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Gender differences in using humor to respond to sexist jokes

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Abstract: We examine the degree to which women and men use humor to confront sexist jokes. We also test the social benefits and perceived effectiveness of confronting with humor. One-hundred-sixty-four (46% female) participants read about a male coworker who made a sexist joke and reported how they would respond in an open-ended format. Women were more likely than men to say they would respond with humor. Specifically, 16% of women, compared to 4.5% of men, spontaneously provided a humorous confrontation. Participants then read a second scenario that asked them to imagine a male friend making a sexist joke. We manipulated the confronter's gender and the type of confrontation (humorous versus serious) in the scenario. Confronters who used a humorous (versus serious) response were rated as more likeable but less effective. People often hesitate to confront sexism for fear of social repercussions. Given that humorous confrontation reduces social backlash, it might be worth slightly lower perceived effectiveness to increase overall rates of confronting sexism.

Keywords: sexist humor, confrontation, gender differences, backlash

1 Introduction

A disparaging message couched in humor can be just as, or even more, harmful as a serious message (Ford 2000; Ford et al. 2008). Sexist humor not only diminishes women but also trivializes that diminishment, making the confrontation of sexist humor uniquely difficult (Mallett et al. 2016; Woodzicka et al. 2015). One barrier to confronting sexism is the social backlash that often accompanies confrontation (Good et al. 2012). The social costs are especially high when confrontations are serious or assertive (Becker and Barreto 2014; Martinez et al.

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2017). Therefore, using humor to confront sexist humor might be a valuable strategy to decrease social backlash and potentially increase rates of confronting. Humorous responses may be particularly useful for female confronters who are at greater risk for social backlash for confronting sexism (Eliezer and Major 2012). We examine the degree to which women and men use humor to confront sexist jokes. We also test whether the confronter's gender impacts the likeability of the confronter and the perceived effectiveness of a humorous (versus serious) confrontation.

1.1 Consequences of sexist humor

Disparagement humor affects attitudes, social norms, and behavioral intentions (Woodzicka and Ford 2010). With regards to attitudes, sexist humor may either be interpreted as benign amusement or a reprehensible expression of sexism. Two factors affect the likelihood that sexist humor is perceived to be trivial rather than harmful: gender and sexist attitudes. Men view sexist humor as more humorous and less offensive than do women (Chapman and Gadfield 1976; Hemmasi et al. 1994; Smeltzer and Leap 1988). Additionally, women consider the telling of sexist jokes at work to be more inappropriate than do men (Smeltzer and Leap 1988). Interestingly, both men and women who have sexist attitudes are particularly likely to be amused rather than offended by sexist humor (Butland and Ivy 1990; Greenwood and Isbell 2002; Henkin and Fish 1986; LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998; Moore et al. 1987).

Sexist humor has broader consequences for social norms, including how people view themselves and standards for how to treat others (Woodzicka and Ford 2010). Sexist humor triggers a state of self-objectification and increased body surveillance in women, but not men (Ford et al. 2015). While positive humor can enhance workplace performance (Mesmer-Magnus and Glew 2012), women who experience sexual harassment, including sexual jokes, are less likely to be satisfied with their jobs and more likely to withdraw from the workplace (e. g. neglect assignments, take long work breaks; Fitzgerald et al. 1997). Sexist jokes also contribute to a hostile work environment by increasing tolerance of sexual harassment (Baker et al. 1990; Gutek and Koss 1993). Ford (2000) found that exposure to sexist jokes led to greater tolerance of a supervisor's sexist behavior, but only for people who endorsed hostile sexism (i. e. dislike of women who violate traditional gender norms; Glick and Fiske 1996).

Perhaps most disturbing is the power of sexist humor to facilitate discrimination against women. Ford and Ferguson (2004) proposed the Prejudiced Norm Theory to explain how sexist humor loosens norms that dictate equal

treatment for women and men. Highly prejudiced people suppress prejudice when social norms signal restraint and release prejudice when norms communicate approval to do so (Ford and Ferguson 2004). They argue that humor communicates that a prejudicial message is non-threatening and can be interpreted in a playful, non-serious mindset. By making light of the expression of prejudice, sexist humor communicates that it is acceptable to treat sexism in a less critical manner (Husband 1977). In this mindset, people high in prejudice are more likely than those low in prejudice to perceive an external social norm of tolerance of sexism. Indeed, Ford (2000) found that sexist jokes increased tolerance of a sexist event only for participants high in hostile sexism who adopted a non-critical mindset. Further, hostile sexism predicted the amount of money participants cut from the budget of a women's organization upon exposure to sexist comedy skits (Ford et al. 2008). A perceived local norm of approving the cuts mediated the relationship between hostile sexism and discrimination against the women's organization. The serious nature of the consequences of sexist humor underscore the importance of reducing the prevalence of such humor.

1.2 Confronting sexism

Confrontation—the use of verbal or nonverbal responses to convey disapproval of an offensive remark or behavior (Shelton and Stewart 2004)—can reduce biased attitudes and future instances of sexism (Czopp et al. 2006; Mallett and Wagner 2011). Confrontation affords targets and bystanders a way to communicate dissatisfaction with sexist remarks and sends a clear message that sexism is unwelcome (Czopp et al. 2006; Gulker et al. 2013).

Yet the decision to confront is not an easy one. Although most people anticipate confronting, many fewer actually do. Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) found that 68% of women imagined that they would refuse to answer at least one sexually harassing question asked by a male interviewer, but when faced with sexist questions during a real job interview, no one refused. While Swim and Hyers (1999) found that 45% of women confronted sexism, only 15% did so directly. The others responded in relatively subtle ways (e. g. asking the perpetrator to repeat himself) that might not be perceived as confrontation by the perpetrator. Mallett and colleagues (2016) found that fewer than 50% of participants confronted sexism in a computer mediated chat session, and that a humorous (versus serious) comment further reduced confrontation. So, although people often find sexist behavior to be unacceptable, they rarely challenge the offensive behavior.

The confronting prejudiced responses (CPR) model is based on classic work on bystander intervention to identify factors that predict when individuals will confront (Ashburn-Nardo et al. 2008; Goodwin et al. 2007). The model proposes that people must overcome five hurdles to successful confrontation: the interpretation of the event as discrimination, deciding whether it is confrontation-worthy, taking responsibility to confront the incident, deciding how to confront, and finally, actual confrontation. Humor increases the difficulty of clearing several hurdles. Disparaging jokes and remarks that play on traditional gender role prejudice and sexual objectification are among the most frequent types of sexism (Swim et al. 2001), and appear to be more difficult to confront than serious sexist statements (Mallett et al. 2016; Woodzicka et al. 2015).

People must find remarks or behavior to be offensive in order to challenge that behavior (Brinkman et al. 2011; Dickter and Newton 2013). Although the underlying sentiment of a sexist comment and sexist joke is similar, the mode of communication changes the interpretation of a biased remark. Humor communicates that one should not seriously consider the information being conveyed (Ford and Ferguson 2004). Humorous messages, including prejudicial ones, signal that the message should not be critically scrutinized, but should instead be viewed as non-literal and outside the realm of moral scrutiny (Attardo 1993; Gray and Ford 2013; Zillman 1983). In fact, an incident is perceived to be less severe when bias is framed in a humorous (versus serious) manner (Ford et al. 2008). As a result of using a non-critical lens to interpret humorous communications, people are less likely to label disparaging jokes (versus serious statements) as sexist. For example, Woodzicka et al. (2015) found that a sexist joke (“What do you call a woman with half a brain? Gifted.”) was rated as less offensive than a sexist comment which conveyed the same sentiment (“It doesn’t seem like women as a group are very smart.”). People were also less likely to rate sexist jokes, compared to serious sexist statements, as confrontation-worthy. Therefore, humor makes it less likely that people will clear the first and second hurdles on the path to confrontation.

The final steps of taking responsibility to confront and actually confronting sexist humor might be especially difficult if people are uncertain whether the speaker intended to say something biased (Ashburn-Nardo et al. 2008). Mallett et al. (2016) found that women were less likely to perceive the person making a remark as sexist when he delivered the sexist content in the form of a joke compared to a serious statement. Not surprisingly, as perceptions of the speaker as sexist decreased, so did confronting. Even the way that women confronted differed depending on the use of humor. Participants confronted a sexist joke presented via instant messaging less assertively than a similar serious comment.

Confronting an instance of sexism is difficult, in part, because of the social costs associated with it. Female confronters are often rated as hypersensitive or overreacting (Czopp and Monteith 2003; Dodd et al. 2001), and have been regarded as whiney complainers (Kaiser and Miller 2001). Perhaps because confronting is inconsistent with the female gender role (Hyers 2007), women face more costs than men when confronting. Men who publically confront sexism are rated more favorably than women who confront (Gervais and Hillard 2014). This is in line with research showing that targets of prejudice who confront are more likely to be viewed as troublemakers and complainers than non-targets who confront (Eliezer and Major 2012; Gulker et al. 2013; Rasinski and Czopp 2010; Shultz and Maddox 2013).

The costs of confronting sexist humor appear to be higher than those associated with other types of confrontation. For example, Woodzicka et al. (2015) found that a confronter (with a gender-neutral name) who publically labeled a sexist joke as sexist by saying “that’s sexist!” was rated as less likeable than a confronter who declared the joke “not funny.” The penalties for standing up to sexist humor, versus other forms of disparagement humor, are especially harsh. A confronter was rated as less likeable when confronting a sexist joke (by labeling it as biased or declaring it not funny) compared to confronting a racist joke with the same strategies (Woodzicka et al. 2015). People value others who have a sense of humor (Mesmer-Magnus and Glew 2012). Those who confront sexist humor risk being labeled humorless or overly sensitive.

Unfortunately, women are less likely to confront sexism if the costs of doing so are high. Shelton and Stewart (2004) exposed women to a sexist interview and manipulated the perceived cost of the confrontation by telling female participants either that it was a prestigious and competitive job (high cost), or that the interview was for a noncompetitive charity position (low cost). They found that 92% of women confronted the sexist interviewer when the cost was low, compared to only 22% when the cost was high. Given that confronting sexist humor is especially costly for women, perhaps one way to encourage confrontation is to promote the use of confrontation strategies that incur fewer social costs.

In sum, using humor to confront a prejudicial remark may be tricky. On the positive side, a confronter who uses humor may be seen as more likable compared to a confronter who addresses bias in a more serious way. On the negative side, humorous confrontations may be less effective than serious confrontation (Monteith et al. 2019). Drawing from the persuasion literature, Swim et al. (2009) argue that people must attend to the message at the heart of a confrontation for it to be effective. If a humorous confrontation is vague or includes qualifying statements, then a person may not understand that it is

intended to challenge biased behavior. As a result, humorous confrontations may be less effective than serious confrontations. Research on sexist humor has yet to examine the impact of a confronter using humor, therefore one aim of our research is to test how the use of humor in confrontations impacts confronter likeability and perceived effectiveness of the confrontation.

1.3 The current study

Most people can remember a time when they witnessed a sexist joke or comment and thought of the perfect witty comeback after they had walked away. Indeed, online articles with titles such as “Flawless Comebacks to Those Annoying Sexist Comments” and “The Best Comebacks to Sexist Comments” advocate the use of humor when confronting. Women might especially benefit from creative confronting since direct confrontation often leads to social sanction (Czopp and Monteith 2003; Gulker et al. 2013; Kaiser and Miller 2004; Shelton and Stewart 2004; Swim and Hyers 1999). Humor has long been a useful tool in smoothing conflict in interpersonal relationships (Collison 1988; Coser 1959; Mulkay 1988), and women tend to use humor as a social lubricant to smooth difficult situations (Smith et al. 2000). In this way, the witty comeback may allow for the target or bystander to send a message that the sexism is unwelcome, but in a way that minimizes social backlash.

Some may question whether women will adopt humor as a defensive strategy to respond to sexism. Early research concluded that men were more likely to appreciate and use humor than women (see Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 1998, for a review). More recently, researchers have challenged such conclusions pointing out biases in early work on sex differences in humor appreciation and use. For example, early work focused on joke-telling and the appreciation of jokes. Crawford and Gressley (1991) found that joke-telling tends to be more characteristic of male humor while women are more likely to use humor in personal anecdotes. Additionally, Tannen (1986, 1990) suggests that men’s and women’s distinct conversational goals may shape when and how humor is used. Men use humor more for self-presentation – to appear funny and create a positive personal identity. Women, on the other hand, use humor more to create or maintain group solidarity and achieve gender-relevant social goals (Hay 2000).

The main objectives of this study are 1) to examine gender differences in the use of humor to confront sexism, 2) to measure the likeability of a confronter who uses humor, and 3) to examine the perceived effectiveness of a humorous confrontation. Given that women tend to use humor to achieve group solidarity and are aware of the social costs associated with directly confronting sexism, we

expect that women will be more likely than men to use humor as a low-cost strategy to confront sexism (hypothesis 1). Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, we explore sex differences in using humor to confront sexist humor. Male and female participants were asked to imagine that they experienced two scenarios. In the first scenario, participants read about a coworker who made a sexist joke in their presence and reported what they would say or do after hearing the joke. In the second scenario, participants imagined a conversation in which a male friend made a sexist joke and another friend confronted the sexist joke. We manipulated the gender of the confronter along with the type of the confrontation – half of the participants imagined a humorous confrontation and half imagined a serious confrontation. Participants rated the likeability of the confronter along with the effectiveness of the confrontation. We expected that those using humor as a confrontation strategy would be viewed as more likeable than those using more serious methods of responding (hypothesis 2). We also hypothesized that humorous confrontations would be viewed as less effective at stopping sexism than serious confrontations (hypothesis 3).

2 Method

2.1 Participants

One hundred and sixty four participants (46% female, 54% male) were recruited via Amazon's MTurk and were compensated \$1.00. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 62 years ($M = 35.47$, $SD = 9.80$). The majority of participants self-identified as White (74%), followed by Black (12%), East Asian (7%), and Latinx (7%).

2.2 Procedure

Participants accessed the Qualtrics survey via the Amazon Mechanical Turk website. After giving informed consent, participants were asked to carefully read Scenario A and completed the anticipated response measures. The same participants then read Scenario B and completed the confrontation beliefs measures. In Scenario B we manipulated the gender of the confronter so that participants imagined either a male or a female confronter. We also varied the type of the confrontation – half of the participants imagined a humorous confrontation (“Still single, aren't you Mark?”) and half imagined a serious confrontation (“You're not funny Mark.”). Participants then provided demographic

information including age, gender, and ethnicity. Last, participants were debriefed and paid \$1.00 via the Amazon MTurk interface.

2.3 Materials and measures

2.3.1 Sexist joke scenario A

All participants read and responded to two scenarios. Scenario A described a first-person interaction where a male co-worker told a sexist joke: *Imagine that you are in the break room at work. You are talking to a male co-worker about the recent internet search that you did. He says, "That reminds me of a joke ... Is Google male or female? Female, because it doesn't let you finish a sentence before making a suggestion."*

2.3.2 Anticipated response

After reading Scenario A, participants were asked the open-ended question, "How would you respond to your co-worker". After providing a written response, we assessed their willingness to use a humorous response by having them rate the likelihood that they would employ two specific responses: "What? I couldn't hear you over my eyes rolling," and "I'm pretty sure that sounded funnier in your head." Ratings were made using a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). These two responses were highly correlated ($r = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) and were averaged to create the *witty confrontation* variable. Finally, we assessed their willingness to use more serious responses by asking participants to rate how likely they would be to respond using two serious confrontations: "That's not funny" and "That's sexist." These two serious responses were highly correlated ($r = 0.63$, $p < 0.001$) and were averaged to create the *serious confrontation* variable. Last, participants rated how likely they would be to employ each of two common, non-verbal, response strategies: ignoring their coworker's joke or laughing.

2.3.3 Sexist joke scenario B

Participants next read Scenario B which described the participant as a bystander. Specifically, participants read about a social interaction during which a male friend told a sexist joke and another friend confronted it. We

manipulated the sex of confronter (male or female) and the type of confrontation (witty or serious): *You and your friends are talking about dinner plans, trying to figure out if you will go out to dinner or cook at home. During the conversation your friend Mark says, “Why does the bride always wear white? Because it’s good for the dishwasher to match the stove and refrigerator.” Your friend Emily [or Jake] responds “Still single, aren’t you Mark?” [or “You’re not funny Mark.”].* Both the serious and witty confrontations were created by the authors.

2.3.4 Confrontation beliefs

In response to Scenario B, participants used a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely) to answer all items. They rated how funny and clever they perceived the confronter, along with how much they respected and liked the confronter and wanted to be friends with him or her. The *Witty* variable was created by averaging ratings of confronter funniness and cleverness ($r = 0.82$, $p < 0.001$). A confronter *Likeability* variable was created by averaging ratings of how much participants wanted to be friends with the confronter, the degree to which they respected the confronter, and how much they liked the confronter ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Participants also rated the effectiveness of the confrontation using four items. Two items measured perceptions of the immediate effectiveness of the remark (“To what degree does the response tell Mark that the joke is inappropriate?” and “To what degree does the response tell Mark that the joke is unwanted?”). They were moderately correlated ($r = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and were averaged to create the *EffectiveNow* variable. Two items measured perceptions of the future effectiveness of the remark (“To what degree will this response stop Mark from making similar jokes in the future?” and “Mark will remember this remark next time he considers telling this joke.”). They were also moderately correlated ($r = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$) and were averaged to create the *EffectiveFuture* variable.

3 Results

3.1 Anticipated responses to sexist humor

Two raters, who were unaware of hypotheses, coded five categories in the open ended answers regarding imagined responses to a co-worker’s sexist joke in scenario

A: Ignore ($\kappa = 0.92$; “I would ignore him”), Smile/Laugh ($\kappa = 0.98$; “I would probably just laugh”), Roll Eyes ($\kappa = 0.94$; “I would roll my eyes.”), Witty Confrontation ($\kappa = 0.89$; “Don’t quit your day job” “And like a woman, it is usually right!”), and Serious Confrontation ($\kappa = 0.97$; “Hey dude, that’s a bit offensive.” “I’d tell him it wasn’t funny.”). Any disagreements in coding were decided by a third rater.

Table 1 presents the percentage of participants who anticipated using each of the five responses. The most common response to the sexist joke, spontaneously provided by 51% of participants, was laughing or smiling. The least common coded response was eye rolling (5%). Chi square tests found significant gender differences for three categories: laughing/smiling, humorous confrontation, and eye rolling. Men were more likely than women to anticipate laughing at the joke, $X^2(1) = 4.05, p = 0.044$. Women were significantly more likely than men to respond with a witty confrontation, $X^2(1) = 6.12, p = 0.013$. Sixteen percent of women said they would confront in a witty way. Examples of such confrontations include “Don’t quit your day job,” “I agree, it is a female because she is very smart, she knows almost everything!,” “Cute.” “Wow, so original!” and “That only happens to you when your suggestions aren’t worth listening to!” Often, women clarified that they would pair their humorous response with a smile. Women also anticipated rolling their eyes more than men, $X^2(1) = 5.91, p = 0.015$.

Table 1: Total percentage and percent by gender of coded anticipated responses.

	Percentage	% by Gender	
	Total	Female	Male
Laugh/Smile	51	43	58
Serious Confrontation	25	29	22
Humorous Confrontation	10	16	4.5
Ignore	8	7	9
Eye Roll	5	9	1

A 2 (Gender: male, female) by 4 (Response Type: laugh, serious confrontation, witty confrontation, ignore) Mixed Groups ANOVA was computed. The main effect for Response Type was significant, $F(2, 471) = 11.47, p < 0.001$. Please see Table 2 for the descriptive statistics associated with this test. Participants reported being more likely to laugh in response to the sexist joke than ignore it, $t(160) = 3.38, p = 0.001, d = 0.53$, confront seriously, $t(159) = 4.91, p < 0.001, d = 0.77$, or confront wittily, $t(161) = 3.30, p = 0.001, d = 0.52$. Participants also reported being more likely to ignore the joke than to confront it in a serious manner, $t(160) = 2.06,$

Table 2: Means and standard deviations for anticipated responses to sexist humor.

Type of Response	Mean	SD
Laugh	2.98	1.54
Serious Confrontation	2.07	1.24
Witty Confrontation	2.40	1.35
Ignore	2.32	1.40

$p = 0.041$, $d = 0.33$. Further, witty confrontation was rated as more likely than serious confrontation, $t(161) = 3.14$, $p = 0.002$, $d = 0.49$.

The interaction between Gender and Response Type was significant, $F(3, 471) = 4.71$, $p = 0.003$. Supporting hypothesis 1, women reported being more likely ($M = 2.73$, $SD = 1.46$) than men ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.17$) to engage in witty confronting, $t(162) = 3.21$, $p = 0.002$, $d = 0.50$. Men reported being more likely ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.53$) than women ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 1.52$) to laugh in response to the sexist joke, $t(160) = 2.23$, $p = 0.027$, $d = 0.35$. Men and women did not differ in reports that they would ignore or seriously confront the joke, $ps > 0.20$.

3.2 Confrontation beliefs

Although confrontations were not pretested for funniness, we verified that our witty confronters in Scenario B were, indeed, seen as more witty than the serious confronters (recall that the Witty variable is an aggregate rating of funny and clever). We computed a 2(Gender of Confronter: man, woman) by 2(Confrontation Type: witty, serious) by 2(Gender of Participant: man, woman) between groups MANOVA on the dependent variable Witty. As expected, witty confronters ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.97$) were rated as wittier than serious confronters ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.07$), $F(1, 155) = 105.46$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 1.61$. No other main effects or interactions were significant.

A 2(Gender of Confronter: man, woman) by 2(Confrontation Type: witty, serious) by 2(Gender of Participant: man, woman) between groups MANOVA was also computed on the dependent variable Likeability. Confronter likeability was significantly affected by confrontation type, gender of the confronter, and the gender of the participant. Supporting hypothesis 2, confronters using humor ($M = 3.90$, $SD = 0.90$) were rated as more likeable than those confronting using serious statements ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 155) = 4.89$, $p = 0.028$, $d = 0.35$. Women participants ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.03$) rated the confronter (regardless of confronter gender) as more likeable than

did men ($M = 3.55$, $SD = 1.03$), $F(1, 155) = 5.37$, $p = 0.022$, $d = 0.37$. Interestingly, women confronters ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.93$) were rated as marginally more likeable than men confronters ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.13$), $F(1, 155) = 3.86$, $p = 0.051$, $d = 0.30$. The interaction between confronter gender and participant gender was marginally significant, $F(1, 155) = 3.66$, $p = 0.058$. Men rated women confronters ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 0.87$) as significantly more likeable than men confronters ($M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(86) = 3.06$, $p = 0.003$, $d = 0.65$. Women rated women ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 1.01$) and men ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.06$) confronters similarly, $p > 0.05$.

A 2(Gender of Confronter: man, woman) by 2(Confrontation Type: witty, serious) by 2(Gender of Participant: man, woman) between groups MANOVA was computed on the dependent variables EffectiveNow and EffectiveFuture. Supporting hypothesis 3, participants rated serious confronters ($M = 4.19$, $SD = 1.03$) as more effective in the moment (EffectiveNow) than witty confronters ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.95$), $F(1, 156) = 10.38$, $p = 0.002$, $d = 0.51$. No other main effects or interactions were significant for EffectiveNow. Of interest is that serious confronting ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 1.15$) was rated as equally effective as witty confronting ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.96$) in decreasing sexist humor in the future, $F(1, 156) = 0.07$, $p = 0.80$. No other main effects or interactions were significant for EffectiveFuture.

4 Discussion

Interpersonal confrontation of sexism can be difficult. Finding ways to confront that exact fewer costs for the confronter is an important step toward increasing the likelihood of confrontation. The current research suggests that women are more likely than men to use active yet subtle strategies to express displeasure with sexist humor. Although humorous confrontation is not viewed as effective as more direct challenges, the reduction in social backlash that accompanies the use of humor during confrontation warrants its use. Simply put, doing something is likely better than doing nothing.

Men and women differed in regards to how they anticipated responding to a sexist joke; women were more likely to say they would do something active to challenge the joke whereas men tended to simply accept the joke. In support of hypothesis 1, our qualitative analysis of what women and men spontaneously said they would do in response to a sexist joke showed that women were more likely than men to say that they would make a humorous comment or roll their eyes. Men, on the other hand, reported being more likely than women to laugh

or smile at the joke. So although women were joking in response to sexism, this was likely a defensive maneuver rather than an expression of appreciation for the disparagement humor. No gender differences emerged when participants anticipated making a serious confrontation or ignoring the sexist joke. These qualitative results were consistent with participants' rating of their likelihood to use similar strategies to confront sexist humor.

Our results contradict earlier work suggesting that women are less likely than men to use humor in socially awkward situations at work (Cox et al. 1990). This contradiction is likely due to Cox et al. (1990) using gender-neutral scenarios. During a gender-stereotype relevant conversation, women may be more motivated to use humor to counter-act gender stereotypes than during gender-neutral interactions. Women might be especially motivated to smooth over an awkward situation by demonstrating that although they do not approve of sexist humor, they have a well-developed sense of humor. The use of humor in these situations may also move women closer to their goals of maintaining group solidarity and achieving gender-relevant social goals (Hay 2000).

Men may have been less likely to respond with humor because they did not pick up on any social tension that needed to be alleviated. Mirroring past research (Hemmasi et al. 1994; Smeltzer and Leap 1988), men were more likely than women to report that the joke was funny and laugh at the joke. If men did not object as strongly to the joke as women, then they would have not been motivated to smooth the social situation by adding humor to their response. In general, men face fewer penalties for confronting sexism than women (Czopp and Monteith 2003). Therefore, even men who found the joke to be offensive may be less motivated to use humor than women if they do not anticipate backlash for confronting sexism.

Supporting hypothesis 2, those who used humor while confronting were viewed as more likeable than those who did not use humor. This was the case regardless of whether the confronter was a man or a woman. Not surprisingly, women rated confronters—regardless of how they confronted—as more likeable than did men. This makes sense given that women may be invested in decreasing sexism against their ingroup. Recall that the social costs associated with confronting are a major barrier to people challenging biased remarks (Ashburn-Nardo et al. 2008). If the goal is to increase overall rates of responding to sexism, it may be worth using a humorous confrontation as it has fewer social costs than a serious confrontation – even if it is rated as slightly less effective. Continued research on the link between decreasing social backlash and increasing both the frequency and effectiveness of confrontation is warranted.

Supporting hypothesis 3, humorous confrontation was rated as less effective in-the-moment than was serious confrontation, regardless of whether the

confronter was a woman or a man. Note that the average effectiveness rating of the witty confrontation was moderately high – 3.70 on a 5-point scale where 5 indicated extremely effective. Thus, humorous confronting was not perceived as *ineffective*. Rather, serious confronting was simply viewed as more effective than humorous confrontation. This result did not extend to future expectations – witty and serious confrontations were rated as equally likely to stop the future use of sexist humor. Future effectiveness ratings for both serious and witty confronting were just under the mid-point of the scale, suggesting that both approaches were perceived as only somewhat effective in stopping future acts of sexism. Additional research should investigate whether humorous confrontations actually have a long term effect on curbing biased behavior.

Our research shows that women, more so than men, anticipate using witty comebacks to confront sexism. We know that women do use less assertive responses to humorous, compared to serious, sexist remarks (Mallett et al. 2016). Yet we know little about whether women actually confront in more humorous ways than men. Clearly, how people think they will respond in the face of sexism is frequently different than how they actually do. Recall that Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) found that the majority of women imagined that they would refuse to answer at least one sexually harassing question asked by a male interviewer, but when a separate sample of women was actually put in that sexually harassing situation, not a single woman refused. In light of the disconnect between anticipated versus actual behavior, future research should investigate whether humorous and serious confrontations produce different results when actually used in confrontations rather than simply asking people to imagine the effectiveness of the confrontation. As long as the confrontation induces negative, self-directed affect, it should reduce biased attitudes and behavior (Czopp et al. 2006).

The current research did not examine individual differences that likely shape perceptions of witty confronting. Research suggests that people lower in sexism and higher in feminist identification are more likely to recognize and confront instances of sexism (Ayres et al. 2009; Wang and Dovidio 2017). How people who vary on these individual differences perceive humorous confrontations is unknown. In the current study, humorous confronters were viewed as more witty and likeable than serious confronters. Those low in sexism likely applaud any attempt at confrontation (serious or witty); those higher in sexism might appreciate a witty confrontation precisely because of the expressed humor. Furthermore, people who identify as feminists may find witty confrontations especially appealing as they help counteract the stereotype of feminists as humorless. Future research on the relationship between an individual's sexism, feminist identity, and perceptions of witty confrontation is justified.

In addition, research that identifies effective, low cost, confrontations is warranted. One limitation of the current study is that the humorous confrontation used in the second scenario was not pretested for funniness. Researchers may wish to gather confrontations that been confirmed to be funny and test whether training people to use such comebacks increases the likelihood of confrontation. It will also be important to determine whether some humorous comebacks are more effective and well-received than others. For example, some humorous comebacks may disparage the speaker (e. g. “Still single, Mark?”) and therefore be less effective than humorous comebacks that do not impugn the other’s character (Stone et al. 2011). Finally, it would be interesting to note whether some witty responses are easier than others for potential confronters to memorize and utilize. Answering these questions would advance our understanding of when and why individuals confront disparagement humor, and whether it is a useful tool in combatting prejudice.

The present study also used a single sample to evaluate two scenarios. As such, how participants responded to the first scenario could have shaped their interpretation of and predicted responses to the second scenario. For example, perhaps reporting that they would likely use a witty response when they personally encountered a sexist joke increased the likelihood that participants would anticipate using a witty response when they witnessed a joke as a bystander. Researchers who use this paradigm in future work may choose to counterbalance the order of the scenarios to test for order effects in predicted responses.

Because interpersonal confrontation may decrease future instances of sexism (Czopp et al. 2006; Mallett and Wagner 2011), research exploring how to increase confrontation rates is justified. Most people who confront sexism do so in subtle or indirect ways (Swim and Hyers 1999) that may not be perceived as confrontation by the perpetrator or bystanders. For instance, Woodzicka and Good (2018) found that 25% of individuals engaged in “low stakes prodding” in response to a face-to-face interaction where a confederate told a sexist joke or made a sexist comment. Low stakes prodding involved subtly pointing out the gendered nature of the remark, but not explicitly addressing sexism. For example, an individual might state “I find it interesting that you thought about gender while commenting on my choices.” This strategy was perceived as a form of confrontation by more than 75% of bystanders (Woodzicka and Good 2018). Humorous confrontation is another example of low-cost confrontation, and it is viewed as moderately effective at stopping sexism in-the-moment. Perhaps we could increase rates of confrontation if we present people with an array of confrontation strategies rather than focusing on direct confrontation, which is difficult and costly. Knowing more ways to respond may increase rates of responding (Lawson et al. 2010).

Researchers once thought that men were more likely to appreciate and use humor than women (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 1998). Yet we find that women are actually more likely than men to anticipate using a witty comeback to a sexist joke. In comparison, the majority of men anticipate simply laughing at the joke. This discrepancy may be due to women using humor to create or maintain group solidarity and to achieve gender-relevant social goals (Hay 2000). Women may also be using humor as a social lubricant to smooth a difficult situation (Smith et al. 2000). In the current study, women who reported that they would use a humorous confrontation often clarified that they would pair their humorous response with a smile, reinforcing the idea that they work towards the goal to have a smooth interaction, even when confronting sexism. Further, men and women who used a humorous confrontation were seen as equally likeable, which suggests that humor worked to maintain positive regard for the confronter. Future research can continue to explore women's and men's motivations for using humor versus a more serious tone to combat prejudice.

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