

Society's Perceptions: Traditional Versus Modern Masculinity and Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between traditional and new masculinity traits and the perceived likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment. With shifting gender norms and the rise of new masculinity, understanding how these changes influence societal perceptions is important, as society's values might influence what traits are uptaken by men (Iacoviello, 2022). We hypothesized that men with new masculine traits would be perceived as less likely to engage in sexual harassment compared to traditionally masculine men and the control condition. To further elaborate and interpret results, the precarious manhood theory (Vandello et al., 2008), which proposes that masculinity must be continually validated, was used. The study involved 315 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.1$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13$) from the United Kingdom, randomly assigned to assess a fictional profile containing traditional, new, or no specified masculinity traits (control). Results from a one-way ANOVA indicated that new masculine men were perceived as significantly less likely to engage in sexual harassment than traditional masculine men and the control group. The control group had a slightly higher perceived chance to engage in sexual harassment, although this finding was non-significant. These findings highlight the positive societal perception of new masculinity and give indications of how society perceives men in general. Future research should explore the complexity of masculinity to provide a more comprehensive understanding, as the dynamics of masculinity are complex.

Keywords: new masculinity, traditional masculinity, sexual harassment, societal perceptions

Society's Perceptions: Traditional Versus Modern Masculinity and Sexual Harassment

As the conception of masculinity has been changing throughout the years, some argue that traditional gender norms seem to die out (Wade, 2015). Feminist movements have raised awareness for the importance of equality between men and women, which challenged the long-established, conservative views of gender (Bohan, 1993). As women's working hours have been rising, a new shift in family dynamics has been required and mothers and fathers have started to take on similar roles in family life (Oláh et al., 2021). Following this, men were forced to adapt to new social needs and norms. This "crisis of traditional masculinity" has started to set the standard for new, modern masculinity traits (Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). As these new standards have been developing, a significant interest in new masculinity and what it means to be a man in the twenty-first century has been rising (Connor et al., 2021).

The effects of the uptake of these 'new' masculinity traits are starting to reveal themselves in society, and literature is showing a significant interest in this development as well (Philips, 2006). Amongst the societal issues frequently associated with traditional masculinity, lies sexual harassment (Malonda et al., 2023). With over half (55%) of all European women having experienced sexual violence (FRA, 2023), sexual harassment remains an important issue to address. This study aims to assess the effects of the uptake of new masculinity traits through society's perceptions of the perceived likelihood of engagement in unwanted sexual behavior. This will be conducted by comparing both traditional and new masculine men, as well as a control condition. To further elaborate and interpret results, the 'precarious manhood theory', as proposed by Vandello et al. (2008), will be used.

Masculinities: Traditional versus New

The concept of masculinity itself can be described as a social construct that entails “the social roles, behaviors, and meanings prescribed for men in any given society at any one time” (Kimmel, 2000). When speaking about ‘masculinity’, someone generally refers to traditional masculine norms, and this form of masculinity is mostly considered the one ‘widely spread’ and acknowledged form of masculinity (Pleck et al., 1993). Being ‘masculine’ is considered a way to signify and validate maleness, and is usually culturally defined as being non-feminine (Whitehead, 2001). This ‘manhood’ is not a stable social status, as suggested by the ‘precarious manhood theory’ (Vandello et al., 2008). This theory proposes that ‘masculinity’ or ‘manhood’ must continually be earned and validated through behavior that adheres to traditional masculine norms. When men feel like their masculinity is threatened, they may resort to behaviors to reclaim and prove their masculinity, such as dominance, aggression, or sexual harassment (Vandello et al., 2008).

Conceptualization of Traditional Masculinity

Traditional masculinity is considered to be hegemonic (Bohan, 1993). This hegemony is characterized by the traditional masculine man being dominant over women, but also other, non-masculine men (Bohan, 1993). For the conceptualization of traditional masculinity in terms of personality traits, different characteristics have been used throughout studies, with each study emphasizing different features. To give an illustration, personal attributes such as aggression, social dominance, lack of empathy, self-assurance and toughness have been used to give an impression of what is thought to be ‘the traditional masculine man’ (Parent et al, 2019). Although these attributes tend to vary widely, one component that seems to be quite universal is the anti-feminine aspect of traditional masculinity, and the avoidance of being perceived as such (Kimmel, 2001). This is interesting, as new masculinity is

characterized by the rejection of these ‘masculine’ aspects, and the uptake of more feminine-like features (Elliot, 2015).

Conceptualization of New Masculinity

The rejection of traditional norms does, however, not directly tell what specific characteristics are adopted instead (Kaplan et al., 2016), and this conceptualization of new masculinity differs across literature as well. The new masculine man is described as possessing more positively perceived, gentler and less dominant traits (Segal, 1993). Different terms have been used to describe both the concept of new masculinity itself (e.g. caring masculinity; Elliot, 2015, non-traditional masculinity; Kaplan et al., 2017, new masculinity; Offer & Kaplan, 2021, contemporary masculinity; Connor et al., 2021) and the specific personality traits used to conceptualize the matter. Traits such as rejection of male domination, interdependence, compassion, sensitivity and care for others have been associated with new masculinity (Elliot, 2015). Caring and compassionate characteristics have always been associated with femininity (Hanlon, 2012). Femininity has generally been seen as some sort of ‘threat’ to ‘real manhood’, as taking up these characteristics could signify similarity and equality between men and women, endangering the dominant position of the male sex (Segal, 1993). It is also essentially the rejection of traditional things that ‘make men, men’. Even though the perception of new masculinity as a threat is still present in modern-day society, new masculinity is becoming more conventional, is widely accepted, and even promoted (Elliot, 2015).

Society and Masculinity

In early masculinity research, the focus has primarily been on gender differences, gender inequality and gender roles. Slowly there has been, as mentioned, a change in perception of masculinity. Research has adapted to this shift, focussing on the rise of new masculinity, but

especially the inter-individual differences in uptake and support of these new norms (Iacoviello et al., 2022). Only focussing on this one-sided view of new masculinity overlooks an important matter; society's perception of this development.

As masculinity can be seen as a social construct, perception of 'being masculine' and 'masculine behavior', but also what is thought of (new) masculinity, varies throughout different times and cultures. Thus, masculinity is, as previously mentioned, not stable. It must constantly be earned, evaluated and validated (Vandello et al., 2008). Therefore, research is of great importance, as social validation will determine if men decide to take on new masculinity norms or not; men tend to take on the characteristics they think are valued most by society (Iacoviello, 2022).

Masculinities and Sexual Harassment

It could be beneficial for men to move away from traditional norms and take on more new masculinity traits, considering the behaviors associated with both forms of masculinity. New masculine characteristics are associated with positive and supportive behavior, and the rejection of gender inequality (Elliot, 2016). On the contrary, possessing traditional masculinity norms is correlated with negative behaviors and opinions such as aggression, violence and sexism (Malonda et al., 2023).

One of the specific negative behaviors associated with traditional masculinity is, as noted previously, sexual harassment (Malonda et al., 2023). Sexual harassment can be defined as the utilization of unwelcome implicit or explicit sexual overtones, in the form of physical, verbal, or non-verbal behavior or remarks (Paludi & Brickman, 1991). Whilst it is important to address that both men and women can be a victim of sexual harassment, the prevalence for women is significantly higher than for men (Smith et al., 2018; Kearl, 2018). In most cases of sexual

harassment, the perpetrator is male; statistics vary from around 80% of workplace sexual harassment perpetrators (Goa & Li, 2021), to nearly 99% of rape perpetrators (U.S. Dept of Justice, 2002). Sexual harassment, as explained before by the ‘precarious manhood theory’ (Vandello et al., 2008), does not primarily indicate an expression of sexual desire. It is also used to ‘fit in’ with a peer group, or to consciously or unconsciously coerce dominance, power and/or control over the victim (Vandello et al., 2008). However, the behavior that is felt or seen as sexual harassment can vary from person to person; it has been found that some traditionally masculine men do not perceive certain problematic behaviors as sexual harassment, while victims do experience them as such (Rizzo et al., 2021).

Although sexual harassment claims have been slowly declining over the years, it remains an ongoing societal issue (Quick & McFadyen, 2017), and prevalence continues at an unacceptably high level (FRA, 2023). Being a victim of sexual harassment can have significant consequences, with damage varying from (minor) violence-related injuries to permanent (psychological) damage (Gutek & Kos, 1993). This makes it an important issue to address.

This study therefore aims to examine the relationship between the perceived likelihood of men engaging in sexual harassment, and traditional and new masculinity, as well as the ‘average’ man (control group). We hypothesized that men who are considered ‘new masculine’ are perceived as less likely to engage in sexual harassment, while traditionally masculine men and men in the control condition are perceived as more likely to engage in this behavior.

Methodology

This study (PSY-2324-S-0306) has been approved by the Ethics Committee of Psychology of the University of Groningen.

Participants

Participants were reached through the online research platform Prolific. The complete questionnaire was administered through Qualtrics. Our simple random sample consisted of 317 people from the United Kingdom, which was composed using convenient sampling. The sample size was based on the power calculation. Out of the participants 317 were female and one participant identified themselves as *other*. All participants were heterosexual. Data from the other-identifying participant was removed, as we were aiming for an all-female sample. One other participant's data was removed, as they did not report their age to be over 18. This left us with a sample of 315 participants. The ages of these participants varied from 20 to 78, with a mean age of 42.1 (SD = 13).

Procedure

We performed an experimental study using a between-subjects design, with the use of an online questionnaire, which participants could fill in wherever they were. Initially, participants were informed about the structure of the study, which information would be asked of them and data processing procedures. They were, however, not told about the specific hypotheses or goals of the study. Participants could then consent to both participation in the study and processing of their data. Participation was at all times voluntary and quitting was permitted at any moment. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions in which they could see one of the masculinity profiles: a) traditional masculine profile; b) new masculine profile; and c) control condition. A control question was used to determine how masculine the participants perceived the man in their experimental condition to be. Participants were presented with the description of a fictional man, William Burton (WB). This description included level of education, profession and race (caucasian), and remained constant across all three conditions. The conditions differed in mentioning either

traditional masculinity traits (i.e. stoic, insisting on one's views, competitive, and independent.) or new masculinity traits (i.e. sensitive, valuing the opinions of others, supportive, and collaborative). In the control condition, participants were not presented with any traits. Full descriptions can be found in Appendix A. Based on this description, our participants were asked how likely they perceived WB to engage in sexual harassment, work fraud, emotional expression, intimate partner violence, fatherhood, support of gender equality and solidarity with disadvantaged groups. Since this is a bachelor thesis, participants read and responded to all scenarios. However, this paper will focus on the sexual harassment scenario only. All questions utilized a 7-point Likert-scale. Finally, participants were asked questions on demographics. This included gender and age, as well as ProlificID. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed about the purpose of the study and thanked for their participation.

Measurements

Manipulation check

To check if the traits used to describe traditional and new masculinity corresponded with the expected image, participants were asked a control question: “How masculine do you think this man is?” (1 = *extremely unmasculine*, 7 = *extremely masculine*), ($F(2, 307) = 4.50$, $p = .012$). They were also asked to what extent they would like to be friends, colleagues or neighbors with WB and how competent or warm they perceived him to be in comparison to the average man.

Sexual Harassment

To measure the perceptions of our participants on masculinity and sexual harassment, a scenario describing sexual harassment was given. To measure the perception of how likely

WB is to engage in this scenario, the following item was used: “To what extent do you think that this sexual harassment defendant is William Burton?” (1 = *extremely unlikely*, 2 = *extremely likely*), $\alpha = 0.111$.

Results

Descriptives

Of the 317 participants in our study, one was removed as they did not report to be over the age of eighteen, and one was removed as they reported not identifying as female. This left us with a sample of 315 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 42.1$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 13$), with $N = 100$ in the new masculine (NM) condition, $N = 105$ in the traditional masculine (TM) condition, and $N = 110$ in the control condition. Group descriptives can be found in Table B1 (see Appendix B).

Preliminary Analyses

To analyze the data, Jamovi was used. Using Shapiro-Wilk’s test, it was estimated that the assumption of normality was violated, $W = 0.956$, $p < .001$. This counted for the violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances, as estimated by Levene’s test as well, $F(2,312) = 5.76$, $p = .003$. However, as our sample was of reasonable size ($N = 315$) and surpassed the threshold of 200, this discrepancy could be neglected. A large sample allowed us to expect that the distribution of residuals approximated normality. As the assumption of homoscedasticity was violated, we used Welch’s ANOVA test.

A manipulation check indicated that the intended perceived masculinity level was congruent with the actual perceived level of masculinity, $F(2,202) = 16.6$, $p < .001$.

A correlational analysis indicated that there was no significant correlation between sexual harassment and masculinity level, $r(307) = .060$, $p = 0.296$. Results can be found in Table 2 (see Appendix B).

Likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment

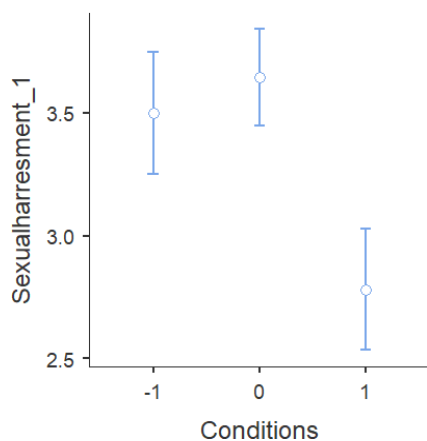
To analyze the effects of traditional and new masculinity on the perceived likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment, and as the assumption of equality of variances was not met, a Welch's ANOVA analysis was conducted. Results indicated a significant difference between men who endorsed either new or traditional masculinity values, and the control condition, $F(2, 204) = 15.5, p < .001$.

To explore pairwise differences between groups, post-hoc tests were conducted using a Games-Howell post-hoc test, as results did not indicate equal variances. Results indicated that the perceived likelihood of engagement in sexual harassment was higher in the TM condition ($M = 3.5, SD = 1.24$) compared to the NM condition ($M = 2.78, SD = 1.28$) with mean differences 0.719, $p < .001$. The male target in the control condition ($M = 3.65, SD = 1.05$) was perceived as more likely to engage in sexual harassment than the new masculine target, with mean differences -0.865, $p < 0.001$. There were no significant differences between the male target in traditional and control conditions, with mean differences -0.145, $p = 0.633$. A histogram of the marginal means can be found in Figure 1, a QQ-plot can be found in Figure 2 and the results can be found in Table B3 (see Appendix B).

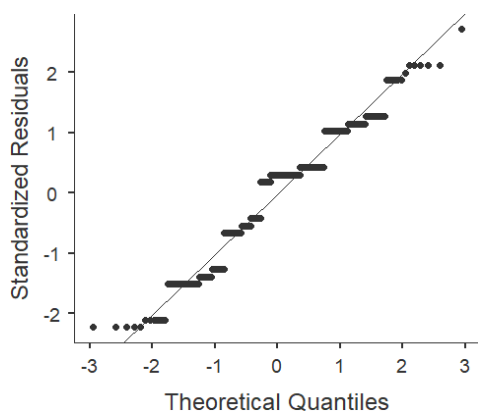
These results indicate that we can reject the null hypothesis, and we can conclude that there is a difference in the perceived likelihood of engagement in sexual harassment between traditional masculinity and new masculinity.

Figure 1

Marginal Means for Perceived Likelihood of Engaging in Sexual Harassment

**Figure 2**

Residuals - QQ plot



Discussion

The current study aimed to explore the relationship between traditional and new masculinity traits and the perceived likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment. We hypothesized that men who possess new masculinity traits would be perceived as less likely to engage in sexual harassment, while men who embody traditional masculinity traits and the

control condition would be perceived as more likely to engage in this behavior. The results indicated a significant difference in this perceived likelihood across the different masculinity profiles; findings provided evidence supporting our hypothesis. Men possessing traditional traits and the control condition were perceived as more likely to engage in sexual harassment, while men possessing new masculine traits were perceived as less likely to engage in this behavior.

These results support existing literature that associates new masculinity with more positive behaviors (Elliot, 2015; Iacoviello et al., 2022), and traditional masculinity with negative ones (Malonda et al., 2023). Positive behaviors such as sensitivity, supportiveness, collaboration and valuing others' opinions promote respect and equality in interactions, which could explain the perception of new masculine men to be more respectful towards women and less likely to engage in behaviors that violate personal boundaries (Elliot, 2015; Iacoviello et al. 2022). In contrast, negative behaviors such as aggression, violence and sexism could be associated with the disregard of consent and autonomy of others, which could make traditional masculine men perceived as more likely to engage in sexual harassment (Malonda et al., 2023). Recalling the precarious manhood theory (Vandello et al., 2008), this behavior might be explained by the need to constantly prove and reclaim masculinity, especially when it is threatened.

A surprising result was the perceived likelihood of the control condition (description of a man without any masculine traits) to engage in sexual harassment. Although this result was not significant, it was found that the perceived likelihood of what is considered to be an 'average' man to engage in unwanted sexual advances was slightly higher than the perceived likelihood of the traditional masculine man to engage in this behavior. This might be explained

by possible societal stereotypes associated with the ‘average’ man. As stated before, when speaking about ‘masculinity’, someone generally refers to ‘traditional masculine’ norms. These norms are seen as the standard and remain widely recognized and ingrained in society (Pleck et al., 1993). The absence of any traits might have defaulted participants’ perceptions to the societal stereotypes of masculinity, which could have influenced their response in the direction of traditional norms.

Another explanation could be the way society, or in this case, women, perceive men in general. Women’s personal experiences with sexism, sexual harassment or male dominance (this could also include extensive media coverage on sexual harassment as, for example, the #MeToo movement) might make them more cautious or distrusting (Kearl, 2018). So to say, ‘every man could be a perpetrator’. Then, not necessarily the traits a man possesses would explain the likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment, but more the fact that ‘the man is a man’.

This would also explain why the control condition is perceived to be more likely to engage in sexual harassment than the new masculine man. As the average man is most likely seen as more ‘traditionally’ masculine than ‘new’ masculine, its associated behaviors might align with more traditional masculine norms as well, resulting in the perception of the control condition as more likely to engage in negative behavior, in comparison to the new masculine condition.

Limitations & Future Studies

Several limitations should be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample consisted of exclusively female participants. This could have introduced gender bias, which makes it difficult to generalize the results to the population, as men and women might have different

perceptions regarding sexual harassment. Reasons for this could be different ways men and women are exposed to and engage in sexual harassment; with men mostly being the perpetrator and women the victim (U.S. Dept of Justice, 2002; Goa & Li, 2021). This division of experiences could influence the way women respond to the likelihood of the male target engaging in sexual harassment, but it also gives possible new insights for future research. It is important that not only the female perspective is analyzed, but also the male perspective, to give a complete picture of society. Especially as traditional masculinity is generally seen as a way to 'fit in' with other men (Vandello et al., 2008). Opinions of other men could then shape the way men behave regarding their masculinity. This also counts for the sexuality of participants. As we only used heterosexual women, this could have influenced the perception of masculinity as well. It would be interesting to see how, for example, lesbian women or homosexual men perceive different masculinities.

Another limitation is the cultural generalizability of the sample, as it consisted of participants exclusively from the United Kingdom. Norms and values, but also the prevalence of masculinity and sexual harassment can vary significantly across different regions and societies (Luthar & Luthar, 2007). This may affect the applicability of the results in a broader, more global context. It would therefore be important to conduct future research in other countries and societies as well.

An additional limitation is the generalizability of masculinity as a construct. Theories regarding masculinity are mostly based on men who are members of the dominant (white and western) culture. Men who are not members of this dominant culture, such as black men, are often less able to perform traditional masculine characteristics due to possible negative consequences (Bush & Bush, 2018). Their engagement in different masculinities could be far

more complex, as they are generally still seen as more threatening when they perform behaviors that symbolize power or strength (Hester & Gray, 2018). As a result of this, the use of a caucasian man in our scenarios could have influenced perceived masculinity and engagement in certain behaviors. It is therefore important to conduct future research on the racial and cultural differences in the perception of and engagement in masculinity as well.

Although the precarious manhood theory provides sufficient explanation as to why men could engage in certain negative behaviors and with that why society could perceive them to do so, its use in this study also has some limitations. It does not explain why some traditional masculine men whose masculinity is threatened do not engage in negative behaviors and also lacks explanation for non-traditional masculine men who do engage in negative behaviors. It looks at only one aspect of the threat to masculinity, and essentially blames society (and with that its expectations) for men's bad behavior, which is an explanation that overlooks potential other underlying factors. This further emphasizes the complexity of masculinity as a whole and raises questions about possible other influences that impact the establishment of different masculinity 'profiles' and their associated (both perceived and actual) behavior. This applicability and other explanations of associated and actual behaviors could therefore be an additional interest of future research.

The complexity of masculinity and corresponding situations could also influence responses on other levels; the descriptions of traditional and new masculinity traits provided in the experimental conditions may not comprehensively capture the complexity and nuances of masculinity as a construct. Participants' interpretations of the traits could vary, potentially influencing their responses. Additionally, the use of hypothetical scenarios to assess perceptions of sexual harassment may not fully capture the complexities and dynamics of

real-life situations. Participants' responses to scenarios might differ from their reactions in actual encounters with sexual harassment. Further research should therefore include different scenarios or different experimental designs to capture a broader range of and deeper insight in responses.

Implications

Our results have important implications for the prevention of sexual harassment. Society's opinions on masculinity and its norms may decide what masculinity traits are adopted and valued by men (Iacoviello, 2022). If society values new masculinity traits over traditional ones, and this becomes 'the norm', men's pursuit of traditional masculinity could decline. Presuming that, as described by the 'precarious manhood theory' (Vandello et al., 2008), negative behaviors such as sexual harassment or aggression could be explained by the need to reclaim and prove traditional masculinity, these negative behaviors might decrease when traditional masculine norms do not have to be met. Following this, it may be possible that by changing society's values of masculinity, an important first step in the prevention of sexual harassment could be made.

This theory provides a reason to promote the uptake of new masculinity traits. This starts with analyzing the way society values masculinity at this moment, which is what was conducted in this study. By subsequently making society aware of their values and stereotypes surrounding masculinity, important steps to reduce the expectations around traditional masculinity, and to promote the uptake of new masculinity traits could be taken. In the form of intervention or awareness programs for both men on a personal level and society as a whole, awareness about traditional masculinity and its potential risk behaviors could be made. It would be essential to assure and convince men that it is not necessary to

conform to traditional masculine norms, that the uptake of new masculinity is acceptable and could even be of great importance.

Conclusion

The findings of this study emphasize the influence of societal perceptions of masculinity on the perceived likelihood of engaging in sexual harassment. Our results provide evidence for the positive perception of new masculinity, in comparison to the negative perception of traditional masculinity, as traditional masculine men were seen as more likely to engage in sexual harassment. As societal perceptions influence what traits are uptaken by men (Iacoviello, 2022), the promotion of new masculinity within society could encourage men to implement new masculinity traits. With the uptake of new masculine traits instead of traditional ones, as supported by the precarious manhood theory, behavior to prove and reclaim masculinity (e.g. sexual harassment), might be preventable. However, it is important to further explore the dynamics of masculinity and its implications in future research, since these are very complex. Based on the findings, successful intervention strategies and awareness campaigns could eventually be constructed to create a fairer, safer and more equal society.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire Scenarios

Traditional Masculine Condition

William Burton is a senior manager at LMS, a finance company in London, United Kingdom. He is originally from Manchester, where he lives with his girlfriend. William is 38, has an Associate Degree in Finance, and is Caucasian. *He is described as stoic, insisting on his views, competitive, and independent.*

Control Condition

William Burton is a senior manager at LMS, a finance company in London, United Kingdom. He is originally from Manchester, where he lives with his girlfriend. William is 38, has an Associate Degree in Finance, and is Caucasian.

New Masculine Condition

William Burton is a senior manager at LMS, a finance company in London, United Kingdom. He is originally from Manchester, where he lives with his girlfriend. William is 38, has an Associate Degree in Finance, and is Caucasian. *He is described as sensitive, valuing the opinions of others, supportive, and collaborative.*

Appendix B

Tables

Table B1

Descriptives

	Conditions	N	Mean	SD
Sexualharrasment	TM	100	3.50	1.24
	Control	110	3.65	1.05
	NM	105	2.78	1.28

Table B2

Correlational matrix

	Sexual harassment	masculinity level
Sexual harassment	—	
Masculinity level	0.060	—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table B3

Game-Howell Post-Hoc Test - Sexual harassment

		TM	Control	NM
TM	Mean difference	—	-0.145	0.719 ***
Control	Mean difference		—	0.865 ***
NM	Mean difference			—

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$