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# Precarious manhood increases men's receptivity to social sexual behavior from attractive women at work<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The precarious nature of manhood, a hard-won and easily lost social status, has been linked to negative outcomes such as aggression in men, lower well-being for men and women, and more instances of workplace harassment. We posit that precarious manhood also influences men's perceptions of social sexual behavior (SSB) directed at them by a coworker of the opposite gender, shedding light on gender asymmetries in perceptions of SSB at work. Across four experiments ( $N = 1656$ ), we demonstrate that men are more receptive to SSB from attractive women when their manhood is threatened compared to when it is affirmed (Studies 1–2). This effect holds after controlling for short-term mating orientation, is limited to men's (as opposed to women's) perceptions of SSB from opposite-gender initiators (Study 2) and is also limited to men's perceptions of SSB from attractive (versus unattractive) women (Study 3). Additionally, we find that at baseline, men who receive SSB from attractive women experience greater feelings of masculinity, which are limited to perceptions of sexual (versus nonsexual) behavior from attractive women, ruling out the possibility that men are simply more flatterable than women (Study 4). Our findings suggest that men's insecurities about their manhood may leave them more vulnerable to potentially problematic workplace behaviors that cater to their sense of masculinity.

*Men don't actually come on seriously to every attractive woman they work with, but they do expect a show of ritual, ego-satisfying flirtation.*

- Mark Feigan Fasteau, *The Male Machine*, 1974, p. 57

Although Fasteau's quote alluding to a relationship between men's ego-based needs and receptivity to sexual behavior from attractive women was written in a time that predates the modern workplace, research continues to find that social sexual behavior (SSB), or nonwork-related verbal and nonverbal behaviors having sexual content, remains a common workplace occurrence (Gutek, Cohen, & Konrad, 1990, p. 255; Rawski, O'Leary-Kelly, & Breaux-Soignet, 2021; Sheppard, O'Reilly, van Dijke, Restubog, & Aquino, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the #MeToo social movement launched in 2017 highlights that the more pernicious forms of SSB continue to occur, highlighting the need for more research to identify

the underlying causes of ego-driven SSB dynamics.

Evidence also finds that men tend to experience the same SSBs at work as less offensive and harmful than do women (e.g., Gutek, 1985) and that a greater percentage of men rate receiving SSB at work to be positive (46%) than do women (10%) (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Study 1).<sup>2</sup> The explanation for this gender asymmetry in perceptions of SSB has focused on gender differences in power (Berdahl, Magley, & Waldo, 1996; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; MacKinnon, 1979). Considering women have less power in the organizational context (e.g., Mann, 1995; Ragins & Sundstrom, 1989), they are likely to view SSB at work more negatively because being in a position of relatively low power means less control over a given situation, and therefore greater threat and lower enjoyment (e.g., Berdahl et al., 1996; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). While

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<sup>1</sup> The current research examines perceptions of social sexual behavior as opposed to sexual behavior given the latter includes workplace behaviors that are sexual in nature but can be performed without others bearing witness to them (e.g., viewing pornography in private on an office computer) (Aquino, Sheppard, Watkins, O'Reilly, & Smith, 2014). Considering the current research concerns recipients' perceptions of sexual behavior directed at them, we examine social sexual behaviors, rather than the broader set of sexual behaviors which includes behaviors that can be enacted in isolation.

<sup>2</sup> We note that the current work is limited to heterosexual men and women's perceptions of SSB from opposite-gender individuals.

this power account undoubtedly plays a key role in explaining the difference in men's and women's experience of SSB, the current work proposes an additional account of why men may experience SSB at work more positively than women do.

As suggested by the above quote, the current work examines the possibility that, compared to women, men's relatively positive experience of receiving SSB stems from this class of behavior serving as a mechanism for restoring their gender status as "real men" after their gender status is threatened. Theories of precarious manhood suggest that affirming men's gender status is important because manhood is considered a precarious social status that needs to be continually demonstrated (Fasteau, 1974; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008) through displays of masculinity, which is defined as the attributes, qualities, behaviors and traits that are regarded as characteristic of men (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 2018; Connell, 1987; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).<sup>3</sup> Sexual performance is a central theme to masculinity (along with antifemininity, success, self-reliance, aggression, and sexual performance) (e.g., Doyle, 1995; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Pleck, 1995; Wong, Horn, & Chen, 2013); one way men signal masculinity and thereby establish their manhood is by boasting about their sexual successes (Eder, Evans and Parker, 1995; Kehily, 2005; Pascoe, 2011; Sweeney, 2014). Considering the workplace is a site of frequent masculinity contests and where men feel particular pressure to prove themselves as "real men" (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018), men may be especially receptive to behaviors from others that affirm their manhood at work. Given the relevance of sexual performance to manhood, we posit that receiving SSB may boost men's feelings of masculinity and therefore make it a positive experience for men.

Womanhood, in contrast, differs from manhood in that it is believed to be defined by biological markers and is therefore a less fragile social status that need not be proven repeatedly (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Furthermore, sexual performance has not been theorized to be a central theme to womanhood. Thus, receiving SSB at work should not affect women's gender status.

In the present research, we examine the relationship between SSB and precarious manhood and propose that men who have their manhood threatened (as opposed to affirmed) will experience SSB more positively. Additionally, we test whether threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB are limited to perceptions of SSB from attractive (as opposed to unattractive) women. High physical attractiveness of female romantic partners has been shown to boost men's perceived masculinity (Baumeister, Reynolds, Winegard, & Vohs, 2017; Meszaros, 2017), suggesting that SSB from unattractive women will not afford men the same boost in felt-masculinity compared to SSB from attractive women.

Through investigating a novel link between precarious manhood and men's perceptions of SSB, we identify a unique avenue through which men's tenuous gender status shapes their experiences. Prior work has found that men who have their manhood called into question are more likely to experience psychological threat (e.g., Eisler & Skidmore, 1987; Levant, 1996; Pleck, 1981), as well as more negative emotions, and less empathy (Vescio, Schermerhorn, Gallegos, & Laubach, 2021) compared to men who have their manhood affirmed. In addition to these affective

<sup>3</sup> We note that masculinity and manhood have often been equated in the precarious manhood literature, with both masculinity and manhood being interchangeably described as constructs that can be threatened and affirmed (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Vandello et al., 2008; Vandello & Bosson, 2013). In the current work, we conceptualize manhood as a precarious status that can be threatened, affirmed, earned, maintained, or regained, while we treat masculinity as a felt or conveyed identity consisting of the masculine attributes, qualities, behaviors and traits. In other words, masculinity is a broader characterization, such that women can also act masculine and convey masculinity, but manhood is the state of being a man (e.g., manhood can be considered a masculine gender identity; Pleck, 1981).

consequences, prior research has found that men who experience psychological threats as a result of incurring gender threats (i.e., providing false feedback that individuals are gender-incongruent) are more likely to engage in acts intended to repair their gender status as "real men." For instance, men who have their manhood challenged (versus affirmed) express more interest in purchasing a sports utility vehicle (SUV), more support for war, and more homophobic attitudes (Willer, Rogalin, Conlon, & Wojnowicz, 2013). By examining how challenges to manhood influence men's perceptions of SSB, the current work highlights an additional outcome of precarious manhood that sheds light on the gender asymmetry in perceptions of SSB.

Additionally, the current work investigates a novel way in which men can experience increases in their self-perceptions of masculinity. Prior work examining the behavioral consequences of precarious manhood has largely focused on aggressive acts performed by men (e.g., Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Bosson, Vandello, Burnaford, Weaver, & Wasti, 2009) that are meant to restore their manhood. In the current work, we highlight another avenue that boosts men's masculine self-image: receiving SSB from attractive women. By highlighting this novel source of masculine assurance, we show that threatened men may more favorably evaluate circumstances that affirm their gender status, even when those circumstances consist of behavior from others. Thus, threatened men not only engage in aggressive behaviors to repair their gender status, as past research has shown, but they may also respond favorably to others' behaviors when those behaviors serve as a source of masculine assurance.

The current work also builds upon prior findings linking precarious manhood and SSB by investigating how gender threats shape men's perceptions of SSB when they are on the receiving end of such behavior, as opposed to enacting SSB. For instance, prior research finds that men who experience threats to their manhood are more likely to engage in sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007a; Berdahl, 2007b; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003) and greater sexualization of women (Dahl, Vescio, & Weaver, 2015), suggesting that when men have their manhood threatened, they may be more likely to enact behaviors meant to subordinate women to restore their gender status (Weaver & Vescio, 2015). However, the cited research has regarded men as potential enactors of SSB, rather than as potential recipients. As such, we have a limited understanding of how gender threats influence perceptions of SSB from a recipient's perspective. Given men and women both enact SSB (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Kray, Kennedy, & Rosenblum, 2022; Sheppard et al., 2020), it is important to understand how factors such as gender threat and physical attractiveness of opposite-gender initiators influence men and women's perceptions of receiving SSB. The current work aims to show that men with threatened manhood may not only be more likely to enact SSB, but also more likely to enjoy receiving SSB, suggesting that simply receiving SSB, rather than engaging in acts of harassment meant to subordinate women, is enough to restore men's sense of masculinity in their own eyes.

## 1. Precarious manhood, masculinity and sexual performance

Manhood, in contrast to womanhood, is seen as a precarious social status that is earned rather than granted, impermanent once won, and achieved through active demonstrations of manhood (Vandello et al., 2008). Whereas Vandello et al. (2008) find that womanhood is believed to be defined by biological markers (e.g., hormonal changes), manhood is defined by social proof. As such, the precarious nature of manhood provides a valuable lens through which to better understand men's phenomenology. The elusive and uncertain nature of manhood is a source of great anxiety for men (e.g., Eisler & Blalock, 1991). In turn, this uncertainty can motivate men to engage in risky and maladaptive behaviors or to avoid adaptive and beneficial behaviors (see Vandello & Bosson, 2013 for review) in attempts to establish their manhood.

With regards to the specific qualities and attributes that may allow men to demonstrate manhood, prior literature has identified five themes

central to the construct of masculinity: antifemininity, success, self-reliance, aggression, and sexual performance (Brannon & David, 1976; Doyle, 1995; Mosher & Anderson, 1986; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Mosher & Tomkins, 1988; Pleck, 1995; Wong et al., 2013). These elements of the male role provide a base on which to hypothesize how the precariousness of manhood may impact men's behaviors. For example, understanding these bases of masculinity allowed Bosson et al. (2009) to hypothesize and find evidence for the idea that men are more likely to choose a task that demonstrates aggression (over a control task) when their manhood is threatened, or for Vandello and Bosson (2013) to find that men were less likely to seek flexible work arrangements, despite their desire for work flexibility and work-life balance, to the extent that they believed doing so could call their masculinity into question.

In the current work, we build upon the precarious manhood hypothesis to examine men's perceptions of SSB in the workplace. As mentioned above, sexual performance is an element of masculinity: qualitative research has supported this notion, finding that men boast about their sexual successes to signal their masculinity to other men (Eder, Evans and Parker, 1995; Kehily, 2005; Pascoe, 2011; Sweeney, 2014). Thus, one could argue that when men have their manhood threatened, they may leverage their sexual experiences to restore their manhood. Given prior research finds that men who have their manhood threatened engage in more hypermasculine behaviors to regain their gender status (e.g., Bosson et al., 2009), we propose that men who have their manhood challenged (as opposed to affirmed) will evaluate SSB more positively, as sexual performance is central to masculinity, and receiving SSB may heighten men's perceptions of their own sexual appeal, and thus, their sense of masculinity.

**Hypothesis 1.** Men who have their manhood threatened will perceive SSB from women more positively than men who have their manhood affirmed.

Additionally, research finds that girls and women do not have the same requirements of social proof to achieve and maintain their status as women, suggesting that womanhood happens to girls, while manhood must be achieved by boys (Gilmore, 1990; Vandello et al., 2008). Thus, womanhood is relatively less precarious than manhood, and cannot be as easily threatened. Given women are less likely to experience threats to womanhood, they may also be less predisposed to favoring circumstances that affirm their womanhood, such as receiving sexual attention from an opposite-gender coworker. As such, we additionally predict that this effect (i.e., more positive perceptions of SSB from opposite-gender initiators when gender status is threatened) will only emerge for men, and not for women, as men's tenuous relationship with their gender status will bias them to favor circumstances that affirm their manhood.

**Hypothesis 2.** Men, but not women, who have their gender status threatened will perceive SSB from opposite-gender initiators more positively than when they have their gender status affirmed.

## 2. Physical attractiveness of men's female partners and masculinity implications

We posit that men's felt-masculinity boost from SSB, and therefore their positive experience of SSB, is contingent upon the physical attractiveness of the woman enacting SSB. Research has documented a robust bias in favor of attractive individuals known as the attractiveness bias (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Hatfield & Sprecher, 1986; Watkins & Johnston, 2000), such that attractive people are favored, and their actions are perceived to be more positive. Moreover, physical attractiveness in the context of sexual behavior is considered an easily perceivable, salient, and positively valued cue (Langlois et al., 2000; Peters, Rhodes, & Simmons, 2007). Having a physically attractive sexual partner is assumed to be desirable in society, particularly men having attractive female partners (Feingold, 1992; Hagiwara, 1975; Townsend, 1993; Townsend & Levy,

1990). Moreover, evolutionary literature suggests that men are particularly attentive to physical attractiveness, as physical attractiveness signals high fertility in women (Buss, 1989; Schwarz & Hassebrauck, 2012). As such, heterosexual men have been found to compete with other men for attention from physically attractive women (Baumeister et al., 2017), suggesting that SSB from an attractive woman can cause men to feel relatively superior to other men. Supporting this notion, sociological research has found that men utilize their relationships with physically attractive women to assert their masculine superiority over other men (Hoang, 2015; Parreñas, 2001). Research has also documented how "trophy wives," or female romantic partners who reflect cultural standards of beauty are regarded as status symbols of masculinity for their male partners (Meszaros, 2017). Thus, we arrive to the following prediction:

**Hypothesis 3.** Threatened men's more positive evaluations of SSB compared to affirmed men will be limited to perceptions of SSB from attractive (as opposed to unattractive) women.

The association between men with physically attractive female romantic partners and heightened perceived masculinity may exist because beauty is considered a relatively scarce resource, and attractive women are believed to have greater romantic choices than unattractive women (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004; Epstein, Klinkenberg, Scandell, Faulkner, & Claus, 2007). As such, a physically attractive romantic partner can bolster a man's status such that he is believed to possess more positive qualities (e.g., confidence, wealth, ambition) compared to a man who is paired with an unattractive woman (Rodeheffer, Leyva, & Hill, 2016; Sigall & Landy, 1973). The assumed positive qualities (e.g., greater perceived confidence, wealth, and ambition) that are associated with men who are paired with attractive women also fulfill masculine stereotypes (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Prentice & Carranza, 2002), suggesting that men with physically attractive romantic partners are conferred greater masculine status than men with physically unattractive romantic partners. Therefore, men are less likely to derive boosts in their felt-masculinity from sexual attention from unattractive women. As such, we postulate that receiving SSB from an attractive woman can affirm a man's status as a sexually successful man, affirming his manhood, while SSB from a physically unattractive woman provides no such affirmation. Although existing literature on the masculinity implications for physically attractive women's male partners has focused on the context of romantic partners, we posit that such a dynamic exists in professional settings as well. In personal and professional settings alike, sexual attention from an attractive woman may signal that the male target of SSB is a "real man." Thus, we propose that receiving SSB from an attractive female coworker can boost a man's self-perceptions of masculinity and lead him to experience that interaction positively. Moreover, we expect that men's higher self-reported masculinity will only emerge when they are evaluating SSB as opposed to non-social sexual behavior (non-SSB), given nonsexual interactions with attractive women are unlikely to cater to any of the five themes of masculinity (i.e., antifemininity, success, self-reliance, aggression, and sexual performance; Brannon & David, 1976; Doyle, 1995; Mosher & Anderson, 1986; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984; Mosher & Tomkins, 1988).

**Hypothesis 4.** Men who evaluate SSB (versus non-SSB) from attractive (versus unattractive) women will report greater self-perceptions of masculinity.

## 3. The current research

Across four studies, we investigate the link between precarious manhood and men's perceptions of SSB from women. To do so, we examine whether men who have their manhood threatened enjoy SSB more than men who have their manhood affirmed, and whether men's more favorable reactions to receiving workplace SSB from attractive women are driven by boosts in self-perceptions of masculinity. The

studies in this paper strive to demonstrate that this phenomenon is unique to men, specific to evaluations of SSB from attractive (compared to unattractive) women, and pertaining to perceptions of SSB (compared to non-SSB).

Study 1 sought to establish the link between men's perception of SSB and precarious manhood by manipulating whether men's gender status was threatened or affirmed. If SSB from an attractive woman provides a masculinity boost, then men who have their manhood threatened should be more receptive to it compared to men who have their manhood affirmed (Hypothesis 1), given the former are in greater need of restoring their threatened gender status. Study 2 tested whether the relationship between threatened or affirmed manhood and perceptions of SSB from an attractive opposite-gender initiator was unique to men by manipulating whether participants' gender status was threatened or affirmed and contrasting men's perceptions of SSB to those of women's (Hypothesis 2). Study 3 explored a boundary condition of this effect by manipulating whether men had their manhood threatened or affirmed while also manipulating the physical attractiveness of the female initiator (either high in attractiveness or low in attractiveness) to test whether threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB were limited to perceptions of SSB enacted by attractive (but not unattractive) female initiators (Hypothesis 3). Finally, Study 4 tested the prediction that men experience higher self-reported masculinity when evaluating SSB (versus non-SSB) from an attractive (versus unattractive) woman (Hypothesis 4), shedding light on why threatened men may view SSB from attractive women more favorably than affirmed men. Furthermore, in Study 4, we conducted exploratory moderated mediation analysis to examine whether men's positive perceptions of SSB from an attractive woman were due to boosts in self-perceptions of masculinity. For each of the studies, we determined the sample size prior to beginning data collection and recruited 50–100 participants per condition to fulfill minimum cell-size requirements (Simmons, Nelson, & Simonsohn, 2011).<sup>4</sup> All measures, manipulations, and exclusions are disclosed.

#### 4. Study 1

In Study 1, we investigated the relationship between precarious manhood and men's receptivity to SSB at work from an attractive woman. We manipulated gender threat by giving men false feedback on a gender identity assessment (Bosson et al., 2021; Caswell, Bosson, Vandello, & Sellers, 2014; Vandello et al., 2008; Willer et al., 2013) and subsequently asked them to evaluate scenarios in which they received SSB from an attractive woman. We elected to examine only men's evaluations of SSB from attractive women in this initial test because women's gender status is not characterized by the same precarious nature as manhood (e.g., Vandello et al., 2008). We expected to find that men who had their manhood threatened (as opposed to affirmed) would react more positively to SSB from an attractive woman given they have comparatively more to gain regarding their sense of masculinity (Hypothesis 1).

##### 4.1. Method

###### 4.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 200 heterosexual men through Amazon's Mechanical Turk ( $M_{age} = 37.32$ ,  $SD_{age} = 11.29$  years), providing 80% power to detect a small-to-medium effect size ( $d = 0.36$ ). The study had a 2-cell (gender status: threatened or affirmed) between-subject design.

###### 4.1.2. Materials and procedure

Participants were informed that they were taking a survey designed to assess how individual characteristics impacted perceptions of

<sup>4</sup> For exploratory measures, survey materials, and data for studies, refer to Supplemental Materials (<https://osf.io/mt9q4/>).

acceptable workplace behavior. Participants first completed an ostensible gender identity assessment in which they rated themselves on 30 characteristics (see Supplemental Materials for full list of characteristics) taken from the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). After participants completed the assessment, they were randomly informed that their gender identity score aligned with the average woman's response (threatened masculinity) or the average man's response (affirmed masculinity). This false-feedback manipulation of gender status has been previously used in the precarious manhood literature (e.g., Vandello et al., 2008). The false feedback was accompanied by a visual scale anchored with "feminine" or "masculine" at either end along with an arrow indicating the participant's ostensible score. As a manipulation check, participants had to type their score into the following screen.

For the second part of the survey, participants were shown an ostensible employee-ID photo of an attractive woman (initiator) named Nicole and asked to imagine Nicole was their coworker at a fictitious company called Acme Inc. To increase generalizability, we selected two photos of attractive female targets from the Chicago Faces Database (Ma, Correll, & Wittenbrink, 2015) in which targets were shown against a white background from the shoulders up, had closed-lip smiles, and wore grey t-shirts.<sup>5</sup>

Participants were then asked to imagine that Nicole engaged in three different SSBs (gave you sexual attention, stares at you in a sexually suggestive manner, asks you to go for a drink after work), presented one at a time in a randomized order. We selected these three behaviors because they spanned a range from being complimentary in nature (i.e., asks you to go for a drink after work) to being potentially offensive in nature (i.e., gave you sexual attention, stares at you in a sexually suggestive manner).<sup>6</sup> For each behavior, participants indicated the valence of their experience by indicating how positive or negative of an experience the behavior by Nicole would be to them on a 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) Likert-type scale. We combined ratings of all three behaviors into one composite score for Valence of Experience ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ).

##### 4.2. Results

Of the 200 participants, sixteen failed to correctly recall their gender identity score within 10 points and four participants indicated that they did not believe in the results of their gender identity assessment, causing us to drop their responses from the analyses, leaving a final sample size of 180 men. We subjected the data to a *t*-test comparing responses of men who were in the gender threatened condition with men who were in the gender affirmed condition. In line with predictions, men who had their manhood threatened viewed SSB from an attractive female coworker to be significantly more positive ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) than men who had their manhood affirmed ( $M = 4.85$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(178) = 2.38$ ,  $p = .018$ ,  $d = 0.36$ . Ratings from men who had their manhood threatened ( $t(88) = 10.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.12$ ) and affirmed ( $t(90) = 5.63$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.59$ ) were both significantly above the midpoint of the scale, indicating the behaviors were rated relatively positively.

##### 4.3. Discussion

Study 1 provides an initial demonstration of a causal link between

<sup>5</sup> A pre-test conducted by Chicago Faces showed that the first ( $M = 4.66$ ) and second ( $M = 4.30$ ) female targets were rated similarly on attractiveness. Ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). Each face was rated by a minimum of 85 respondents. The norming data provided by Chicago Faces Database only provided a single mean value for each face regarding ratings of physical attractiveness. As such, standard deviation figures, *t*-statistics, *p*-values, and measures for Cohen's *d* are unavailable. See Table 1 in Supplemental Materials for information on stimuli used in Studies 1–4.

<sup>6</sup> Please refer to Table 2 in Supplemental Materials for pretested ratings of the social sexual behaviors.



precarious manhood and receptivity to SSB, specifically the experience of receiving SSB from a coworker who is an attractive woman. Men who had their gender status threatened were more receptive to SSB than men who had their gender status affirmed, suggesting that men who experience gender threats have a greater need to affirm their manhood, and are thus likely to be more receptive to circumstances that cater to their sense of masculinity (e.g., SSB from an attractive woman). By contrast, men who had their gender status affirmed in the gender identity assessment had comparatively less to gain, and thus evaluated SSB from an attractive woman to be less positive of an experience, although notably well above the midpoint of the scale.

## 5. Study 2

In Study 2, we compared men's responses to those of women to further confirm that our phenomenon is unique to men and thus consistent with precarious manhood theory. Given that sexual performance is not central to a woman's sense of femininity and womanhood is not characterized by the same precarious nature as manhood, women's perceptions of SSB from an attractive opposite-gender initiator are unlikely to be affected by whether or not their gender status is threatened. As such, we did not expect women to differentiate on ratings of SSB from attractive opposite-gender initiators whether they had their gender status threatened or affirmed, resulting in an interaction between participant gender and gender status driven by threatened men's favorable perceptions of SSB from attractive women (Hypothesis 2). Moreover, to rule out the possibility that men's receptivity to attractive women's SSB is simply due to men's higher interest in uncommitted sex, we controlled for participants' sociosexual orientation by having them complete the sociosexual orientation inventory (SOI; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), a construct measuring short-term mating orientation. We tested the hypothesis using an online pre-registered experiment (pre-registration: <https://aspredicted.org/2u5km.pdf>).

### 5.1. Method

#### 5.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 403 heterosexual participants through Prolific (50% women;  $M_{age} = 34.36$  years,  $SD_{age} = 11.04$  years; 30% single, 16% in a relationship, 46% married, 5% divorced, 3% widowed or separated).<sup>7</sup> The analysis had 80% power to detect an effect size of  $f = 0.17$ . The study had a 2 (participant gender: man or woman)  $\times$  2 (gender status: threatened or affirmed) between-subject design.

#### 5.1.2. Materials and procedure

We retained a design similar to Study 1. Participants completed an ostensible gender identity assessment in which they rated themselves on

<sup>7</sup> We collected participants' marital status to determine whether our findings persisted across participants with various marital situations. For the 239 participants who were not single (in a relationship, married, or separated), we found a significant interaction between participant gender and gender status after controlling for SOI,  $F(1,234) = 4.68$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.020$ . Men who had their gender status threatened rated SSB more positively ( $M = 5.12$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) compared to men who had their gender status affirmed ( $M = 4.38$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ),  $t(234) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $d = 0.63$ . Women did not differ in their ratings of SSB whether they had their gender status threatened ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) or affirmed ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(234) = 0.05$ ,  $p = .955$ ,  $d = 0.05$ . For participants who were single (single, divorced, or widowed) we did not find a significant interaction,  $F(1,125) = 1.22$ ,  $p = .271$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.010$ . However, this may be due to the smaller sample size of single participants, as we found that threatened men's ratings of SSB were still trending higher ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) than those of affirmed men ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ),  $t(125) = 1.29$ ,  $p = .198$ ,  $d = 0.39$ . Single women did not differ in their ratings of SSB whether they had their gender status threatened ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ) or affirmed ( $M = 2.89$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ),  $t(125) = 0.25$ ,  $p = .803$ ,  $d = 0.00$ .

25 characteristics (see Supplemental Materials for full list of characteristics) and were then randomly informed that their gender identity score either aligned with the average woman's response (affirmed womanhood for women, threatened manhood for men) or the average man's response (affirmed manhood for men, threatened womanhood for women). Participants were then shown an ostensible employee-ID photo of an attractive opposite-gender individual (initiator) and asked to imagine the initiator was their hypothetical coworker at a fictitious company called Acme, Inc. Participants saw one of two possible target photos (two attractive female targets and two attractive male targets) that were sourced from the Chicago Faces Database (Ma et al., 2015).<sup>8</sup> To increase the generalizability of the findings, participants were asked to imagine that their coworker shown in the picture, Nicole or Nathan, engaged in eight different SSBs presented one at a time in a randomized order. In addition to using the three sexual behaviors from Study 1, we included five items from the Flirtation subscale used in Sheppard et al.' (2020) SSB scale (flirted with you, looks at you in a sexually provocative way, told you that you were pretty, beautiful, or handsome, made you feel that you were attractive or desirable, made complimentary remarks about a specific part of your body).

We employed the same measure for valence of experience as in Study 1. Finally, participants provided their demographic information and completed the SOI (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), which was used as a control variable in our analyses.

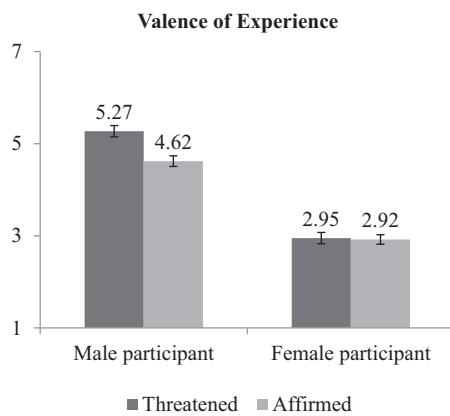
### 5.2. Results

As pre-registered, we dropped responses from 24 participants who failed to correctly recall their gender identity score within ten points and one participant who indicated that they did not believe in the results of their gender identity assessment. Additionally, nine participants did not provide responses to the SOI, causing their responses to be dropped from the analysis, which left a final sample size of 369 participants. Our dependent measures were subjected to a 2 (participant gender: man or woman)  $\times$  2 (gender status: threatened or affirmed) analysis of covariance, while controlling for SOI. The pattern of results holds regardless of whether we control for SOI. We combined ratings of all eight behaviors into one composite score for valence of experience ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

#### 5.2.1. Valence of experience

A main effect for participant gender indicated that men experienced SSB more positively ( $M = 4.93$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) compared to women ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ),  $F(1,364) = 248.00$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.405$ . Additionally, a main effect for gender status indicated that threatened participants found SSB to be a more positive experience ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) compared to affirmed participants ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 1.39$ ),  $F(1,364) = 4.61$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.012$ . A main effect of SOI emerged,  $F(1,364) = 44.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.108$ . Most germane to Hypothesis 2, we found a significant interaction between participant gender and gender status after controlling for SOI (as shown in Fig. 1),  $F(1,364) = 6.08$ ,  $p = .014$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.016$ . Replicating Study 1, men who had their gender status threatened rated SSB more positively ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) compared to men who had their gender status affirmed ( $M = 4.62$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ),  $t(364) = 3.20$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.55$ . By contrast, women did not differ in their evaluations of SSB whether they had their gender status threatened ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) or affirmed ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(364) = 0.22$ ,  $p = .828$ ,  $d = 0.03$ .

<sup>8</sup> For the attractive female target photos, we used the same stimuli as in Study 1. We sourced two new photos of attractive male targets. A pre-test conducted by Chicago Faces suggested that the first ( $M = 4.66$ ) and second ( $M = 4.59$ ) attractive male targets were rated similarly on attractiveness.



**Fig. 1.** Men's and women's reported valence of experience of SSB measured from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) as varied by threatened or affirmed gender status (Study 2).

### 5.3. Discussion

Study 2 provides a pre-registered replication of the finding from Study 1 showing that men with threatened gender status enjoy SSB more than men with affirmed gender status, further demonstrating the link between precarious manhood and perceptions of SSB. Additionally, Study 2 provides support for *Hypothesis 2*, showing that this effect is unique to men and not women, as women did not enjoy SSB any more or less whether they had their womanhood threatened or affirmed. We note, however, that this effect could be driven by lower precariousness of womanhood compared to manhood, lower relevance of sexual performance to womanhood, or both of these factors. While disentangling this is beyond the scope of the current work, this finding raises the possibility that there may be work behaviors that women (but not men) might perceive more positively when their gender status is threatened. Finally, we note that Study 2 demonstrates that our effect holds while controlling for participants' sociosexual orientation, suggesting that threatened men's greater receptivity to SSB is not simply due to their greater desire for uncommitted sex.

## 6. Study 3

In Study 3, we sought to test whether threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB were limited to perceptions of SSB from attractive (as opposed to unattractive) opposite-gender initiators. In line with prior research finding that sexual performance is a central theme to masculinity (e.g., Doyle, 1995; Mosher & Sirkin, 1984), Study 1 found evidence suggesting that men who have their gender status threatened perceive SSB more positively than men who have their gender status affirmed, as threatened men may be more receptive to circumstances that affirm their manhood. Moreover, given women's gender status is not characterized by the same precarious nature as manhood (e.g., Vandello et al., 2008), Study 2 found that this effect was unique to men's (as opposed to women's) perceptions of SSB. However, we note that the stimuli used in Studies 1–2 depicted relatively attractive initiators of SSB. Thus, it is presently unclear whether threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB are limited to behaviors initiated by women who are high (as opposed to low) in physical attractiveness. Since having highly attractive female romantic partners has been shown to boost men's perceived masculine status (Baumeister et al., 2017; Meszaros, 2017), we expect that threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB will be limited to perceptions of SSB from physically attractive women, whereas perceptions of SSB from unattractive women will not differ between threatened and affirmed men. We tested the hypothesis using an online pre-registered experiment (pre-registration: <https://aspredicted.org/x5b6f.pdf>).

## 6.1. Method

### 6.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 452 heterosexual men through Amazon's Mechanical Turk ( $M_{age} = 40.11$  years,  $SD_{age} = 12.21$  years; 38% single, 10% in a relationship, 43% married, 8% divorced, 1% widowed or separated),<sup>9</sup> providing 80% power to detect an effect size of  $f = 0.13$ . This study employed a 2 (gender status: threatened or affirmed)  $\times$  2 (initiator attractiveness: unattractive or attractive) between-subject design.

### 6.1.2. Materials and procedure

We retained a design similar to Studies 1–2. Participants completed an ostensible gender identity assessment in which they rated themselves on 33 characteristics (see Supplemental Materials for full list of characteristics) and were then randomly informed that their gender identity score either aligned with the average woman's response (threatened manhood) or the average man's response (affirmed manhood). Participants were then shown an ostensible employee-ID photo of an attractive or unattractive woman named Nicole (initiator) and asked to imagine the initiator was their hypothetical coworker at a fictitious company called Acme, Inc. Participants saw one of four possible target photos (two attractive female targets and two unattractive female targets) that were sourced from the Chicago Faces Database (Ma et al., 2015).<sup>10</sup> Participants were asked to imagine that their coworker shown in the picture engaged in the same three SSBs as in Study 1 presented one at a time in a randomized order. Participants rated each behavior using the same measure for valence of experience as in Studies 1–2. Finally, participants provided their demographic information and completed a manipulation check where they indicated how attractive they found their coworker on a 1 (very unattractive) to 7 (very attractive) Likert scale.

## 6.2. Results

As pre-registered, we dropped responses from 20 participants who failed to correctly recall their gender identity score within ten points and eight participant who indicated that they did not believe in the results of their gender identity assessment, leaving 424 analyzable responses.

### 6.2.1. Manipulation check

Participants rated the more attractive initiator photos to be higher in attractiveness ( $M = 5.53$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) than the less attractive initiator photos ( $M = 2.41$ ,  $SD = 1.30$ ),  $t(422) = 27.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.64$ . Thus, the attractiveness manipulation was successful. Additionally, a two-way ANOVA with gender status and initiator attractiveness serving as our fixed factors only revealed a main effect of initiator attractiveness, suggesting that our gender status manipulation did not impact participants' perception of initiator attractiveness,  $F(1,420) = 735.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.637$ .

<sup>9</sup> We recoded participants' marital status such that participants who self-identified as single, divorced, or widowed were coded as single (1) while participants who indicated they were in a relationship, married, or separated were coded as not single (0). In an exploratory vein, we included this variable as a factor in our between-subjects ANOVA. We did not find a significant three-way interaction between participants' marital status, initiator attractiveness, and gender status on participants' valence of experience,  $F(1,416) = 0.26$ ,  $p = .611$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.001$ . There were no significant two-way interactions between participants' marital status and the remaining two variables. Only a main effect indicated that participants who were single evaluated SSB more positively ( $M = 4.01$ ,  $SD = 1.61$ ) than participants who were not single ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $F(1,416) = 5.03$ ,  $p = .025$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.012$ .

<sup>10</sup> We utilized the same two attractive female target photos employed in Studies 1–2 ( $M_1 = 4.66$ ;  $M_2 = 4.30$ ). We sourced two new unattractive female targets ( $M_1 = 2.01$ ;  $M_2 = 1.61$ ) from Chicago Faces Database (see Table 1 in Supplemental Material for information on all stimuli).

### 6.2.2. Valence of experience

We combined ratings of all three behaviors into one composite variable for valence of experience ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) and conducted a two-way ANOVA with gender status and initiator attractiveness serving as our fixed factors. In line with the attractiveness bias (e.g., Dion et al., 1972), a main effect for initiator attractiveness indicated that men experienced SSB from attractive women more positively ( $M = 4.83$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) compared to SSB from unattractive women ( $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ),  $F(1,420) = 197.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.320$ . Additionally, a main effect for gender status indicated that threatened men rated SSB more positively ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.68$ ) compared to affirmed men ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ),  $F(1,420) = 8.28$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.019$ . Most germane to Hypothesis 3, we found a significant interaction between initiator attractiveness and gender status (as shown in Fig. 2),  $F(1,420) = 4.82$ ,  $p = .029$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.011$ . Replicating Studies 1–2, men who had their gender status threatened rated SSB from attractive women more positively ( $M = 5.15$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ) compared to men who had their gender status affirmed ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $t(420) = 3.59$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.46$ . By contrast, men did not significantly differ on their perceptions of SSB from unattractive women whether their gender status was threatened ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) or affirmed ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(420) = 0.48$ ,  $p = .630$ ,  $d = 0.07$ .

### 6.3. Discussion

Study 3 provides evidence suggesting that threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB are limited to SSB from attractive female initiators. Our results align with previous research which finds that for men, having a physically attractive romantic female partner is linked to heightened perceived masculinity (Meszaros, 2017; Rodeheffer et al., 2016; Sigall & Landy, 1973), which suggests that men are less likely to derive boosts in their masculinity from sexual attention from unattractive women. As such, we postulate that receiving SSB from an attractive woman can affirm a man's status as a "real man", reinforcing his sense of masculinity, while SSB from a physically unattractive woman provides no such boost in self-perceptions of masculinity.

However, while Studies 1–3 have found evidence suggesting that threatened men (compared to affirmed men) experience SSB from attractive women more positively, suggesting that threatened men may be more predisposed to favoring circumstances that affirm their manhood, it is presently unclear whether SSB from attractive women

does in fact increase men's sense of masculinity. Given we manipulated men's gender status at the onset of Studies 1–3, the paradigm did not allow us to isolate the effect that SSB from attractive women had on men's self-perceptions of masculinity. We address this shortcoming in Study 4 by examining how SSB from attractive women impacts men's sense of masculinity at baseline by directly measuring men's sense of masculinity after they consider receiving SSB from an attractive woman, without threatening or affirming their gender status at the onset of the study.

## 7. Study 4

In Study 4, we directly measured the impact of SSB on self-perceptions of masculinity by including a measure of gender identity to test whether men reported greater self-perceptions of masculinity upon considering SSB from an attractive (versus unattractive) female coworker (Hypothesis 4). Furthermore, to test whether men's boosts in felt-masculinity were specifically about the sexual performance aspect of masculinity rather than an effect of physical attractiveness, we contrasted perceptions of SSB with perceptions of non-social sexual behavior (non-SSB) carried out by opposite-gender coworkers of high or low attractiveness. We also contrasted men's perceptions of SSB with those of women to confirm that initiator attractiveness positively influenced men's (but not women's) perceptions of SSB. Finally, we conducted exploratory moderated mediation analysis to understand whether the relationship between participant gender, initiator attractiveness, type of behavior, felt-masculinity, and positive perceptions of SSB was strongest when the participant was male, the opposite-gender initiator was physically attractive, and the participant was evaluating SSB (versus non-SSB). Specifically, we sought to investigate whether men experienced heightened self-perceptions of masculinity only when evaluating SSB from attractive women, and whether their greater self-perceived masculinity mediated their positive perceptions of SSB. This study was pre-registered (pre-registration: <https://aspredicted.org/e6ee6.pdf>).

### 7.1. Method

#### 7.1.1. Participants and design

We recruited 601 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (46% female;  $M_{age} = 38.80$ , 25% of participants aged 30–35 years), providing 80% power to detect an effect size of  $f = 0.11$ . No participants were screened out and no exclusions were made in the analysis. This study employed a 2 (initiator attractiveness: unattractive or attractive)  $\times$  2 (participant gender: man or woman)  $\times$  2 (behavior type: SSB or non-SSB) between-subject design.

#### 7.1.2. Materials and procedure

We retained a paradigm similar to Study 2, except we did not manipulate participants' gender status. Participants were instructed to imagine a scenario in which they were an employee at Acme Inc. and were matched with an opposite-gender hypothetical coworker (i.e., initiator) who enacted three different behaviors towards them. Participants were either assigned to view one of two possible photos of attractive opposite-gender initiators, or one of two possible photos of unattractive opposite-gender initiators. There was a total of eight possible target photos.<sup>11</sup>

Participants were randomly assigned to either the SSB condition or the non-SSB condition. For evaluating SSB, participants rated the same

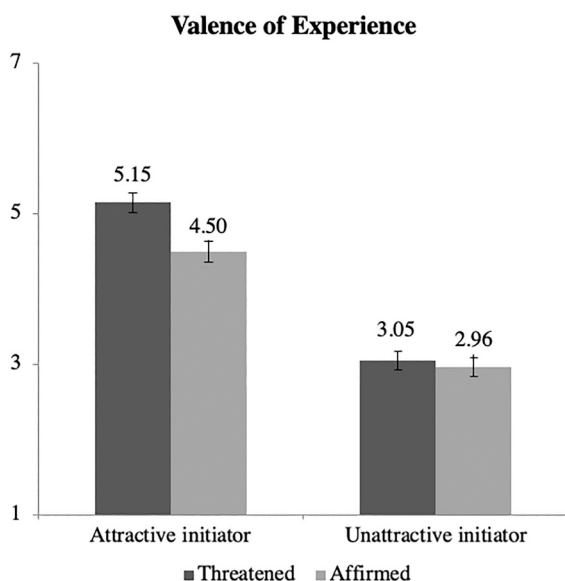


Fig. 2. Men's reported valence of experience of SSB measured from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) as varied by initiator attractiveness and threatened or affirmed gender status (Study 3).

<sup>11</sup> We utilized the same attractive female targets ( $M_1 = 4.66$ ;  $M_2 = 4.30$ ) from Studies 1–3 and the same attractive male targets from Study 2 ( $M_1 = 4.66$ ;  $M_2 = 4.59$ ). We sourced two additional unattractive female targets ( $M_1 = 2.01$ ;  $M_2 = 2.18$ ) and two unattractive male targets ( $M_1 = 2.16$ ;  $M_2 = 2.14$ ) and from Chicago Faces Database.



three behaviors as in Study 1 (gave you sexual attention, stares at you in a sexually suggestively manner, asks you to go for a drink after work). For evaluating non-SSB, participants rated the following three behaviors: gave you input for a team project, challenges your idea in a friendly manner, asks you to volunteer for a charity initiative with them. As in Studies 1–3, participants rated their valence of experience for each behavior (i.e., how positive or negative of an experience this would be for them). For participants' gender identity, participants indicated how masculine each behavior from their coworker made them feel (if the participant was a man) or how feminine each behavior made them feel (if the participant was a woman). Furthermore, to capture the effect of received SSB on self-perceptions of masculinity, participants indicated the extent to which each of the three behaviors made them feel dominant ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), important ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), powerful ( $\alpha = 0.85$ ), prestigious ( $\alpha = 0.87$ ), in control of the situation ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ), desirable ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), and like a winner ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ), which were combined into a composite variable ( $\alpha = 0.95$ ).<sup>12</sup> This study did not include a measure of feminine attributes. As such, we were only able to assess how behavior type and initiator attractiveness affected men's self-perceptions of masculinity, but not women's self-perceptions of femininity. All new items were rated on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very) Likert-type scale.

## 7.2. Results

Our dependent measures were subjected to a three-way analysis of variance with participant gender, initiator attractiveness, and behavior type serving as between-subject factors. We combined ratings of all three behaviors into one composite score for Valence of Experience ( $\alpha = 0.98$ ), as well as for our gender identity measures: Masculinity ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ), and Femininity ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

### 7.2.1. Valence of experience

Three significant main effects emerged. First, men perceived behaviors more positively ( $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) than did women ( $M = 4.12$ ,  $SD = 1.69$ ),  $F(1,593) = 49.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.077$ . Second, participants perceived behaviors from attractive initiators more positively ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ) compared to behaviors from unattractive initiators ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $F(1,593) = 28.95$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.047$ . Third, non-SSB was perceived more positively ( $M = 5.32$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than SSB ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.64$ ),  $F(1,593) = 434.89$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.423$ .

In addition to these main effects, a significant three-way interaction emerged between participant gender, initiator attractiveness, and behavior type (as depicted in Fig. 3),  $F(1,593) = 14.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.025$ . To understand the source of this interaction, we examined the two-way interactions between initiator attractiveness and behavior type at each level of participant gender. For men, the interaction was significant,  $F(1,322) = 19.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.056$ . Men rated SSB from attractive female initiators to be more positive ( $M = 4.81$ ,  $SD = 1.56$ ) than SSB from unattractive female initiators ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.55$ ),  $t(593) = 7.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.87$ . However, for non-SSB, men did not differentiate between attractive ( $M = 5.27$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) and unattractive female initiators ( $M = 5.17$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ),  $t(593) = 0.54$ ,  $p = .587$ ,  $d = 0.11$ .

For women, the interaction between initiator attractiveness and behavior type was not significant,  $F(1,271) = 0.78$ ,  $p = .377$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.003$ . Only two main effects emerged. Women rated non-SSB ( $M = 5.42$ ,  $SD = 0.84$ ) substantially more positively than SSB ( $M = 2.61$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1,271) = 629.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.699$ . Women also rated behaviors by attractive initiators ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) more positively than behaviors by unattractive initiators ( $M = 4.07$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ),  $F(1,271) = 6.27$ ,  $p = .013$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.023$ . Notably, while women did not differentiate in

<sup>12</sup> Results are robust to whether or not desirable is included in the composite variable for self-perceptions of masculinity.

their ratings for SSB between attractive ( $M = 2.69$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ) and unattractive initiators ( $M = 2.51$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ;  $t(593) = 0.90$ ,  $p = .369$ ,  $d = 0.17$ ), they rated non-SSB from attractive male initiators more positively ( $M = 5.62$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) than non-SSB from unattractive male initiators ( $M = 5.24$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ),  $t(593) = 2.03$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $d = 0.47$ . This suggests that women may be sensitive to the physical attractiveness of opposite-gender initiators when evaluating non-SSB, but not SSB.

### 7.2.2. Gender identity

Two significant main effects emerged. Men felt more masculine ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.51$ ) than women felt feminine ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ),  $F(1,593) = 69.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.104$ . Second, participants felt more gender identity congruent when evaluating SSB ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) compared to non-SSB ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ),  $F(1,593) = 29.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.048$ . The main effect for initiator attractiveness approached marginal significance, as participants felt marginally more gender identity congruent when considering behaviors from attractive initiators ( $M = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.65$ ) as opposed to unattractive initiators ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ),  $F(1,593) = 3.78$ ,  $p = .052$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.006$ .

These main effects were qualified by a significant three-way interaction between participant gender, initiator attractiveness, and behavior type,  $F(1,593) = 10.00$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.017$ . Upon examining the two-way interaction between initiator attractiveness and behavior type by participant gender, a significant interaction emerged for men,  $F(1,322) = 10.79$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.032$ . Supporting Hypothesis 4, men felt more masculine when considering SSB from attractive ( $M = 4.51$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ) versus unattractive female initiators ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ,  $t(593) = 4.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.58$ ), but for non-SSB, their ratings of masculinity did not differ between attractive ( $M = 3.20$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) and unattractive initiators ( $M = 3.35$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $t(593) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .509$ ,  $d = 0.12$ . Additionally, when evaluating behaviors from unattractive women, men's gender identity congruence did not differ between their evaluations of SSB and non-SSB, suggesting that men's greater felt-masculinity from experiencing SSB is unique to SSB from physically attractive (versus unattractive) women,  $t(593) = -1.22$ ,  $p = .224$ ,  $d = 0.19$ . For female participants, there was only a main effect of behavior type, as women felt more feminine when evaluating SSB ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ) as opposed to non-SSB ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ),  $F(1,271) = 8.01$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.029$ .

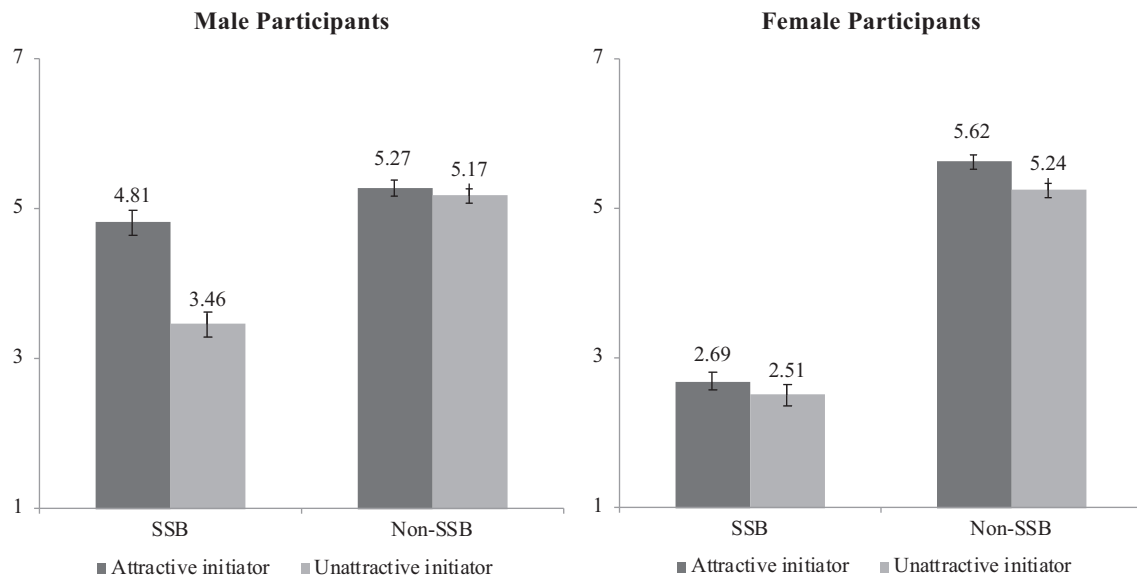
### 7.2.3. Self-perceptions of masculinity

Three significant main effects emerged. First, men reported greater self-perceptions of masculinity ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) than did women ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(1,593) = 65.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.100$ . Second, participants reported greater self-perceptions of masculinity when considering behaviors from attractive initiators ( $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ) compared to behaviors from unattractive initiators ( $M = 3.29$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ),  $F(1,593) = 8.48$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ . Third, participants reported greater self-perceptions of masculinity when considering non-SSB ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) as opposed to SSB ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ),  $F(1,593) = 19.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.032$ .<sup>13</sup>

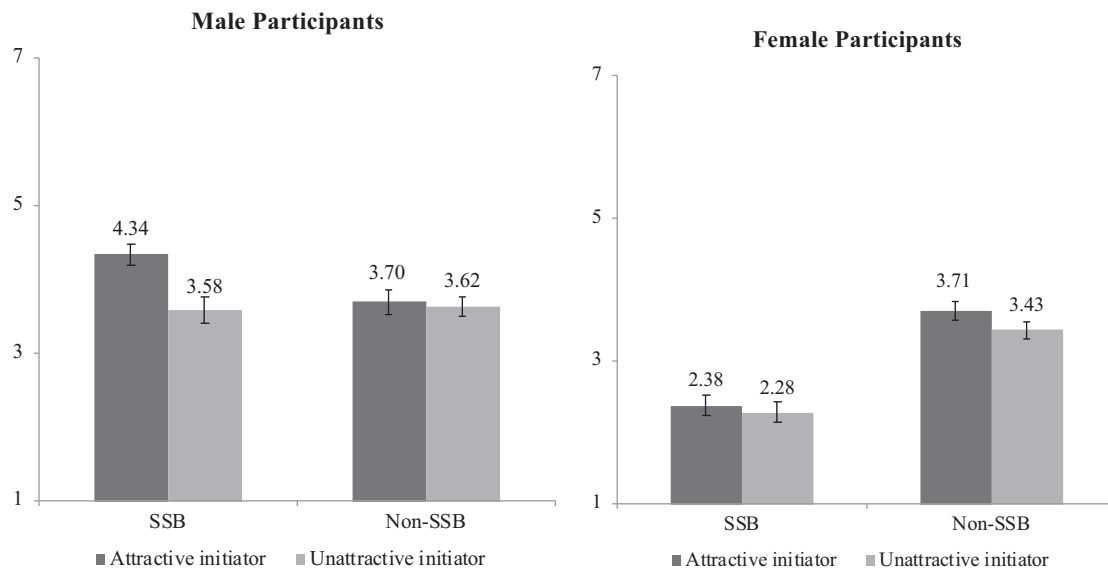
In addition to these main effects, a significant three-way interaction between participant gender, initiator attractiveness, and behavior type emerged (as depicted in Fig. 4),  $F(1,593) = 4.12$ ,  $p = .043$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.007$ . We separately examined the two-way interaction between initiator attractiveness and behavior type by gender.

For men, a significant interaction emerged,  $F(1,322) = 4.65$ ,  $p = .032$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.014$ . Supporting Hypothesis 4, men reported higher self-

<sup>13</sup> We note that this main effect may not be entirely interpretable given this measure only assessed self-perceptions of masculinity, rather than both self-perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Given the gender identity variable included a single-item measure of femininity and results showed that women felt more feminine when evaluating SSB as opposed to non-SSB, it is reasonable to expect that receiving SSB should increase women's felt-femininity.



**Fig. 3.** Men and women's reported valence of experience of behaviors (SSB and non-SSB) enacted by attractive or unattractive opposite-gender initiators measured from 1 (very negative) to 7 (very positive) (Study 4).



**Fig. 4.** Participants' reported self-perceptions of masculinity from experiencing SSB or non-SSB from attractive or unattractive opposite-gender initiators (Study 4).

perceptions of masculinity when considering SSB from attractive ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) versus unattractive initiators ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ,  $t(593) = 3.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.50$ ), but their ratings for non-SSB did not differ between the attractive ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ ) and unattractive initiators ( $M = 3.62$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ),  $t(593) = 0.40$ ,  $p = .690$ ,  $d = 0.06$ . Moreover, comparing across behavior type, attractive initiators provided a boost in self-perceptions of masculinity only with SSB (the comparison between SSB and non-SSB from an attractive initiator was significant,  $t(593) = 3.17$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d = 0.46$ ), but men reported no differences between the SSB and non-SSB from unattractive initiators,  $t(593) = -0.19$ ,  $p = .847$ ,  $d = 0.03$ .

For women, the interaction between initiator attractiveness and behavior type was not significant,  $F(1,271) = 0.45$ ,  $p = .504$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.002$ . Instead, the analysis showed only a main effect of behavior type, as women reported lower scores on the elements of masculinity when evaluating SSB ( $M = 2.33$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ) as opposed to non-SSB ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1,271) = 85.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.239$ .

#### 7.2.4. Moderated moderated mediation

In an exploratory vein, we ran a conditional process model using Hayes (2013) PROCESS macro (Model 11 with 5000 resamples) to understand whether participants' perceptions of behavior from initiators of varying attractiveness were moderated by their gender and the type of behavior being evaluated, which interacted to predict their self-perceptions of masculinity, which then mediated participants' valence of experience (see Fig. 5).<sup>14</sup> We entered initiator attractiveness as the predictor (1 = high attractiveness, 0 = low attractiveness), participant gender (0 = man, 1 = woman) and behavior type (1 = SSB, 0 = non-SSB) as moderators, self-perceptions of masculinity as the mediator, and valence of experience as the outcome variable. To provide evidence for

<sup>14</sup> We note that although this analysis was not pre-registered, it was a logical extension and meaningful test of our theoretically based predictions. Thus, we report this analysis in an exploratory vein.

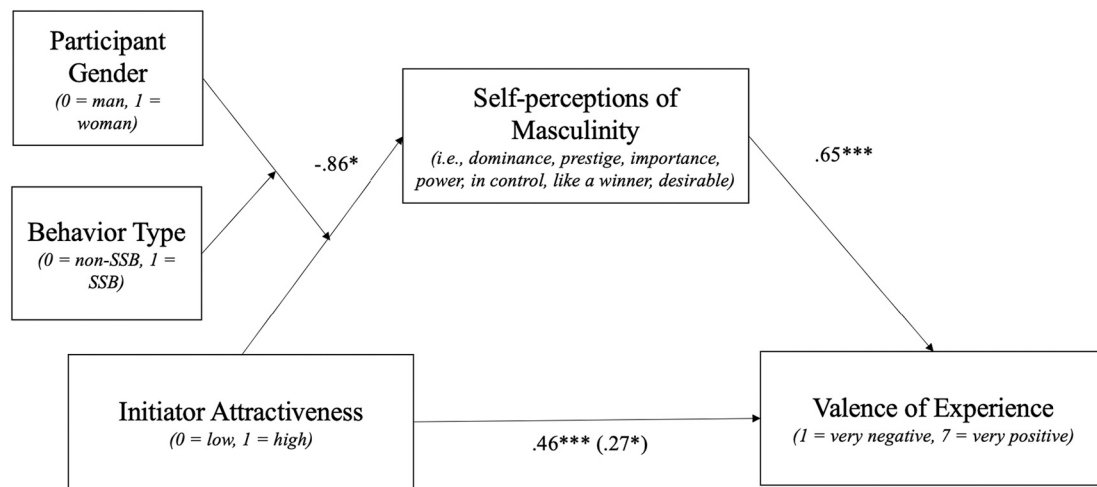


Fig. 5. Moderated moderated mediation model (using Hayes PROCESS Model 11 showing the indirect effect of initiator attractiveness on participants perceptions of SSB as mediated by self-perceptions of masculinity. Unstandardized regression coefficients are shown. The coefficient on the A-path reflects the three-way interaction between initiator attractiveness, behavior type, and recipient gender. The value inside parentheses indicates the coefficient when the mediator was included in the model. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ . (Study 4).

moderated moderated mediation, the index of moderated moderated mediation must be significantly different from zero.

The index of the moderated moderated mediation model was significant, as indicated by the confidence interval which does not include zero, index =  $-0.56$ ,  $SE = 0.27$ , 95% CI [ $-1.10$ ,  $-0.04$ ]. The index of conditional moderated mediation by behavior type was significant for men (index =  $0.44$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ , 95% CI [ $0.05$ ,  $0.85$ ]) but not for women (index =  $-0.12$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ , 95% CI [ $-0.47$ ,  $0.22$ ]). The direct effect of initiator attractiveness on valence of experience remained significant (direct effect =  $0.27$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ , 95% CI [ $0.06$ ,  $0.48$ ]). The indirect effect between initiator attractiveness, self-perceptions of masculinity, and valence of experience was only significant for men's perceptions of SSB, (indirect effect =  $0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ , 95% CI [ $0.20$ ,  $0.80$ ]) but not for men's perceptions of non-SSB (95% CI [ $-0.21$ ,  $0.34$ ]), or women's perceptions of SSB (95% CI [ $-0.18$ ,  $0.32$ ]) and non-SSB (95% CI [ $-0.04$ ,  $0.42$ ]). In other words, these results suggest that men may experience heightened self-perceptions of masculinity when evaluating SSB (as opposed to non-SSB) from attractive (as opposed to unattractive) women, and this significantly mediates the effect of initiator attractiveness on men's perceptions of SSB. These findings offer insight into a potential mechanism – heightened self-perceptions of masculinity – which may be driving men's favorable perceptions of SSB from attractive women.

### 7.3. Discussion

Study 4 provides support for Hypothesis 4; that men experience higher self-perceptions of masculinity when considering receiving SSB (as opposed to non-SSB) from attractive (as opposed to unattractive) women. Additionally, while participants' overall reported valence of experience was more positive for non-SSB over SSB (possibly because non-SSB was perceived as more appropriate for the workplace setting), men experienced greater gender-identity congruence and boosts in self-perceptions of masculinity only when considering SSB from attractive women, and not when considering non-SSB from attractive women, or SSB from unattractive women. We also found that men were sensitive to their female coworker's physical attractiveness when evaluating SSB, but not when evaluating non-SSB, suggesting that men may be less sensitive to women's physical attractiveness when those women's behaviors are not benefiting men's sense of masculinity. Given that men did not experience positive consequences from evaluating non-SSB from attractive women, their perceptions of interactions with attractive and unattractive women were similar.

In contrast to men, women rated non-SSB from attractive men more positively than the same behaviors from unattractive men, indicating that women are indeed sensitive to men's physical attractiveness, in line with findings on the attractiveness bias (Dion et al., 1972). However, this did not extend to women's evaluations of SSB in the workplace, as being the recipient of workplace SSB might make women's sexual subordination to men more salient, possibly triggering feelings of sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gervais, Holland and Dodd, 2013). Women also reported feeling more feminine upon considering SSB as opposed to non-SSB. However, heightened feelings of femininity do not carry the same implications as masculinity, as femininity has historically been associated with subordination to men (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), while masculinity has been associated with dominance, power, and general workplace success (Eagly, 1997; Heilman, 2012). This is in line with women's reported decrease in self-perceptions of masculinity (e.g., power, dominance) upon considering SSB as opposed to non-SSB.

### 8. General discussion

To our knowledge, the current work serves as the first empirical demonstration of the link between precarious manhood and men's perceptions of SSB directed at them. While prior work linking precarious manhood and SSB has primarily examined how challenges to manhood influence men's likelihood of enacting SSB, the current work highlights a previously unexplored explanation behind men and women's perceptual asymmetry in evaluating workplace SSB directed towards them. Study 1's results demonstrated the link between threatened manhood and anticipations of positively experienced SSB. In Study 2, we established that this effect was unique to men, as women's perceptions of SSB were unaffected by whether their womanhood was threatened or affirmed. In Study 3, we once again manipulated men's threat to their gender status and found that threatened men's more positive perceptions of SSB are limited to perceptions of SSB from physically attractive (as opposed to unattractive) women. In Study 4, we contrasted these findings with perceptions of non-SSB while also varying initiator attractiveness, finding that men, absent any gender status threat, experienced a boost in self-perceptions of masculinity when evaluating SSB (as opposed to non-SSB) from attractive women (as opposed to unattractive women). Lastly, although manhood has been thought of as a social status that must be earned through public demonstrations, our findings from Study 4 show that self-perceptions of masculinity can be

boosted via sexual attention from attractive women even absent any momentary threat.

### 8.1. Theoretical implications

The most significant theoretical contribution of the current research is demonstrating how perceptions of SSB at work are directly linked to precarious manhood. Though existing literature has identified sexual performance as part of the conceptualization of masculinity, social psychological research has not yet examined how this component affects perceptions of receiving SSB. Through our studies, we learned that men who feel insecure in their manhood are more receptive to workplace SSB from attractive women, as they presumably have a greater need to have their manhood assured. We find that this effect is unique to men's (but not women's) evaluations of SSB, as women who had their womanhood affirmed or threatened evaluated SSB nearly identically. Moreover, we find that men experience a unique boost in their feelings of masculinity when they evaluate SSB (as opposed to non-SSB) from an attractive (as opposed to unattractive) woman. These findings illuminate how men's needs to prove their gender status shape their perceptions, and how men's chronic insecurities about their gender status make them especially predisposed to favoring circumstances that reaffirm their manhood. As such, men are more likely to behave in biased manners when their gender status is under threat.

The present research carries implications for the strategic sexual performance literature (Watkins, Smith, & Aquino, 2013), suggesting that men are most susceptible to manipulation by strategic sexual performances when men feel that their manhood is under threat, and when those performances are enacted by attractive women. On the other hand, our findings suggest that women are comparatively unlikely to be influenced by strategic sexual performances despite a male initiator's physical attractiveness, as our findings show that women view SSB from both attractive and unattractive men as similarly negative. In a similar vein, our findings also carry implications for the feminine charm literature (Kray & Locke, 2008; Kray, Locke, & Van Zant, 2012), which asserts that women might combine friendliness with flirtation to achieve favorable negotiation outcomes. According to the present set of findings, feminine charm may be most effective when enacted by physically attractive women unto men, especially men who are insecure about their manhood, as it may provide men with a boost in self-perceptions of masculinity that would motivate those men to behave in ways that favor the women providing those boosts.

While our findings suggest that attractive women who enact SSB may benefit more from men who receive (or perceive to be receiving) that behavior, existing literature suggests that attractive women may be more susceptible to negative judgments from observers who perceive attractive women to be acting in a sexual way. Attractive women may face both higher benefits and costs merely from their attractiveness, given that attractive women are more sexualized regardless of their behavior (Gervais et al., 2013) and men generally interpret behaviors to be more sexual than do women (see Lindgren, Parkhill, George, & Hendershot, 2008 for a review). Further, sexually agentic women have been found to suffer heightened social and economic penalties (i.e., backlash; Rudman, 1998) given their use of sexual power is seen as threatening to the gender hierarchy (Infanger, Rudman, & Sczesny, 2016). For example, women who "dress sexy" are considered lower status (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005). As such, attractive women who may not even be consciously enacting SSB run the risk of incurring increased social penalties, even though their SSB serves to boost male recipients' masculine status. Thus, although attractive women may appear to benefit from male recipients' positive perceptions, the backlash at the hands of observers may outweigh any social or economic gains.

The current work also carries significant implications for the emotional labor literature (Hochschild, 1983; Steinberg & Figart, 1999), which describes the relational rather than task-based aspect of some

occupations that require individuals to regulate their own emotions in a manner that shapes the states of mind of others (e.g., hospitality, medical care etc.). Given that attractive women are especially capable of affirming men's gender status via SSB, it may be possible that attractive women in occupations requiring emotional labor face particular pressure to soothe men's egos, thus producing greater expectations that they engage in SSB. As such, many of the existing findings on emotional labor may be particularly exacerbated for women who are physically attractive.

### 8.2. Limitations and future research directions

We recognize limitations of the current work. First, our experiments employ hypothetical scenarios, leaving the exact first-hand experiences of men undergoing real, social sexual interactions potentially unclear. However, understanding how an initiator's physical attractiveness influences participants' perceptions of SSB requires experimental controls for extraneous factors, as it would be otherwise difficult to understand whether our findings are due to initiator attractiveness, or a host of other factors. Moreover, it would be difficult to study this phenomenon in a laboratory setting, as it would require exposing research participants to potentially sexually harassing behavior. While sexual harassment has previously been studied in a laboratory setting (Maass et al., 2003; Siebler, Sabelus, & Bohner, 2008) it has focused on factors that influence men to enact sexually harassing behavior, rather than be the recipients of sexual behavior. As such, we are limited to examining perceptions of SSB in hypothetical settings that pose minimal risk to participants.

We also acknowledge that the stimuli employed in our experiments to manipulate initiator attractiveness only depicted White initiators of SSB. As such, it may be possible that our findings are moderated by initiator race and that intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) plays a role in shaping men's perceptions of SSB. However, given that the demonstrated link between men's gender status and their positive perceptions of SSB from attractive women is central to the initiator's physical attractiveness rather than the initiator's race, one could argue that the demonstrated effect would hold regardless of initiator race. Future research might examine whether initiator race moderates the extent to which men experience boosts in masculinity and thus perceive SSB more positively.

In addition, our research is limited to interactions with opposite-gender initiators, leaving it unclear if our findings persist in same-gender dyads and among non-heterosexual participants. Future research might examine how men are impacted by SSB from attractive individuals in same-gender dyads and non-heterosexual participants.

Additionally, the current studies only examine how precarious manhood influences men's perceptions of SSB when they are the recipients of said behavior. As such, it is unclear how challenges to manhood may influence men's perceptions of SSB directed by women towards other coworkers (i.e., when they are observing rather than receiving SSB). According to the male pragmatism literature, men tend to be more morally hypocritical than women, in that they are more lenient in judging the severity of their own morally ambiguous actions as opposed to other's actions (Kray & Haselhuhn, 2012; Lammers, Stapel, & Galinsky, 2010). Thus, men who incur challenges to their manhood may positively evaluate circumstances that boost their masculinity (i.e., receiving SSB from attractive women), but negatively evaluate circumstances that pose further threat to their masculinity (e.g., when attractive women direct SSB towards other men), as this might invoke feelings of intrasexual competition (Baumeister et al., 2017), further challenging their manhood. Future research might examine how varying men's perspective (i.e., being a recipient or observer) and whether they have their manhood challenged or affirmed might impact men's perceptions of SSB.

Finally, another area for future research would be to identify potential moderators, such as political orientation, that might carry implications for men's relationship with their manhood and ultimately



impact their perceptions of SSB. For example, conservative men might ascribe more to traditional ideologies of manhood compared to liberal men, potentially leading to greater responses to precarious manhood. Future research might also examine what contextual factors may leave men more susceptible to threats to their gender status beyond the “false feedback” paradigm characteristic of the precarious manhood literature.

## 9. Conclusion

Through the present research, we highlight that men not only enjoy workplace SSB more than women because they have the social and institutional power to do so, but because their masculinity needs drive them to favor circumstances that reaffirm their precarious manhood (i. e., SSB from attractive women). We find that simply receiving sexual attention from an attractive woman is enough to make a man feel masculine and reaffirm his gender status as a “real man.” By illuminating an important antecedent to the gender asymmetry in perceptions of workplace SSB, we hope to illustrate how men’s uniquely tenuous gender status leaves them exposed to potentially problematic behavior that nonetheless affirms their manhood.

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## Data availability

The data, code, and supplementary analysis can be found on the following OSF link: (<https://osf.io/mt9q4/>)

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## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2022.104409>.

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