Full Length Article

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Scrutinizing sexism in comedy under the lens of social identity threat and prejudiced norm theory: are leadership aspirations and benevolent sexism affected?

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Abstract: Perceived gender differences and the supposed flaws of women are frequently conveyed in comedy formats – yet the consequences of such humor may differ for female and male recipients. Theory and research on *stereotype threat* and *social identity threat* suggest that stereotyping or devaluing communication against women can lead to their decreased identification with domains in which they are negatively stereotyped. Additionally, according to *prejudiced norm theory*, sexist humor that objectifies and stereotypes women can increase recipients' tolerance of discrimination. This research sought to test both theories to explore the differential effects that sexist humor may have on women and men. In an experiment, it was examined whether the exposure to sexism in comedy (vs. non-sexist comedy) influences individuals' 1) leadership aspirations and 2) endorsement of benevolent sexism. Participants (N = 384; n = 154 female and n = 230 male) watched either a sexist or a non-sexist comedy clip by the American comedian *Anthony Jeselnik*. Watching sexist comedy had a small negative effect on women's, but not on men's leadership aspirations. Watching sexist comedy did not substantially influence participants' endorsement of benevolent sexism; however, independent of experimental

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condition, men reported more benevolent sexism than women. Results are discussed in the light of the ongoing replication crisis and with respect to their practical relevance.

Keywords: benevolent sexism; disparaging humor; gender; leadership aspirations; social identity; stereotype threat

1 Introduction

Comedy is a compelling media genre, popular among all genders. Notably, jokes that devaluate or depreciate members of specific social groups (*disparaging humor*, Zillmann 1983) are frequently shared in comedy shows. Some comedians and their audiences enjoy *sexist humor* which objectifies or stereotypes women (Woodzicka and Ford 2010). Besides the arguable entertainment factor, this practice is controversially discussed in society, and there is some scientific evidence that sexist humor may negatively influence men's attitudes and behavior towards women (e.g., Ford et al. 2013; Romero-Sánchez et al. 2017). Previous research has demonstrated that sexist jokes can legitimize sexist behavior and discrimination; this effect was particularly pronounced for men who reported more sexist attitudes (e.g., Ford et al. 2008; Ford et al. 2013). Further, sexist jokes can increase women's self-objectification, and thus, negatively influence their self-image (e.g., Ford et al. 2015b). However, research on the psychological consequences of watching sexist comedy especially for female audiences is rare (e.g., Wright et al. 2018). Thus, a critical examination of psychological consequences of misogynistic media content for female and male consumers appears vital.

Previous research demonstrated that despite both men and women perceiving the humor to be sexist, they showed different reactions regarding its potential to be threatening (Lawless et al. 2020). Focusing on the targets, theory and research on *social identity threat* describes how situations in which individuals are confronted with negative evaluations of their groups can elicit a sense of threat, manifesting in emotional, cognitive, or behavioral consequences (Steele 1997). Regarding a humorous context, *prejudiced norm theory* describes how disparagement humor may facilitate the release of existing prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Ford et al. 2015a).

In this research, we set out to scrutinize sexism in comedy based on both theoretical backgrounds, that is, social identity threat in the media context (Appel and Weber 2021) and prejudiced norm theory (Ford and Ferguson 2004). We pursued two main research questions: 1) Can sexist comedy elicit social identity threat, and thus, influence women's leadership aspirations? 2) Does sexist comedy have a prejudice releasing function, as prejudice norm theory suggests, and thus, influence

recipients' endorsement of benevolent sexism? We suggest that sexism in comedy affects recipients' aspirations and attitudes, and that different effects may be observed for women and men. An experiment was conducted to examine individuals' responses to sexist comedy against women regarding leadership aspirations and benevolent sexism (i.e., the endorsement of positively toned conventional gender stereotypes).

2 The influence of sexist humor on women: does it hurt?

Previous research predominantly examined men's responses to sexist humor, but often neglected the women's (i.e., the targets') perspective (e.g., Ford et al. 2020; Tabassum and Karakowsky 2023; Woodzicka and Ford 2010). Being exposed to sexist jokes (compared to non-sexist jokes) may have adverse effects on women, as it can elicit negative emotions such as disgust or anger (LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998). Women with a stronger gender identification experience sexist jokes even more negatively (LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998; see also Abrams et al. 2015).

Stereotype threat theory suggests that the confrontation with negative stereotypes or devaluing communication against one's group can lead to lower performance (Steele 1997). This also applies to gender stereotypes that are displayed in the media, including advertisement, news, and entertainment media (see a meta-analysis by Appel and Weber 2021). The theoretical framework of social identity threat shares significant similarities with the theoretical framework of stereotype threat but is broader in scope: social identity threat encompasses not only scenarios in which individuals are subjected to negative stereotypes related to their group (i.e., stereotype threat), but also situations in which an individual's group is subjected to disdain or reduced value in a more general sense (Aronson and McGlone 2009). The negative consequences of social identity threat induced via media include decreased interest in stereotypically male domains such as computer science (e.g., Cheryan et al. 2013) and lower leadership aspirations (e.g., Davies et al. 2005). It has been shown that both explicit and subtle expressions of sexism can cause social identity threat, and thus, be detrimental for women (e.g., Adams et al. 2005). Explicit or overt sexism refers to obviously harmful or unequal treatment of women, for instance, sexual harassment. Subtle sexism is more abstract and often goes unnoticed, for example, media depictions of liberated women as unhappy (Johnson 2007) or more negative nonverbal behaviors towards female than male leaders (Swim and Cohen 1997).

However, despite the popularity of the comedy genre, only few studies examined social identity threat effects of humorous sexist communication (see Ford et al. 2015a). Sexist humor disparages women by playing upon traditional gender roles, sexist stereotypes of inferiority, or reducing them to sexual objects – in sum, communicating diminishment and devaluation of women. It has been shown that sexist humor may elicit social identity threat among women, resulting in more negative self-views and feelings of social exclusion (Ford et al. 2020), as well as increased self-objectification (Ford et al. 2015b). Further, being exposed to sexist comedy (compared to neutral comedy) can have detrimental effects on women's cognitive performance (Weber et al. 2023). We suggest that examining potential threat effects of media content is particularly important: the regular exposure to stereotyping or devaluing media communication may create a "climate of threat," hindering women from pursuing certain interests, careers, or life goals (e.g., Cheryan et al. 2009; London et al. 2012). This particularly pertains to traditionally male dominated domains such as the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) or leadership roles.

The current experiment examines the differential effects of sexism against women in comedy on women's interest to take a leadership role. Based on social identity threat theory, we expected that these effects are smaller, absent, or even reversed among men, whose group is not targeted. Leadership aspirations are important at every career stage, including tasks such as taking responsibility for outcomes and coordinating team members; yet leadership roles remain a gender-stereotypically male territory (Netchaeva et al. 2022), making it more challenging for women to raise their hand when being asked whether they want to take up a leadership role. The avoidance of a task for which one's group is negatively stereotyped has been shown to be a potential consequence of stereotype threat. Previous studies have shown that women who were confronted with TV commercials or print advertisements that devalued women (vs. neutral advertisements) showed the expected threat effect and reported lower interest in a leadership role, indicating lower aspirations in the respective domain (Davies et al. 2002; Davies et al. 2005; Prasad 2011). We intended to assess people's interest in taking a leadership role based on a scenario-based question (i.e., a situational judgement test), a method which previous research has shown to be reliable and valid (e.g., Leicht et al. 2017; see also meta-analysis by Christian et al. 2010). The considerations outlined above result in the following hypotheses (preregistered[1]):

Hypothesis 1a: There will be an interaction of gender (women vs. men) and comedy (sexist vs. non-sexist) on leadership aspirations.

1 All hypotheses were preregistered under https://aspredicted.org/fzj7-f2dx.pdf. Please note that the numbering and order of the hypotheses deviates from the preregistration.

Hypothesis 1b: Women who are exposed to sexist comedy report lower leadership aspirations compared to women who are exposed to non-sexist comedy and compared to men.

2.1 Sexism in comedy and sexist attitudes: a reciprocal relationship?

According to *Ambivalent Sexism Theory*, *hostile sexism* refers to explicit animosity towards women, whereas *benevolent sexism* describes paternalistic attitudes and the endorsement of conventional stereotypes, which may be expressed by subjectively positive attitudes towards women (Glick and Fiske 2001). Both hostile and benevolent sexism are relatively stable belief systems, yet the situational salience and perceived appropriateness to express such beliefs may vary (see systematic review by Bareket and Fiske 2023). Arguably, benevolent sexism is a more subtle and more acceptable form than hostile sexism, as it may generally appear more appropriate to express subjectively positive attitudes toward women than overt hostility (Glick and Fiske 2001). In previous research, individual differences in sexist attitudes predicted the extent to which people enjoyed and were influenced by sexist humor (Woodzicka and Ford 2010). Sexist attitudes, in particular hostile sexism, and the perceived funniness of sexist jokes have consistently been shown to be positively correlated, among both men and women (e.g., Eyssel and Bohner 2007; Greenwood and Isbell 2002; Riquelme et al. 2021). Further, among men who scored high on hostile sexism, sexist humor can create a perceived social norm of sexism and legitimize sexist behavior (e.g., Ford et al. 2001; Ford et al. 2013); for example, it negatively influenced men's willingness to donate to a women's organization (Ford et al. 2008).

Going beyond sexism as an individual difference variable that predicts how funny people rate sexist humor, we assume a reciprocal relationship, in line with considerations by Bareket and Fiske (2023). Initial evidence suggests that being primed with gender-stereotypes can increase the endorsement of benevolent sexism (Good and Sanchez 2009). According to prejudiced norm theory, the reception of disparagement humor may release pre-existing prejudice (Ford et al. 2015a; see also Ford and Olah 2021). It can increase the tolerance of discrimination against members of the group that is made fun of as well as recipients' willingness to discriminate against the targeted group. Research has shown that in a humorous context, men who hold sexist attitudes toward women feel 'safe' to express their thoughts without worrying about social rejection, thus shifting perceived norms about discriminatory forms of behavior (Ford and Ferguson 2004; Mallett et al. 2016). This effect may not only affect discrimination but also prejudice against women (similar effects have been shown for Black people: see Saucier et al. 2018), as expressed in the form of

higher endorsement of benevolent sexism. For instance, being exposed to pornography increased benevolent sexism among women (Hald et al. 2013). Bareket and Fiske (2023) encourage experimental research manipulating situational factors to enhance our understanding of how and where sexism operates and is expressed. Therefore, we investigate benevolent sexism as an outcome variable in response to exposure to sexist comedy, which has rarely been done. Initial findings suggest that being exposed to sexist (vs. non-sexist) humor in TV shows may increase recipients' sexist attitudes (Wright et al. 2018).

Blatant expressions of sexism in comedy (e.g., rape jokes) may appear inappropriate to most recipients, as they intentionally and unambiguously describe harmful and unequal treatment of women. However, watching such sexist comedy might prime sexist cognitions (e.g., serving as a reminder for those with higher sexist beliefs that "women should do X or appear Y"), as previous research has shown that messages that promote chivalrous behavior toward women can trigger mental associations linked to sexist attitudes (Bosson et al. 2020). Consequently, after being exposed to overtly sexist jokes, the expression of subtle sexist attitudes may be judged as acceptable or rather normal behavior. We reason that listening to rape jokes might increase the attitude that women are weak and should be protected. Thus, based on prejudiced norm theory, we argue that overt sexism in comedy may situationally lead to a stronger expression of subtle sexist attitudes. We examine whether the exposure to sexism in comedy compared to similarly inappropriate, but non-sexist comedy may influence individuals' endorsement of benevolent sexism. However, prejudiced norm theory only differentiates between people high versus low in prejudice (Ford and Ferguson 2004); this may apply to both outgroup (i.e., men) and ingroup (i.e., women) members. Thus, prejudiced norm theory does not inspire differential predictions for women, as the targets of the jokes, and men, whose group is not affected. This leads to the following hypothesis and to the explorative analysis (preregistered):

Hypothesis 2: Watching sexist comedy (compared to non-sexist comedy) leads to more benevolent sexism among men and women.

Explorative Analysis: Is there an interaction between gender and comedy condition on benevolent sexism in the form that men's benevolent sexism is increased by watching sexist comedy, but women's is not?

2.2 The present research

The aim of the present study was to test how sexist comedy, as compared to non-sexist comedy, affects women's, but not men's, leadership aspirations, as well as participants' endorsement of benevolent sexism. We therefore searched for comedy

stimuli that were comparably funny and comparably reprehensible, yet significantly different regarding sexist content.

American comedian Anthony Jeselnik is known for offensive jokes that frequently revolve around the topic of relationships to women. Jeselnik's jokes can be viewed as exemplary for dark or insulting humor, making use of violations (not only regarding sexism, but also other topics such as religion or death) in the "benign" context of a comedy show. The jokes often unambiguously describe offensive treatment of women, representing overt sexist attitudes; yet, as the statements are part of a comedy show, they may not be taken seriously or could even be interpreted as exposing the ugliness of stereotypes and objectification (see Ford and Olah 2021).

A pilot study using a within-subject design was conducted to ensure that the stimulus material meets our criteria (see below). After carefully pretesting the comedy clips, we ran the main experiment in a 2×2 between-subjects design to test our hypotheses.

The experiment was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/fzj7-f2dx.pdf (but we adapted the order of hypotheses). Preregistration documents, the online Supplement, data, codes, and material can be found in the Open Science Framework (OSF) repository (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/R7FBP).

We report all studies, conditions, and variables. However, theory concerning one DV and two potential moderator variables has been moved to the Supplement, along with respective findings. This refers to the DV domain interest (the validity and reliability of our operationalization, which was more exploratory in nature, is questionable, which we critically discuss, see Supplement 1: Threat effect on domain interest) and to the moderators perceived funniness of the comedy clips and humor styles (Supplement 2: Moderation by perceived funniness; Supplement 3: Humor styles as potential moderators). To anticipate, results were inconclusive.

3 Methods

3.1 Pilot study

In order to find two comparable clips, we pre-selected three supposedly sexist and three supposedly non-sexist comedy clips from comedian Anthony Jeselnik's show 'Caligula' (2013). In the supposedly sexist clips, Jeselnik talks about interactions with his girlfriend, her physical appearance, and their communication behavior, including rape jokes. The jokes in the supposedly non-sexist clips revolved around topics such as drugs, death, and his interactions with fans after the show. The duration of each clip ranged from 64 s to 90 s (total duration of all clips in the pretest: 7:49 min). All six clips were presented to n = 38 participants (n = 28 women; age:

M = 34.29, SD = 12.28, range 18–66 years; snowball-sampling via social media). Perceived sexism of each clip was measured by asking participants to rate the item "Did the video clip involve prejudicial or discriminatory treatment of women?" (modified from Bill and Naus 1992). Reprehensibility was measured by asking how offensive and inappropriate the jokes were (two items averaged to form an index). The three items were answered on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *very much*. Finally, perceived funniness was measured with five items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree* (Weber et al. 2023, adapted from Swani et al. 2013).

Repeated measures ANOVAs including the ratings of all six comedy clips showed that they did not differ regarding perceived funniness, F (5, 185) = 1.39, η^2 = 0.036, p = 0.229, all ranging between M = 2.12 and M = 2.42. Yet – as expected – the six clips differed in ascribed sexism (Huynh–Feldt corrected), F (3.22, 119.05) = 38.47, η^2 = 0.51, p < 0.001; the three pre-selected supposedly sexist clips were rated more sexist (ranging between M = 3.50 and M = 4.76) than the three pre-selected supposedly non-sexist clips (ranging between M = 1.34 and M = 1.58). Unexpectedly, the six clips also had varying reprehensibility ratings (Greenhouse-Geisser corrected), F (3.97, 146.97) = 6.09, η^2 = 0.15, p < 0.001 (ranging between M = 3.13 and M = 4.61). Based on the results of this pilot study, we chose two clips for the main study (see below for descriptives).

3.2 Stimuli: sexist versus non-sexist comedy

Two short excerpts (duration sexist clip: 76 s, duration non-sexist clip: 82 s) met our criteria best. The sexist comedy clip consisted of jokes in which Jeselnik plays on the stereotype that women are overly sensitive and should therefore be taken less seriously. For example: "[…] My girlfriend now is almost perfect. And she hates that I tell rape jokes. […] [She] [s]ays 'Anthony, how can you make light of something as terrible as rape after I told you that I got raped in high school?' And I said, 'Baby, because I don't believe you.'" (Polito et al. 2013, transcribed from subtitles, minute 17:23–17:43). In the non-sexist comedy clip, Jeselnik jokes about how he is annoyed by babies while travelling on planes: "[…] 'Anthony, there's nothing worse than a baby on an airplane. […]' But I disagree. I can give you guys four examples of when having a baby on an airplane was awesome… Although, they were all on 9/11." (Polito et al. 2013, transcribed from subtitles, minute 50:10–50: 36). Pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni-adjusted) of the pilot study data showed that both clips differed in ascribed sexism (non-sexist: M = 1.47, SD = 1.29, sexist: M = 4.76, SD = 2.26), 95 % CI [2.10, 4.48], p < 0.001, d_{RM} = 1.43. Perceived reprehensibility did not differ (non-sexist: M = 4.30, SD = 2.22, sexist: M = 4.61, SD = 2.39), 95 % CI [−0.80, 1.41], p = 0.621, d_{RM} = 0.14.

Notably, both the sexist and the non-sexist clip were rated rather low on the five-point perceived funniness scale: the funniness ratings lay below the scale midpoint (non-sexist: M = 2.17, SD = 1.56, sexist: M = 2.22, SD = 1.24).

3.3 Design and participants

The experimental factor had two levels (comedy content: sexist vs. non-sexist, between subjects). In the analyses, participant gender was treated as the second design factor. Men and women were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions (sexist vs. non-sexist comedy clip). Under the assumption of a small effect of f^2 = 0.02 and a power of $1 - \beta$ = 0.80, the optimal sample size amounted to a total of 344 participants (MANOVA: special effects and interactions, two predictors, three response variables; G*Power; Faul et al. 2007). To account for potential exclusions, we intended to over-sample by around 20 % to ensure data quality. Participants were recruited via Amazon Mturk and received monetary compensation. A total of N = 424 volunteers completed the study (all English speaking). Participants were excluded from the final sample as preregistered: if they did not answer the attention check-items correctly (n = 28), did not watch the video completely (n = 14), and/or reported technical or sound issues (n = 5). Last, one person was excluded who did not report their gender. Neither univariate nor multivariate outliers were present. The final sample (n = 384; age: 19–71 years, M = 35.74, SD = 10.46) consisted of n = 154 female and n = 230 male participants, of which 58.9 % reported to have a college degree or higher education.

3.4 Measures

All instructions and measures were presented in English. Descriptive statistics (M, SD) of the dependent variables are displayed in Table 1. Descriptives of all other variables are reported in the online supplement (Supplement 4: Descriptive statistics of control variables).

3.4.1 Leadership aspirations

Participants' leadership aspirations were assessed based on a scenario question; the fictitious task and wording was adapted from Davies and colleagues (2005) to fit the online context of this study. Participants reported their interest in being a 'leader' (i.e., a traditionally masculine role) and being a 'problem solver' (additional measure of a lower status and traditionally less masculine role, serving as a control item) with

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of the dependent variables.

	Gender	Comedy condition			
		Non-sexist		Sexist	
		N	*M* (SD)	*N*	*M* (SD)
Leadership aspirations	Men	113	4.40 (2.00)	117	4.64 (2.03)
	Women	83	4.54 (2.11)	71	3.90 (2.00)
Benevolent sexism	Men	113	3.08 (1.32)	117	3.17 (1.35)
	Women	83	2.81 (1.40)	71	2.61 (1.24)

one item each that were answered on a seven-point scale from 1 = *no interest* to 7 = *strong interest*. The two items did not correlate, $r = 0.004$, $p = 0.936$.

3.4.2 Benevolent sexism

The eleven-item benevolent sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory by Glick and Fiske (2001) was presented, answered on a six-point scale (0 = *disagree strongly*; 5 = *agree strongly*). The scale showed very good reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.95$).

3.4.3 Perceived funniness

We assessed perceived funniness of the comedy clips based on five items (e.g., "The video clip was amusing"; Weber et al. 2023, adapted from Swani et al. 2013). The items were answered on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Internal consistency was very good (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.94$). Results of the preregistered moderation analysis are reported in the online supplement (Supplement 2: Moderation by perceived funniness).

3.5 Procedure

In the country where this research was conducted, psychological researchers carry more responsibility for ethical treatment of participants than in other countries. Therefore, it was not required to obtain institutional ethics approval for this study, as it did not concern issues regulated by law. The reported research was carried out in full accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, as well as the ethical guidelines and data protection policies provided by the American Psychological Association and the

German Psychological Society. Informed consent was acquired online prior to the experiment. The study was advertised on Amazon Mturk as a project on the 'Psychology of Comedy' (cover story). In the recruitment text, we notified people that "The comedy clips presented in this study can contain offensive and disparaging language. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this research study. […]" After giving their informed consent, participants filled in the humor styles questionnaire (see Supplement 3: Humor styles as potential moderators). Then, they were randomly assigned to watch one of the videos and completed the scale on perceived funniness. The dependent variables were then presented in a randomized order. Next, participants provided demographic information (age, gender, sexual orientation, and education) and whether they knew ('Do you know the comedian? ' – 'yes,' 'no,' 'not sure') and liked the comedian ('Do you like the comedian?'; 1 = *strongly dislike* to 7 = *like very much*), as well as how sexist ('I found the jokes…' 1 = *non-sexist*; 5 = *sexist)* and inappropriate ('I found the jokes…' 1 = *appropriate*; 5 = *inappropriate)* they experienced the jokes. Last, participants reported whether they had experienced technical problems and were provided with an open text field for comments, before being thanked and thoroughly debriefed.

4 Results

4.1 Manipulation check and correlations

As in the pilot study, the comedy clips in the two experimental conditions did not differ regarding their perceived inappropriateness (non-sexist: n = 196, M = 3.15, SD = 1.33; sexist: n = 188, M = 3.16, SD = 1.35), F (1,382) = 0.01, p = 0.932, η^2 < 0.001, but with regard to the sexism ratings (non-sexist: M = 1.80, SD = 1.07; sexist: M = 3.39, SD = 1.26), F (1,382) = 179.27, p < 0.001, η^2 = 0.319. No difference emerged regarding perceived funniness (non-sexist: M = 3.19, SD = 1.21; sexist: M = 3.06, SD = 1.28), F (1,382) = 1.08, p = 0.299, η^2 = 0.003, and with respect to liking the comedian (non-sexist: M = 3.88, SD = 1.74; sexist: M = 3.73, SD = 1.78), F (1,382) = 0.64, p = 0.425, η^2 = 0.002. Notably, in the main study, the comedy clips were rated funnier than in the pilot study.

Attesting to the differential validity of the ratings, the funnier people perceived the videos, the more they liked the comedian, r = 0.85, p < 0.001, the less inappropriate, r = −0.62, p < 0.001, and the less sexist, r = −0.30, p < 0.001, they judged the content. Liking of the comedian was negatively correlated with perceptions of the content being inappropriate, r = −0.65, p < 0.001, and sexist, r = −0.29, p < 0.001. In line with previous research, benevolent sexism and perceived funniness correlated significantly in the sexist comedy condition, r = 0.20, p = 0.006, but not in the non-sexist comedy condition, r = −0.01, p = 0.889.

4.2 Preliminary analyses: gender differences in perceived inappropriateness, perceived funniness, liking, and perceived sexism

Three separate ANOVAs with participants' gender (female vs. male) as the independent variable and perceived inappropriateness, perceived funniness, and liking of the comedian as the respective dependent variables showed that women (n = 154) and men (n = 230) differed in their perception of the comedy and the comedian (regardless of the content of the comedy). Women (M = 3.52, SD = 1.33) rated the comedy as more inappropriate than men (M = 2.91, SD = 1.28), F (1,382) = 20.30, p < 0.001, η^2 = 0.050. Likewise, women (M = 2.86, SD = 1.25) rated it less funny than men (M = 3.31, SD = 1.21), F (1,382) = 12.21, p = 0.001, η^2 = 0.031, and liked the comedian less (women: M = 3.38, SD = 1.79; men: M = 4.10, SD = 1.68), F (1,382) = 16.04, p < 0.001, η^2 = 0.040. To check whether the sexist and the non-sexist content differed in terms of perceived inappropriateness and funniness dependent on gender, we included the comedy condition as an additional factor in a 2 × 2 design, but no significant interactions were obtained.

Turning to perceived sexism, we ran a 2 × 2 (comedy condition × gender) ANOVA. There was a main effect of comedy condition, F (1,380) = 184.26, p < 0.001, η^2 = 0.327, and a main effect of gender, F (1,380) = 4.67, p = 0.031, η^2 = 0.012, but no significant interaction, F (1,380) = 2.19, p = 0.140, η^2 = 0.006. Pairwise comparisons showed that women rated the sexist comedy clip significantly more sexist than men, 95 % CI [0.10; 0.78], p = 0.012, d = 0.36, but not the non-sexist comedy clip, 95 % CI [–0.25; 0.41], p = 0.623, d = 0.08.

Taken together, these results indicate a successful manipulation. Including perceived inappropriateness or liking of the comedian as covariates did not change the results of any of the following analyses that omit these covariates.

4.3 Leadership aspirations

We expected that sexist comedy lowers women's leadership aspirations, and thus, an interaction between gender and comedy condition (H1a). Means are reported in Table 1. Figure 1 illustrates the pattern of findings. An ANOVA[2] with two between-subjects factors (comedy condition and gender) and leadership aspirations as the

2 Our hypotheses are based on several univariate questions, rather than one multivariate question. Consequently, deviating from the preregistration, we ran separate analyses for the different hypotheses instead of one MANOVA including all dependent variables (following Huberty and Morris 1989).

dependent variable showed no main effect of gender, F (1,380) = 1.97, p = 0.161, η^2 = 0.005, no main effect of the comedy condition, F (1,380) = 0.88, p = 0.349, η^2 = 0.002, but the expected significant interaction effect, F (1,380) = 4.34, p = 0.038, η^2 = 0.011. The hypothesis-driven planned contrasts (H1b) showed that women who watched sexist comedy reported lower leadership aspirations than men who watched sexist comedy, 95 % CI [−1.34; −0.14], p = 0.016, d = 0.37; as expected, after watching non-sexist comedy, no such difference emerged, 95 % CI [−0.43; 0.72], p = 0.625, d = 0.07. The difference between women who watched sexist comedy and women who watched non-sexist comedy did not reach statistical significance in the two-tailed test, 95 % CI [−0.01; 1.29], p = 0.052, d = 0.31. The small-to-moderate effect size suggests a trend toward a meaningful difference, which may warrant further investigation. No differences emerged regarding participants' aspirations to be a 'problem solver'. The results support Hypothesis 1a and partially support Hypothesis 1b with a small-to-medium effect size regarding the difference between women versus men who watched sexist comedy. Although the interaction effect size was small, it suggests that the influence of sexist humor on leadership aspirations may be contingent on gender.

4.4 Benevolent sexism

To examine whether watching sexist comedy (compared to non-sexist comedy) leads to more benevolent sexism among both men and women (H2), we conducted an ANOVA with comedy condition as the independent variable and benevolent sexism as the dependent variable. The results showed no main effect of the comedy condition, F (1,382) = 0.01, p = 0.936, η^2 < 0.001. Thus, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

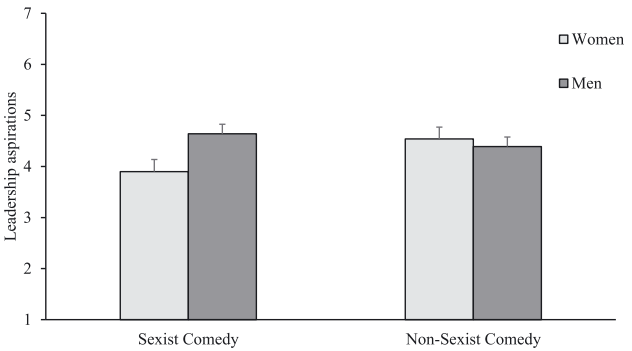

Figure 1: Participants' leadership aspirations based on gender (women vs. men) and comedy condition (sexist vs. non-sexist). error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

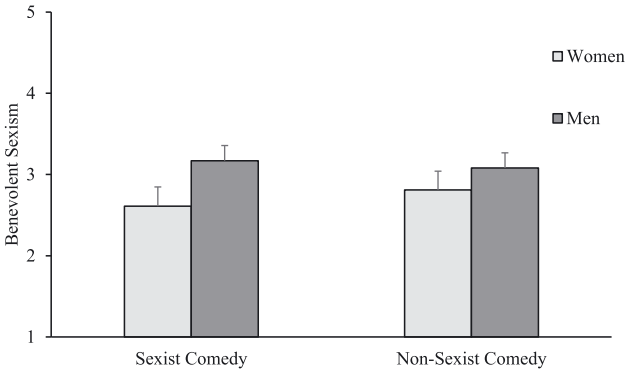

Figure 2: Participants' benevolent sexism based on gender (women vs. men) and comedy condition (sexist vs. non-sexist). Error bars represent standard errors of the mean.

Additionally, as preregistered, we explored a potential interaction between gender and comedy condition on benevolent sexism (see Figure 2). A 2 × 2 ANOVA with benevolent sexism as the dependent variable showed a main effect of gender, F (1,380) = 8.95, p = 0.003, η^2 = 0.023, but no main effect of comedy condition, F (1,380) = 0.18, p = 0.676, η^2 < 0.001, and no interaction effect, F (1,380) = 1.02, p = 0.312, η^2 = 0.003. Men endorsed benevolent sexism more than women, regardless of the comedy condition. In the online supplement (Supplement 5: Exploratory analyses on benevolent sexism), we report exploratory analyses, including the three subfactors of benevolent sexism, namely protective paternalism, complementary gender differentiation, and heterosexual intimacy.

5 Discussion

To extend knowledge on potential psychological effects of sexist jokes, we scrutinized sexism in comedy under the lens of social identity threat regarding women's leadership aspirations. Additionally, we examined whether sexist comedy has a prejudice releasing function, as prejudice norm theory suggests. This experiment adds to prior research on the impact of stereotyping and devaluing media content. The study profits from an experimental design and bears high external validity due to using real comedy as stimulus material. The pilot study ensured the use of highly controlled stimulus material, which was rated comparably funny and inappropriate, yet different regarding sexist content.

5.1 Threat effects of sexist comedy

Our findings support the assumption that sexism in comedy is perceived differently by women and men and may potentially harm those who are made fun of. The results showed that after watching sexist comedy, women reported lower interest in pursuing a leadership role in a fictitious scenario than men, whereas no gender difference was found after watching non-sexist comedy. It might seem astonishing that women's interest in taking a leadership role may be influenced by a very short video. Even if we only found a small effect immediately after exposure, we argue that being confronted with sexist attitudes in comedy reinforces what women tend to hear and experience in many situations throughout their life. Therefore, sexist comedy is not "just a joke" – it is a reminder for women that they are often objectified, stereotyped, and viewed as inferior to men, and thus, activates associated feelings and thoughts. This study shows that – due to threat effects – sexist humor may not only lower cognitive performance (as shown by Weber et al. 2023) but may also spill over to women's willingness to take a role in a domain which is considered stereotypically male, that is, leadership. This finding also relates to other research, for instance on backlash effects, showing that gender threat can lead to higher levels of gender conformity, and thus, to women not pursuing male-dominated careers or sports (Rudman and Fairchild 2004). Future studies should include a more differentiated operationalization of leadership aspirations, to assess different facets of the construct.

Theory and research around stereotype threat and social identity threat have been challenged by null results and the prerequisite of certain boundary conditions for threat effects (e.g., Flore and Wicherts 2015). With a small effect size, the current research adds to the notion that threat effects may be difficult to replicate, especially in non-lab settings (Shewach et al. 2019). As effects may be rather small, large-enough samples are necessary for stable effects, and replications are required. In particular, more research is needed to address (potentially detrimental) effects of sexism in comedy on its audiences. For example, the comedian's gender likely plays a role in the interpretation and consequences of misogynistic jokes, as they may be perceived differently depending on whether an ingroup or an outgroup member tells them (Parrott and Hopp 2020; Romero-Sánchez et al. 2017). It is important to note that our data indicated that the judgments of the comedian himself also correlated with judgments of inappropriateness and sexism. The production of jokes and the perception of humor never exist in a vacuum. Therefore, other variables besides belonging to the in-versus outgroup such as liking or trust may play a relevant role regarding effects of disparaging humor.

There may also be differential effects based on joke content. The sexist jokes in the current study were rather harsh, including, for instance, a rape joke. Women in

leadership roles (e.g., in politics) often face rape threats and other forms of harassment. Thus, the found threat effect on leadership aspirations may be specifically connected to the joke's content; other research showed that watching comedy which described women as naïve and only interested in shopping (i.e., the 'dumb blonde'-stereotype) resulted in decreased cognitive performance among women (Weber et al. 2023). In sum, the effects found in this study should be replicated across different (cultural) contexts, with different comedians, and various types of jokes.

5.2 The role of benevolent sexism: predictor or outcome?

Previous research looking at sexist attitudes as a predictor showed that men and women who were high in hostile sexism appreciated sexist jokes more than people low in hostile sexism (e.g., Eyssel and Bohner 2007; Ford 2000; Greenwood and Isbell 2002; LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998; Thomas and Esses 2004). Regarding benevolent sexism, previous findings diverged based on recipients' gender. Men who scored high on benevolent sexism appreciated sexist jokes more than those low on benevolent sexism (e.g., Eyssel and Bohner 2007; Greenwood and Isbell 2002). The contrary was true for women: those high on benevolent sexism found sexist humor less amusing than those low on benevolent sexism (Greenwood and Isbell 2002) and even expressed more disgust in response to sexist jokes (LaFrance and Woodzicka 1998).

Our focus on benevolent sexism as an outcome variable instead of an individual difference variable constitutes a relatively new approach recently encouraged (Bareket and Fiske 2023); comparable previous studies suggested that watching sitcoms that contain sexist (vs. non-sexist) humor increased recipients' endorsement of both hostile and benevolent sexism (Wright et al. 2018). This effect did not emerge in our study. Whereas men typically score higher than women in hostile sexism, gender differences in benevolent sexism have often been non-significant (Glick and Fiske 2001). In our study, men endorsed benevolent sexism more than women, though there was no significant interaction.

Since the construct was introduced, the context for ambivalent sexism in society has shifted. This may lead to different ramifications for hostile and benevolent sexism, as outlined by Barreto and Doyle (2023) – yet there is still a lack of research looking at the expression, perception, and consequences of different forms of sexism in the changing and global context. Therefore, despite the null finding regarding the impact of sexist comedy on benevolent sexism, this study contributes to looking at the bigger picture. Given the hostility of the rape-related humor in the sexist condition, including hostile sexism as an outcome variable might have yielded findings in support of prejudiced norm theory. We encourage future research to include both

hostile and benevolent sexism. In sum, our findings should neither be interpreted as strong evidence for nor against prejudiced norm theory.

5.3 Limitations and future research perspectives

We were interested in testing whether sexist (as compared to non-sexist) comedy negatively affects women's counter-stereotypical aspirations. Other research may answer questions such as, does adding humor to sexist statements lead to less severe consequences as compared to no humor? To examine whether humor can mitigate the effect of sexist content, a direct comparison of statements with identical content, but either including humor or not (e.g., sexist joke vs. sexist statement) would be required. However, as the primary research question in this study aimed at whether sexist comedy can impair women's leadership aspirations, the two chosen experimental conditions appear sufficient.

A potential limitation of our study is that participating in a research study may have heightened people's awareness of gender stereotypes and sexism in the presented comedy, which in turn could have affected how participants expressed sexist attitudes or reacted to the induced identity threat (e.g., Kray et al. 2001; Wright et al. 2018). Similarly, the assessment situation may have influenced participants' open consent to sexist attitudes. Even though we measured benevolent sexism, which is generally regarded the more acceptable component of sexism (Glick and Fiske 2001), we cannot rule out social desirability effects. Future studies should control for potential influences of internalized (e.g., socio-cultural) and external (i.e., situational) social norms, which is difficult to do in online studies (see below). Further, other variables such as participants' general awareness of stereotypes (e.g., Gibson et al. 2014), as well as their nationality, cultural background, or political attitudes may have influenced the results and should be addressed in future research. As we used an English speaking MTurk sample, the participants in this study may have come from various countries, which we did not control for. Generally, limitations regarding the use of online samples apply, in particular with respect to the MTurk platform (Aguinis et al. 2021; Rivera et al. 2022), as data quality might be lower compared to other samples (Douglas et al. 2023). We tried to secure data quality with the help of several preregistered measures to identify careless responders who were excluded from the final sample. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that data quality, representativeness, and reliability in online studies can be lower compared to traditional data collection methods. Also, our study did not include an explicit measure of experienced threat because prior theory and research suggest that negative effects of social identity threat on aspirations and behaviors are not always accompanied by conscious threat awareness (Major et al. 2014; Schmader et al. 2008).

Arguably, watching comedy in an experiment constitutes a rather artificial situation. Thus, matching recipients' natural viewing situation may be relevant to assess real world consequences. Comedy shows are usually longer media formats; therefore, the length of the comedy clips in the current study (about 1 min) may not have been sufficient for stronger effects to occur. However, with the recent rise of (misogynistic) short-format videos on TikTok and YouTube (e.g., Das 2022), these stimuli represent a realistic scenario that social media users may often encounter.

Additionally, our study only examined short-term rather than long-term effects. More research is needed to explore the potentially reciprocal relationship between sexism in comedy and recipients' sexist attitudes, especially taking a long-term perspective, for instance under the lens of cultivation processes (e.g., Hermann et al. 2021; Morgan and Shanahan 2010). As indicated by the obtained positive association between benevolent sexism and perceived funniness in the sexist comedy condition, people with more sexist attitudes may experience sexist comedy as funnier, and thus, potentially watch it more frequently. At the same time, watching sexist comedy may increase sexist attitudes over time, particularly among those who consider it funny. Frequent exposure to sexism in comedy may yield stronger effects than a single exposure as examined in the current experiment. Further, research should consider the possibility of reinforcing spirals (Slater 2015) between sexist attitudes and sexism in comedy: While higher levels of sexist attitudes increase people's appreciation of sexist jokes against women, frequently watching sexist comedy may also increase sexist attitudes. We encourage future research to explore such reciprocal effects, potentially making use of longitudinal designs.

6 Conclusions

Sexism in comedy is a common strategy to entertain large crowds – but it may affect female and male recipients in different ways. This research contributes to the ongoing public debate about sexism in comedy, as it addresses its broader social consequences. Yet, more research is needed to shed light on processes and underlying mechanisms of social identity threat effects of entertainment media – a field with interesting and important research questions to answer. In the light of present anti-science trends in society, there is a particular need for researchers to investigate phenomena which polarize, and to clearly communicate their findings to spark both academic and public discourse. This includes finding ways to address the various forms of sexism in society, as also argued and demonstrated by other researchers (see Barreto and Doyle 2023; Saucier et al. 2020). This research adds to the notion that sexism in comedy may be more than 'just a joke,' at least for the targets of this form of humor.

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