dyadic conversation, to leave the conversation is to end the conversation. Accordingly, we predicted that when an unwanted topic is introduced, people would be both more likely to stay quiet in a multi-party conversation, and more likely to leave a multi-party conversation than a dyadic one.

3.1. Participants and design

We recruited 200 participants on MTurk, and 206 completed the study.[1] Due to a programming error in the survey flow, the demographics block of questions was only displayed to a subset of participants (we thus had demographic data only for 28 males and 21 females, 24% of the participants; M_{age} = 34.39, SD = 11.93, range = 19–63).

3.1.1. Unwanted conversations questionnaire

Participants were presented with the 10 topics identified in Study 1. Specifically, participants completed the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire that we introduced in the current work (see Table 4 above). Participants were asked to reflect on the past month. Per each topic, they were asked to choose from the following choices: 1) "Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it"; 2) "Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not mind talking about it"; 3) "No, this did not recently come up in a conversation I was in."

Per each instance of an unwanted topic coming up in a conversation (i.e., response option 1), participants reported the *type of conversation* (dyadic vs. multi-party) they were in, the *emotions* experienced when the topic came up, and the *behavioral responses* one took when the topic came up. We analyzed each individual conversation with multilevel modeling, treating participant and topic as random factors (for a similar example of this kind of approach, see Slepian et al., 2017).

3.1.2. Conversation type

We first collected data to capture a dichotomous variable, measuring whether the conversation was a dyad (only one other person beyond the participant), or whether the participant was involved in a multi-party conversation.[2]

3.1.3. Emotions and behavioral responses

Participants were asked, when the unwanted topic came up in conversation, to what extent they felt each of the 10 emotions (most frequently experienced by Study 1 participants): uncomfortable, nervous, irritated, uneasy, annoyed, awkward, embarrassed, frustrated, anxious, and angry (ranging from 1-not at all to 7-very much).

[1] When participants for whatever reason do not submit their code for payment on Mechanical Turk, it allows additional participants beyond the recruitment allotment to participate. Whenever this happens in the current work, we analyze all participants' data.

[2] Participants were asked, "including you, how many people were having the conversation." The critical distinction was whether the conversation was composed of a dyad (one other person besides the participant), or a multiparty conversation (multiple others in the conversation). Answering how many were in the conversation, occasionally the participant entered "one," while meaning "two," and thus this was coded as a dyad. Later studies resolve this ambiguity by providing participants with a dichotomous choice [two people total, including the participant (dyad), or more than two people total, including the participant (multi-party)].

Table 3
Frequency of bi-grams representing strategies reported by participants, Study 1.

Change subject, try change, change topic, something else, steer conversation, make joke, say anything, try steer	706
Leave conversation, walk away, leave room, go bathroom, excuse myself, excuse leave, excuse from, make excuse	237
Stay quiet, just listen, stay silent	59

Note: The labels we use throughout the paper in bold.

Table 4
Factor analysis of emotion scale, Study 2.

Item #		Anxiety Factor	Annoyance Factor
1.	Uncomfortable	**.71**	.12
2.	Nervous	**.80**	.28
4.	Uneasy	**.74**	.35
6.	Awkward	**.80**	.15
7.	Embarrassed	**.77**	.23
9.	Anxious	**.72**	.39
10.	Angry	.34	**.79**
3.	Irritated	.19	**.87**
5.	Annoyed	.17	**.83**
8.	Frustrated	.33	**.78**

Additionally, participants were asked what they did when the unwanted topic came up. Participants were shown the top three strategies identified in Study 1. Participants were allowed to select any options that fit, "stayed quiet," "tried to change the subject," and "left the conversation." Also, to allow the participants to indicate that they did not actually avoid the conversation topic, we allowed them to indicate "talked about it anyway." At the end of the study, participants were asked whether they had read all survey questions and responded carefully, or if they did not respond with care and that their data should be dropped.

3.1.4. Analysis strategy

As we collected multiple observations per each participant, we analyzed our data via multilevel modeling. We tested our fixed effects of interest while including participant and conversation topic as crossed random factors. Correspondingly, the remaining variance explained in each model corresponds to the general relationships of our measures that are not specific to any particular participant or conversation topic (Judd, Westfall, & Kenny, 2012). R-packages *lme4* (De Boeck et al., 2011) and *lmerTest* (Kuznetsova, Brockhoff, & Christensen, 2017) ran multilevel *lmer* models through Satterthwaite approximation tests to calculate *p*-values (scaling model estimates to approximate the *F*-distribution to estimate degrees of freedom, which are thus non-whole numbers and differ by predictor). Models that examined binary outcomes used *glmer* to model a binomial distribution (thus not needing to approximate the *F*-distribution, and hence yielding whole number degrees of freedom to test the significance of Wald's *z* tests).

3.2. Results and discussion

3.2.1. Frequency of topics

Fig. 1 presents the extent to which participants in the past month had sought to avoid each conversation topic. From our sample of 206 participants, there was a total of 510 times when an unwanted conversation came up, which translates to an average of 2–3 unwanted conversations per participant. Of course, not every instance of having politics, religion, family, etc. arise in conversation is unwanted. Indeed, as can be seen in Fig. 1, occasionally our participants did not mind talking about these topics. That said, they also frequently did not want to talk about them either. The frequently unwanted topics identified in the current work can be clearly differentiated from the topics people like to talk about (as demonstrated in Study 4b; those topics include, movies, TV shows, food, and music). Importantly, our study designs ensured we specifically examined psychological processes related to when these unwanted topics were indeed unwanted.

3.2.2. Emotions

A Principal Factor Analysis with a varimax rotation identified two factors with an Eigenvalues larger than 1 (Table 4). We label the first factor "anxiety," which includes anxious, awkward, embarrassed, nervous, uncomfortable, and uneasy, emotions that have been shown to map onto the behavioral inhibition system (i.e., rather than acting, inhibiting to avoid a negative outcome; Dissabandara, Loxton, Dias, Daglish, & Stadlin, 2012; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004).

We label the second factor "annoyance," which includes annoyed, frustrated, irritated, and angry, emotions that have been shown to map onto the behavioral activation system (i.e., taking action to avoid a negative outcome, or bring about a positive outcome; Cooper, Gomez, & Buck, 2008; Gray, 1982; Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2002; McNaughton & Corr, 2004). Both factors together accounted for 69% of the variance in the 10 variables. We thus averaged the emotions per each factor to examine how these emotion composites predicted behavioral responses to unwanted topics coming up in conversation.

3.2.3. Behavioral responses

Implementing the multilevel modeling strategy described above, per each insistence of topic avoidance, we entered both emotion composites (inhibition- and activation-oriented emotions) as simultaneous predictors of each behavioral response to address the unwanted conversation topic.

These models included random intercepts for participant and topic of conversation. The outcome variable was binary, coded as 0 if the participant did not select the strategy, and 1 if the participant selected the strategy. Whether the conversation was a dyadic conversation (coded as 0) or multi-party (coded as 1) would also likely determine the behavioral response, and thus was also included as a predictor (see Table 5).

This revealed that, as predicted, the more anxiety participants experienced when an unwanted topic was introduced into the conversation, the more likely they were to stay quiet. In contrast, the more annoyance participants experienced when an unwanted topic was introduced into the conversation, the more likely they were to leave the conversation.

The results demonstrate that the emotions experienced in response to unwanted conversation topics indeed cohere with the two core systems for behavioral regulation, the behavioral inhibition system and the behavioral activation system. That is, the emotions fell into two factors, with the corresponding emotions per each factor perfectly aligning with the ways in which these emotions have been previously associated with the behavioral inhibition and activation systems (see Carver & White, 1994; Fowles, 1980; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997).

As further evidence for this alignment, emotions that are inhibiting (e.g., anxious, nervousness, embarrassment) predicted staying quiet when someone brought up an unwanted topic, and emotions that are activating (e.g., annoyance, irritation, frustration) predicted taking action, and leaving the conversation.

We did not have a clear prediction for which behavioral system would predict trying to change the conversation topic. That said, we found that inhibiting emotions predicted trying to change the conversation topic. Trying to change the subject of a conversation could be more in service of an inhibition goal than a goal of taking action per se.

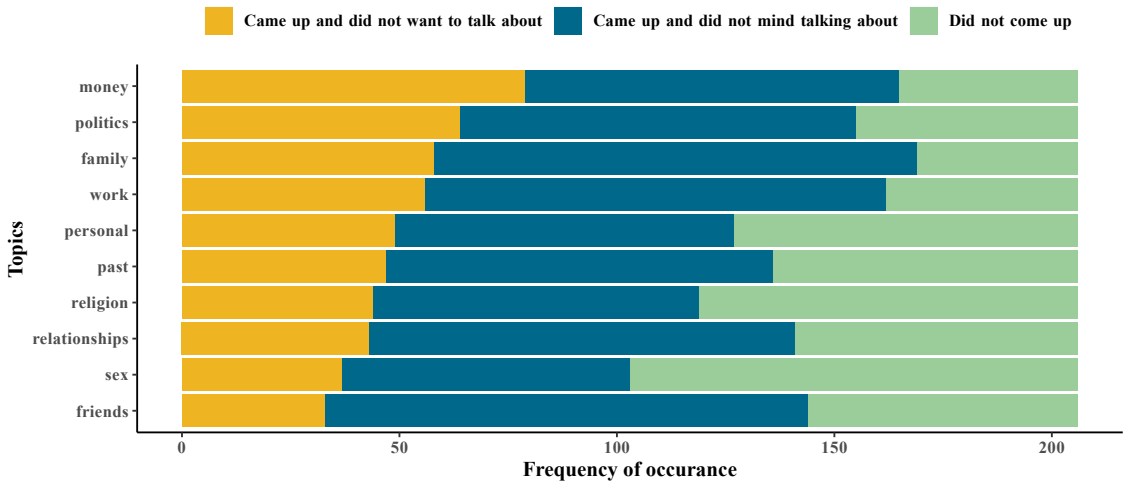

Fig. 1. The frequency of topic avoidance of Study 2 participants (N = 206) from the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, Study 2.

Table 5
Strategies utilized with different emotions. Study 2. (df = 504).

	B (Log likelihood)	*SE*	*Odds Ratio*	*z*	*p*
Predicting Staying Quiet (30.59%)					
Anxiety	**0.20**	**0.09**	**1.22**	**2.19**	**.03**
Annoyance	**−0.10**	**0.08**	**0.90**	**−1.24**	**.22**
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.86	0.24	2.36	3.63	< .001
Predicting Leaving conversation (18.24%)					
Anxiety	**0.01**	**0.13**	**1.01**	**0.09**	**.93**
Annoyance	**0.69**	**0.14**	**1.99**	**4.81**	**< .001**
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.95	0.33	2.59	2.85	.004
Predicting Changing subject (46.27%)					
Anxiety	**0.17**	**0.08**	**1.19**	**1.99**	**.05**
Annoyance	**−0.14**	**0.08**	**0.87**	**−1.81**	**.07**
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.51	0.22	0.60	−2.31	.02
Predicting Talking anyway (27.84%)					
Anxiety	**−0.17**	**0.10**	**0.84**	**−1.62**	**.11**
Annoyance	**0.14**	**0.09**	**1.15**	**1.52**	**.13**
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.61	0.28	0.54	−2.19	.03

Note: Focal emotion predictors in bold. Percentages indicate the proportions of participants to have engaged in the particular behavior.

If anything, activating emotions predicted a reduced tendency to change the subject.

Conversation type also predicted behavioral responses. In response to an unwanted conversation topic, when participants were in a multi-party (vs. dyadic) conversation, they were 2.36 times more likely to stay quiet (far more feasible in a multi-party than when in a dyad), and 2.59 times more likely to leave the conversation (also easier to do in a multi-party than when in a dyad). In contrast, in response to an unwanted conversation topic, when participants were in a dyadic (vs. multi-party) conversation, they were 1.67 times more likely to try to change the subject (participants may assume in a multi-party conversation, the topic will change course on its own).

In sum, in response to common unwanted conversation topics (when these topics were indeed unwanted), the emotions people frequently experience cohere into two factors, each representing a core system for behavioral regulation, 1) the behavioral inhibition system and 2) the behavioral activation system. Emotions that are inhibiting were related to trying to stay quiet and trying to change the subject. Activating emotions were associated with leaving the conversation. To clarify the nature of these relationships, Study 3 next sought to examine the motivations people have for topic avoidance.

4. Study 3: Motivations for conversation topic avoidance

Study 2 found that the most common emotional reactions to unwanted topics introduced into a conversation (from Study 1) cohered into two factors that aligned with the behavioral inhibition system and the behavioral activation system, which in turn predicted corresponding behavioral responses to unwanted conversations. Inhibiting emotions predicted inhibiting behavior (e.g., staying quiet) and activated emotions predicted taking action (e.g., leaving the conversation). However, the specific motivations behind these responses remain unknown.

In Study 3, we collected free response data from participants on why they might seek to avoid talking about the commonly avoided conversation topics identified in Study 1. We aimed to collect free-text responses per each of 1000 participants, yielding 1000 documents of text responses for which to submit to a machine-learning algorithm. Through this analysis we reveal the latent semantic structure in participants' described motivations for avoiding unwanted conversation topics.

4.1. Participants and design

We recruited 1000 participants on MTurk, and 1005 participants completed the study (mean age = 36.41, SD = 12.40, range = 18–77, 621 women, 383 men, and 1 other). We included an honesty check question at the end of the survey asking participants whether they had been honest in their responses in the survey (they were paid regardless of their answer); all participants responded yes.

Participants were randomly presented with one of the 10 topics identified by the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, introduced in Study 1 and implemented in Study 2. To generate a large dataset of text responses, we provided participants with a free response textbox per each of four social groups. Specifically, for a randomly selected topic, participants were asked to write about the reasons for which people would not want to talk about the topic with family, friends, romantic partners and coworkers.

4.2. Results and discussion

Consistent with our proposal of two distinct topic avoidance processes (one based in the behavioral inhibition system, and one based in the behavioral activation system), we predicted two major

Table 6
Order of motivations reported by participants, Study 3.

	Topic 1	Beta*	Topic 2	Beta*
#1	embarrass	.022	differ	.037
#2	share	.017	avoid	.026
#3	judg	.015	time	.019
#4	much	.015	argument	.017
#5	bring	.015	view	.014
#6	privat	.012	opinion	.013
#7	feel	.012	discuss	.010
#8	fear	.011	fight	.010
#9	worri	.010	conflict	.009
#10	need	.009	lead	.009

* Beta represents the probability a word is generated from each topic. The higher the beta, the more likely the word is generated from that topic.

corresponding machine-learning derived topics (i.e., constellations of co-occurring text in participants' responses) would emerge, one per system. We first combined the four responses from each participant into one document. We removed English stop words and other context-specific words (topic-related words, i.e., family, friends) and stemmed the words. Then, we implemented a machine learning algorithm to identify the underlying structure of the free responses for why they sought to avoid the conversation topics.

Specifically, to identify two topics that emerged from this free response data, we utilized the Latent Dirichlet Allocation topic model using R-package *topicmodels* (Hornik & Grün, 2011), and constructed a frequency table to visualize the words that most differentiated the two underlying clusters of motivations for topic avoidance (see Table 6). The machine learning algorithm identifies constellations of words that tend to uniquely cooccur, but the results (like with a factor analysis) require some interpretation (Sievert & Shirley, 2014). Table 6 thus provides the per-topic-per-word beta probability of stemmed words that are highly associated with each topic.

As can be seen, the first motivation for conversation avoidance that emerged from this analysis deals with privacy, worry, awkwardness, and concern with being judged (Topic 1). We label this as *privacy* concerns. The second motivation deals with different opinions/views, conflict, and argument, which we label as *conflict* concerns (Topic 2). With privacy concerns, people noted being worried about how they look to others and were afraid of being judged. With conflict concerns, people described wanting to avoid creating arguments among those with different views and opinions.

We propose that the privacy concern topic that emerged from the machine learning algorithm is an inhibiting motivation (i.e., wanting to hold back private personal information to avoid feeling embarrassed or being judged). In contrast, we suggest that the conflict concern topic is an activating motivation (i.e., wanting to take action so as to circumvent an argument, a fight or a conflict).

Accordingly, in Studies 4a and 4b, we predicted that when an unwanted topic comes up in conversation, privacy concerns would predict inhibiting emotions, whereas conflict concerns would predict activating emotions.

5. Studies 4a and 4b: Conversations in the field and online

Study 3 identified two broad motivations for conversation topic avoidance, concern for one's privacy and concern for creating a conflict with another. Studies 4a and 4b built on Study 3 by formally introducing and testing our Topic Avoidance Process Model. Specifically, we tested our prediction that 1) concern for privacy that follows from an unwanted conversation would predict inhibition-oriented emotions, whereas 2) concern for creating a conflict would predict activation-oriented emotions (Study 5 then also examines behavioral responses).

We examined this hypothesis in two unique settings. In Study 4a, we approached individuals in the field (Central Park in New York City), and randomly assigned them to (believe that they would) talk about one of the unwanted conversation topics (from the prior studies), specifically with a known other/others, with them in the park.

In Study 4b, we recruited individuals online, and they had an instant message computer-mediated conversation with another participant (a stranger). In both studies, immediately before the conversation, we measured privacy and conflict concerns. In Study 4a, before the conversation started, we measured anticipated emotions in the conversation, and in Study 4b, we measured emotions experienced during the conversation (after it finished).

We predicted that increasing levels of privacy concerns would predict increased inhibition-oriented emotions (e.g., anxious, embarrassment, nervous), whereas increasing level of conflict concerns would predict increased activation-oriented emotions (e.g., annoyance, irritation, anger).

5.1. Study 4a: Anticipated conversations with known others in the field

We sought 200 participants as in the prior studies and recruited as many participants as possible over two Saturdays in the summer. This led to 223 participants approached in Central Park in New York City. After excluding three participants who did not speak English, our final sample size was 220 participants (M_{age} = 30.40, SD = 8.52, range = 18–68, 129 women and 91 men). These participants included those who lived in the U.S., but also tourists who reported to be visiting from Argentina, Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China (/Hong Kong), Colombia, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, Kosovo, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Poland, Puerto Rico, South Africa, Trinidad, U.K., and Ukraine.

Experimenters approached groups (which ranged naturally from 2 to 6 individuals) by asking if they would be interested in participating in a very short study. After the participants agreed, the experimenter informed participants that they would have a very short, two-minute conversation with each other on a randomly selected topic.

After informing participants of the randomly-selected conversation topic (from the ten unwanted topics from Study 1; politics, money, personal issues/problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past, and friends), but before the conversation, participants were asked to complete a one-page survey. The survey contained two sets of questions, a six-item motivation scale (introduced here), and a ten-item emotion scale (from Study 2). For the former, participants were asked, in having the upcoming conversation, how much they were concerned (from 1-not at all concerned to 7-very concerned) with "privacy," "being judged," "how people think of you," (privacy concerns; α = 0.75), and "causing an argument," "creating a conflict," and "having a disagreement" (conflict concerns; α = 0.83). After the participants completed the scales, participants were thanked and debriefed (no conversation about the randomly-assigned topic actually took place).

5.2. Study 4b: Live conversations with strangers online

In Study 4b, we connected participants online through ChatPlat, an instant message platform for research (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Huang et al., 2017). Anticipating some participants would fail to connect with others, we recruited 250 participants on MTurk, seeking a final sample of 200 participants. We received 253 responses and three participants reported that their data should be dropped from the study (not responding with honesty or care), and 73 participants were unable to connect with another participant (i.e., two participants were not online at the same time). This led to a sample size of 177 participants who connected with a conversation partner for the study (M_{age} = 35.37, SD = 10.72, range = 21–72, 102 women and 75 men).

Participants first were informed they would have a conversation with another person (but not until after the study begun), and we

randomly displayed a choice between two topics. One option was always "personal stories," a topic we anticipated would be unwanted relative to a randomly selected topic pre-tested to be desirable (movies, food, TV shows, hobbies and music). As anticipated, most participants did not want to talk about "personal stories," relative to the other topics (130 participants; 73% of the 177 participants). We did not include in analysis the participants who wanted to talk about personal stories as such participants could not be said to be having an unwanted conversation.

To increase the personal nature of what was to be discussed, participants completed a modified version of the Common Secrets Questionnaire (Slepian et al., 2017). Participants were shown five common categories of secrets, presented in quotes, that shared conceptual overlap with the topics from Study 1 (presented in parentheses), such as "dislike a friend" (topic: friends), "dissatisfied with your situation at work" (topic: work), "personal beliefs" (topics: religion and politics), and "unhappy in a romantic relationship" (topic: romantic relationships). Participants were asked among the common secrets (presented in quotes), which secrets they were currently keeping, and to identify one to two secrets that they could use some advice on.

Participants were next informed that they would have a conversation where they would specifically ask for advice on one of their secrets. Participants reported, in having the conversation, how much they were concerned with privacy, and creating a conflict with the other participant (as in Study 4a).

Participants were then paired with one another for a live conversation via ChatPlat, and asked to have their conversation (i.e., about their secrets and to ask for advice). After the online conversation, which lasted 5 to 10 min, participants reported the emotions they experienced during the conversation (using the same scale items as in Studies 2 and 4a).

5.3. Results and discussion

Adopting the multilevel modeling strategy from Study 2, we entered privacy and conflict motivations for topic avoidance as simultaneous predictors of emotions, treating conversation group (Study 4a)/dyad (Study 4b) as a random factor. To isolate the unique relationship of each motivation with each emotional response to an unwanted conversation topic, we entered the alternate emotion composite in each analysis.

As conversation type varied in Study 4a (i.e., dyadic vs. multi-party, depending on the size of the group that Central Park participants were in), we also included whether the conversation was dyadic (coded as 0) or multi-party (coded as 1) as in the prior studies. As can be seen in Tables 7 and 8, only two positive effects consistently emerged in both studies: *privacy concerns predicted inhibition-emotions of anxiety*, whereas *conflict concerns predicted activation-emotions of annoyance*.

Whereas there was a positive relationship between conflict concern and anxiety in Study 4a, there was no such relationship in Study 4b; hence this unexpected relationship was not reliable. In both Studies 4a and 4b, there was also a negative relationship, such that while conflict concerns predicted increased annoyance, privacy concerns predicted reduced annoyance. In Study 4a, which had both dyads and multi-party groups, an unwanted conversation topic evoked more anxiety in multi-party groups than in dyads.

Study 4a asked participants who were with known others (who were lounging in a park) to have a conversation about a randomly-chosen topic from the 10 most-commonly unwanted conversations. We measured concerns with the upcoming conversation and anticipated emotions (participants believed they were about to have the conversation). Study 4b paired participants with strangers over the internet, and asked participants to actually have the unwanted conversation, thus allowing us to measure emotions experienced in the conversation (immediately after it finished).

In both studies, despite different manners of having a conversation (live in person, vs. over the internet), different interaction partners (known others vs. strangers), and very different participant populations (tourists hailing from all across the world vs. MTurk participants), we found evidence for both of our predicted effects in both studies.

Table 7
Emotion as a function of privacy and conflict concerns, Study 4a.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Anxiety						
Privacy Concerns	**0.29**	**0.17, 0.40**	**0.06**	**4.84**	**213.85**	**< .001**
Conflict Concerns	**0.11**	**−0.01, 0.23**	**0.06**	**1.86**	**210.70**	**.06**
Annoyance	0.47	0.36, 0.58	0.05	8.68	210.85	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.34	−0.62, −0.05	0.14	−2.33	51.68	.02
Predicting Annoyance						
Privacy Concerns	**−0.15**	**−2.80, −0.02**	**0.07**	**−2.25**	**211.06**	**.03**
Conflict Concerns	**0.14**	**0.01, 0.27**	**0.07**	**2.04**	**212.34**	**.04**
Anxiety	0.55	0.43, 0.68	0.06	8.69	210.32	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.21	−0.09, 0.52	0.16	1.37	51.89	.18

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.

As predicted, the more participants were concerned with privacy with regard to the unwanted conversation, the more they anticipated and experienced inhibiting emotions of anxiety (e.g., anxious, nervous, embarrassed). In contrast, the more participants were concerned with creating a conflict with their conversation partners, the more they anticipated and experienced activating emotions of annoyance (e.g., annoyed, irritated, frustrated). Although not predicted, this distinction was further reinforced by privacy concerns being linked with reduced activating emotions.

6. Study 5: Motivations, emotions, and behavioral responses

The Topic Avoidance Process Model that we introduce in the current work proposed *motivational* contexts for topic avoidance would predict *behavioral responses*—through *distinct emotional reactions* to unwanted conversation topics. Specifically, we predicted an inhibiting pathway and an activating pathway based in the two core systems for behavioral regulation (i.e., inhibiting behaviors that could result in negative outcomes, and taking action to bring about positive outcomes or avoid undesired outcomes; Carver & White, 1994; Fowles, 1980; Gray, 1982; McNaughton & Corr, 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997).

Study 2 revealed that, in response to unwanted conversations, inhibiting emotions of anxiety (anxious, nervous, embarrassed) predicted an inhibited response (staying quiet), whereas activating emotions of annoyance (annoyed, irritated, frustrated) predicted an activating response (taking action by leaving the conversation).

Study 3 then revealed with a bottom-up descriptive approach two broad motivations for conversations avoidance, concern for privacy and concern with creating a conflict. Studies 4a and 4b found that these two motivations align with the two proposed pathways, whereby privacy concerns predicted emotions that were inhibiting, and conflict concerns predicted emotions that were activating.

Studies 4a and 4b designs did not allow participants to have the option to remain quiet, change the conversation topic or leave the conversation. Therefore, in Study 5, we measured behavioral responses to unwanted conversations to test our full model (Fig. 2).

6.1. Participants and design

We recruited 200 participants on MTurk and received 202 responses. We included the same honesty check question as in the prior

Table 8
Emotion as a function of privacy and conflict concerns, Study 4b.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Anxiety						
Privacy Concerns	**0.43**	**0.25, 0.60**	**0.09**	**4.85**	**124.00**[a]	**< .001**
Conflict Concerns	**−0.05**	**−0.23, 0.14**	**0.10**	**−0.47**	**124.00**[a]	**.64**
Annoyance	0.72	0.48, 0.95	0.12	5.96	124.00[a]	< .001
Predicting Annoyance						
Privacy Concerns	**−0.12**	**−0.23, −0.002**	**0.06**	**−1.99**	**111.12**	**.05**
Conflict Concerns	**0.14**	**0.03, 0.26**	**0.06**	**2.41**	**115.24**	**.02**
Anxiety	0.31	0.21, 0.41	0.05	6.15	117.06	< .001

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.
[a] In some version of R/lme4, the random intercept model fails to converge properly. However, when dropping the random intercept (group in this case), the patterns of significance remain the same.

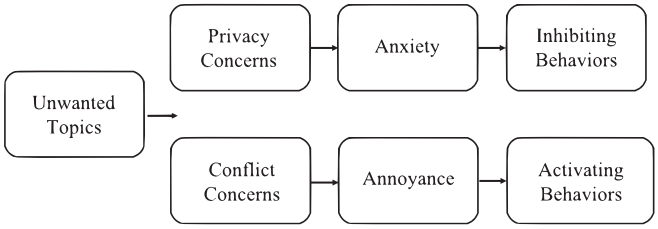

Fig. 2. The Topic Avoidance Process Model.

studies; excluding the two participants who indicated they did not respond with care and accuracy, which yielded a final sample of 200 participants (M_{age} = 37.43 years, *SD* = 12.00, range = 20–76, 105 women, 96 men).

Study 5 had a similar design to Study 2. As in Study 2, participants completed the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, but we limited participants to reflect on only conversations from the past week (rather than the past month as in Study 2). Per each topic that participants answered "Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it," participants completed measures per the specific conversation they were in.

Per each recent unwanted conversation, participants completed the scale of motivations for topic avoidance (from Studies 4a and 4b), as well as the scale of inhibiting and activating emotions experienced during the conversation (from Studies 2, 4a, and 4b), and behavioral responses to the unwanted conversation (from Study 2).

6.2. Results and discussion

6.2.1. Frequency of topic avoidance

From our sample of 200 participants, there was a total of 440 times when an unwanted conversation came up, which translates to an average of 2–3 conversations each participant was in (in the past week) where they sought to avoid talking about a topic introduced by someone else (Fig. 3).

6.2.2. Motivations for topic avoidance predicting emotional reactions

We first examined the motivations for topic avoidance as simultaneous predictors of emotional reactions to unwanted conversation topics, implementing the same multilevel modeling approach from the prior studies. We examined the unique relationship of each motivation for topic avoidance with each emotional response to an unwanted conversation topic (see Table 9).

As predicted, the more that participants were concerned for their *privacy* when an unwanted topic came up in conversation, the more they experienced *inhibiting* emotions of anxiety (e.g., anxious, nervous, embarrassed).

In contrast, the more that participants were concerned with creating *conflict*, the more they experienced *activating* emotions of annoyance (e.g., annoyed, irritated, frustrated). The concern with privacy also predicted reduced activating emotions. Each of these effects replicated Studies 4a and 4b's results.

We also found that when an unwanted conversation topic came up in a dyadic conversation (vs. multi-party conversation), people were significantly more anxious, and independently, marginally more annoyed.

6.2.3. Emotional reactions predicting behavioral responses

We next examined whether emotional reactions to unwanted conversations predicted behavioral responses. In pursuit of testing a mediational model, we also entered the two motivations (as is required by a mediational model to isolate the *b paths*; see Table 10 below).

This revealed that independent of the motivations for topic avoidance, the more *inhibiting* emotions of anxiety that participants experienced (e.g., uncomfortable, uneasy, awkward) the more likely they were to *stay quiet*.

In contrast, the more *activating* emotions of annoyance they experienced (e.g., annoyed, frustrated, angry), the significantly more likely they were to *leave* the conversation.

Here, neither anxiety nor annoyance predicted changing the subject, whereas changing the subject was predicted by anxiety in Study 2. Across studies, changing the subject thus was not reliably related to one pathway over the other (this might be an issue with the item wording, an issue we return to in the General Discussion). Consistent with Study 2, when participants were in a multi-party (vs. dyadic) conversation, they were more likely to stay quiet.

6.2.4. Mediation analysis

Our mediation analysis is unique in that the models are multilevel and the outcome variable is binary. There is no current consensus on how to conduct multilevel mediation analyses nor on how to examine indirect effects when the units of the two paths differ (i.e., the *a* path here is an unstandardized regression coefficient from a Gaussian model, whereas the *b* path is a log-likelihood value from a binomial model).

A recent paper suggests a formula for calculating an indirect effect that circumvents both of these issues (Iacobucci, 2012). The logic of the bootstrapped indirect effect test (which multiplies the two path coefficients per some number of empirical bootstrapped simulations of the dataset) is maintained in this method, while also converting the paths into standardized units so that they can be multiplied. The $Z_{Mediation}$ statistic divides the *a* coefficient by its standard error, and the *b* coefficient by its standard error, and multiples these resulting *z*-values, yielding the numerator of the equation, which is divided by the pooled standard error (i.e., the square root of the sum of the two squared z-values and one). The result is the $Z_{Mediation}$ statistic, a standardized representation of the strength of the indirect effect, whereby its significance can be tested via a *z*-test. We calculated the indirect effect for our two postulated pathways with this formula using the coefficients from Tables 9 and 10 (see Table 11). While it might be logical to

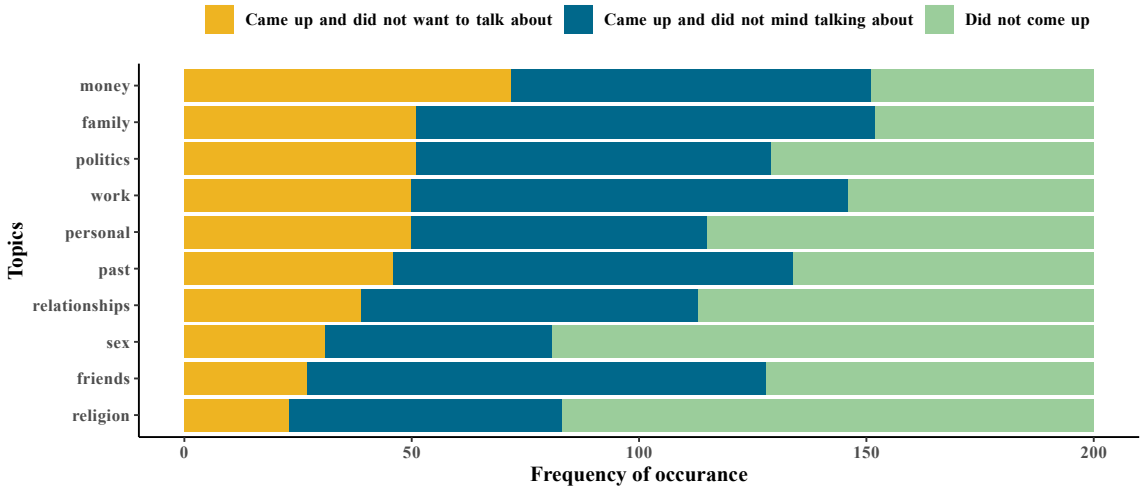

Fig. 3. The frequency of topics in Study 5 participants (N = 200) report having encountered each topic in the past week.

Table 9
Emotions as a function of privacy and conflict concerns, Study 5.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Anxiety						
Privacy Concerns	**0.48**	**0.42, 0.55**	**0.03**	**14.52**	**426.43**	**< .001**
Conflict Concerns	**0.03**	**−0.03, 0.09**	**0.03**	**1.03**	**417.02**	**.30**
Annoyance	0.27	0.19, 0.34	0.04	6.97	424.27	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.24	−0.47, −0.01	0.12	−2.07	423.03	.04
Predicting Annoyance						
Privacy Concerns	**−0.12**	**−0.21, −0.03**	**0.05**	**−2.49**	**422.75**	**.01**
Conflict Concerns	**0.34**	**0.27, 0.40**	**0.03**	**10.15**	**402.99**	**< .001**
Anxiety	0.37	0.26, 0.48	0.05	6.84	433.28	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.25	−0.51, 0.02	0.14	−1.81	413.73	.07

Note: Focal motivation predictors in bold.

consider the behavioral outcome as occurring last, and the motivation occurring first, these indirect effects should be understood as based in correlation, rather than as demonstrating a casual process.

We found that when an unwanted conversation topic came up in the past week, the more participants were concerned with *privacy*, the more likely they were to *stay quiet*, through increased *inhibiting emotions of anxiety*.

In contrast, the more participants were concerned with creating *conflict*, the more likely they were to *leave the conversation*, through increased *activating emotions of annoyance*. The concern with privacy did not predict staying quiet through activating emotions, nor did concern with conflict predict leaving the conversation through inhibiting emotions.

These findings provide support for our Topic Avoidance Process Model, whereby in responses to unwanted topics being brought up in conversation, we predicted 1) a set of two pathways, one based in the behavioral inhibition system, and one based in the behavioral activation system, and 2) that motivational contexts for topic avoidance would predict behavioral responses through corresponding emotional reactions (see Table 10). Indeed, participants' emotional reactions to unwanted conversation topics showed a two-factor structure of inhibiting and activating emotions, which aligned both with corresponding motivations for topic avoidance (concerns for privacy and for conflict), and corresponding responses (staying quiet, and leaving the conversation, respectively).

Table 10
Strategies utilized with emotions, Study 5. (df = 432).

	B (Log likelihood)	*SE*	*Odds Ratio*	*z*	*p*
Predicting Staying Quiet (29.32%)					
Anxiety	**0.27**	**0.11**	**1.31**	**2.37**	**.02**
Annoyance	**−0.08**	**0.09**	**0.92**	**−0.90**	**.37**
Privacy concerns	−0.19	0.09	0.83	−2.00	.05
Conflict concerns	0.08	0.07	1.08	1.09	.27
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	1.20	0.26	3.32	4.55	< .001
Predicting Leaving conversation (14.78%)					
Anxiety	**−0.22**	**0.16**	**0.80**	**−1.40**	**.16**
Annoyance	**0.47**	**0.14**	**1.60**	**3.39**	**< .001**
Privacy concerns	0.02	0.13	1.02	0.14	.89
Conflict concerns	0.07	0.10	1.07	0.68	.50
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.54	0.36	1.72	1.48	.14
Predicting Changing subject (39.78%)					
Anxiety	**−0.08**	**0.10**	**0.92**	**−0.85**	**.39**
Annoyance	**−0.02**	**0.08**	**0.98**	**−0.21**	**.83**
Privacy concerns	0.29	0.09	1.34	3.43	< .001
Conflict concerns	0.01	0.06	1.01	0.22	.83
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.42	0.25	0.66	−1.70	.09
Predicting Talking anyway (29.32%)					
Anxiety	**−0.05**	**0.11**	**0.95**	**−0.41**	**.68**
Annoyance	**0.004**	**0.09**	**1.00**	**0.04**	**.97**
Privacy concerns	−0.15	0.09	0.86	−1.63	.10
Conflict concerns	−0.14	0.07	0.87	−1.94	.05
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.38	0.28	0.68	−1.36	.17

Note: Focal emotion predictors in bold.

7. Studies 6a and 6b: Unwanted conversations at work, self/other-focus, and feelings of authenticity

Conversations can be fraught with challenge and uncertainty. As discussed in the introduction, the workplace is a particularly challenging place when it comes to managing the boundaries of interpersonal relationships (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2006; Rothbard et al., 2005). Our final Study 6a (and its exact replication Study 6b) sought to examine topic avoidance in this consequential context. With diverse perspectives and individuals in the workplace, people are likely to encounter individuals with different value systems and beliefs, which could cause concern for being judged (privacy concern) but also for voicing opinions that could upset another (conflict concern). Moving

Table 11
Significance test of mediation model with binary outcomes, Study 5.

IV	Mediator	DV	*95% CI*	*Zmediation*	*p*
Privacy →	**Anxiety →**	**Stayed Quiet**	**0.46, 4.38**	**2.42**	**.02**
		Left Conversation	−3.33, 0.59	−1.37	.17
		Changed Subject	−2.76, 1.16	−0.80	.42
Conflict →	**Annoyance →**	Stayed Quiet	−2.84, 1.08	−0.88	.38
		Left Conversation	**1.25, 5.17**	**3.21**	**.001**
		Changed Subject	−2.21, 1.71	−0.25	.80

Note: Significant indirect effects in bold.

beyond emotional reactions and behavioral reactions to unwanted conversation topics, Studies 6a and 6b examined what participants attend to during these conversations.

When do participants attend more to the self, and when do they attend more to their interaction partners? Our prior studies suggest that there are two broad motivations and corresponding pathways for when people seek to avoid a topic that has been introduced in conversation. We predicted that concern with privacy would prompt a participant to attend more to the self during a conversation. In contrast, we predicted that concern with creating a conflict would prompt a participant to attend more to the other person/people during conversation.

Finally, we predicted that these processes would have relevance to feelings of authenticity. Prior work on authenticity in the workplace has distinguished between *knowing* oneself and *expressing* oneself (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Knoll et al., 2015; van den Bosch & Taris, 2014). Drawing from research on self-consciousness, we propose that these two forms of authenticity align with self-focus and other-focus, respectively. The distinction between attending to *oneself* during a conversation versus attending to *others* shares conceptual overlap with research on *private* and *public* self-consciousness.

The more one attends to the self (e.g., what one has said, how one feels), the more one experiences private self-consciousness. Private self-consciousness is associated with an enhanced awareness of one's self-concept, with a focus on being aware of who one truly is, and understanding one's actions (Fenigstein et al., 1975). We thus predicted that when an unwanted conversation topic evoked privacy concerns, people would attend more to themselves during the conversation, which would, in turn, predict greater feelings of self-awareness (i.e., increasing the feeling that they know who they truly are and what they feel comfortable discussing).

In contrast, the more one attends to others (e.g., what others have said, what others might feel), the more one experiences public self-consciousness. By focusing on how others might feel and maintaining one's relationship with those others, individuals with public self-consciousness adjust their behavior to others accordingly (Fenigstein et al., 1975). We thus predicted that when an unwanted conversation topic evoked conflict concerns, people would attend more to their interaction partners during the conversation. We predicted that this focus on responding appropriately to the other person (to maintain the relationship) would predict feeling that one is accepting external influence (the inverse of authentic self-expression; Knoll et al., 2015).

To test these hypotheses, we adapted a measure previously used to capture self-awareness and acceptance of external influence in the workplace. The Authenticity Inventory from Knoll et al. (2015) found two factors in self-reported authenticity, Authentic Self-Awareness (knowing one's true self) and Authentic Self-Expression (expressing one's true self; i.e., the inverse of accepting external influence).

7.1. Participants and design

In both Studies 6a and 6b, we sought to recruit 200 participants on MTurk to participate in the study. For Study 6a, we received 202 responses (M_{age} = 33.27 years, *SD* = 9.79, range = 18–65, 107 men, 94 women, and one other). For Study 6b, we received 199 responses (M_{age} = 35.67 years, *SD* = 9.04, range = 20 to 66, 104 men, 94 women, and 1 other). We included the same honesty check question as in previous studies. Two Study 6a participants were excluded, and three Study 6b participants were excluded, yielding final samples of 199 and 196 participants, respectively.

Both studies had the exact same methods. Study 6b was an exact replication of Study 6a. Participants first completed the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire as in Studies 2 and 5. Per each topic that was recently brought up (in the past month) that participants did not want to talk about *at work*, participants indicated the type of conversation they were in (dyadic vs. multi-party), their motivations for avoiding that topic (concern for privacy and concern with creating a conflict)—each from the earlier studies—as well as what they were attending to (the self vs. the other/s, described below). Finally, they reported on their feelings of authenticity during the conversation (self-awareness and self-expression, described below).

Drawing upon prior work on conversations (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Caughlin & Golish, 2002; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995), per each conversation, participants reported the extent of focus on the self vs. others during the conversation. Participants were asked during the conversation (from 1-not at all to 7-very much), how much were they "thinking about what I said," "thinking about how I felt," and "thinking about my true self" to capture a self-focus, and "thinking about what the other person/people said," "thinking about how they felt," and "thinking about maintaining a relationship with them" to capture a focus on others. We predicted that *privacy* concerns would predict focusing on one's *self* during the conversation, whereas *conflict* concerns would predict focusing on the *other person/people* in the conversation.

Also per each conversation that participants did not want to have at work, participants reported their feelings of authenticity in that conversation. Participants answered a six-item authenticity questionnaire (adapted from Knoll et al., 2015). The six-item scale captures two dimensions of authenticity, and as can be seen in Table 12, we found the same factor structure in the present study as in prior work.

As in Studies 2 and 5, at the end of the study, participants were asked whether they had read all survey questions and responded carefully, or if they did not respond with care and that their data should be dropped.

7.2. Results and discussion

7.2.1. Frequency of topic avoidance

Figs. 4 and 5 present the extent to which participants recently had sought to avoid each conversation topic while at work. From Study 6a's final sample of 199 participants, there was a total of 432 times when an unwanted conversation came up, and from Study 6b's final sample of 196 participants, there was a total of 392 times when an unwanted conversation came up, each of which translates to an average of 2–3 recent unwanted conversations in the workplace (from the 10 topics).

7.2.2. Predicting self vs. other focus from motivations for topic avoidance

We implemented the same multilelevl modelling analysis strategy as in the earlier studies. As predicted (see Tables 13 and 14), in both studies, privacy concerns were significantly positively related to a self-

Table 12
Authenticity scale items, Study 6a & 6b.

	Items	Study 6a		Study 6b	
		ASA Factor	ASE Factor	ASA Factor	ASE Factor
ASA	I understood my self-related thoughts.	**.90**	.01	**.91**	.06
	I was aware of who I truly am.	**.90**	.06	**.90**	.09
	I had a very good understanding of why I said the things I did.	**.86**	−.02	**.95**	.03
ASE	I was strongly influenced by the opinions of others.	.03	**.83**	.28	**.68**
	I nodded or stayed silent to convey agreement with someone even though I really disagreed.	−.07	**.81**	−.09	**.74**
	I said what I thought others would want to hear.	.04	**.89**	.03	**.87**

Note: ASA = Authentic Self-Awareness. ASE = Authentic Self-Expression (the inverse of accepting external influence).

focus during conversations in the workplace (thinking about "what I said," "how I felt", and "my true self") whereas conflict concerns were significantly positively related to an other-focus during conversations in the workplace (thinking about "what the other person/people said," "how they felt," and "maintaining a relationship with them").

7.2.3. Predicting feelings of authenticity from self and other focus

Next, in pursuit of testing a mediational model on feelings of authenticity, we examined both foci (self and other) as simultaneous predictors of felt authenticity, including the preceding variables (as would be required by a mediational model to isolate the *b* path), and also including the alternate authenticity scale to isolate the unique relationship with each.

As predicted (see Tables 15 and 16), a self-focus during the conversation most closely aligned with the Authentic Self-Awareness felt during workplace conversations, whereas an other-focus during the conversation most closely aligned with the Authentic Self-Expression felt during workplace conversations.

Specifically, in both Studies 6a and 6b, although focusing on others was associated with increased Authentic Self-Awareness, *focusing on the self most strongly predicted Authentic Self-Awareness* (as indicated by non-overlapping 95% CIs in both cases). A focus on the self was not consistently associated with Authentic Self-Expression, whereas *a focus on others in the conversation was consistently associated with reduced Authentic Self-Expression.*

It is important to note that these two authenticity scales capture notably distinct aspects of authenticity. Self-awareness does not refer to how people express themselves to others, and self-expression does not refer to awareness of one's true self. The most reliable effects were that—independent of how authentic people felt their expressions were—*the more they were focusing on themselves in the workplace conversation, the better they felt they understood themselves.* In contrast—independent of how well people felt they understood themselves—*the more they were focusing on the other person/people in the workplace conversation, the less authentic they felt their expressions were.*

7.2.4. Mediation analysis

Finally, we implemented the same statistical mediation modeling strategy as in Study 5. We hypothesized that privacy concerns would be related to heightened levels of self-awareness, through greater focus on the self. And we predicted that conflict concerns would be related to lower levels of self-expression authenticity (i.e., increased acceptance of external influence), through more focus on others in the conversation. Indeed, these mediation paths were significant (see Tables 17 and 18).

Unexpectedly, in both studies we observed a significant pathway from conflict concern to higher levels of self-awareness through an enhanced other-focus. Accordingly, topic avoidance motivated by privacy concerns and conflict concerns were both associated with increased self-awareness, but through different mechanisms.

Topic avoidance motivated by privacy concerns predicted an increased self-awareness through an increased self-focus. Topic avoidance motivated by conflict concerns also predicted an increased self-awareness, yet here through an increased other-focus. Thus, *higher levels of self-awareness seem to follow from both a self-focus and an other-focus* (see Tables 17 and 18 above). Self-awareness may require paying attention to both the internal and external world.

In sum, motivation to avoid an unwanted conversation topic predicts increased authentic self-awareness, but through two different pathways. Topic avoidance motivated by privacy concerns predicts a heightened self-focus, and thereby self-awareness. Topic avoidance motivated by conflict concerns predicts a heightened other-focus, which also feeds forward to increased self-awareness. Yet, by one pathway, topic avoidance predicts reduced authentic self-expression. Topic avoidance motivated by conflict concerns was associated with

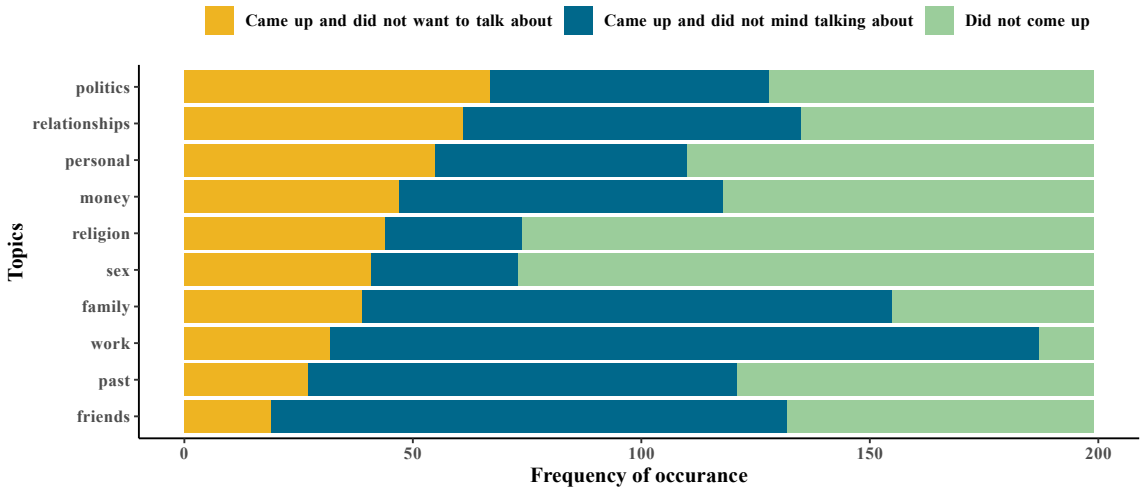

Fig. 4. The frequency of topics in Study 6a participants (N = 199) report having encountered each topic in the past month.

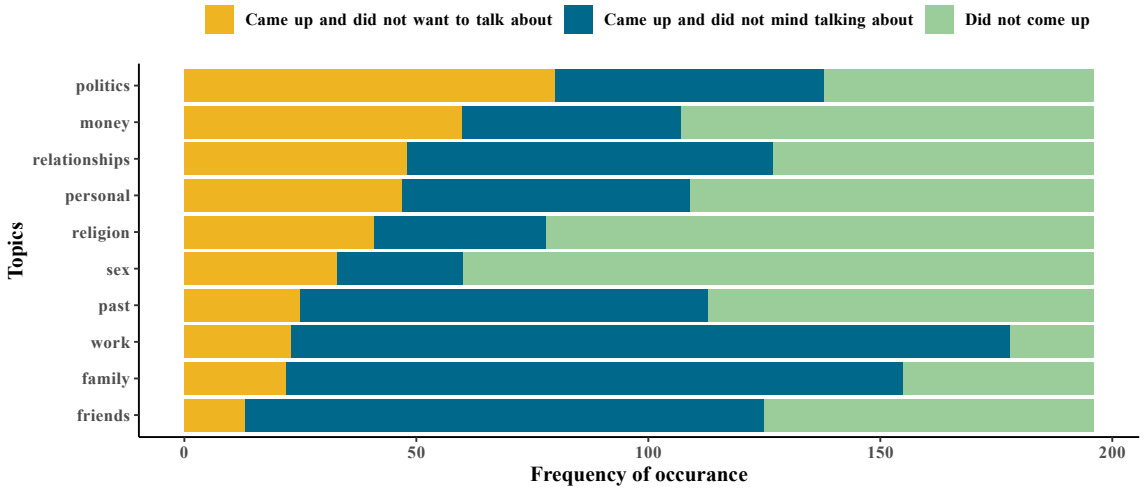

Fig. 5. The frequency of topics in Study 6b participants (N = 196) report having encountered each topic in the past month.

Table 13
Focus as a function of privacy and conflict concerns, Study 6a.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Self-Focus						
Privacy Concerns	**0.28**	**0.21, 0.35**	**0.03**	**8.05**	**354.18**	**< .001**
Conflict Concerns	**−0.005**	**−0.07, 0.06**	**0.03**	**−0.16**	**254.26**	**.88**
External Focus	0.37	0.28, 0.45	0.04	8.21	423.96	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.05	−0.25, 0.15	0.10	−0.52	394.12	.60
Predicting Other-Focus						
Privacy Concerns	**−0.05**	**−0.13, 0.02**	**0.04**	**−1.44**	**417.03**	**.15**
Conflict Concerns	**0.29**	**0.23, 0.34**	**0.03**	**10.56**	**411.21**	**< .001**
Internal Focus	0.38	0.29, 0.46	0.04	8.36	421.07	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.02	−0.18, 0.22	0.10	0.20	403.02	.84

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.

Table 14
Focus as a function of privacy and conflict concerns, Study 6b.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Self-Focus						
Privacy Concerns	**0.13**	**0.06, 0.21**	**0.04**	**3.38**	**340.43**	**< .001**
Conflict Concerns	**−0.01**	**−0.08, 0.05**	**0.03**	**−0.37**	**168.75**	**.71**
External Focus	0.30	0.21, 0.39	0.04	6.76	380.71	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.12	−0.35, 0.10	0.11	−1.06	345.66	.29
Predicting Other-Focus						
Privacy Concerns	**0.02**	**−0.06, 0.10**	**0.04**	**0.49**	**378.37**	**.62**
Conflict Concerns	**0.25**	**0.19, 0.31**	**0.03**	**8.27**	**380.64**	**< .001**
Internal Focus	0.36	0.25, 0.46	0.05	6.92	378.99	< .001
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.07	−0.31, 0.18	0.12	−0.53	376.17	.60

Note: Focal motivation variables in bold.

diminished feelings of self-expression through an increased focus on others.

8. General discussion

Much of life is filled with social interaction and conversation. Yet with the diversity of situations and places in which these conversations occur along with the diversity of individuals that we encounter, an interaction partner may sometimes bring up a topic of conversation one would rather not talk about. The current work finds that this experience is common, and examined underlying motivations for topic avoidance

Table 15
Focus as a function of authenticity, privacy and conflict concerns, Study 6a.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Authentic Self-Awareness (ASA)						
Self-Focus	**0.26**	**0.18, 0.34**	**0.04**	**6.45**	**380.54**	**< .001**
Other-Focus	**0.10**	**0.02, 0.18**	**0.04**	**2.35**	**362.80**	**.02**
Privacy Concerns	−0.09	−0.15, −0.03	0.03	−2.94	346.52	.003
Conflict Concerns	−0.002	−0.05, 0.05	0.02	−0.10	331.65	.92
Authentic Self-Expression	−0.02	−0.10, 0.05	0.04	−0.62	424.44	.54
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.14	−0.29, 0.02	0.08	−1.68	328.78	.09
Predicting Authentic Self-Expression (ASE)						
Self-Focus	**−0.01**	**−0.12, 0.09**	**0.05**	**−0.26**	**369.21**	**.80**
Other-Focus	**−0.23**	**−0.33, −0.13**	**0.05**	**−4.57**	**381.21**	**< .001**
Privacy Concerns	−0.05	−0.12, 0.03	0.04	−1.20	333.32	.23
Conflict Concerns	−0.06	−0.13, 0.003	0.03	−1.87	235.62	.06
Authentic Self-Awareness	0.06	−0.07, 0.18	0.06	0.90	418.59	.37
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.03	−0.24, 0.17	0.11	−0.33	340.49	.74

Note: Focal conversational focus variables in bold.

as well as emotional reactions, behavioral responses, and foci of attention.

We presented the Topic Avoidance Process Model, which predicted two distinct motivational pathways in response to an interaction partner introducing a topic of conversation one would rather not talk about. We tested and found support for this model across diverse contexts, including retrospective recall, live conversations, and with studies online and in the field. Additionally, we found that finding oneself in these unwanted conversations has implications for the workplace as well as personal feelings of authenticity. We briefly summarize our studies below, and then discuss theoretical and practical implications of our findings.

In the current work, we implemented a novel approach to the study of conversation topic avoidance. First, we administered a large scale (N = 1000) survey in a sample of participants distributed across the U.S., asking per a series of social relationships, the conversation topics they seek to avoid talking about. This enabled us to obtain a set of frequent topics people seek to avoid talking about in their daily life, across a range of contexts, from a large and generalizable sample. Prior work in this domain, in contrast, has only studied specific contexts, such as parent-children relationships in divorced households (Afifi &

Table 16
Focus as a function of authenticity, privacy and conflict concerns, Study 6b.

	b	*95% CI*	*SE*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Predicting Authentic Self-Awareness (ASA)						
Self-Focus	**0.31**	**0.23, 0.40**	**0.04**	**7.36**	**375.57**	**< .001**
Other-Focus	**0.11**	**0.03, 0.18**	**0.04**	**2.76**	**351.41**	**.006**
Privacy Concerns	−0.01	−0.07, 0.06	0.03	−0.18	379.87	.85
Conflict Concerns	0.02	−0.03, 0.07	0.02	0.75	322.90	.45
Authentic Self-Expression	0.08	0.002, 0.16	0.04	2.02	379.36	.04
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	0.04	−0.14, 0.22	0.09	0.42	327.05	.68
Predicting Authentic Self-Expression (ASE)						
Self-Focus	**0.12**	**0.01, 0.23**	**0.06**	**2.09**	**345.55**	**.04**
Other-Focus	**−0.18**	**−0.28, −0.09**	**0.05**	**−3.73**	**344.74**	**< .001**
Privacy Concerns	−0.14	−0.23, −0.06	0.04	−3.36	369.64	< .001
Conflict Concerns	−0.08	−0.15, −0.01	0.03	−2.40	243.26	.02
Authentic Self-Expression	0.12	−0.01, 0.24	0.06	1.84	377.76	.07
Dyadic (0) vs. Multi-party (1)	−0.05	−0.28, 0.18	0.12	−0.42	324.83	.68

Note: Focal conversational focus variables in bold.

Schrodt, 2003), or topics avoided in conversation with one's romantic partner (Afifi et al., 2009).

In Study 1, we identified the top ten topics people sought to avoid talking about: politics, money, personal issues/ problems, work, religion, family, romantic relationships, sex, the past and friends. When these topics were brought up in a conversation, participants reported experiencing negative emotions such as anxiety and annoyance. In addition, individuals reacted to such unwanted conversation topics by staying quiet, trying to change the topic, or leaving the conversation.

In Study 2, we found that the emotions and reactions identified from Study 1 mapped onto two behavioral systems. Within the behavioral inhibition system, participants experienced inhibiting emotions of being uncomfortable, nervous, uneasy, awkward, embarrassed and anxious. Through such inhibiting emotions, participants were more likely to stay quiet during the conversation. On the other hand, within the behavioral activation system, participants experienced activating emotions of being angry, irritated, annoyed and frustrated. Through such activating emotions, participants were more likely to take action and leave the conversation.

In Study 3, by employing a machine learning algorithm, we identified two broad motivations that underlie why people seek to avoid unwanted conversation topics, centering on concern for privacy (not wanting people to judge oneself), and concern for creating a conflict (not wanting to have an argument). Studies 4a, 4b, and 5 found that these motivations align with the inhibiting and activating pathways predicted by our Topic Avoidance Process Model. Privacy concerns evoked by unwanted conversation topics predicted staying quiet in the conversation through inhibiting emotions, whereas conflict concerns predicted leaving the conversation through activating emotions.

Table 18
Significance test of mediation, Study 6b.

IV	Mediator	DV	*95% CI*	*Zmediation*	*p*
Privacy →	**Self-Focus →**	**Self-Awareness**	**1.02, 4.94**	**2.98**	**.003**
		Self-Expression	−2.36, 1.56	−0.40	.69
	Other-Focus →	Self-Awareness	−1.50, 2.42	0.46	.65
		Self-Expression	−2.44, 1.48	−0.48	.63
Conflict →	Self-Focus →	Self-Awareness	−2.29, 1.63	−0.33	.74
		Self-Expression	−1.84, 2.08	0.12	.90
	Other-Focus →	**Self-Awareness**	**0.63, 4.55**	**2.59**	**.01**
		Self-Expression	**−5.24, −1.32**	**−3.28**	**.001**

Note: Significant indirect effects in bold.

Finally, Studies 6a and 6b found these pathways have implications for personal feelings of authenticity in the workplace as a function of what people attend to during workplace conversations. The inhibiting privacy pathway was associated with focusing on one's self during a conversation in the workplace, which was thereby associated with feeling that one has a good sense of who they are. In other words, while seeking to uphold privacy boundaries evokes inhibiting processes, a corresponding enhanced self-focus was not felt as less authentic. For example, if one is the kind of person to not discuss sex or religion at work, then to stay quiet during such conversation is felt as authentic, as characterized by being aware of who one's self is (and what one feels comfortable discussing).

In contrast, the activating conflict pathway was associated with focusing on the other person/people in the conversation. A focus on others (during a workplace conversation) was also associated with increased self-awareness. Perhaps if one is the kind of person to not want to create a conflict, then to attend to others can also feel authentic (in the sense of being aware of who one's self is, and one's values). Yet a focus on others also corresponded with accepting those others' external influence (i.e., feeling that one is *not* authentically expressing oneself). Independent of how aware one is of their true self (i.e., self-awareness), an enhanced focus on others that follows from concern with creating conflict seems to feel inauthentic (presumably as a function of not expressing one's true opinions).

8.1. Theoretical implications

The current research advances the understanding of the psychology of conversations. Conversation is a joint action (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) and a coordinating process (Richardson, Dale, & Kirkham, 2007; Sacks et al., 1978). Moreover, the content of dialogue serves a functional purpose; it allows people to understand each other (Fusaroli, Rączaszek-Leonardi, & Tylén, 2014). There are also social benefits to conversation. For instance, asking questions during conversation leads one to be more liked by an interaction partner (Huang et al., 2017). Less research, however, has examined the disruptive components of conversations. While asking questions increases liking, asking questions may also elicit topics that conversation partners would prefer not to talk about. The current research adds to the literature on conversation by

Table 17
Significance test of mediation, Study 6a.

IV	Mediator	DV	*95% CI*	*Zmediation*	*p*
Privacy →	**Self-Focus →**	**Self-Awareness**	**3.37, 7.29**	**5.33**	**< .001**
		Self-Expression	−2.16, 1.76	−0.20	.84
	Other-Focus →	Self-Awareness	−3.01, 0.91	−1.05	.29
		Self-Expression	−0.78, 3.14	1.18	.24
Conflict →	Self-Focus →	Self-Awareness	−2.12, 1.80	−0.16	.87
		Self-Expression	−1.93, 1.99	0.03	.98
	Other-Focus →	**Self-Awareness**	**0.45, 4.37**	**2.41**	**.02**
		Self-Expression	**−6.10, −2.18**	**−4.14**	**< .001**

Note: Significant indirect effects in bold.

investigating psychological processes that arise when an unwanted conversation topic is introduced into conversation.

Whereas prior work has examined participants as the arbiter of what topics are introduced into a conversation (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Golish, 2000; Merrill & Afifi, 2012), we examined how individuals react to unwanted conversation topics that were brought up by another party. Through a bottom-up process, we uncovered two broad motivations and emotional reactions. Additionally, whereas past literature has examined topic avoidance in close relationships and family relationships (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Afifi & Schrodt, 2003; Afifi, 2003; Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Golish, 2000), we examined topic avoidance across all relationship types (Studies 1–5) as well as specifically in the workplace (Studies 6a and 6b).

A recent review highlights that as the number of individuals involved in a conversation increases, so does the complexity of the conversation (Cooney et al., 2019). The difference between a dyadic conversation and a multi-party one is more than an increase in numbers. In a multi-party conversation, as compared to a dyadic conversation, each participant will have less airtime, each will have a harder time taking turns, and each will have greater difficulty in providing feedback to the person speaking (for the reason that the conversation will not work if multiple people speak at once). As a function of each individual having less air time, people should be more likely to stay quiet (in response to an unwanted topic) if they are in a multi-party conversation, as compared to a dyadic conversation.

And given that a conversation which is composed of more than two parties can survive an individual exiting it, whereas a conversation of only two parties cannot, it should be easier to exit a multi-party conversation, relative to a dyadic one. Indeed, the current work provides support for these predictions. The present results are among the first to compare dyadic to multi-party conversation within the same empirical setting. Comparing dyadic to multi-party conversation is an area ripe for future research.

Along these lines, with more parties present in a conversation, the risk of any individual disclosure may be greater. A potential strategy for seeking to avoid an unwanted conversation topic (when introduced by an interaction partner) may be to speak to the topic, but without revealing anything personal. Perhaps the depth of disclosure thus varies with conversation group size. Relatedly, while a growing body of work documents the ways in which secrecy impacts well-being (Liu & Slepian, 2018; Slepian & Bastian, 2017; Slepian, Greenaway, & Masicampo, in press), the different ways in which people keep and maintain their secrets is understudied. Perhaps topic avoidance is one way in which people keep secrets. Additionally, certain personality traits of interaction partners may discourage disclosure (Slepian & Kirby, 2018). Thus, how different individuals or situations promote topic avoidance is another area for future research.

In addition to providing the first picture of what happens when an interaction partner brings up a conversation topic one seeks to avoid, the current work offers novel insights into experiences of felt authenticity. We add to a growing body of work (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; Wood et al., 2008) that recognizes that feelings of authenticity not only vary by person (trait authenticity), but also by context and situation (state authenticity). For instance, we examined how personal feelings of authenticity vary by conversation. Given the central role of social interaction in daily life, it makes a good deal of sense that our conversations with others would evoke varying levels of felt authenticity. That is, we may not always feel that we present our true selves across every conversation. We suggest that examining conversations people seek to avoid will shed greater insight into feelings of state authenticity.

There are many aspects about oneself one may wish to not disclose (McDonald, Salerno, Greenaway, & Slepian, 2020; Slepian, Chun, & Mason, 2017; Slepian, Halevy, & Galinsky, 2019; Slepian, Kirby, & Kalokerinos, 2020). People believe that omitting information is better than lying (Levine et al., 2018). Yet non-disclosure can produce negative outcomes of its own (Baum & Critcher, 2020; John, Slepian, & Tamir, 2020). Concealment can be costly in social interactions (Critcher & Ferguson, 2014). Likewise, dodging a direct question can lead to less trust and liking towards the speaker once detected (Rogers & Norton, 2011). The usage of so-called paltering could be seen with a benign intention, but also can be perceived as dishonest (Rogers, Zeckhauser, Gino, Norton, & Schweitzer, 2017). Accordingly, deflecting a question by asking another direct question yields better outcomes than other deceptive methods (Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019). But still, it is non-normative to respond to an inquiry with something like “I would rather not talk about that” (see Bitterly & Schweitzer, 2019; John et al., 2015). The current work suggests that how someone handles an unwanted topic or attempts to skirt around it (Rogers & Norton, 2011) will have important implications for authenticity.

8.2. Practical implications

The current research suggests practical implications for employees and managers. First, when an unwanted conversation topic arises in the workplace, focusing on one's self may provide a compass for how to successfully navigate that interaction. Focusing on the self was associated with heightened feelings of self-awareness. Recognizing “I am not the kind of person who feels comfortable talking about X at work” may offset some of the discomforts of the behavioral strategies deployed to avoid an unwanted topic in conversation.

A recent model of authenticity suggests that certain contexts are more likely to evoke feelings of reduced authenticity (e.g., when someone feels like they do not fit in; Schmader & Sedikides, 2018). Managers should thus be sensitive to contexts in which employees might not feel comfortable expressing themselves in the workplace, and how a simple conversation could cause discomfort in such contexts. Future work could explore how different relationship types or differences in status (Phillips et al., 2009) impact the processes we explored in the current work.

Interestingly, we found that within the context of unwanted conversations at work, participants reported higher levels of authentic self-awareness than authentic self-expression. We found that focusing on the self and others were both associated with higher feelings of authentic self-awareness, whereas only focusing on others was associated with (reduced) feelings of authentic self-expression. Integrating research on conversation with that on authenticity we believe will be particularly fruitful in better understanding when people feel they authentically know themselves, and when they feel they are authentically expressing themselves. Indeed, organizations can surely benefit from a better understanding of what fosters feelings of authenticity in the workplace. When employees feel like they can be themselves at work, they have higher well-being (Ménard & Brunet, 2011).

An interesting future direction would examine what happens after people have an unwanted conversation. Perhaps the conversation is not as uncomfortable as individuals anticipate (see Epley & Schroeder, 2014). Moreover, perhaps difficult conversations—under certain conditions—could make individuals feel closer to each other (Slepian & Greenaway, 2018), better understand each other (Schroeder, Kardas, & Epley, 2017), and improve outcomes for both parties (Levine, Roberts, & Cohen, 2020). In seeking to improve communication in the workplace, future work could examine whether people recognize when an interaction partner is uncomfortable with a topic that has been introduced into the conversation, and how they respond in turn.

8.3. Future research directions

The present work identified potential strategies for avoiding unwanted conversation topics. But the utility of these strategies and their psychological implications await future research. One strategy, “change the subject,” was not clearly linked to either activating or inhibiting systems. Future work might choose to create two versions of this item, one that could be considered approach-oriented (e.g., explicit calls to

change the subject), and the other, avoidance-oriented (e.g., more subtle shifts to redirect the conversation). Future research should more closely explore how people seek to shift the topic of conversation, and how successful these attempts are. Future research could also examine direct rejections of the conversation topic. For example, when one's conversation partner is of lower status, frank disapprovals may follow from them introducing an unwanted conversation topic. More generally, future work could gain better temporal resolution into how the unwanted conversation unfolds (or dissolves).

Context is likely to moderate the present results. For example, increased closeness with one's interaction partner could magnify the effects we find (the stakes are higher), or perhaps mitigate them (we are more at ease). Beyond social closeness, other relevant variables that will likely moderate the present results include where the conversation is taking place or its medium (e.g., in-person, over the phone, instant message). Finally, while we believe that there is more to gain in first understanding processes that generalize across diverse conversation topics, future work could also compare the conversation topics to one another.

Last but not least, the unwanted topics identified in this paper are also categories that people often do talk about. Figs. 1, 3, 4, & 5 demonstrate that across the top 10 most common unwanted conversation topics that come up in people's daily life, people also frequently do not mind talking about them. Of course, there are instances in which people enjoy talking about these topics too. Aside from extremes of threat and enjoyment, people's preferences and non-preferences for discussing these topics will be multiply determined. One may seek to avoid a topic in conversation to keep it light and enjoyable. Or, one may want to discuss a certain topic, but at a different time. Future work should explore these and other motivations for wanting to avoid a topic of conversation introduced by one's conversation partner, and how these motivations differentially shape downstream processes and outcomes.

In sum, across a diverse set of topics, relationships, and forms of conversation, we found two reliable pathways for topic avoidance (paralleling the two core systems for behavioral regulation). With this first step, future work could begin to compare topic avoidance across different contexts, topics, and relationships, and we believe that future work would benefit from the new methods and instruments introduced in the current work (e.g., the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, motivations for topic avoidance, and emotional reactions to unwanted conversations). Social life is rich in interactions, relationships, and different topics for discussion. Inevitably, conversations will veer into territories we wish they would not, and we hope that future work further explores this pervasive phenomenon.

Author contributions

Both authors contributed to the conceptualization of studies, methodology and formal analysis. K.Q. Sun provided the original draft and M.L. Slepian provided critical review & editing. Both authors approved the final version of the manuscript for submission.

Appendix A

Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, Study 1

We are interested in the psychology of conversations. Sometimes, certain topics come up during conversations and people want to avoid talking about them.
We would like to know whether IN THE PAST WEEK if YOU have been involved in a conversation with one or more people, and a topic came up that you wanted to avoid talking about.
For each conversation topic, select the option that best fits.

- *Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not want to talk about it.*
- *Yes, this recently came up in a conversation I was in, and I did not mind talking about it.*
- *No, this did not recently come up in a conversation I was in.*

Family
Friends
Work
Relationships
Money
Sex
Politics
Religion
The Past
Personal Issues/Problems

Note: In this example iteration of the Unwanted Conversations Questionnaire, participants are surveyed about having encountered these topics in conversation in the past week, but this can be modified to reference no time window, or shorter or longer time windows (e.g., past day, past month). The three options were displayed as a drop-down menu.

Appendix B. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.03.002.

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