Trust or doubt? Neural resonance based on facial expressions in a deception game reflected by frontal EEG activities.

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Abstract

The frontal cortex plays a critical role in the deception. While previous neuroimaging studies have examined the functions of various subregions within the frontal cortex, particularly in relation to truth inhibition and lie production, there is a limited understanding of frontal activities during deception in the context of social interaction. To bridge this gap, we investigated an EEG dataset collected during a deception game involving two participants (one player and one observer) who engaged in social interaction. In the game, the player was instructed or chose spontaneously whether to lie or tell the truth, while the observer decided whether to doubt or trust the player based on the player's facial expressions. Our analyses on the behavioral and EEG data revealed two major findings: (1) The observers' responses were directly impacted by the players' facial expressions. Without being informed about the trial conditions, the observer was more likely to doubt the player in instructed conditions compared to the spontaneous ones, a tendency that was evident in both the behavioral data and the observer's vlPFC activities. (2) Despite a performance at the chance level, the observer's responses seemed to depend on the player's neural activities. As evidence, both the observer's vlPFC and the player's dmPFC-vlPFC activities reflected the observer's responses (trust versus doubt). According to these results and previous research, we propose a neural resonance model driven by facial expressions from the player's emotional regulation system (dmPFC-vlPFC) to the observer's emotion perception system (vlPFC) during the deception game.

1. Introduction

A large body of neuroimaging studies has emphasized the contributions of frontal cortex in deception (Spence et al., 2001; Spence et al., 2004; Abe et al., 2006; Kireev et al., 2006; Ito et al., 2012; Scheuble and Beauducel, 2020). These studies have focused on the process of generating false information while suppressing the truth, identifying distinct functional subregions within the frontal cortex. Specifically, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex has been implicated in the production of lies (Langleben et al., 2005; Nunez et al., 2005; Priori et al., 2008; Ito et al., 2012). Within this area, Priori et al. (2008) found that activities were distinctive by different types of lies, such as denying a fact and making up an event that never happened. Additionally, Ito et al. (2012) found that the left dorsolateral prefrontal cortex was more activated during lie preparation than truth preparation, a pattern not observed on the right side, suggesting a bilateral distinction in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. Conversely, the inferior frontal gyrus has been suggested to act in the truth inhibition during deception (Abe, 2011). This region has been reported to activate when delivering false information (Kireev et al., 2017; Kireev et al., 2015; Verschuere et al., 2012; Vartanian et al., 2013) and in studies involving typical response inhibition tasks (Aron et al., 2003; Obeso et al., 2013; Sebastian et al., 2013).

Although the functional specializations of subregions in the deceivers' frontal cortex have been widely reported, little is known about the simultaneous cortical dynamics of both the deceiver and the deceived, as well as their social interactions during deception. Deception, inherently a type of social behavior, often involves emotions as a critical medium in these interactions. The role of frontal activities in emotion has been investigated for decades. Early studies on people with cortical lesions have suggested the asymmetrical involvement of prefrontal regions to positive and negative emotions (Goldstein, 1944), which has been confirmed by subsequent studies (Gainotti, 1972; Robinson and Price, 1982). In the context of social interaction like deception, the roles of frontal cortex on social modulation involve various of functions (Harmon-Jones et al., 2009). Particularly, previous studies have demonstrated the relation between the left frontal electrical activities and the emotion states of facial expression, with increased activation during joyful expressions (Ekman and Davidson, 1993; Graham and Cabeza; 2001). Similar asymmetrical frontal activities were also found to reflect the emotional motivation directions. For example, promotion was found to be related to higher asymmetrical bilateral frontal activations than prevention (Amodio et al., 2004). The dynamics of such emotional motivation may play an active role during deception. For example, guilt, an important emotional component in deception (Battigalli et al., 2013; Seiter and Bruschke, 2007), has been linked to both increased and reduced motivation varying over time (Amodio et al., 2007).

To sort out the frontal activities during deception at a social interaction aspect, this study analyzed an EEG dataset collected from a player and an observer simultaneously during a task

designed to encourage deception. At each time, the player decided to relay either the true or a false information to the observer, who watched the player's facial expression before choosing to trust or doubt the player. By examining the signals from the frontal regions and analyzing participants' behaviors, our primary aim was to determine if there were neural or behavioral linkages between the player and the observer based on the player's facial expressions. To answer this question, on both roles' frontal EEG activities, we examined the effects from either role's behaviors. We hypothesized that the frontal activities representing socially interacted behaviors in one role would be impacted by the behaviors of the other role.

2. Methods

2.1. Description of the Dataset

As illustrated by Chen, Fazil, and Wallraven (2024), the dataset we used in the present investigation was curated from a data description study published in *Scientific Data.* This dataset contains a complete set of raw behavioral data and EEG data, as well as a preprocessed EEG dataset that were collected in a two-player deception experiment. Twenty-four participants (12 females, age: 25±4.34 yrs) with normal or corrected-to-normal vision and no reported history of neurological disorder participated in this experiment for monetary rewards of around USD10/h. This experiment was approved by the Institutional Review Board with the number KUIRB-2019-0043-01. All participants were naïve to the experimental paradigm and gave written informed consent prior to the experiment.

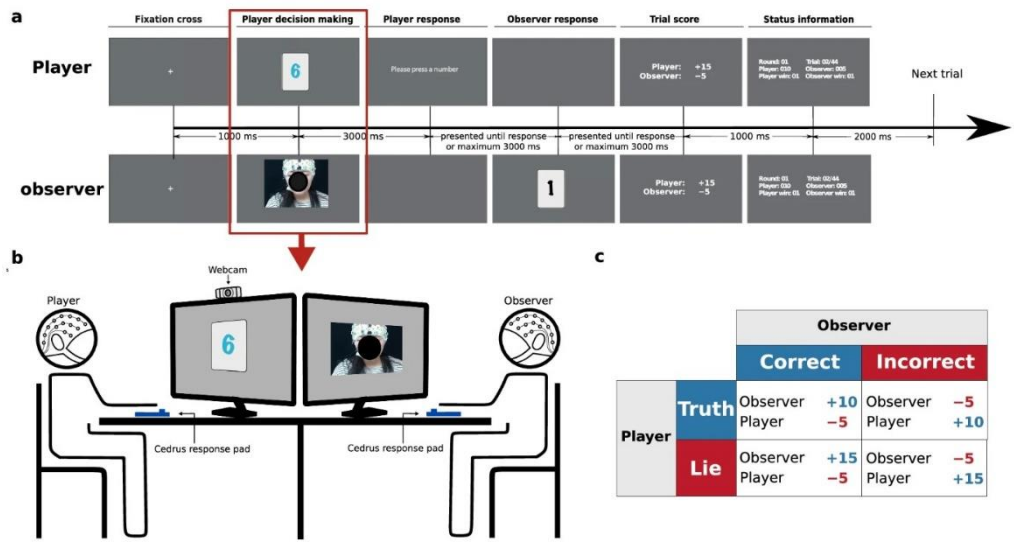

Figure 1. Illustration of the experiment. a) Schematic of a trial. b) Setup of the experiment. c) Scoring system used in the experiment. This figure was copied from Figure 1 in Chen, Fazil, and Wallraven (2024).

2.2. Experimental Procedures

Depicted in Figure 1, the task of this experiment involved two participants serving as the player

and the observer, respectively, at each time. The two participants faced each other and sat in front of two separated 24-inch monitors (resolution: 1920×1080 px^2, fresh rate: 60Hz; produced by LG, South Korea), with a HD pro C920 webcam (Logitech, Switzerland) installed on the top of the player's monitor (Figure 1 b). Schematic in Figure 1 a, a trial began with a fixation period for 1000ms, during which both participants were asked to fixate on a fixation cross appeared in the center of their respective monitors. Then, a card contained a colored digit (ranging from 1 to 6) presented on the monitor of the player's side, whereas on the observer's side, the monitor showed the live stream of the player's face. This stage lasted for 3000ms, and during this period, the player had to decide what number to be relayed to the observer depending on the color (black, purple, or blue) of the presented digit. The three colors cued three different strategic conditions: (1) the instructed truth condition that the player had to relay the same number presented in the card to the observer; (2) the instructed lie condition that the player had to relay a different number than the presented one; and (3) the spontaneous condition that the player chose any number within the range 1-6 to relay. Succeeding this player decision stage, the player was asked to relay the number by pressing a correspondent button on a RB-740 response pad (Cedrus Corporation, USA) within 3000ms, during which only the background was presented on the observer's side. Triggered by the player's response, a card showing the relayed number in black presented on the observer's monitor, and the observer was asked to decide whether the information was a lie (to doubt) or the truth (to trust) by pressing one of two buttons on the response pad within 3000ms. Upon the observer's response, feedback was given to both participants according to a score system as illustrated in Figure 1 c. The score system, explained before the experiment, was designed to encourage active participation of both participants by successful deceiving and detecting in exchange for higher scores. At the end of each trial, for the monitors of both sides, the trial scores that both participants acquired were presented for 1000ms and followed by a summary of status showing the accumulated scores, number of trials and rounds won by each side, as well as the progress of experiment for 3000ms.

The 24 participants were separated into 12 pairs, and in each pair, two participants took turns to serve as the player and the observer. This resulted to 24 paired cases, and 23 of them successfully finished the experiment. For each case, the entire experiment consisted of 11 sessions, in which each session contained 44 trials (spontaneous: 22, instructed lie: 11, instructed truth: 11) and these trials were presented in a randomly shuffled order. During all these experiments, EEG and responses of both participants were recorded. This experiment was programmed in Python using PsychoPy.

2.3. EEG Apparatus

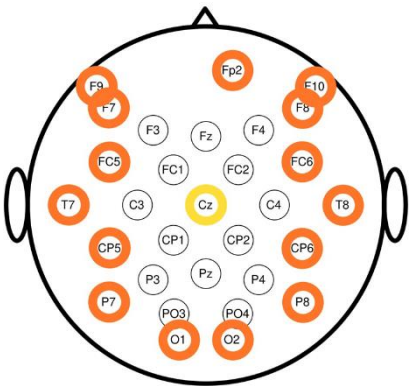

Figure 2. Electrode locations relative to the scalp. This figure was reproduced from Figure 3 in Chen, Fazil, and Wallraven (2024). Color rings around the labels in this figure have no specific meanings.

According to the data description, the EEG data was recorded with two BrainAmp amplifiers (Brain Products, Germany) from 30 EEG electrodes and an EOG electrode. Electrode locations on the caps are visualized in Figure 2. Due to connection issues, the Oz channel was removed from the dataset. The data was digitized at 500Hz, nose-referenced online, and forehead grounded to the electrode Fpz.

2.4. Regions of Interest

As mentioned in the Introduction, in this study, we focus on the frontal cortical activities and thus we picked measurements from nine electrodes located on the frontal regions (F7, F8, F9, F10, Fz, FC1, FC2, FC5, and FC6) from the original dataset. We grouped these electrodes into three regions representing left (F7, F9, and FC5), right (F8, F10, and FC6), and central (Fz, FC1, and FC2) frontal regions, respectively. Note that the left and right regions consist of electrodes placed at the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex (vlPFC), and the central region mainly covers the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC).

2.5. Data Analysis

In the preprocessed dataset, the data was down-sampled to 100Hz and filtered at 1-49Hz. Artifacts were detected and rejected using EEGLAB functions and ICA-based algorithms with Matlab (The MathWork, USA). Data from each channel was then baseline corrected by 500ms prior to the stimulus onset. Further details about the algorithms during preprocessing can be found in the data description (Chen, Fazil, and Wallraven, 2024).

This study aimed to investigate the neural or behavioral linkages between the player and the observer based on the player's facial expressions. Therefore, we only used the data from the "player decision making" stage (as labeled in Figure 1 a). Three channels representing the three ROIs were acquired by averaging the data from those electrodes belonging to each ROI. In the following analysis, we analyzed the EEG measurements from our selected channels according to

the experimental conditions and participants' responses by four variables: (1) result: correct versus incorrect; (2) player's task: instructed versus spontaneous; (3) player's behavior: truth versus lie; and (4) observer's response: trust versus doubt.

The resulted signals were then analyzed at three levels: ERPs, left-right correlations, and central-lateral correlations. In the ERP analysis, for each participant pair and each role during the experiment, EEG signals were averaged across trials but discriminated according to the specific variable to be examined. Then, we compared the ERP signals at each sampling time instant using repeated-measures ANOVAs (RM-ANOVAs) with the variable as the main factor. Multiple test corrections by a window of 50ms were performed on the p-values. Since both central-lateral and bilateral differences could be recognized by the subsequent correlation analysis, we didn't discern signals from the left and right lateral regions at this stage, and instead we averaged the signals from these two ROIs and examined the effects on the lateral regions at an overall level. Also, neither did we analyze the difference in magnitude between the central and lateral ROIs herein.

For the left-right correlation analysis, we calculated the moving-window Pearson correlation coefficients between the ERP signals from the left and right frontal regions with a window length of 100ms. Similarly for the central-lateral correlation analysis, we calculated the moving-window Pearson correlation coefficients between the ERP signals from the lateral and central frontal regions with a same window length. In both correlation analyses, we compared the correlation coefficients at each sampling time instant using RM-ANOVAs with the variable as the main factor and multiple-test corrected the resulted p-values by a window of 50ms.

3. Results

3.1. Behavioral Results

We first examined if the observers' responses were balanced based on results (correctness) and responses, respectively. For the 484 trials each participant ran as an observer, the mean (std) number of correct and incorrect trials were 241.13 (13.56) and 242.74 (13.5), respectively. A RM-ANOVA with the result (correct versus incorrect) as the main factor on the count of trials found no significant effect ($F(1,22)=0.08$, $p=0.78$). The observers' responses by two choices were also not significantly uneven as indicated by a RM-ANOVA with the response (trust verses doubt) as the main factor on the count of trials ($F(1,22)=1.8$, $p=0.19$). Next, we examined if the observers' responses were unbalanced across different experimental conditions. We used the ratio between the counts of trials responded with "doubt" and "trust" to determine the degree of incredibility under each condition. The mean (std) ratios for the instructed lie, instructed truth, spontaneous lie, and spontaneous truth conditions were 1.14 (0.27), 1.31 (0.45), 0.86 (0.22), and 0.81 (0.24), respectively. A RM-ANOVA with the player's task (instructed versus spontaneous) and behavior (truth versus lie) as the main factors on the count of trials found a significant effect of the task ($F(1,22)=15.72$, $p<0.001$) and a significant interaction between the

two main factors (F(1,22)=5.89, p<0.05), but didn't find any significant effect of the player's behavior (F(1,22)=1.52, p=0.23). These results indicate that, although the observers' responses were generally even by both correctness and judgements, they tended to be more skeptical when the players were instructed, regardless of what types of instructions were given. Note that the observers were not explicitly instructed about the experimental conditions during the entire experiment, therefore these results suggest that the observers could detect, at a certain degree, if the players were instructed or not. Moreover, the observer understood that the number of trials were even between the instructed lie and truth conditions. Therefore, the observers' biased responses indicate that they were directly influenced by the players' facial expressions.

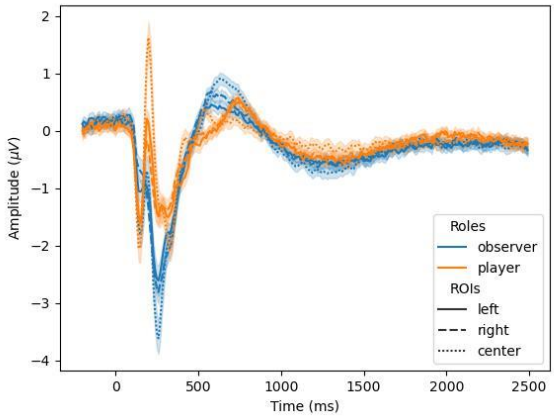

Figure 3. Averaged ERP signals for both roles and all three ROIs during the "player decision making" stage. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

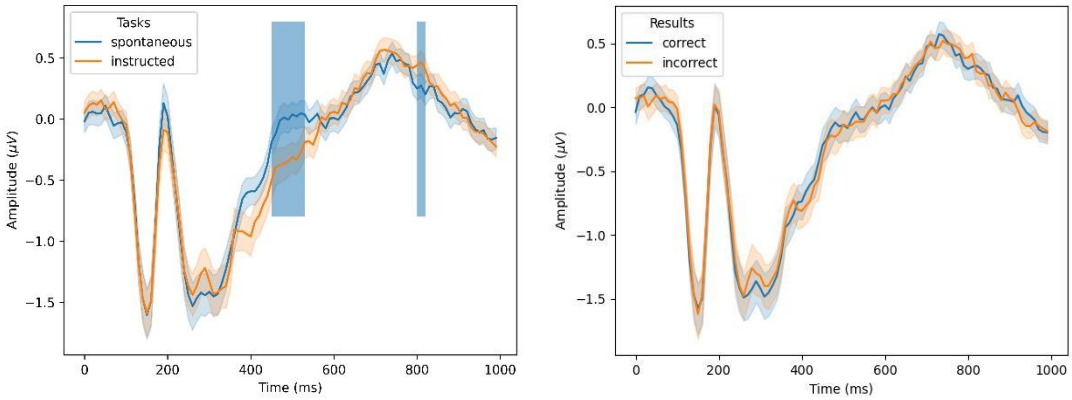

Figure 4. Lateral ROI ERPs for the players conditioned by tasks (left panel) and results (right panel). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects (p<0.05) from the condition on the ERPs after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

3.2. ERP Results

Figure 3 shows the average ERP signals from both roles and the three ROIs. We observed that these ERPs were different in magnitude between the two roles and/or across the three ROIs at certain periods within the first 1000ms. We thus determined the duration from 0 to 1000ms as the critical period to be examined for the effects from those variables we illustrated previously.

In all the analyses, we only detected one major effect that was from the player's task (instructed versus spontaneous) on their lateral frontal ERPs lying mainly between 450ms and 540ms, shown in Figure 4 (left panel), as indicated by RM-ANOVAs on a temporal sample basis followed by multiple-test corrections. We collected all the samples during this period and ran another RM-ANOVA with the player's task as the main factor on the sample collections and it confirmed the significant effect ($F(1,22)=17.87$, $p<0.001$). Such major effect was controlled by other conditional settings, where no major effects were detected on ERPs of both roles and both ROIs, from results, players' behaviors, and observers' responses, as shown in Figure 4 (right panel) and Figure A1, A2 in the Appendix. These results suggest that, for the players, the execution of task instructions could be represented by the activities that recorded at the vlPFC.

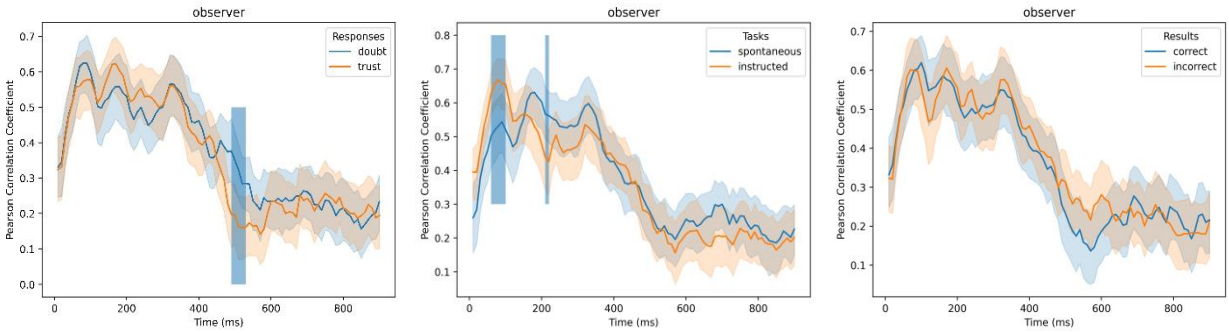

Figure 5. Pearson correlation coefficients between ERPs from left and right ROIs for the observers, conditioned by responses (left panel), tasks (middle panel), and results (right panel). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the correlation coefficients after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

3.3. Left-right Frontal Correlation Analysis

During the critical period beginning from 0ms to 1000ms, we observed two major effects from those four variables on the correlation dynamics between the left and the right ROIs, both of which were from the observer's side. As shown in Figure 5, it was detected by the RM-ANOVAs on a temporal sample basis that the observer's response (doubt versus trust) had a significant effect on their inter-lateral dependencies between 480ms and 530ms, as confirmed by another RM-ANOVA with the observer's response as the main factor on the collection of correlation coefficients within this duration ($F(1,22)=11.24$, $p<0.01$). Moreover, the player's task also had a

significant effect on the observers' inter-lateral dependencies mainly between 50ms and 100ms indicated by a same statistical testing manner ($F(1,22)=8.89$, $p<0.01$). These results suggest that the observers' responses, towards the players' facial expressions, could be encoded by the dynamics of their bilateral asymmetry in the signals recorded from the vlPFC. Moreover, the player's task was also reflected by the observer's vlPFC activities in as early as the first 100ms, which indicates an early awareness of the player's task from the observer's side through facial expression observations. These effects were controlled by other conditions as shown in Figure 5 (panel right) and Figure A3 in the Appendix.

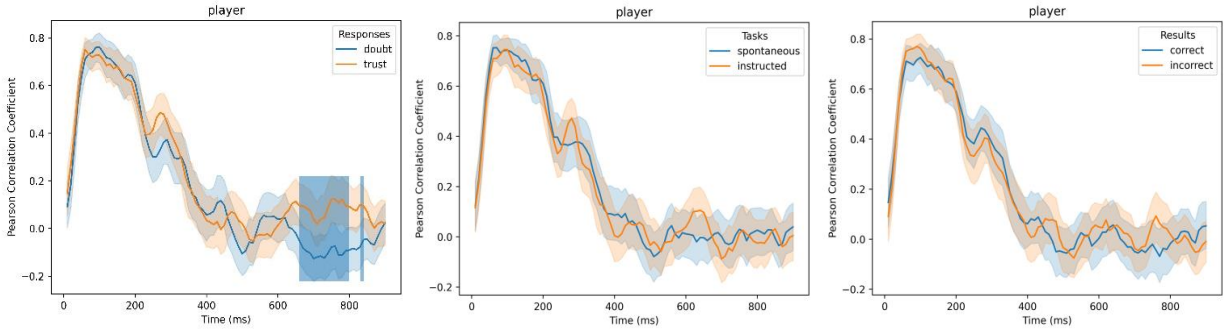

Figure 6. Pearson correlation coefficients between ERPs from central and lateral ROIs for the players, conditioned by responses (left panel), tasks (middle panel), and results (right panel). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the correlation coefficients after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

3.4. Central-lateral Frontal Correlation Analysis

In all the analyses, we observed one effect on the central-lateral ROI correlations, as indicated by the RM-ANOVA on a temporal sample basis. Shown in Figure 6, the observer's response had a significant effect on the player's central-lateral connections between 650ms and 790ms, as confirmed by another RM-ANOVA with the observer's response (doubt versus trust) as the main factor on the collection of correlation coefficients within this duration ($F(1,22)=21.07$, $p=0.0001$). This result provides direct evidence for the linkage from the player's neural activities in the frontal cortex, specifically in the connections between signals recorded from the dmPFC and vlPFC, to the observer's responses. Such effect was controlled by all other conditional settings as shown in Figure 6 (panel middle and right) and Figure A4 in the Appendix.

4. Discussion

In the behavioral analysis, we found the numbers of correct and incorrect trials were relatively even across all participants. This raised the question about whether the observers made their decisions by random guesses or if they utilized the information conveyed through the players' facial expressions. Regarding this question, we had two major findings in this study. First, not

only the players but also the observers could be consciously aware of the player's task of whether being instructed or spontaneous. In the EEG data, we found the related information was represented by the activities recorded from the vlPFC, by which both roles' behaviors were encoded and/or impacted. As the evidence, our analyses detected significant effects of the player's task on both the magnitude of ERPs from the players' lateral ROIs and the degree of observers' bilateral frontal asymmetries. It was also confirmed by the significantly higher doubt-to-trust ratio for the instructed conditions than spontaneous ones. This indicates the observers' responses were directly influenced by the player's facial expressions. Second, the observers' responses were directly impacted by the players' neural activities, as indicated by the significant effect of the observer's response (doubt versus trust) on the players' central-lateral ROI connections. A simple and straightforward postulate to this phenomenon is that the observer's decision to trust or doubt the player depended on their ability to detect or recognize specific facial behaviors of the player influenced by the dmPFC-vlPFC connectivity. Whereas from the observer's side, detection or recognition to these facial expressions might be encoded by the dynamics of their bilateral asymmetries in the vlPFC, as indicated by the significant effect of the observer's response (doubt versus trust) on their inter-lateral ROI dependencies.

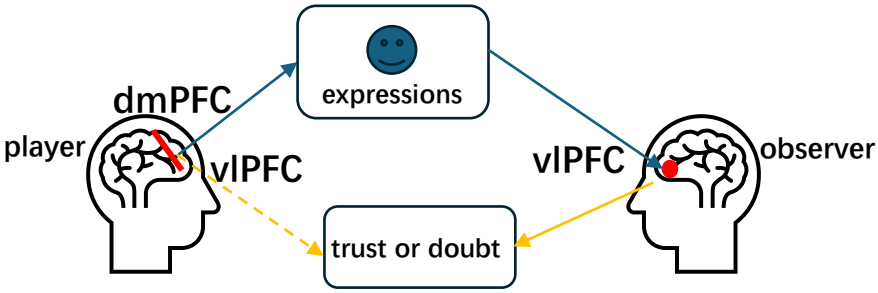

Figure 7. Illustration of a neural resonance model between the player and the observer. The blue arrows illustrate the information path, and the yellow arrows illustrate the effects observed in the data.

Given the observers' chance-level performance and the effects from the observer's behaviors on both roles' neural activities, we propose a neural resonance model, as illustrated in Figure 7, to explain the how the facial expressions were cortically processed by both roles and how their behaviors were linked to their neural activities. We discuss the neural correlates involved in this model in the next paragraph.

Our findings involved the EEG signals collected from our three ROIs that mainly covered the dmPFC and the vlPFC. These areas were documented to play critical roles during the emotion regulation and perception. Recent research has implicated that the dmPFC functioned in regulating emotions by influencing other prefrontal regions (Scharnowski et al., 2020; Baumgartner et al., 2011; Koush et al. 2019). The involvement of dmPFC in emotional regulation has been reported by a series of studies, which found the increased activation of dmPFC with respect to increased emotional levels in contrast to the control (Domes et al., 2010; Ochsner et

al., 2004; Ochsner et al., 2009). In addition, the exerting role of dmPFC in emotional regulation has also been emphasized by uncovering the functional connections between the dmPFC and other regions including superior frontal gyrus (SFG), ventral medial prefrontal cortex (vmPFC), and amygdala (Koush et al., 2019; Braunstein et al., 2017; Berboth and Morawetz, 2021; Banks et al. 2007). Given the other functions that were recognized, including interacting emotions with memory (Kensinger et al., 2021), action controls (Domenech and Koechlin, 2015), and integrating external information during social cognition (Martin et al., 2017), dmPFC has been considered to serve as the key hub for emotional regulation. As for the vlPFC, neuroimaging studies have shown that this region activated in response to emotional facial expressions by associating with the amygdala (Meta-analysis: Fusar-Poli et al., 2009). For example, Liu et al. (2017) observed weaker modulations between vlPFC and amygdala with appeasing faces compared to the control in macaques. Also, evidenced in an TMS study, subjects' sensitivity to happy and angry faces were mediated after their vlPFC was interrupted (Chick et al., 2020). The vlPFC has thus been considered to be responsible for facial emotion perception.

Consistent to the previous findings, this study found that the EEG signals recorded from vlPFC were sensitive to two factors: the player's task (instructed versus spontaneous) and the observer's response (doubt versus trust), and all the information was conveyed by the players' facial expressions. Furthermore, the player's dynamics of connections between dmPFC and vlPFC were sensitive to the observer's responses. This indicates the linkage between the player's emotional regulations and the observer's behaviors at a social interaction aspect. Taken together, a neural resonance from the player's emotional regulation system to the observer's emotion perception system was likely to be built based on the player's facial expressions during the deception experiment.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we investigated an EEG dataset regarding the social interaction by facial expressions during the deception. Our analysis led to two major findings: (1) Despite not being explicitly informed of the specific conditions, the observer was more likely to doubt the player in instructed conditions, with the effect reflected by both behavioral data and the observer's vlPFC activities. (2) Both the observer's (vlPFC) and the player's (dmPFC-vlPFC) neural activities reflected effects of the observers' responses (trust versus doubt), yet the observers' performance were at the chance level. According to the previous research, dmPFC-vlPFC connectivity and vlPFC activities were related to emotional regulation and emotion perception, respectively. Consequently, our findings suggest the presence of a neural resonance process based on facial expressions from the player's emotional regulation system to the observer's emotion perception system.

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Author Contribution

DH: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing-original draft, and Writing-review and editing.

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Appendix

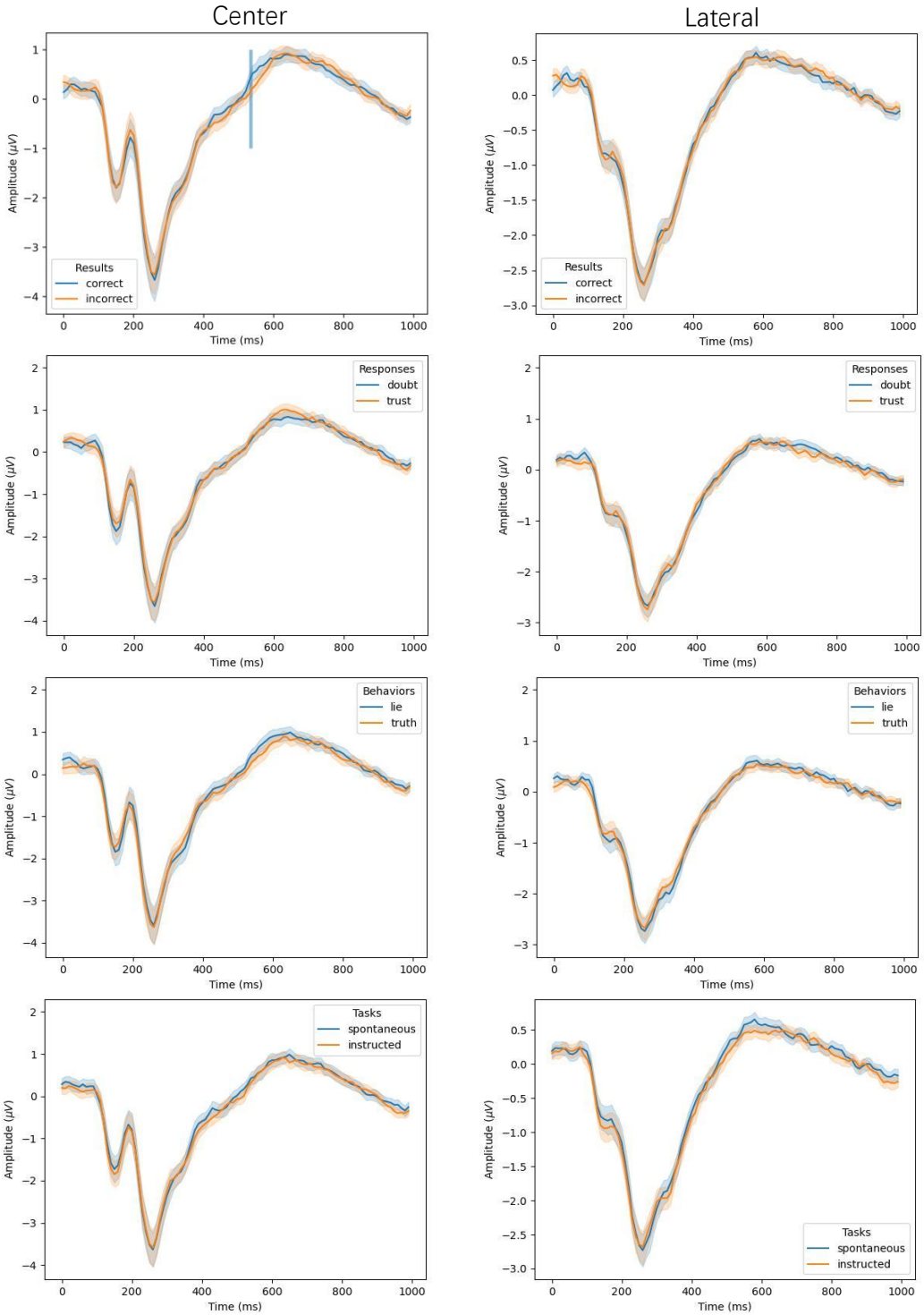

Figure A1. Center and lateral frontal ERPs for the observers conditioned by different variables (indicated by the legends). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the ERPs after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

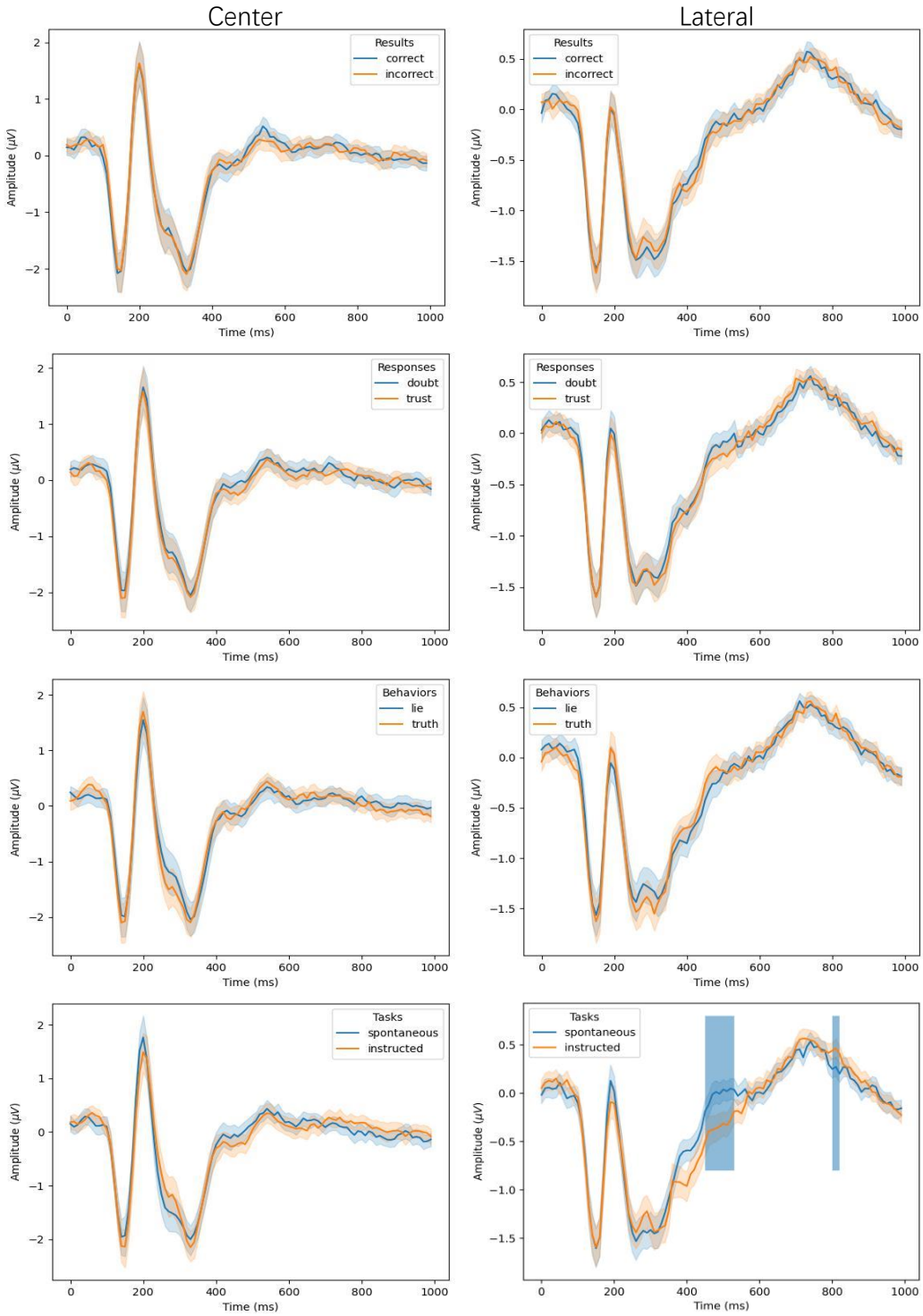

Figure A2. Center and lateral frontal ERPs for the players conditioned by different variables (indicated by the legends). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the ERPs after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

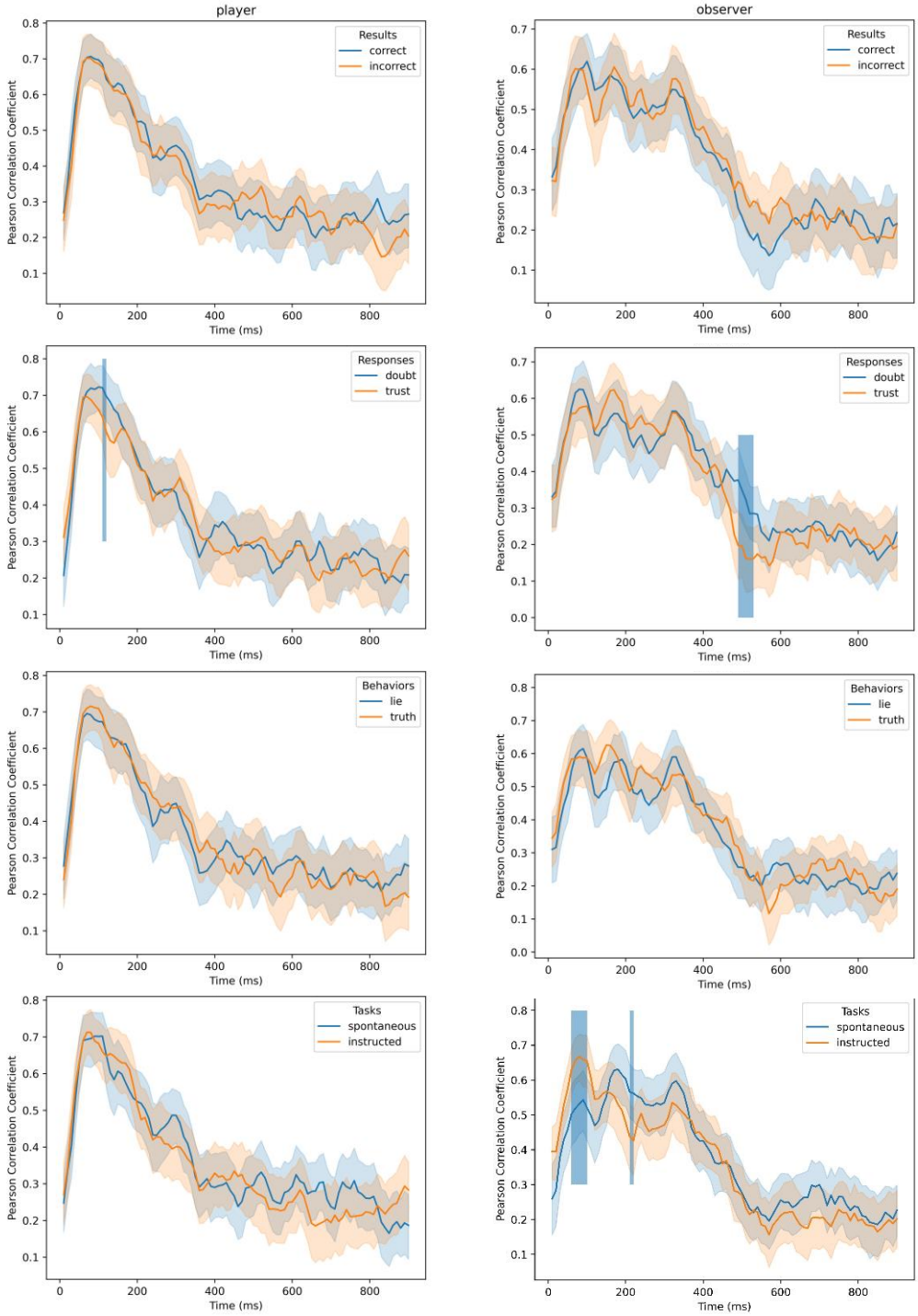

Figure A3. Pearson correlation coefficients between ERPs from left and right ROIs for the observers (right panel) and players (left panel) conditioned by different variables (indicated by the legends). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the correlation coefficients after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.

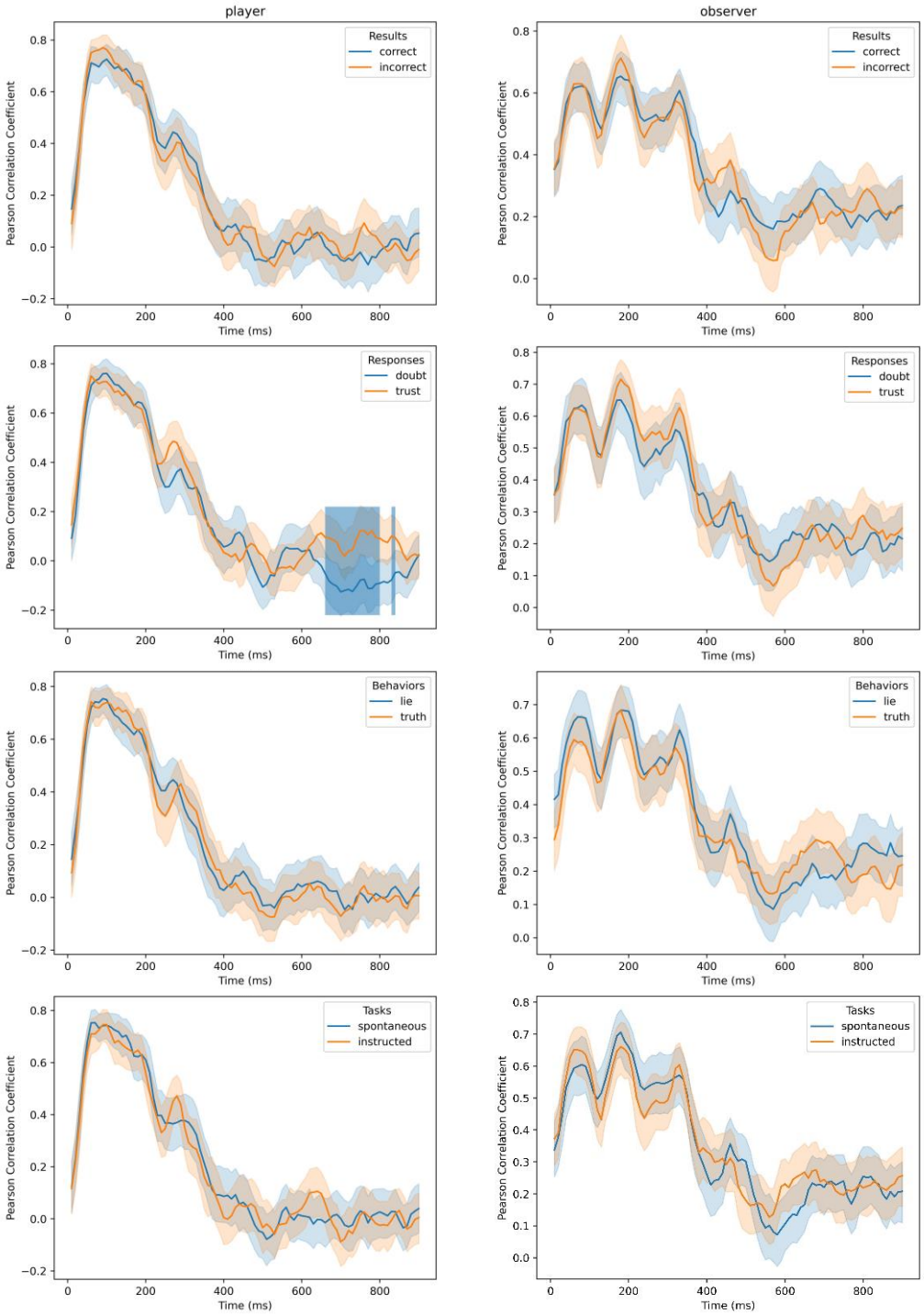

Figure A4. Pearson correlation coefficients between ERPs from central and lateral ROIs for the observers (right panel) and players (left panel) conditioned by different variables (indicated by the legends). Blue boxes highlighted the temporal duration where RM-ANOVAs detected significant effects ($p<0.05$) from the condition on the correlation coefficients after multiple test corrections. Time 0 marks the stimulus onset. Shadings indicate the 95% confidence intervals across participants.