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In the office or at the gym: The impact of confronting sexism in specific contexts on support for confrontation and perceptions of others

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ABSTRACT

The current research investigated support for confronting a sexist comment and how responses in a work or social setting by a target or witness can influence actor perceptions. Across three studies, we demonstrated that although most people supported confrontation by a female target, she was evaluated less positively when confronting than passive, especially in a social versus professional context. In contrast, a male witness was evaluated more positively when confronting than passive, regardless of context. Notably, perceptions of the perpetrator of the comment were only influenced by the target's response: with less positive evaluations when the target was confronting than passive, especially in the office. These findings contribute to understanding which responses and environments foster confrontation and reduce backlash.

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Being the target of prejudice and discrimination is common for racial and ethnic minorities, and women in society today (Graf, 2018; Plaut et al., 2015). For example, research using daily diary methods found that college women reported experiencing one to two sexist incidents per week (Swim et al., 2001). Though bias is commonplace, confronting acts of prejudice is relatively rare (Dickter & Newton, 2013; Kawakami et al., 2019). For example, only 16% of women who were targets of sexism directly confronted the perpetrator (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Research indicates that non-targets or witnesses of prejudice also seldom confront bias. For example, when witnesses were placed in a situation where a perpetrator made a racist comment, no one confronted him (Kawakami et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, confronting intergroup bias is important because it has a number of positive downstream consequences. For example, confrontation has the power to promote a more inclusive climate (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008), to produce positive subsequent interactions, and to reduce the likelihood of future stereotyping and prejudice

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(Czopp et al., 2006; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). Confronting can also provide benefits to the confronter, such as increased confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of empowerment (Gervais et al., 2010).

Given the positive effects of confrontation, it is important to examine both support for and obstacles associated with confronting perpetrators of bias. In the present research, we therefore investigated beliefs about whether people should confront sexism, one common social cost (negative evaluations of the confronter by others), as well as one benefit of confrontation (signaling that the perpetrator was out of line). Furthermore, we explored the potential impact of the context of the confrontation, whether professional or social, on both support for confrontation and evaluations. We then report three experiments that specifically investigated the role of confrontation by a female target of sexism or a male witness, and context on perceptions of the target, witness, and perpetrator, as well as, support for confrontation. Finally, we discuss the implications of our findings for increasing confrontation and reducing sexism.

Support for confrontation

An initial goal of the present research was to investigate whether people believe that we should confront sexism. On the one hand, we live in a society with strong norms against prejudice and discrimination. Because of these standards, people are motivated to espouse views that indicate that they are egalitarian and fair to all (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Crandall et al., 2002). This may be especially the case since the fall of 2017, when support for people who confront perpetrators of sexual abuse or harassment has received widespread attention with the #MeToo movement (Zacharek et al., 2017). On the other hand, compared to racism, sexism is viewed as more acceptable (Czopp et al., 2006; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010) and not severe enough to warrant being taken seriously (Blodorn et al., 2012). For example, Czopp and Monteith (2003) found that when confronted with their own sexist compared to racist behavior, participants reacted with much less discomfort and remorse.

While previous research has often looked at support for a specific form of confrontation by a specific person (Kahn et al., 2015) or at impressions of the confronting target (Garcia et al., 2010; Kaiser et al., 2009), in the present study we investigated support for confrontation, per se. Specifically, we examined whether people believe that it is important to confront or remain passive to a sexist comment. In addition, we explored whether this support is moderated by the identity of the confronter. Although a female target may be more likely to recognize sexism (Rodin et al., 1990; Swim et al., 2001), it is unclear whether people assume that a female target and/or a male witness should confront. When men advocate on behalf of women and take on the role of ally, they can be effective partners in combatting sexism (Dickter et al., 2012; Drury & Kaiser, 2014). It is therefore important to understand support for confrontation by a female target of sexism and a male witness both before and after confrontation.

Barriers and benefits of confrontation

There are both barriers and benefits to confrontation. A major barrier is the social cost to the confronter (Kaiser & Miller, 2001); when such costs are high, people are less likely

to act (Shelton & Stewart, 2004). One common form these costs can take is negative evaluations of the confronter by others, especially if the person confronting is the female target. In particular, female targets who confront are often perceived as oversensitive troublemakers and complainers who overreact and are rude (Becker et al., 2011; Eliezer & Major, 2012). Because men ostensibly have no self-interest in signaling that an action is sexist, their responses are perceived to be more objective and legitimate (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Male witnesses who confront, therefore, are typically not met with the same level of negativity (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Rasinski & Czopp, 2010).

In contrast to remaining passive (Blanchard et al., 1994), one additional benefit of confrontation is that it can signal that a behavior is offensive, impact evaluations of the perpetrator (Czopp & Monteith, 2003), and foster support for confrontation (Mallett & Wagner, 2011; Rasinski et al., 2013). A further goal of the present research was to investigate how confrontation affects perceptions of perpetrators of sexism and beliefs about whether people should confront sexism. While research indicating that men are perceived to be more objective when confronting suggests that they may be more effective in defining sexism and therefore how the perpetrator is evaluated (Drury & Kaiser, 2014), other research indicates that female targets may be more impactful (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008; Mallett & Wagner, 2011). Furthermore, legal definitions of harassment often denote that the female target is in the best position to define whether behaviors are objectionable. For example, such definitions typically include such terms as “unwelcome” and “conduct that is likely to cause offense to the target” (Ontario Human Rights Commission [OHRC], 2019; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2019). In the present research, we investigate whether confrontation by a female target and/or a male witness results in less positive evaluations of the male perpetrator and support for confrontation in general.

Effects of context

Several factors have been shown to impact evaluations of targets who confront (Kawakami et al., 2019). For example, Kaiser et al. (2009) found that group identification can moderate these evaluations. Specifically, their results demonstrated that women who weakly identified with women, expressed more negative attitudes toward targets who confronted sexism. Furthermore, research suggests that the perceived pervasiveness of sexism can impact perceptions of confronters. In particular, when sexism is seen as more pervasive, women but not men evaluate a female target more positively when she protested gender discrimination (Garcia et al., 2010; Kahn et al., 2015). A primary goal of the present research was to extend this literature by examining how the situation in which the confrontation takes place can influence perceptions of confronters.

One reason why contexts are important is because they are often associated with specific norms (Cialdini et al., 1990; Pronin et al., 2008). Norms related to confronting sexism may differ across environments. Work environments often have clear policies and expectations for reporting acts of bias, and strongly encourage female targets to respond to the perpetrator to prevent future abuse (Glick, 2014). For example, Human Rights Codes often stipulate that sexual harassment is prohibited in the workplace and recommends that employers enact anti-sexual harassment policies (OHRC, 2019; U.S. EEOC,

2019). Norms related to confronting such behavior in more social contexts and everyday life, however, are much less explicit or formalized (Bates, 2015; Graf, 2018). Though the act may be perceived to be sexist in both contexts, explicit norms about how to respond are much less common in social contexts. In the present experiments, we investigated how a more professional versus social context interacts with confronter identity to impact support for confrontation and evaluations of the female target, the male witness, and the perpetrator of sexism.

Notably, context may impact support for confrontation differently than evaluations of the actors. According to Construal Level Theory (CLT), people may respond differently to hypothetical versus actual events (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Thus, when imagining how people should respond to sexism, they may react to events on a more abstract level. When thinking on this level, people focus less on peripheral cues such as the local context, and their responses instead reflect their core values and promote just actions (Alper, 2020; Eyal et al., 2009). In the present context, when asked if a target or witness should confront, people may therefore invoke their ideological egalitarian values and support confrontation regardless of context.

However, when presented with a concrete instance of confrontation, people may react to this specific event at a lower level of construal (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wakslak & Trope, 2009). When processing events on this level, people focus more on details and secondary features of the event such as the immediate situation. When events are less hypothetical, priorities related to abstract, principle-based values are weakened and may be unrelated or even reversed from reactions at a more abstract level. In the present context, when asked to evaluate targets, witnesses, and perpetrators in a specific context, people's actual responses may be driven more by implicit gender biases than higher-level egalitarian values (Kawakami et al., 2019; McConnell et al., 2011).

Overview of studies

The present research has the potential to contribute to the literature on confronting bias in three ways. First, an initial goal was to investigate support for confrontation, *per se*, by examining beliefs about whether a female target and/or male witness should confront sexism. Second, we explored not only how confrontation influences perceptions of a female target or male witness who confronts, but also the perpetrator. Third, our research extends previous literature on responses to bias by investigating the role of context. Specifically, we explored how confronting in a professional or social context influences both support for confrontation and evaluations of the actors.

To achieve these goals, we conducted three experiments. In each study, participants recruited and given course credit for an online study via an undergraduate participant pool, were presented with a scenario of a sexist comment occurring in either a gym or office. The focus of Study 1 was on perceptions of the perpetrator of sexism and on support for confrontation by the target and witness. In this initial experiment, where no one responded to the sexist comment, we examined whether the perpetrator's comment was deemed offensive and whether he was evaluated negatively. Given our focus on confrontation, we wanted to ensure that the comment was indeed perceived to be inappropriate. We also explored support for confrontation and whether it was moderated

by context. In accordance with CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), we expected that when people were asked hypothetically whether a female target or male witness should confront, regardless of whether the event occurred in the gym or office, they would respond according to higher-level egalitarian values and support confrontation.

In Study 2, participants were presented with the same scenario which now included a response to the sexist comment by a female target. We predicted that the target would be evaluated more negatively when she confronted than was passive (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker et al., 2013). Furthermore, based on CLT, we expected that when evaluating this actual event, participants would be influenced by the context. Specifically, we expected that the target would be evaluated less negatively in a professional context, where the norms about confrontation are more explicit and formalized, than in a social context. Furthermore, if confrontation by a female target signals instances of sexism, perpetrators will be evaluated more negatively when the target confronted than was passive in a professional versus social context. We also expected, based on CLT, that when people were asked hypothetically whether others should stand up for confrontation, even after it occurs, participants would respond according to abstract, global values, and support confrontation by a target regardless of context.

In Study 3, the focus was on the effect of a male witness' response to sexism. In contrast to a female target, we expected that a male witness would be evaluated more, *not less*, positively when he confronted than was passive (Czopp & Monteith, 2003). Based on CLT, when responding to an actual event, we also expected that the witness would be judged more positively in a professional than social context. Furthermore, if confrontation by a male witness helps define instances of sexism, perpetrators would be evaluated more negatively when the witness confronted than was passive in a professional than social context. We also expected, based on CLT, that when asked hypothetically whether others should stand up for confrontation, regardless of context, participants would support confrontation by a witness.

Study 1

Methods

Participants and design

The primary goal of Study 1 was to initially assess perceptions of a sexist comment and the perpetrator in a professional and social context when confrontation information was not provided, as well as support for confrontation. Participants were randomly assigned to context condition in a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) x 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed design with actor as a within-subjects variable. The data from 242 (117 female, age range: 17–38 years old, $M_{age} = 19.43$, $SD_{age} = 2.81$; race: 49% Asian; 16% White; 15% Middle Eastern; 5% Black; 15% other/undisclosed) participants were included in the analyses.¹ A sensitivity analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) found that our final sample could detect effects of $f = 0.11$ ($\eta^2 = 0.01$) for the predicted actor main effect (power = .80, $\alpha = .05$, M observed correlation among repeated measures, $r = .16$).

Procedure

Participants randomly assigned to the gym context read the following scenario: *Jack, Eileen, and Ralph go to the same gym. When the three of them are at the gym one day, Jack makes a comment to Eileen saying "You seem moody, is it your time of the month or something?"* Alternatively, participants assigned to the office context read: *Jack, Eileen, and Ralph work at the same office. When the three of them are at the office one day, Jack makes a comment to Eileen saying, "You seem moody, is it your time of the month or something?"*

After reading the scenario and completing comprehension questions (see supplemental material), to investigate perceptions of the actors and the sexist comment, participants responded to items related to the likability of each actor and the offensiveness (how socially acceptable and offensive), and typicality of the perpetrator's behavior on 9-point scales. Finally, participants were presented with two questions about whether they thought Eileen (the female target) would (Yes/No), and should say or do anything (Yes/No) followed by the same two questions about Ralph (the male witness),² before an attention check (see supplemental material).

Results and discussion

Likability ratings

Likability ratings were subjected to a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) x 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed ANOVA with actor as a within-subjects variable. Although participant gender was included in the initial analysis of all experiments, it did not qualify any of the predicted effects and all gender effects are reported in the footnotes.³ The main effect of actor was significant, $F(2, 239) = 136.60, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.53$. Simple effects analyses revealed that the perpetrator ($M = 3.34, SD = 1.73$) was less liked than the target ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.36$), $t(241) = -16.38, p < .001, d = 1.43, 95\% CI [-2.49, -1.96]$, and the witness ($M = 5.30, SD = 1.43$), $t(241) = 13.64, p < .001, d = 1.24, 95\% CI [-2.24, -1.68]$. Furthermore, the witness was liked less than the target, $t(241) = 2.70, p = .007, d = 0.19, 95\% CI [0.07, 0.46]$. The 2-way actor x context interaction was not significant, $F(2, 239) = 136.60, p = .603, \eta^2 < 0.01$.

Offensiveness of perpetrator's behavior

Perceived offensiveness and social acceptability (reverse-scored) of the perpetrator's behavior were correlated ($r = .25$) and a composite mean score was created. To investigate the effect of context (gym vs. office) on perceptions of the perpetrator's behavior, an ANOVA was conducted on ratings of offensiveness and typicality, separately. The effects of context on offensiveness ratings, $F(1, 242) = 1.89, p = .170, \eta^2 < 0.01, 95\% CI [-0.69, 0.12]$, and typicality ratings, $F(1, 242) = 0.77, p = .384, \eta^2 < 0.01, 95\% CI [-0.34, 0.87]$, were not significant. The perpetrator's behavior was considered offensive ($M = 7.11, SD = 1.61$; $M = 6.83, SD = 1.58$) and moderately typical ($M = 5.65, SD = 2.46$; $M = 5.92, SD = 2.28$) in both the office and gym, respectively.

Expectations and support for confrontation

To examine the effects of context (gym vs. office) on both expectations and support for confrontation by the target and witness, we conducted binary logistic regressions

separately for the female target and the male witness. As expected, context did not significantly impact expectations for confrontation by the target, $B(1, N = 242) = -0.04$, $W = 0.01$, $p = .926$, $Exp(B) = 0.96$, 95% CI [0.44, 2.12], or witness, $B(1, N = 242) = 0.01$, $W < 0.01$, $p = .984$, $Exp(B) = 1.01$, 95% CI [0.58, 1.76], or whether the target, $B(1, N = 242) = 0.34$, $W = 0.90$, $p = .344$, $Exp(B) = 1.40$, 95% CI [0.70, 2.82], or witness, $B(1, N = 242) = -0.12$, $W = 0.21$, $p = .644$, $Exp(B) = 0.88$, 95% CI [0.52, 1.49], should confront. However, chi-square analyses collapsing over context demonstrated that a majority of participants expected that the female target would confront (88%) than remain passive (12%), $\chi^2(1, N = 242) = 142.96$, $p < .001$, and should confront (84%) than remain passive (16%), $\chi^2(1, N = 242) = 113.87$, $p < .001$. Notably, while fewer participants expected that a male witness would confront (29%) than remain passive (81%), $\chi^2(1, N = 242) = 44.69$, $p < .001$, a small majority reported that he should confront (64%) than remain passive (46%) $\chi^2(1, N = 242) = 18.00$, $p < .001$.

In summary, in Study 1, no information was provided about how targets or witnesses responded to sexism. Under these circumstances, the male perpetrator was perceived as less likeable than a female target and a male witness and his behavior was evaluated as offensive. The results further indicated that a large majority of participants expected that a female target would and should confront the male perpetrator. In contrast, few participants expected a male witness to confront the perpetrator, though more than half thought he should. In line with CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), these responses to a hypothetical event (should they confront) were not moderated by context, potentially indicating a more abstract level of processing related to a focus on higher-order values than peripheral cues.

Study 2

Methods

Participants and design

The primary goal of Study 2 was to investigate the impact of confrontation by the target and context on actor evaluations as well as support for confrontation. Participants were randomly assigned to context and target response condition in a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) \times 2 Target Response (Confront vs. Passive) \times 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed design with actor as a within-subjects variable. The data from 215 (111 females; age range: 17–43 years old, $M_{age} = 19.32$, $SD_{age} = 2.89$; race: 42% Asian; 28% White; 11% Middle Eastern; 6% Black; 13% other/undisclosed) participants were included in the analyses. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power found that our final sample could detect effects of $f = 0.14$ ($\eta^2 = 0.02$) for the predicted Context \times Target Response \times Actor interaction on actor evaluations (power = .80, $\alpha = .05$, M observed correlation among repeated measures, $r = .19$).

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to read a scenario set in a gym or office in which the target either confronted the perpetrator of a sexist comment or remained passive. While the descriptions of the situations were the same as in Study 1, in the confront conditions: *Eileen responds by saying: "That's not OK, Jack"* and in the passive conditions: *Eileen smiles politely without saying anything*. We selected this passive response to indicate that the

target had heard the comment and provided a neutral response. Because our primary focus was on how the same response would impact evaluations of the actors in different contexts and because a nonresponse or any negative reaction could be construed as signaling disapproval and opposition (Dickter & Newton, 2013; Kawakami et al., 2019), we chose to compare a direct confrontation with a nonconfrontational response.

After completing comprehension questions, participants evaluated the behavior and likability of the target, witness, and perpetrator on 9-point scales. Participants were also asked to indicate whether they thought the target and witness should have said anything (Yes/No) and finally presented with an attention check.⁴

Results and discussion

Evaluative ratings

Evaluations of the behavior and likability of each actor were correlated ($r = .40$ to $.50$) and a composite mean evaluative score for each actor was created. To examine the effect of context and target response on evaluations, we conducted a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) \times 2 Target Response (Confront vs. Passive) \times 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed ANOVA with actor as a within-subjects factor.⁵ The main effect of actor was significant, $F(2, 210) = 185.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.64$. The perpetrator ($M = 2.61, SD = 1.50$) was evaluated less positively than the target ($M = 5.76, SD = 2.02$), $t(214) = -17.44, p < .001, d = 1.77, 95\% CI [-3.50, -2.79]$, and the witness ($M = 4.09, SD = 1.56$), $t(214) = -12.69, p < .001, d = 0.97, 95\% CI [-1.71, -1.25]$. The witness was also evaluated less positively than the target, $t(214) = 9.84, p < .001, d = 0.93, 95\% CI [1.34, 2.01]$. The main effects of context, $F(1, 211) = 6.96, p = .009, \eta^2 = 0.03$, and target response $F(1, 211) = 63.97, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.23$, were also significant. Actors were evaluated less positively in the office ($M = 4.01, SD = 1.06$) than gym ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.05$), and when the target confronted the perpetrator ($M = 3.63, SD = 0.86$) than was passive ($M = 4.63, SD = 0.86$).

The actor \times target response interaction was also significant, $F(2, 210) = 12.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.11$. However, this effect was qualified by the predicted three-way interaction, $F(2, 210) = 5.40, p = .005, \eta^2 = 0.05$. Simple effects analyses related to target evaluations produced a significant context \times target response interaction, $F(1, 215) = 8.97, p = .003, \eta^2 = 0.04$. Although the female target was rated less positively in the office when she was confronting ($M = 5.13, SD = 1.85$) than passive ($M = 6.46, SD = 1.69$), $F(1, 215) = 15.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.07$, she was rated especially negatively in the gym when she was confronting ($M = 4.30, SD = 1.71$) than passive ($M = 7.04, SD = 1.62$), $F(1, 215) = 69.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.25$, see Figure 1. For witness evaluations, the context by target response interaction was not significant, $F(1, 215) = 0.67, p = .415, \eta^2 < 0.01$. Participants rated the male witness less positively when the target was confronting ($M = 3.85, SD = 1.63$) than passive ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 215) = 5.74, p = .017, \eta^2 = 0.03$, regardless of context, see Figure 2. For perpetrator evaluations, the context \times target response two-way interaction was significant, $F(1, 215) = 3.96, p = .048, \eta^2 = 0.02$. Although in the office, the perpetrator was evaluated less positively when the target was confronting ($M = 1.87, SD = 1.14$) than passive ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.68$), $F(1, 215) = 10.20, p = .002, \eta^2 = 0.05$, evaluations of the perpetrator in the gym did not differ when the target was confronting ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.40$) or passive ($M = 2.90, SD = 1.48$), $F(1, 215) = 0.16, p = .676, \eta^2 < 0.01$, see Figure 3.

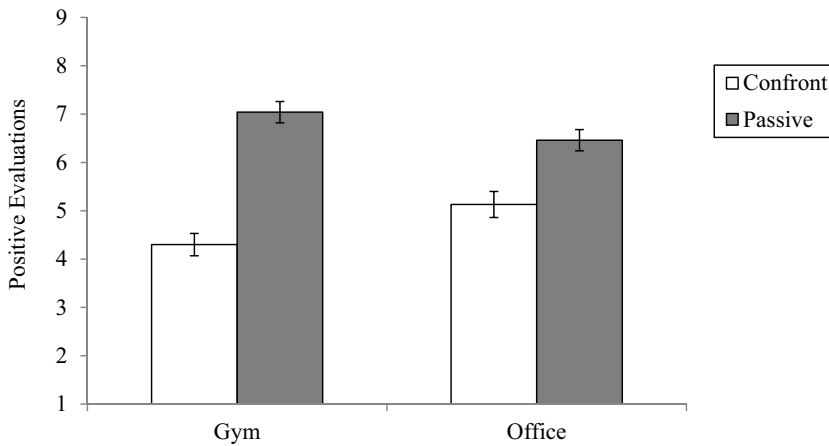


Figure 1. Target evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive target responses in Study 2. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

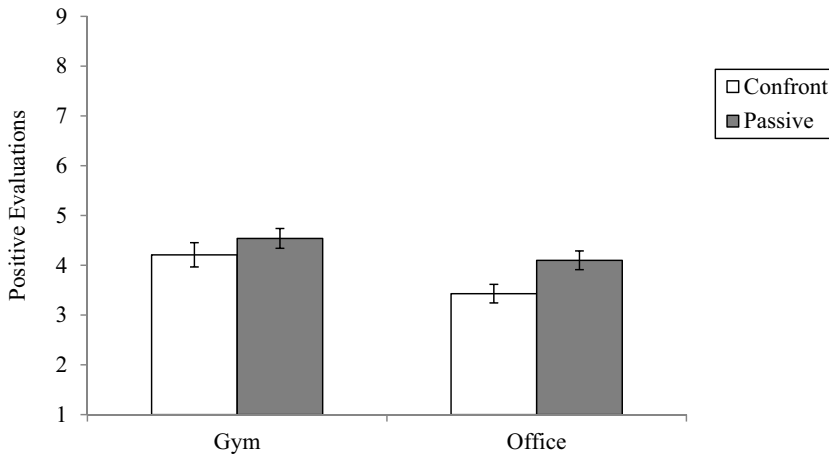


Figure 2. Witness evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive target responses in Study 2. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

Support for confrontation

In Study 2, to examine whether participants believed that the target or witness should confront a sexist comment (yes = 1, no = 2), after reading about a specific response from the target, we conducted two logistic regression analyses related to the effect of context (office = 0, gym = 1) and target response (confront = 0, passive = 1). Analyses related to the female target demonstrated a significant effect of target response, $B(1, N = 215) = 2.14, W = 28.17, p < .001, Exp(B) = 8.53, 95\% CI [3.87, 18.83]$. Confrontation by a female target was supported more when she was confronting (92%) than passive (57%). The target response \times context interaction was not significant, $B(1, N = 215) = -0.67, W = 0.54, p = .464, Exp(B) = 0.51, 95\% CI [0.09, 3.07]$, see Figure 4. Analyses related to the male witness demonstrated a significant effect of context, $B(1, N = 215) = 0.68, W = 5.55, p = .019, Exp(B) = 1.97, 95\% CI [1.12, 3.47]$. Participants supported confrontation by a male

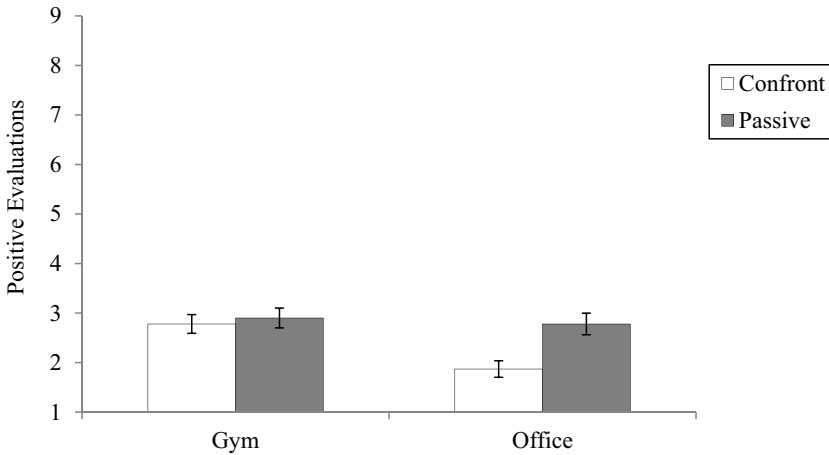


Figure 3. Perpetrator evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive target responses in Study 2. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

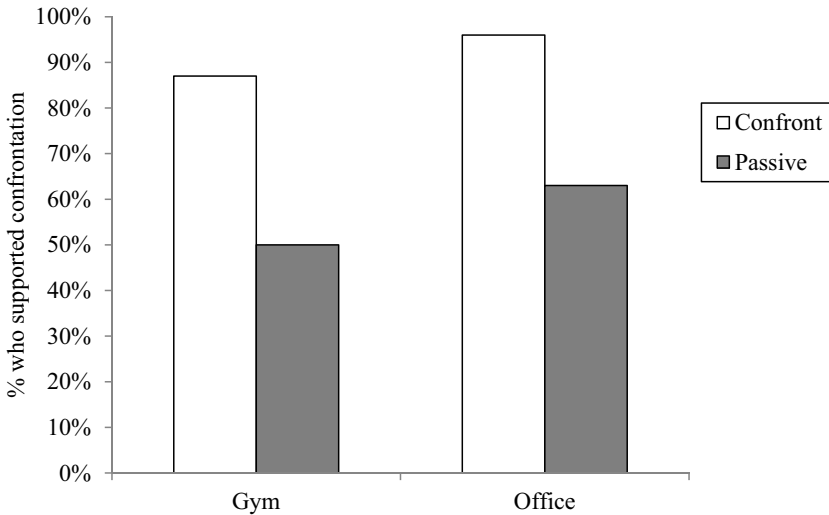


Figure 4. Support for target confrontation across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive target responses in Study 2.

witness more in an office (72%) than gym (55%). Notably, the effect of target response, $B(1, N = 215) = -0.04, W = 0.02, p = .879, Exp(B) = 0.96, 95\% CI [0.55, 1.68]$, and the target response x context interaction, $B(1, N = 215) = -1.01, W = 2.93, p = .087, Exp(B) = 0.37, 95\% CI [0.12, 1.16]$, were not significant, see Figure 5.

In summary, Study 2 demonstrated that when a female target provided a clear disapproval of the sexist comment, she was evaluated more negatively than when she was passive (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Gulker et al., 2013). Furthermore, the results provided new evidence that the consequences for women who confront in social settings may be particularly harsh. These findings suggest that unlike hypothetical support for confrontation, when presented with a concrete response, peripheral cues such as context were

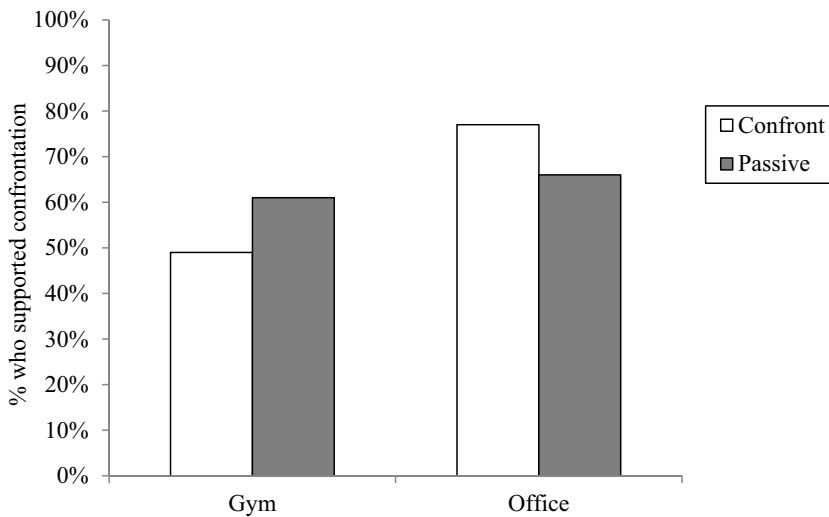


Figure 5. Support for witness confrontation across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive target responses in Study 2.

considered. Furthermore, the results indicated that the target's behavior impacted evaluations of both the witness and perpetrator. In particular, these actors were evaluated more negatively when the target was confronting than passive, and for the perpetrator, this was especially the case in the office. In addition, when asked whether the target should confront the perpetrator, approximately 90% of participants reported that she should confront when she did, compared to only about half of participants when she was passive. Together these findings suggest that the actions of the target of sexism matter – when she does not confront, perceptions of the perpetrator are more positive and support for confrontation declines.

Study 3

Methods

Participants and design

Study 3 investigated the impact of confrontation by a male witness. Participants were randomly assigned to context and witness response condition in a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) x 2 Witness Response (Confront vs. Passive) x 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed design with actor as a within-subjects variable. The data from 202 (110 females; age range: 17–33 years old, $M_{age} = 19.27$, $SD_{age} = 2.20$; race: 38% Asian; 20% White; 11% Middle Eastern; 11% Black; 20% other/undisclosed) participants were included in the analyses. A sensitivity analysis using G*Power found that our final sample could detect effects of $f = 0.12$ ($\eta^2 = 0.01$) for the predicted Context x Target Response x Actor interaction on actor evaluations (power = .80, $\alpha = .05$, M observed correlation among repeated measures, $r = .04$).

Procedure

The procedure was similar to Study 2 with one exception; a male witness rather than a female target responded to the perpetrator's comment. In particular, participants were informed that Ralph, the witness, *responds by saying: "That's not OK, Jack" or by smiling politely without saying anything.*

Results and discussion

Evaluative ratings

Evaluations of the behavior and likability were highly correlated ($r = .30$ to $.60$) and mean composite scores were created for each actor. To examine the effects of witness response and context on evaluations, we conducted a 2 Context (Gym vs. Office) \times 2 Witness Response (Confront vs. Passive) \times 3 Actor (Target vs. Witness vs. Perpetrator) mixed ANOVA with actor as a within-subjects factor. The main effect of actor was significant, $F(2, 197) = 165.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.63$, with the perpetrator ($M = 2.69, SD = 1.53$) evaluated less positively than the target ($M = 4.73, SD = 1.38$), $t(214) = -13.82, p < .001, d = 1.58$, 95% CI $[-2.33, -1.75]$, and the witness ($M = 5.56, SD = 2.06$), $t(214) = -16.16, p < .001, d = 1.64$, 95% CI $[-3.22, -2.52]$. Notably, the target was evaluated less positively than the witness, $t(214) = -4.91, p < .001, d = 0.47$, 95% CI $[-1.17, -0.50]$. A main effect of witness response was significant, $F(1, 198) = 6.96, p = .006, \eta^2 = 0.04$, in which the actors were evaluated less positively when the witness was passive ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.15$) than confronting ($M = 4.51, SD = 0.78$).

Although the actor \times witness response interaction was significant, $F(2, 197) = 14.90, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.13$, the three-way interaction was not, $F(2, 197) = 0.95, p = .389, \eta^2 = 0.01$. Simple effects analyses related to the two-way interaction demonstrated that the witness was evaluated less positively when he was passive ($M = 4.85, SD = 1.94$) than confronting ($M = 6.26, SD = 1.93$), $F(1, 202) = 27.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.12$, see Figure 6. In contrast, the effect of witness response on evaluations of the target, $F(1, 202) = 0.01, p = .997, \eta^2 < .01$,

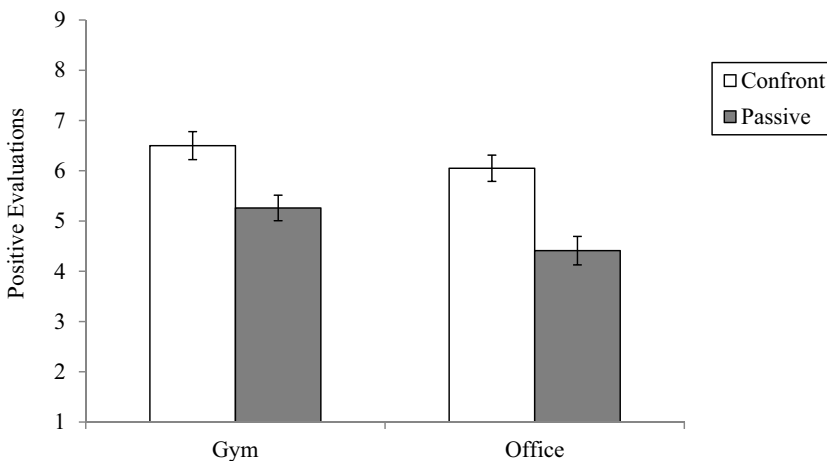


Figure 6. Witness evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive witness responses in Study 3. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

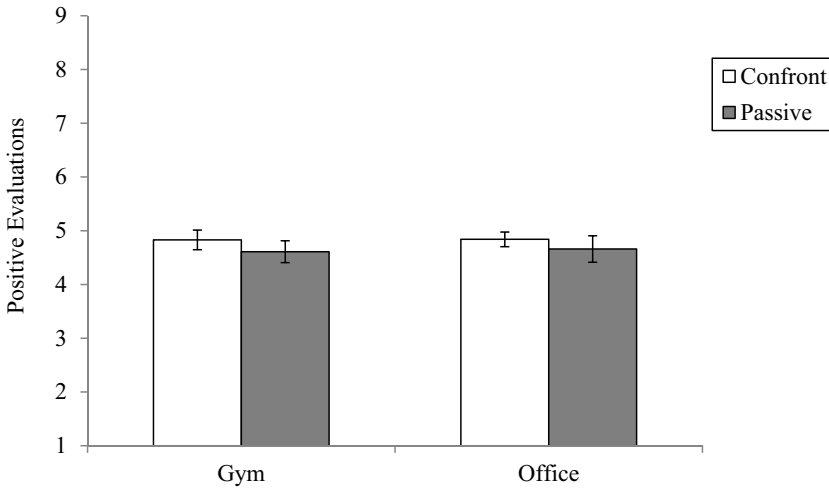


Figure 7. Target evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive witness responses in Study 3. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

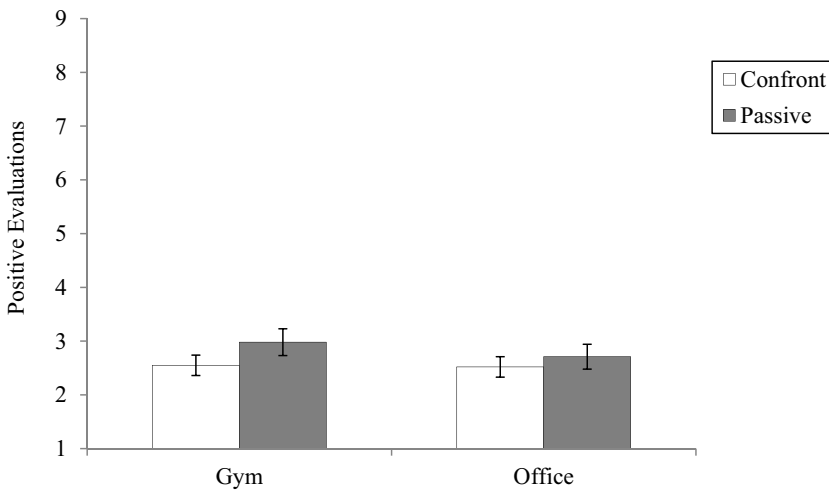


Figure 8. Perpetrator evaluations across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive witness responses in Study 3. Error bars represent the standard error of the mean.

and perpetrator, $F(1, 202) = 2.14, p = .145, \eta^2 = 0.01$, were not significant, see [Figures 7 and 8](#).

Support for confrontation

To examine whether participants believed the target or witness should confront a sexist comment (yes = 1, no = 2), after reading about a specific response from a male witness, we conducted two logistic regression analyses that tested the effect of context (office = 0, gym = 1) and witness response (confront = 0, passive = 1). The results related to the female target for witness response, $B(1, N = 202) = -0.30, W = 0.67, p = .412, Exp(B) = 0.74$,

95% CI [0.36, 1.53], and the context by witness response two-way interaction, $B(1, N = 202) = 0.10, W = 0.02, p = .897, Exp(B) = 1.10, 95\% CI [0.26, 4.73]$, were not significant. In general, most participants reported that the female target should confront (78%-86%), regardless of witness response and context, see [Figure 9](#). The results related to the male witness demonstrated a significant effect of witness response, $B(1, N = 202) = -1.03, W = 9.08, p = .002, Exp(B) = 0.36, 95\% CI [.19, .68]$. Participants reported that the witness should confront more often when he was confronting (82%) than passive (61%). The context \times witness response interaction, $B(1, N = 202) = -0.22, W = 0.11, p = .737, Exp(B) = 0.81, 95\% CI [0.22, 2.89]$, was not significant, see [Figure 10](#).

In summary, the results from Study 3 indicate that the impact of the confrontation by a male witness was limited to witness ratings and was not qualified by context. While a male witness was evaluated more positively when he confronted than when he was passive, his behavior did not impact evaluations of the target or perpetrator. Furthermore, more participants reported that the witness should confront, when he confronted than was passive.

General discussion

In October 2016, candidate Donald Trump was caught on tape making sexist comments. When confronted by the media, his response was that “This was locker room banter, a private conversation that took place many years ago” (Millstein, 2016). This statement suggests that in a more social context, such behaviors are less reprehensible and less worthy of confrontation. In the present research, we specifically investigated the impact of context on processes related to confronting sexism. In doing so, we extended this literature in three important ways by examining how context impacts support for confrontation, as well as the barriers and benefits of confrontation for female targets and male witnesses.

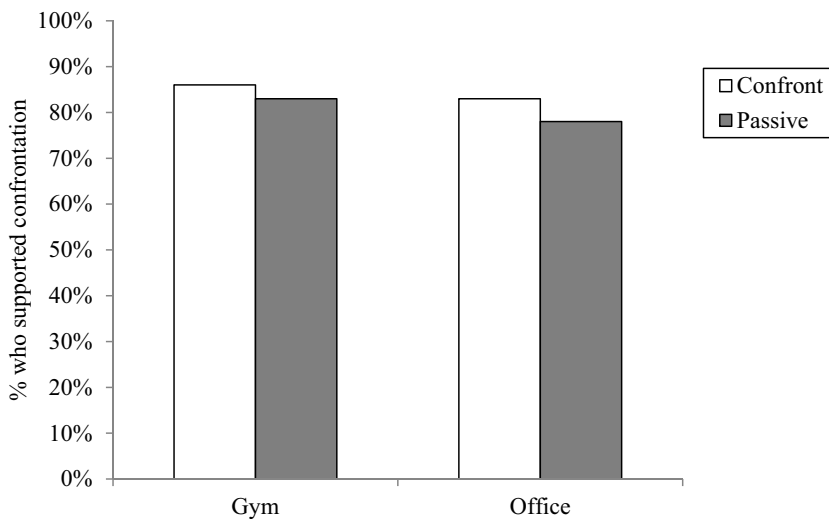


Figure 9. Support for target confrontation across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive witness responses in Study 3.

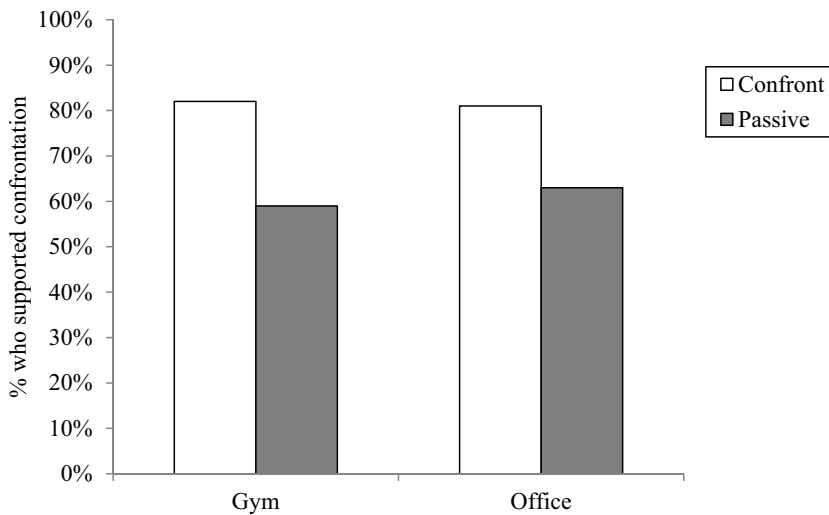


Figure 10. Support for witness confrontation across gym and office contexts and confronting and passive witness responses in Study 3.

Impact of context on whether we should confront

According to CLT, when presented with hypothetical events, people tend to process information on a more abstract level and focus more on core values such as egalitarianism and less on peripheral cues such as context (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In line with this theorizing, in Study 1 we found that when a response to sexism by a target or witness was not provided, most participants reported that the female target (84%) and male witness (64%) should confront the perpetrator of a sexist comment. Notably, when the scenario included responses by the target (Study 2) and witness (Study 3), participants' beliefs about whether an actor should confront were moderated by these responses. Specifically, more participants believed that the target (92%) and witness (82%) should confront after the actor confronted than when she (57%) or he (61%) was passive. Furthermore, as predicted, these findings were not qualified by context.

These results suggest that when presented with a sexist event and no information about confrontation, participants' responses may be driven by injunctive norms about socially appropriate behavior, in which you *should* confront sexism (Cialdini et al., 1990). However, when provided with an actual response by a target or witness, participants' responses may also be influenced by descriptive norms about what other people do. As demonstrated by the #MeToo movement, increasing the prevalence of confronting sexism can have a ripple effect, encouraging greater support for confrontation (Kawakami et al., 2019; Zacharek et al., 2017).

Impact of context on confronter and perpetrator evaluations

In contrast, when presented with concrete instances of confrontation, according to CLT, people tend to process information on a lower level and be more influenced by the

situation and implicit biases rather than loftier values (Kawakami et al., 2019; Trope & Liberman, 2010). In these less hypothetical events, abstract, principle-based values may even be reversed. As such, when the female target was confronting rather than passive in Study 2, she was evaluated less positively, and this was especially the case in the social compared to the work context, wherein expectations about addressing sexism are more formalized. The pattern of results was markedly different, however, for the male witness. When he was confronting rather than passive in Study 3, he was evaluated more positively across contexts, potentially because there are fewer explicit norms related to male confronters. In summary, although participants reported that both a female target and male witness should confront sexism (though to a less extent for the witness), this action came with social costs for the target but not the witness, especially in the social context.

The present research also investigated the impact of confrontation on perpetrator evaluations. Notably, when the target was confronting rather than passive in a work context in Study 2, the perpetrator was judged particularly negatively. In contrast, the witness' actions did not impact ratings of the perpetrator. These findings underline the power of the target. While a target may suffer negative consequences for confronting sexism, her response, not the witness', has important implications for perceptions of the perpetrator and are context dependent.

Future research

An important next step in this research is to determine the mechanisms by which social contexts impact confrontation processes. In accordance with CLT, we suggest that hypothetical versus actual situations influence responding according to higher level core values rather than specific contexts (Trope & Liberman, 2010; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). However, future experiments should explore other hypothetical vs. actual contexts and should vs. evaluative questions to explore this assumption. Moreover, we proposed that in work settings, recommendations related to confronting bias may be more explicit and formalized than in social settings. Further research should also measure and manipulate this aspect of contexts. For example, would having explicit confrontation expectations in social settings result in less negative evaluations of confronting female targets? While the present findings suggest that at times for certain responses, contexts matter, examining a broader array of contexts would be informative.

To further advance this research, it is important to move beyond scenarios to having participants actually experiencing situations in which people confront bias (Karmali et al., 2017; Kawakami et al., 2009; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). For example, participants could interact online in different contexts with confederates acting as targets, witnesses, and perpetrators. Attempts to assess evaluations of these actors in less explicit ways would also allow researchers to rule out impression formation processes and demand characteristics. Including alternative sexist comments and types of confrontation and passive responses (e.g., a lack of response) is also recommended to understand the generalizability of the present results.

Although past research has found participant gender differences in the perception of confronters (Dodd et al., 2001), in the present studies, gender did not impact perceptions of independent actors, the perpetrator behavior, or support for confrontation. Although we did not expect gender to qualify our primary predictions, to investigate the impact of

gender in future research, larger samples are recommended. Furthermore, although we focused on confrontation by a male witness, future studies should also examine whether a female witness would experience benefits like the male witness or costs like the female target when she responds to sexism against another women (Eliezer & Major, 2012).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current research highlights the importance of confronting sexism. While a female target may bear costs for standing up against sexist comments, especially in a social context, her behavior can increase negative perceptions of the perpetrator and support for confrontation. Alternatively, when a male witness stands against sexism as an ally, he can garner praise for his actions, as well as support for confrontation. Because confrontation can reduce sexism, future research is necessary to better understand confrontation processes. The present studies, however, suggest that changing expectations related to responding to sexism in different contexts has the potential to create climates in which confrontation may be less costly.

Notes

1. Information about participant exclusions for each experiment are described in the supplementary material.
2. For exploratory purposes, participants in all studies were also asked what they expected the actors to say and why.
3. The only effect of gender in Study 1 was a main effect on expectations for confrontation by the target. Women (93%) compared to men (84%) expected the target to confront more often, $B(1, N = 242) = 0.95$, $W = 4.69$, $p = .030$, 95% CI [1.10, 6.15].
4. In Studies 2 and 3, perceptions of the offensiveness and typicality of each actor's behavior were also examined. Due to word limitations, analyses related to these items were included in the supplemental materials.
5. In initial analyses, a main effect of gender was found on evaluations of the actors, $F(1, 207) = 12.38$, $p = .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$, with women ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.02$) evaluating the actors less positively than men ($M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.06$). A main effect of gender was found for support for both target and witness confrontation. In particular, women (80%) indicated that a female target should confront more than men (68%), $B(1, N = 215) = -0.97$, $W = 7.61$, $p = .006$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.76]. Similarly, women (78%) indicated that a male witness should confront more than men (46%), $B(1, N = 215) = -1.50$, $W = 23.37$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.41].

Disclosure statement

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