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The Jury on Trial: Assessing the Impact of Courtroom Design and Juror Ideology on Defendant Guilt Perception

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how courtroom design and jurors' ideological attitudes influence guilt perceptions and sentencing. It hypothesized that defendants in secure docks would be perceived as more likely guilty and receive harsher sentences than those at the bar table, with stronger ideological attitudes increasing guilt likelihood. In a between-subjects design, 556 participants reviewed courtroom sketches and case summaries, then rated guilt and sentencing. Defendants in secure docks were more often seen as guilty, and ideological attitudes partially influenced assessments. The findings highlight the need for interventions to reduce bias in legal proceedings and inform policy on courtroom design.

Jurors are entrusted with the critical responsibility of impartially assessing evidence and rendering verdicts in criminal proceedings. In England and Wales, while juries adjudicate less than 1% of criminal cases, these instances typically involve the most serious offences with substantial potential consequences for defendants (Thomas 2010). The fundamental principle of a just trial demands that defendants receive a fair hearing, with any form of bias potentially compromising the integrity of the judicial process (Curley et al. 2022). Despite the importance of impartiality, various factors can influence juror decision-making. Research has increasingly explored potential sources of bias that might impact jury verdicts, recognizing the profound implications of potential errors in judicial outcomes. While empirical research on jury decision-making in England and Wales remains limited, understanding the potential influences on juror perceptions is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the legal system.

1 | Ideological Influences on Jury Decision-Making

Understanding how individual ideological attitudes might influence legal decision-making provides important insights into potential sources of bias. This study examines three key ideological dimensions: right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and belief in a just world. Right-wing authoritarianism is characterized by a strong adherence to established social norms, deference to perceived authorities and resistance to social change. Individuals with high scores on this dimension typically demonstrate greater support for traditional hierarchical structures and may be more likely to view deviation from social norms as threatening (Altemeyer 1981). In a judicial context, this might manifest as a predisposition towards more punitive judgements.

Social dominance orientation reflects an individual's preference for hierarchical social structures and acceptance of group-based inequalities. Individuals with high scores on this dimension tend to support systems that maintain existing social hierarchies and may be more likely to view defendants through a lens of social stratification (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). The belief in a just world represents a psychological tendency to perceive the world as fundamentally fair, where individuals typically get what they deserve. In a judicial context, this belief might lead individuals to more readily attribute responsibility to defendants,

potentially influencing their perceptions of guilt (Lerner and Miller 1978).

The study focuses on these dimensions due to their demonstrated relevance in predicting punitive attitudes and perceptions of justice in prior research. Alternative frameworks, such as moral foundations theory or political ideology scales, were considered but were not directly aligned with the study's focus on legal decision-making processes and perceptions of defendants. The selected measures provide a robust basis for exploring ideological influences within this specific context.

1.1 | Courtroom Design and Defendant Perception

The physical design of courtrooms can potentially influence juror perceptions. Secure docks, which physically separate defendants from the courtroom proceedings, are a feature predominantly observed in jurisdictions like England and Wales. In contrast, many jurisdictions, such as the United States, do not use secure docks, favouring defendants being seated at the counsel table throughout trial proceedings. This difference underscores the need to investigate the specific impacts of secure docks within the England and Wales context, particularly concerning juror perceptions and the presumption of innocence. This architectural choice raises important questions about its potential psychological impact on juror decision-making. Research suggests that environmental cues can significantly influence perceptions of individuals. The use of secure docks might inadvertently communicate a presumption of dangerousness or guilt, potentially undermining the fundamental legal principle of presumption of innocence (Rossner et al. 2017).

1.2 | The Present Study

The current study aimed to compare guilt likelihood and sentencing perceptions between jurors viewing defendants in secure docks versus those at the bar table. We hypothesized higher guilt likelihood and harsher sentencing lengths in the secure dock condition compared to the non-dock condition, based on literature suggesting secure docks undermine the presumption of defendants' innocence (Rosen 1966; Stumer 2010). The study also explored the impact of jurors' ideological attitudes on defendant guilt likelihood, anticipating higher guilt likelihood among those with higher ideological scores, as supported by the literature (De keersmaecker and Roets 2020; Sivasubramaniam et al. 2020). Furthermore, the study explored the impact of jurors' ideological attitudes on defendant guilt likelihood, split by dock condition. We predicted that the relationship between guilt likelihood and ideological attitude scores would differ between the secure dock and non-dock conditions, as supported by prior literature (Davis 1984; Ho et al. 2020; Rossner et al. 2017; Wenzel et al. 2017).

2 | Summarized Method and Results

2.1 | Method

This study recruited 556 participants, aged 18–81 years (mean age = 30.3 years, standard deviation = 14.9 years), through convenience and snowball sampling, with ethical approval from the lead university's ethics committee. An online survey, distributed via Qualtrics, included measures for right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation and belief in a just world, as well as tasks evaluating judgements based on courtroom sketches and case summaries. Participants completed these standardized measures to assess ideological attitudes, which demonstrated strong internal reliability within the sample (Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.88).

The study employed a between-subjects design with two experimental conditions: courtroom sketches either depicting defendants in secure glass docks or seated at the bar table with their lawyer. Case summaries presented ambiguous evidence, and participants rated the likelihood of guilt using a five-point Likert scale and recommended sentencing lengths. Random allocation ensured balanced exposure to conditions, and an attention check mitigated noise in the data. Statistical analyses, conducted using SPSS and JASP software, included independent samples *t*-tests to compare verdict likelihoods and sentencing perceptions between conditions, as well as regression analyses to explore the influence of ideological attitudes. For replicability purposes, an extended version of the method is presented in Appendix A, while all statistical depth and visualizations are provided in Appendix B.

2.2 | Dock Condition Differences

Independent samples *t*-tests examined differences in guilt levels and punishment between dock conditions. Participants in the secure dock condition had significantly higher guilt levels (mean = 19.09, standard deviation = 3.31) compared to those in the non-dock condition (mean = 18.45, standard deviation = 3.75), $t(554) = 2.136$, $p = 0.017$. However, no statistically significant differences were found in participants' perceptions of realistic sentence length or suggested sentence length between the two conditions.

2.3 | Predicting Jurors' Guilt Perception

Correlation analyses examined relationships between variables. Multiple regression analysis revealed the model significantly accounted for variance in guilt levels, explaining 2.2% of its variability.

2.4 | Exploratory Analyses

A parallel mediation analysis explored the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and guilt levels. Analysis revealed that social dominance orientation and belief in a just world significantly mediated this relationship. While right-wing authoritarianism did not directly predict guilt levels, it significantly predicted both mediators, which in turn predicted guilt levels.

3 | Discussion

3.1 | Dock Condition Differences

Independent samples *t*-test analyses revealed a significant difference in guilt levels between the secure dock and non-dock conditions, with participants in the secure dock condition scoring higher on guilt levels. This finding aligns with previous literature

indicating that secure docks may potentially undermine the presumption of defendants' innocence (Rosen 1966; Stumer 2010). However, the study acknowledges the complexity of interpreting these results within the specific context of England and Wales' jury system. As Thomas (2010) has demonstrated through comprehensive empirical analysis, case factors, particularly the nature of the offense, are most predictive of jury verdicts. Our findings should therefore be interpreted with caution, recognizing the unique characteristics of jury decision-making in this jurisdiction. No significant differences were observed in sentencing length perceptions between dock conditions. This non-significant finding may be attributed to broader societal misunderstandings about crime and appropriate legal responses (Byrne 2023). Moreover, it is crucial to note that in the England and Wales legal system, jurors do not play a role in sentencing, further complicating the interpretation of sentencing perception data.

3.2 | Ideological Attitudes and Guilt Perception

The study's exploration of ideological attitudes necessitates careful contextualization. While previous research suggested potential influences of ideological attitudes on jury verdicts (Sivasubramaniam et al. 2020), our findings reveal a more nuanced picture. Regression analyses demonstrated a complex interplay of psychological factors. A significant positive relationship emerged between belief in a just world and guilt levels, consistent with existing literature (De keersmaecker and Roets 2020). Concurrently, a significant negative relationship was observed between social dominance orientation and guilt levels. Notably, right-wing authoritarianism did not significantly predict guilt levels. These complex findings highlight the limitations of self-report measures, potentially influenced by acquiescence and moderacy bias (Kreitchmann et al. 2019). The contradictory results underscore the need for more sophisticated approaches to understanding juror decision-making.

3.3 | Dock Condition and Ideological Attitudes

When analysing data split by dock condition, further nuanced findings emerged. In the non-dock condition, higher belief in a just world correlated with higher guilt levels, while lower social dominance orientation correlated with higher guilt levels. Right-wing authoritarianism did not significantly predict guilt levels in this context. Conversely, in the secure dock condition, no significant relationships were found between ideological attitudes and guilt levels. These findings tentatively suggest that the secure dock's presence might independently influence guilt perceptions, potentially overshadowing the impact of individual ideological attitudes.

3.4 | Exploratory Mediation Analysis

A novel aspect of our research was the exploratory mediation analysis examining social dominance orientation and belief in a just world as mediators in the relationship between right-wing authoritarianism and guilt levels. Both emerged as significant mediators, potentially explaining previous discrepancies in literature (Bray and Noble 1978; Devine and Caughlin 2014; Sivasubramaniam et al. 2020).

3.5 | Broader Implications

The research contributes to ongoing discussions about courtroom design and potential biases in legal proceedings. It supports perspectives held by some judges that secure docks may introduce unintended biases (Rossner et al. 2017) and raises important questions about safeguarding the presumption of innocence (Naughton 2011). While the findings are tentative, they suggest the need for careful consideration of courtroom design and potential interventions to mitigate biases in legal decision-making.

4 | Conclusion

This research highlights the intricate nature of juror decision-making processes. By exploring how courtroom design and individual ideological attitudes might influence perceptions, the study contributes to understanding potential biases in legal proceedings. The findings emphasize the need for continued research and thoughtful interventions to promote fair and equitable legal outcomes. Judicial policymakers should consider these implications, particularly the potential for secure docks to undermine the presumption of innocence. Recommendations include re-evaluating the use of secure docks in courtroom settings and developing standardized jury instructions to counteract possible biases. Future research could explore the efficacy of these interventions in mitigating bias while maintaining courtroom security.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval for the study protocol was awarded by the lead institution.

Conflicts of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Anonymized data can be made available upon request.

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Appendix A: Extended Method

Acronyms

This study employs several key terms abbreviated for ease of reference in the appendix, aiming to reduce word count and enhance the accessibility of tables and figures. These include right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO) and belief in a just world (BJW), which represent the ideological dimensions assessed in the study. Additionally, secure dock (SD) and non-dock (ND) denote the courtroom design conditions, while guilt likelihood (GL) and ideological attitudes (IA) refer to the primary outcome measure and the broader psychological constructs examined. Full descriptions of these terms are provided in the main text for clarity.

Participants

G*Power 3.1.9.4 software (Erdfelder et al. 1996) was utilized to estimate required sample size by performing an a priori calculation (Faul et al. 2007). With a power of (1-β) 0.95 and an α of 0.05, 119 participants were required to detect a medium effect ($f^2 = 0.15$) for multiple regression analyses (Cohen 1988; Kang 2021). A total of 769 responses were gathered from the survey; due to partially completed, inadequate responses or failure to pass attention checks, only 556 were deemed suitable for data analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the lead university's research ethics committee. Participants ($N = 556$) ranged from 18 to 81

TABLE A1 | Demographic characteristics for current study sample.

Demographic characteristic	*n*	%
Biological sex at birth		
Male	116	20.9
Female	439	79.0
Prefer not to say	1	0.2
Ethnicity		
White British	391	70.3
Asian	45	8.1
African	10	1.8
European	40	7.2
Other	28	5.0
Prefer not to say	42	7.6
Courtroom experience		
Jury service[a]	32	5.8
Professional legal[a]	17	3.1
Courtroom observation[a]	32	5.8
Participation credit		
Lead university's research scheme[b]	189	34.0

[a]Displays the number and respective percentage of participants who had relevant courtroom experience.

[b]Displays the number of students recruited through the scheme for participation credit.

years old (M = 30.3, SD = 14.9). See Table A1 for further demographic characteristics.

Materials

A survey was created and distributed online via Qualtrics (2024), and participants were instructed to complete a series of standardized measures for RWA, SDO and BJW, followed by a series of questions relating to courtroom case studies.

RWA

RWA was measured using the revised RWA scale (Altemeyer 2006). Twenty items assessed levels of RWA. Responses were given on a 9-point Likert scale, ranging from *very strongly disagree* (−4) to *very strongly agree* (+4). One example item is 'What our country really needs is a strong, determined leader who will crush evil, and take us back to our true path'. New scores were computed for each item, where −4 equals 1, continuing up to +4 which equals 9. Items were summed to form a measure of RWA, with scores ranging from 20 to 180. Higher scores indicated a greater level of RWA. The scale was previously shown to have excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.90$; Altemeyer 2006), and this was replicated within the present sample ($\alpha = 0.90$). This revised scale is widely recognized as an effective measure of RWA, particularly in the general population, having evolved to accommodate changes in societal norms (Saunders and Ngo 2017).

SDO

SDO was measured using the SDO_6 scale (Pratto et al. 1994). Sixteen items assessed levels of SDO. Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *very negative* (1) to *very positive* (7). One example item is 'Some groups of people are simply inferior to other groups'. Items were summed to form a measure of SDO, with scores ranging from 16 to 112. Higher scores indicated a greater level of SDO. The scale is shown to have excellent internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$; Pratto et al. 1994), and this was replicated within the present sample ($\alpha = 0.93$). This revised scale stands as one of the most extensively utilized tools in the realms of social and personality psychology, demonstrating broad applicability and effectiveness in comprehending intergroup dynamics (Kteily et al. 2012).

BJW

BJW was measured using the Global Belief in a Just World Scale (GBJWS; Lipkus 1991). Seven items assessed levels of BJW. Responses were given on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from *strong disagreement* (1) to *strong agreement* (7). One example item is 'I feel that people who meet with misfortune have brought it on themselves'. Items were summed to form a measure of BJW, with scores ranging from 7 to 49. Higher scores indicated a greater BJW. The scale is shown to have good internal reliability ($\alpha = 0.81$; Hellman et al. 2008), and this was replicated within the present sample ($\alpha = 0.88$). This scale is frequently employed to gauge BJW and continues to serve as a potent measure, surpassing alternative instruments in efficacy (Hellman et al. 2008).

Type of Courtroom Dock

Participants were presented with four short case summaries and courtroom sketches, which were created for the purpose of this study; the courtroom sketches varied dependent on the experimental condition they were randomly allocated to (see Supporting Information: https://osf.io/jbsd5/?view_only=a99bcedeb2b146a0978863647334d3cf). Sketches in the SD condition depicted the defendants placed in a secure glass dock guarded by a prison officer, while the sketches in the ND condition depicted the defendants sat at the bar table with their lawyer.

Study Design and Procedure

The survey underwent pilot testing to verify question suitability, survey functionality and estimate completion time. A between-subjects experimental design was utilized. Participants were recruited online using convenience sampling through the lead university's research participation scheme or via snowball sampling, with an advertisement poster containing both a link and QR code distributed across various social media platforms. Students recruited through the lead university's research participation scheme received credit for their involvement. Before participation, participants received an information sheet detailing study objectives and ethical principles. Fully informed consent was obtained, followed by completion of a brief demographic questionnaire. Additional questions served to ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria; individuals under 18 years old and those who did not provide consent were excluded from the study.

Participants meeting inclusion criteria were randomly allocated to one of two experimental conditions: with or without secure glass dock courtroom sketches. Online questionnaires measured ideological attitude variables, including RWA, SDO and BJW. A short distractor questionnaire unrelated to the current study was included to prevent participants' ideological attitudes becoming reinforced and biasing their responses to the GL questions. Participants examined courtroom sketches and read short case summaries with inconclusive evidence to mitigate confirmation bias. Each case summary focused on a different crime (domestic abuse, armed robbery, assault on a homosexual, mugging) with a different defendant, although all had similar characteristics and facial expressions to reduce further bias. JVs were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *highly unlikely* (1) to *highly likely* (5), with participants being asked to rate the likelihood that each of the four defendants were guilty. Participants were also required to provide both the sentence length they would expect the defendant to receive if they were indeed guilty and the sentence length that they would recommend, measured in years and months. Data collection took approximately 20 min per participant. An attention check item was integrated within the aforementioned scales. Participants who failed to pass the attention check were subsequently excluded from the analysis, mitigating any increase in noise or bias stemming from this lack of attention (Siritzky et al. 2023). After completing the survey, a short debrief form outlining the full study aims and contact details for

researchers was displayed to the participants. The study was open for participation from 30 November 2023 to 18 March 2024.

Statistical Data Analysis

Data were exported from Qualtrics (2024), and subsequent statistical analyses were completed in IBM SPSS Statistics [Version 28.0] (IBM Corp 2021) and JASP [Version 0.18.3] (JASP Team 2024). Items 2, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18 and 19 of the RWA scale and items 9–16 of the SDO scale were reverse-coded and scale scores were totalled across all measures. To test whether those in the SD condition had a significantly higher likelihood of reaching a guilty verdict and a significantly harsher perception of sentencing compared to those in the ND condition, a series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted. Furthermore, to test whether those who scored highly on the IAs had a significantly higher perception of GL and a significantly harsher perception of sentencing compared to those who scored lower, correlations and a series of multiple regression analyses were conducted. All analyses were considered statistically significant with a *p*-value of less than 0.05 (Grabowski 2016).

Appendix B: Extended Results

Data were screened to ensure assumptions were met prior to analysis. Normality was met, evaluated through skewness and kurtosis z-scores within the ±1.96 range as well as the Shapiro–Wilk test ($p > 0.05$). Visual examinations of histograms, boxplots, P–P plots, and Q–Q plots demonstrated normal distribution of residuals and no significant outliers. Levene's test highlighted homogeneity of variance ($p > 0.05$), and scatterplot analysis demonstrated homoscedasticity and a linear relationship between variables. Durbin–Watson values between zero and two indicated positive autocorrelations and suggested independence of errors. VIF values close to one indicated minimal multicollinearity.

Dock Condition Differences

A series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine the differences in GL and punishment between dock conditions. Participants in the SD condition had significantly higher GL (M = 19.09, SD = 3.31) than those in the ND condition (M = 18.45, SD = 3.75), $t(554) = 2.136$, $p = 0.017$. However, there was not a significant difference in perception of realistic sentence length (RSL) between the SD condition (M = 144.80, SD = 125.32) and the ND condition (M = 138.26, SD = 109.08), $t(554) = -0.655$, $p = 0.256$. Furthermore, there was not a significant difference in suggested sentence length (SSL) between the SD condition (M = 255.01, SD = 188.77) and the ND condition (M = 238.25, SD = 178.97), $t(554) = -1.074$, $p = 0.142$.

Predicting Jurors' Guilt Perception

Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between variables prior to regression analyses. See Table B1 for descriptive statistics and correlations.

To assess whether differences in IAs could predict perceptions of GL, a multiple regression analysis was performed. Results indicated that the model significantly accounted for variance in GL ($F(3, 552) = 4.22$, $p = 0.006$), explaining 2.2% of its variability. Beta coefficients were used to access the unique variance associated with each variable (see Table B2, section R1).

Split by Dock Condition

To further examine whether IAs uniquely predicted perceptions of GL, a multiple regression was conducted with the data file split by dock condition. Results demonstrated that the overall fit of the model split by the ND condition was statistically significant $F(3, 273) = 3.43$, $p = 0.018$, explaining 3.7% of its variability, highlighting the included predictors' substantial impact. Beta coefficients were used to access the unique variance associated with each variable (see Table B2, section R2). However, results demonstrated that the overall fit of the model split by the SD condition failed to reach statistical significance $F(3, 281) = 1.39$, $p = 0.247$, suggesting that the model does not explain a significant portion of the variance in GL (see Table B2, section R3).

Exploratory Analyses

Exploring IAs on GL

To explore the non-significant finding of RWA failing to predict GL, a parallel mediation analysis was conducted to examine whether SDO and BJW significantly mediate this relationship between RWA and GL. As can be seen in Figure B1, analysis revealed that SDO and BJW significantly mediated the relationship between RWA and GL. Although RWA did not directly predict GL, it significantly predicted both mediators (SDO and BJW), which in turn, directly predicted GL.

Exploring Jurors' Sentencing Perceptions

To investigate whether IAs could predict perceptions of RSL, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results indicated that the model was marginally significant ($F(3, 552) = 2.62$, $p = 0.050$), explaining 1.4% of its variability. Beta coefficients were used to access the unique variance associated with each variable, although these did not demonstrate significance (see Table B2, section ER1). To examine whether IAs uniquely predicted recommendations for SSL, a multiple regression was conducted. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the overall fit of the model failed to reach statistical significance $F(3, 552) = 0.36$, $p = 0.782$, suggesting that the model does not explain a significant portion of the variance in SSL (see Table B2, section ER2).

TABLE B1 | Table displaying descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. RWA global score	64.70	23.91	–						
2. SDO global score	35.55	15.72	0.610**	–					
3. BJW global score	23.19	7.94	0.431**	0.460**	–				
4. GL score[a]	18.77	3.54	−0.072	−0.090*	0.057	–			
5. RSL[b]	141.58	117.54	0.111**	0.089*	0.083	0.022	–		
6. SSL[c]	246.75	184.03	0.024	−0.008	−0.018	0.104*	0.703**	–	
7. Dock condition	0.51	0.50	−0.053	−0.033	−0.025	0.090*	0.028	0.046	–

[a]Score demonstrates participants' perception of guilt likelihood.

[b]Participants' perception of realistic sentence lengths that would be used in real-world settings.

[c]Participants' suggestion for recommended sentence length.

** and * denote significant correlation at the 0.01 and 0.05 levels, respectively (two-tailed).

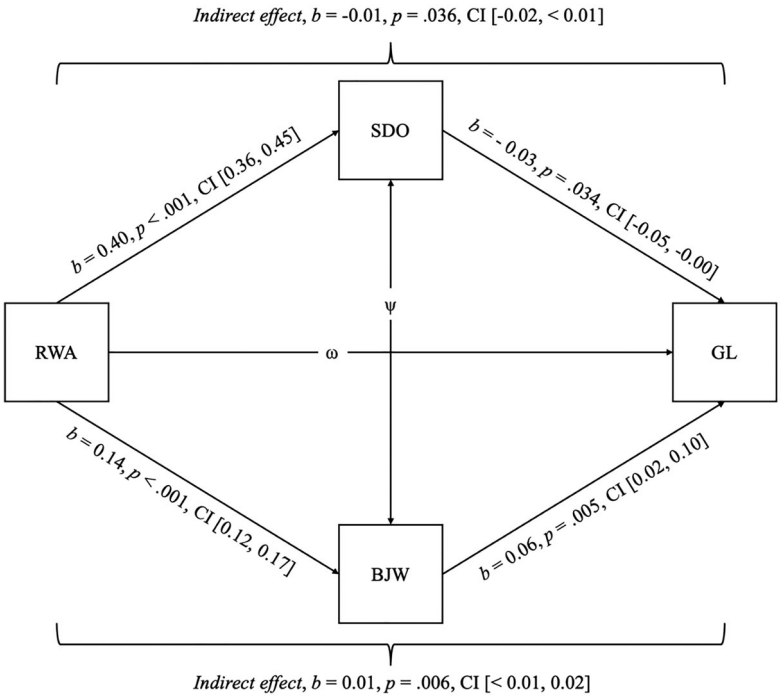

FIGURE B1 | Figure displaying the parallel multiple mediation model to demonstrate the mediating role of SDO and BJW on the relationship between RWA and GL. The residual covariance between SDO and BJW ($b = 24.47$, $p < 0.001$, CI [16.80, 32.15]) is represented by ψ. The path coefficient between RWA and GL ($b = -0.01$, $p = 0.275$, CI [−0.02, 0.01]) is represented by ω.

TABLE B2 | Table displaying results from multiple regression analyses.

	DV	IV	R^2	F	B	SE_B	β	t	p
R1	GL		0.022	4.22					0.006
		RWA			−0.009	0.008	−0.059	−1.09	0.278
		SDO			−0.026	0.012	−0.116	−2.11	0.036
		BJW			0.061	0.022	0.136	2.80	0.005
R2	GL^{ND}		0.021	3.43					0.018
		RWA			−0.001	0.012	−0.009	−0.12	0.904
		SDO			−0.047	0.019	−0.198	−2.52	0.012
		BJW			0.073	0.033	0.154	2.24	0.026
R3	GL^{SD}		0.010	1.39					0.247
		RWA			−0.014	0.011	−0.103	−1.35	0.179
		SDO			−0.006	0.016	−0.027	−0.35	0.727
		BJW			0.047	0.029	0.114	1.66	0.098
ER1	RSL		0.014	2.62					0.050
		RWA			0.395	0.269	0.080	1.47	0.142
		SDO			0.173	0.415	0.023	0.42	0.677
		BJW			0.555	0.721	0.037	0.77	0.442
ER2	SSL		0.002	0.36					0.782
		RWA			0.403	0.423	0.052	0.95	0.341
		SDO			−0.312	0.654	−0.027	−0.48	0.633
		BJW			−0.647	1.137	−0.028	−0.57	0.569

Note: GL^{ND} refers to guilt likelihood, split by no dock condition. GL^{SD} refers to guilt likelihood, split by secure dock condition.