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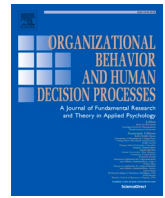
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## Who do they think they are?: A social-cognitive account of gender differences in social sexual identity and behavior at work

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### ABSTRACT

To understand who initiates social sexual behavior (SSB) at work, we examine the strength of individuals' *social sexual identity* (SSI), a self-definition as a person who leverages sex appeal in pursuit of personally valued gains. Using a social-cognitive framework that explores the intersection of personality, motivation, and situations, six studies ( $N = 2,598$ ) establish that SSI strength is a novel predictor of SSB, including sexual harassment, and SSI strength mediates gender differences in SSB tendencies. We find that men's (but not women's) propensity to initiate SSB increases when pursuing self-enhancement goals (e.g., a powerful image), and these gender differences are mediated by momentary SSI strength. By contrast, the adoption of self-transcendence (e.g., affiliation) goals mitigates gender differences in SSB. Together, these findings illustrate the central role of the self-concept in explaining *why* and *when* gender differences emerge in patterns of SSB.

### 1. Introduction

*"At work sometimes I think I am being playful and make jokes that I think are funny. I do, on occasion, tease people in what I think is a good-natured way...I have teased people about their personal lives, their relationships, about getting married or not getting married. I mean no offense and only attempt to add some levity and banter to what is a very serious business...I acknowledge some of the things I have said have been misinterpreted as an unwanted flirtation."*

Statement from Governor [Andrew M. Cuomo, February 28, 2021](#)

*"If you want to understand behavior, follow the self. It takes an amazing variety of forms. The answer to the question "Who am I?" grounds attention, thinking, feeling, motivation, and action."*

Dr. Hazel [Markus, 2022](#), Legacy Award Address, Society for Personality and Social Psychology

The #MeToo movement launched in 2017 brought to light the pervasiveness of sexual harassment. In a cultural paradigm shift, women spoke out and their stories took center stage, while the men being accused largely remained silent. As each horrific story emerged, it was difficult not to wonder, "What was he thinking?" Recently, this dynamic changed when we heard directly from former Governor Cuomo

following accusations of unwanted sexual advances (e.g., asking his staffer "questions about her sex life, such as whether she was monogamous in her relationships and if she had ever had sex with older men"; [McKinley & Rubinstein, 2021](#), March 1). While sexual harassment is often attributed to tendencies to abuse power, to commit ethical lapses, or even to have a strong sex-drive, Cuomo's press release offers a different explanation: he thinks of himself as a flirt who just wanted to lighten workplace stress by injecting sexual banter. The disconnect between the former governor's stated self-perception and how others experienced his actions illustrates how sexual behavior in work settings is a complex social phenomenon that runs the risk of being experienced as sexual harassment by its targets ([Aquino et al., 2014](#); [Berdahl & Aquino, 2009](#); [Sheppard et al., 2020](#)).

Drawing from twenty-five years of influential research citing self-conceptions as important for regulating behavior ([Banaji & Prentice, 1994](#); [Markus & Wurf, 1987](#); [Markus, 2022](#)), we propose a novel explanation for why and when men sexually harass others more than women do. To explore the subjective phenomenology of flirts, we introduce the concept of a *social sexual identity* (SSI), which involves self-defining as a person who leverages sex appeal in pursuit of personally valued gains. We suggest that self-perceptions of SSI are important for understanding what potential harassers think they are doing and how

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they justify their problematic behavior to themselves. In doing so, we shed light on chronic gender differences in *social sexual behavior* (SSB) tendencies, including both those that may be enjoyed by recipients and those considered sexual harassment behavior (SHB). Sexual harassment is a subset of SSB, a value-neutral umbrella term for a wide range of workplace behaviors that have a sexual component (e.g., harassment, flirting, sexual innuendo) and are not task-related (Aquino et al., 2014; Gutek et al., 1990; Rawski et al., in press; Sheppard et al., 2020). In the present research, we focus on the relation between personal identity and SSB tendencies. Recognizing that even SSB that is intended to be playful can be interpreted as sexual harassment, it is important to understand the shared antecedents and underlying mechanisms of a range of SSB to mitigate its harmful effects in the workplace.

To date, most research on SSB has focused on sexual harassment, its most pernicious yet least common form (Gutek et al., 1990). Research and theory aimed at understanding harassers has attempted to do so in at least three ways.<sup>1</sup> First, sexual harassment has been framed as an ethical issue (Bowes-Sperry & Powell, 1999; O’Leary-Kelly & Bowes-Sperry, 2001; Pierce et al., 2004; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019), suggesting that men who harass are especially prone to ethical lapses. Second, sexual harassment is understood as an outgrowth of gender socialization processes and a mechanism by which men maintain power and dominance over women (Bargh et al., 1995; Berdahl, 2007; MacKinnon, 1979; Pryor et al., 1993; Williams et al., 2017), suggesting that men for whom power and sex are cognitively linked are especially prone to harass. By this perspective, sexual harassment is designed to keep women in their subordinate position in the gender hierarchy. Third, sexual harassment has been explained in terms of sexual attraction (Buss & Schmitt, 1993; Diehl et al., 2018; Franke, 1997; Gutek, 1985; Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), proposing that harassers are seeking sex to satisfy their short-term mating goals. None of these explanations offers insight into the harasser’s self-perception when engaging in SSB (e.g., introducing sexual banter into workplace discussions).

We aim to extend knowledge by investigating how focal actors conceive of themselves. Some have suggested that men who harass do not see the inappropriateness of their behavior (Bargh et al., 1995; Fitzgerald, 1993; Rotundo et al., 2001), so examining self-perceptions (i.e., taking harassers at their word) may offer new insights into how to combat sexual harassment.<sup>2</sup> To begin to fill this gap, we propose an account of SSB that is rooted in the self, a psychological construct that is both stable and malleable across social contexts (Markus & Kunda, 1986). We are the first to our knowledge to examine how an aspect of personal identity, rather than group-based identity (cf. Maass et al., 2003), influences initiation of both enjoyed SSB (Sheppard et al., 2020) and problematic SHB (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018).

We also measure flirts’ self-concepts across situations that vary in social demands. Doing so allows us to explore whether the salience of SSI varies across social contexts, influencing whether gender differences emerge in SSB tendencies. Given that men and women are often more similar than different (Jaffee & Hyde, 2000; Tinsley & Ely, 2018) and gender differences are often contextual rather than constant (Kennedy et al., 2017), it is important to consider situational moderators that mitigate gender differences in SSI strength and SSB tendencies, including both potentially welcomed and unwelcomed forms. Because most of the prior work exploring characteristics of harassers has focused exclusively on men (cf. Bargh et al., 1995; Pryor et al., 1993), our understanding of when gender differences emerge for these characteristics

is extremely limited. By examining situational contexts that increase or decrease gender differences in SSI and a range of SSB varying in both frequency and severity, we aim to identify *when* and *why* especially problematic gender gaps are likely to occur.

### 1.1. Social sexual behavior through the lens of social cognition

Social cognition theories aim to understand social behavior by focusing on the underlying intrapsychic processes mediating individuals’ responses to their situations (Heider, 1958; James, 1890; Operario & Fiske, 1999). In contrast to trait-based approaches that focus on a stable set of dispositions that remain invariant across situations, dynamic process-based self-regulatory models acknowledge what individuals are like in broad dispositional terms while also focusing on the interaction of specific situations with the social-cognitive processing system of the individual (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Mischel & Shoda, 1998; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). For instance, moral identity is a social cognitive construct that helps to explain when and for whom moral reasoning translates into moral action (Aquino & Reed, 2002). Kennedy and colleagues (2017) determined that moral identity is an important aspect of identity that interacts with situations to “turn on” and “turn off” gender differences in unethical behavior. They found that gender interacted with a situational factor, the size of financial incentives to lie, leading men to engage in more unethical behavior than women when financial incentives were low but not high. This interactive pattern was explained in terms of women’s greater capacity to regulate their behavior when incentives to lie were low because of their stronger moral identity. However, when financial incentives to lie were high, women behaved similarly to men, indicating the situation had temporarily weakened the strength of their moral identity.

While common to many areas of research, applying an interactionist approach to investigating patterns of gendered behavior is sparse in the SHB literature. Some have called on researchers to investigate the link between sexuality and self-regulation (Vohs & Ciarocco, 2004), but to date, this literature has largely focused on individual difference moderators distinguishing men who are high versus low in the likelihood to engage in sexually coercive behavior when occupying supervisory roles (Bargh et al., 1995; Pryor et al., Williams et al., 2017). However, SHB is typically initiated by coworkers and other employees who do not supervise victims (Gutek et al., 1990; Gutek & Morasch, 1982; USMSPB, 1994). For instance, *contrapower harassment* occurs when targets possess more organizational power than the harasser (DeSouza & Fansler, 2003; McKinney, 1990; McLaughlin et al., 2012; Rospenda et al., 1998; Tian & Deng, 2017). This suggests that, to understand the mechanisms driving sexual harassment, it is necessary to expand focus beyond supervisors’ abuse of power.

By expanding our investigation to compare both men and women, rather than subsets of men, and exploring SHB tendencies that are not tied to formal power over victims, we aim to demonstrate the critical role that self-regulation can play in curbing a wide range of SSB, including its unwelcomed forms. We propose that the extent to which social sexual traits are a central aspect of the self-concept predicts SSB tendencies, and the interpersonal motives activated in specific situations increase or decrease the strength of SSI in the working self-concept, potentially influencing the tendency to initiate SSB. This causal chain suggests situational factors and motives may activate relevant self-concepts and definitions (i.e., internalization of traits into their self-definition) that can increase or decrease individuals’ propensity to initiate SSB.

Examinations of self-perceptions and identity, terms which are often used interchangeably (Oyserman, 2001; Oyserman, et al. 2017; Swann & Bosson, 2010), include awareness of personal characteristics, preferences, goals, and behavioral patterns (Howard, 2000). Self-concepts are organized in a hierarchical fashion, with some attributes more readily accessible than others (Markus & Kunda, 1986) and some attributes

<sup>1</sup> Research has examined the precursors of sexual harassment from three levels of analysis, including harasser-related, target-related, and organizational precursors (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 2009). This review focused on what is known about harasser-related characteristics, the focus of the present investigation.

<sup>2</sup> Few men will admit to “sexually bothering” someone at work (Pryor et al., 1995; USMSPB, 1981), suggesting more subtle measures are needed to capture what motivates sexual harassment.

deemed more important to achieve and affirm than others, thus motivating self-construction in a particular direction (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001; Steele, 1988). A central tenet of social cognitive theory is that people actively guide their own behavior based on both chronic self-perceptions and momentary fluctuations in self-perceptions. We propose that SSI is an important construct for understanding sexual goals, perceptions, and behaviors, and, more specifically, for explaining situational fluctuations in SSB that either enhance or mitigate gender gaps in this risky behavior.

To introduce the SSI construct, we build on prior theorizing that links the centrality of moral traits in individuals' self-definition to moral behavioral patterns (Aquino et al., 2009). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001) provides a framework for linking moral identity to moral outcomes (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Aquino et al., 2007; Detert et al., 2008; Reed & Aquino, 2003; Reed et al., 2007; Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007), and for our purposes, for linking SSI to SSB outcomes. We acknowledge three theoretical assumptions articulated in this body of research that also apply here. First, identity links to behavior through an individual's desire to maintain self-consistency (Blasi, 1980). Second, because only a subset of an individual's identities can be held in conscious awareness in any given moment in time (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Minsky, 1988), the strength of SSI differs between people and across situations. Third, the influence of SSI on behavior will depend on how accessible this aspect of identity is in specific situations (Skitka, 2003). Just like a strong moral identity compels the individual to act in a moral manner, SSI could increase the tendency to initiate SSB. Building on Aquino and Reed's (2002) theorizing about moral identity, we propose that individuals who see themselves as leveraging traits and characteristics associated with sex appeal (e.g., flirtatiousness, charm) will regard SSI as a more central aspect of their self-concepts, increasing the likelihood that they will initiate SSB. Based on social-cognitive principles (Bandura, 1999, 2001), considering both chronic differences in SSI and situational contexts in which SSI is momentarily activated or deactivated, we expect SSI to predict and explain SSB.

**Hypothesis 1.** *Internalization of social sexual identity predicts social sexual behavior.*

### 1.2. Gender differences in social sexual behavior

We propose that SSI can be a useful construct for exploring gendered patterns of SSB. Social-cognitive theory has articulated underlying mechanisms leading men and women to demonstrate different situation-behavior relations (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Mischel & Shoda, 1998). As described above, the moral identity construct helps to identify when and why gender differences in unethical behavior emerge in strategic interactions (Kennedy et al., 2017). Aquino and colleagues' articulation of the role that moral identity plays in moral behavior did not take gender into account (simply controlling for it in analyses). Kennedy and colleagues demonstrated that, consistent with sociocultural pressures for women to be communal (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), women hold moral identity as a more central aspect of their identities than men do, and consequently exhibit distinct behavioral patterns from men as a function of moral identity. The present investigation applies a similar lens within the realm of social sexual behavior to better understand how SSI contributes to gendered patterns of workplace sexual behavior.

We expect men to hold SSI as a more central aspect of their identities than do women due to socialization around expected outcomes (Bandura, 1982) and because gender differences in behavioral tendencies inform self-perceptions (Bem, 1972). In the realm of heterosexual mating, social norms dictate that the courtship process begins with men attempting to breach social distance via flirting (Osella & Osella, 1998). Even relatively recent studies have found that men continue to serve as the primary initiator of sexual relationships (Sanchez et al., 2012). Seminal theories of self-perception and cognitive consistency (Bem, 1972; Festinger, 1957) indicate that a particular aspect of identity

becomes more salient when an individual engages in behaviors consistent with the identity. Further, some evidence supports the notion of a sexual double standard whereby sexual permissiveness is more accepted for men than for women (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010), which might lead men to embrace social sexuality as part of their identity to a greater degree than women. In line with this prediction, college women exhibit more positive reactions to their virginity than do college men and report more pressure to maintain it (Sprecher & Regan, 1996). In work settings, women who sexualize their appearance suffer social penalties, especially if they hold positions of power (Glick et al., 2005). Together, the findings suggest women have learned to limit their reliance on social sexuality at work more so than men.

We predict that, overall, men will both hold SSI as a more central aspect of their identity and initiate more SSB than women. This prediction is consistent with meta-analyses showing men react less negatively than women to a range of social sexual behaviors (Rotundo et al., 2001). However, we note that these expectations run counter to arguments advanced, but untested, by those suggesting women are especially prone to strategically-motivated SSB (Aquino et al., 2014; Watkins et al., 2013). Sexual economics theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) provides the basis for expecting women to be motivated to compensate for their low structural power through the instrumental deployment of sexuality (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Smolak & Murnen, 2011). For example, Pringle (1989) observed that secretaries were encouraged to flirt towards high-status men who were having hard days to alleviate their suffering, presumably to improve their own treatment in the workplace. Aquino and colleagues' (2014) theorizing suggests strategic sexual behavior is "not bounded by gender" (p. 225), although they also indicated (p. 227) that, "it is arguably rational for women to make more frequent use of this advantageous resource than do men." However, Rudman and Fetterolf (2014) found that men were more likely than women to endorse the principles of sexual exchange (i.e., associate sex with money) and to hold more permissive attitudes about engaging in casual sex than women, suggesting sexual exchange theory may reflect patriarchal assumptions, not fact.

**Hypothesis 2.** *Men more strongly internalize social sexuality in their identities than do women.*

**Hypothesis 3.** *Social sexual identity mediates the direct effect of gender on social sexual behavior.*

### 1.3. Motivation and the activation and deactivation of social sexual identity

Social cognition draws on a "motivated tactician" metaphor to capture how behavior is driven in part by the strategic and pragmatic motives active in situations (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Operario & Fiske, 1999). This emphasis on the person as a function of interpersonal goals is also consistent with prior conceptualizations of sexual harassment as deriving from both emotional and instrumental goals (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000), and consistent with prior research suggesting even relatively benign forms of SSB (e.g., flirting) can be motivated by a range of goals (Henningsen et al., 2008). Harassers may use sexually aggressive tactics to alleviate their own negative emotions arising from an aversive or unjust experience, or to create a positive self-presentation (Goffman, 1959), including fostering affiliations with others (Sheppard et al., 2020) and garnering social power (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Both intrapsychic processes (e.g., threat, reactance) and impression management motives are fundamentally intertwined (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985), and both have the potential to impact the initiation of SSB to claim a desired identity.

In keeping with prior research demonstrating that situations can activate and deactivate moral identity with downstream consequences for moral behavior (Aquino et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2017), we expect that the goals that activate or deactivate SSI are important for understanding SSB tendencies. Aquino and colleagues (2009) drew from

circumplex models of goals (Grouzet et al., 2005; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004) to make predictions about situational variations in moral identity strength. These models distinguish between extrinsic goals involving self-interest, achievement, image, and power as reflecting self-enhancement motives and self-transcendence goals involving the pursuit of intrinsically worthy outcomes such as affiliation and benevolence. Self-transcendence goals are incompatible with self-enhancement motives, meaning situations that activate one type of goal may deactivate the other. Aquino and colleagues found that activating self-enhancement motives by introducing financial incentives to engage in unethical behavior temporarily deactivates moral identity in the working self-concept, enabling individuals to engage in deception.

Interpersonal relationships fall along multiple dimensions (Fiske, 1991), including both a “horizontal” affiliative dimension that corresponds with self-transcendence goals and a “vertical” dimension that corresponds with self-enhancement goals related to dominance, power, and status (Bakan, 1966; Foa & Foa, 1974; Hall et al., 2005; Wiggins et al., 1988). While vertical motives have long been theorized to underlie sexual harassment behaviors, their role in producing SSB has not been rigorously examined in an experimental fashion. We consider how vertical motives influence fluctuations in SSI and, in turn, SSB.

We adopt a similar approach by considering whether SSI is stronger when pursuing self-transcendence versus self-enhancement goals. On one hand, flirtation is a common form of SSB that typically communicates light-hearted playfulness, enthusiasm, and attentiveness (Abrahams, 1994; Greer & Buss, 1994; Henningsen et al., 2008; Moore, 1985; 2002). This implies that SSI might become stronger in the working self-concept when individuals desire affiliation. However, elevated social power is also associated with increases in positive emotion and decreases in negative emotion (Cho & Keltner, 2020; Keltner et al., 2003), suggesting that the positive affect associated with flirtation need not imply affiliative motives. In work settings especially, flirtation may reflect instrumental rather than affiliative motives (Bradley et al., 2005; Henningsen et al., 2008). By breaching social distance and communicating sexual intent in a way that begs a response (Aquino et al., 2014; Watkins et al., 2013), the flirt’s actions signal power (Carver & White, 1994; Keltner et al., 2003; Kray & Locke, 2008).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, flirtation is typically perceived by targets as an attempt to gain their attention and to stimulate their interest in the initiator (Frisby et al., 2011), both of which are consistent with self-enhancement motives. Moreover, self-enhancement goals (e.g., desire for power) have long played a central role in existing theories of sexual harassment (Berdahl, 2007; Folke et al., 2020). Taken together, we expect SSI to become active in the working self-concept when individuals seek to self-enhance by appearing powerful.

**Hypothesis 4.** *Desire for self-enhancement strengthens social sexual identity relative to desire for self-transcendence.*

#### 1.4. The interaction of gender and situations

In keeping with prior social cognitive research examining how aspects of identity interact with situations to influence behavior (Aquino et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2017), we investigate a gender-by-situation

perspective. Whereas men’s stronger SSI is expected to produce more initiation of SSB compared to women, we expect situational cues to mitigate this gender difference, with men being especially influenced by situational cues because of their expected greater internalization of the social sexual identity on a chronic basis. According to social cognitive principles, greater centrality of an identity increases its activation potential, or the possibility it will influence behavior (Higgins, 1989; Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Brendl, 1995). For instance, people with stronger moral identities exhibit more variable behavior in the face of financial incentives (Aquino et al., 2009; Kennedy et al., 2017). This identity makes behavior more variable, not more consistent. Consequently, situational moderators typically have stronger effects on behavior for people who have located the identity more centrally in their self-concept, which in the case of SSI, is predicted to be men.

Building on the theorized link between desire for power and momentary SSI strength, we focused on the situational moderator of social power, which we expected to activate varying levels of desire for self-enhancement versus self-transcendence, depending on the social context. Galinsky et al. (2003) defined social power as the ability to control one’s own and others’ resources without social interference. It is *social* because it is based on one’s relationship with others (Fiske, 1993; Overbeck & Park, 2001). Social power transforms the psychological experience of power holders by reducing their inhibitions (Keltner et al., 2003; Kipnis, 1972). Having social power over others motivates goal pursuit (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Depue, 1995; Galinsky et al., 2003) and can promote a host of self-enhancement-based behaviors, including selfishness (Blader & Chen, 2012), objectification of other people (Gruenfeld et al., 2008) and both a lack of empathy (Van Kleef et al., 2008) and perspective-taking (Galinsky et al., 2006). Through processes ranging from the automatic activation of the sexual mating motive (Bargh et al., 1995; Bargh & Raymond, 1995; Pryor, 1987; Pryor et al., 1993; Pryor & Stoller, 1994; Zurbriggen, 2000), sexual overperception (Kunstman & Maner, 2011), and sexual risk-taking (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006), power has been shown to increase aggressive sexual behavior.

Even though power can activate self-enhancement motives from the power holder under certain circumstances, overall, power is neither inherently prosocial nor antisocial (Keltner et al., 2003; Overbeck & Park, 2006). Anecdotally, sexual aggression seems most common among men holding powerful positions. However, the high base rates with which men occupy positions of power in organizations and society obfuscate the direct role of social power itself. This argues against the inevitability of a simple “power corrupts” explanation for sexual harassment. In fact, how power affects the power holder is moderated by individual differences, with only those with weak moral identities (DeCelles et al., 2012) and exchange-orientations (Chen et al., 2001) tending to abuse power. Powerholders engage in more abusive behavior only when they feel incompetent (Fast & Chen, 2009; Fast et al., 2012). Finally, only men who feel chronically low-power are especially prone to abuse situational power through SHB when they gain access momentarily to social power (Williams et al., 2017).<sup>4</sup> This makes sense because, on average, a lack of power instigates a desire for power (Lammers et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2017).<sup>5</sup> Taken together, SHB by powerful men

<sup>3</sup> In addition to claiming power, cross-sex flirting has been described by cultural anthropologists as a game that disrupts gender hierarchy (Osella & Osella, 1998). Observations of flirting youth in the streets of rural India led to the conclusion that, by creating an aura of uncertainty around the flirt’s intentions and the target’s receptivity, power and status differences were momentarily “exaggerated, reversed, confused, and abandoned.” While not qualitatively distinct from harassment, the enactment of these complex forms of dominance and submission were characterized as “a more subtle form of hierarchic heterosexuality than in harassment (Brittan, 1989; Trawick, 1992)” (p. 194). Like teasing is to same-sex interactions, flirtation involves a paradoxical combination of aggression and play (Keltner et al., 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Researchers have also identified other individual differences such as the strength of the cognitive link between social dominance and sexuality as a moderator (Pryor & Stoller, 1994) influencing whether social contextual factors (e.g., permissive norms, role models, opportunity to harass) increase harassment among men (Pryor, 1987; Pryor et al., 1993; Pryor et al., 1995). Less is known about whether these factors mitigate gender differences in sexual harassment, however, because women were largely excluded from the experimental designs.

<sup>5</sup> Individual differences exist in desire for power (Schmid Mast & Hall, 2003; Schmid Mast, 2010), leading some people to be averse to power and responsibility (Hull et al., 2022).

appears not to be inevitable, suggesting a more nuanced approach is needed to understand the relationship between social power and problematic SSB.

Importantly, prior research on social power does not make any predictions about gender per se. It is often implied that men sexually harass more than women do because of men's greater access to power and, if women had as much power as men, then women would engage in problematic SSB to the same degree. While much harassment research has relied on all-male samples (Bargh et al., 1995; Gruenfeld et al., 2008; Maner et al., 2009; Maner et al., 2007; Zurbriggen, 2000), when women have been included in the samples, holding power has had consistent effects for both women and men (Kunstman & Maner, 2011; Williams et al., 2017). However, Winter's seminal research on the need for power found that men and women high in the need for power, which tends to correspond with low-power positions (Williams et al., 2017), differ in the behavior they manifest, with men who are low in responsibility being especially likely to engage in impulsive, profligate behaviors (e.g., drinking, aggression, gambling) (Winter & Barenbaum, 1985; Winter & Stewart, 1978; Winter, 1991). Similarly, Keltner and colleagues (2003, Fig. 4, p. 276) presented unpublished data to suggest that high-power individuals flirt more than low-power individuals (Gonzaga et al., 2001), but their results also seemed to show that low-power men flirted more than high-power women, suggesting gender interacts with power in eliciting SSB.

These findings suggest gender differences in SSB may emerge when experiencing low social power and highlight the need to examine both men's and women's sexualized behavior in both high and low power contexts. Doing so is particularly important given recent evidence that, in everyday life, people have stronger reactions to holding low power than they do to holding high power on a range of psychological variables, including mood, stress, and happiness (Smith & Hofmann, 2016). To gain a full picture of the relationship between social power and behavior, it is necessary to include both low- and high-power conditions in experimental designs (Schaefer et al., 2018). Recent theories of power (Kennedy & Anderson, 2017; Scholl & Sassenberg, 2022; Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2019) have noted the potential for holding high-power positions to generate feelings of responsibility, solidarity, and identification with lower-ranking people. These self-transcendent goals are believed to be especially strong in collaborative settings involving social power (Tost, 2015). Considering these findings, we would expect occupying high-power positions in collaborative settings to be a factor that mitigates gender differences in SSB because it activates desire for self-transcendence rather than self-enhancement goals.

Men may be especially likely to engage in SSB when seeking to compensate for low situational power. SSB, especially in task settings, could demonstrate willingness to violate norms (Van Kleef et al., 2011), given that these settings often prescribe impersonal, unemotional relationships (Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, 2014). SSB violates these norms and therefore may indicate that a person acts on their own volition, fueling perceptions of their power.

**Hypothesis 5.** *Desire for self-transcendence moderates the direct effect of gender on social sexual behavior by decreasing men's (but not women's) social sexual behavior through social sexual identity strength.*

**Hypothesis 6.** *When men who desire self-enhancement engage in social sexual behavior (versus not), they are perceived to have relatively more social power by observers.*

## 2. Overview of research

The current research extends theory and research in several important ways. First, we build on contemporary social-cognitive accounts of social behavior to understand why and when individuals initiate SSB in work settings. Second, we go beyond existing research on gender, power, and SSB by providing an empirical test of the intrapsychic processes that produce situationally variant gender differences in SSB.

Third, in asking when gender differences in SSB are likely to emerge, we consider certain motives (e.g., affiliative goals) and situational contexts (e.g., holding a high-power position) that could suppress gender differences, leading men to act similarly to women. By examining gender in concert with situations, our research speaks to the fundamental question of whether gender differences can be reduced to power differences (Lammers et al., 2011; Lammers & Stoker, 2019; Rucker & Galinsky, 2016; Rucker et al., 2018).

Across six studies, we examine the relation between SSI and SSB tendencies. Studies 1a and 1b establish SSI as a novel predictor of SSB using both correlational and experimental designs adapted from prior social cognitive research. Study 2 attempts to replicate this link between SSI and SSB using naturally varying SSI and controlling for several theoretically relevant individual difference measures. Study 3 experimentally manipulates interpersonal motives, testing the implications of desire for power (i.e., self-enhancement motives) versus desire for affiliation (i.e., self-transcendence motives) on the emergence of gender differences in SSB. Study 4 tests whether social power role moderates the direct effect of gender on the tendency to initiate SSB, an effect we expect to be mediated by SSI. Study 5 examines a downstream consequence of low-power men's SSB by measuring the perceived power of the focal actor. In Fig. 1, we have summarized our conceptual model and labelled our hypotheses.

In each study, we report all participants recruited, all conditions, and all measures. The sample size for each study was determined by analyses of statistical power using the software G\*Power (Faul et al., 2007), which indicated that a sample of 191 or greater would be sufficient to achieve 95 % confidence and 80 % statistical power to detect an interaction using ANOVA if the partial eta-squared were 0.04 or greater. We aimed for at least 80 % statistical power to detect a small effect size ( $d = 0.30$ ). For the laboratory study (Study 4), we planned to recruit a minimum of 50 participants for each condition, consistent with the recommendations of Simmons and colleagues (2018). Final sample sizes were dictated by the availability of participants for the scheduled laboratory sessions over an academic semester. We report all recruited participants and all conditions. All research reported was approved by an Institutional Review Board before commencing. Pre-registrations of our hypotheses and analysis plans for all our studies are available through OSF at the link here: <https://OSF.IO/DHNMZ/>.

### 2.1. Study 1

In Study 1, we had three main goals. First, we sought to establish SSI as a novel predictor of SSB tendencies, distinct from moral identity (MI). By comparing the effects of SSI alongside another interpersonal identity thought to predict SSB, we could control for the interpersonal nature of SSI and demonstrate that it accounts for unique variation in SSB (Hypothesis 1). Second, we tested for chronic gender differences in SSI (Hypothesis 2). Third, we explored whether gender differences in SSB tendencies are mediated by gender differences in both chronic and acute SSI strength (Hypothesis 3). To do so, we conducted Studies 1a and 1b, both utilizing designs from prior social cognitive theory research. Study 1a utilized a correlational design based on Aquino and Reed (2002); Study 1b utilized an experimental design based on Reed et al. (2007).

### 2.2. Study 1a

#### 2.2.1. Method

**Participants and Design.** We recruited 499 participants (250 men, 249 women) from Prolific Academic who indicated that they live within the United States and self-identified as heterosexual. They were paid \$0.70 to complete a short survey on self-perceptions. The average age of the sample was 36.6 ( $SD = 13.0$ ) and the ethnic composition was 72 % Caucasian, 5 % African American, 13 % Asian, 8 % Latino/Hispanic, 0.2 % Native American, and 3 % who selected other categories. Participants reported having, on average, "a moderate amount" of work experience

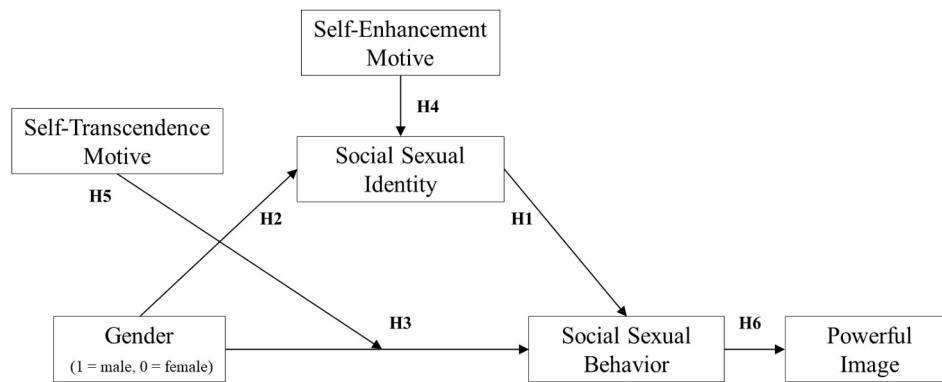


Fig. 1. Proposed model linking male gender to social sexual behavior and a powerful image through social sexual identity with moderation by type of motive.

( $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) on a scale from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). No participants missed the attention check asking for the name of their coworker in the hypothetical vignette, and thus no exclusions were made. The study utilized a correlational design, measuring both SSI and MI in counterbalanced order.

**Procedure.** For each identity, participants were presented with a list of 8 characteristics that might describe a person, either themselves or someone else, and to visualize in their minds the kind of person who has these characteristics and to imagine how that person might think, feel, and act. Based on pilot work examining common language for describing people who flaunt their sexuality, we generated eight characteristics consistent with our conceptualization of SSI, including: “big flirt,” “sex appeal,” “charming,” “enjoys flirting with others,” “playful with members of the opposite sex,” “often flirts to persuade others to see their point of view,” “knows how to use body language to their advantage,” “knows how to be irresistible when they want something from someone.” Words in the moral identity (MI) salience condition were taken from Aquino and Reed (2002): “caring,” “compassionate,” “fair,” “friendly,” “generous,” “helpful,” “hardworking,” and “honest.” Participants were told to proceed to the next page once they had a clear image of what this person would be like.

## 2.2.2. Measures

**Identity Internalization.**<sup>6</sup> Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 5 statements for each identity ( $\alpha_{SSI} = 0.88$  and  $\alpha_{MI} = 0.80$ ) measuring identity internalization (e.g., “It would make me feel good to be a person who has these characteristics” and “I would be ashamed to be a person who had these characteristics” (reverse-scored)). These statements were drawn from prior research on moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). The identity characteristics were displayed while completing these measures to ensure adequate attention to the construct. Response scales ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*).

**Social Sexual Behavioral Intentions.** Immediately following the identity internalization task, participants read a workplace vignette in which they were told to imagine being an employee of Acme, Inc., a

profitable company dedicated to changing the world. They were told that their job involves working closely on a series of important projects with another employee. Participants were always paired with an opposite-sex work partner (named Vicki or Dave, with accompanying photo of an attractive, approximately 30-year-old white individual). Participants were told to imagine that they had worked together for a year and had developed a good working relationship.

To measure SSB, we used a modified version of the 9-item Sheppard et al. (2020) measure. Instead of asking how often participants were recipients of these behaviors in the past, we adapted the scale to ask how often participants intended to initiate these behaviors with their work partner. Sample items for male (female) participants include: “Look at her (him) in a sexually provocative way,” and “Treat Vicki (Dave) as a confidant who you can talk to about your sexual problems.” Response scales ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). Reliability was high ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ), so items were averaged. See the Supplemental Materials for the entire measure.

## 2.2.3. Results

The Supplemental Materials (Table 1) provide descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables.

## 2.3. Social sexual identity predicting social sexual behavior

We conducted a simultaneous linear regression predicting SSB with SSI strength and MI strength. Consistent with our pre-registration and Hypothesis 1, SSI predicted SSB ( $\beta = 0.22$ ,  $t(496) = 8.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ), as did MI ( $\beta = -0.15$ ,  $t(496) = -3.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Both stronger social sexual identities and weaker moral identities predicted greater tendencies to initiate social sexual behavior. Results are robust to controlling for demographic measures, including gender, age, and work experience). See the Supplemental Materials for a full reporting of this analysis.

## 2.4. Gender differences in mean scores

To test for gender differences, we conducted separate independent sample t-tests for each study variable. First, replicating prior research, men ( $M = 1.7$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) reported greater intentions to engage in SSB than women ( $M = 1.4$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ),  $t(497) = 5.17$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.46$ . Second, replicating Kennedy et al. (2017), MI was more central within the self-concept for women ( $M = 6.5$ ,  $SD = 0.6$ ) than men ( $M = 6.1$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(497) = -5.48$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.49$ . Third, and most importantly for testing Hypothesis 2, SSI was more central within the self-concept for

<sup>6</sup> Aquino and Reed (2002) measured both identity internalization and identity symbolization, or the degree to which SSI is reflected in behavior and action (e.g., “I often wear clothes that identify me as having these characteristics”). They found that internalization predicted moral behavior but support for symbolization predicting behavior was mixed. The present study, consistent with Kennedy et al.’s (2017) approach, measures identity from an “insider” perspective (i.e., internalization) rather than what people project to others (i.e., symbolization). We note, however, that in a pilot study ( $n = 392$ ), we measured both SSI internalization and symbolization and found that men reported greater internalization ( $t(390) = 3.67$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.37$ ) and greater symbolization ( $t(390) = 3.28$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.34$ ) of SSI than women. See the Supplemental Materials for a full reporting of this study.

<sup>7</sup> Sheppard et al. (2020) included two SSB subscales (flirtation and storytelling). The results are virtually identical for each subscale, so we have combined them in the main text. See Supplemental materials for a breakdown by each subscale.

**Table 1**  
Zero-order Correlations between Individual Difference Measures in Study 2.

Variable <sup>a</sup>	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1. SSB	2.3	1.2	–														
2. SHB	1.5	1.0	0.70	–													
3. SSI	3.5	1.4	0.56	0.48	–												
4. Sense of Power	4.4	1.0	0.12	0.03	0.31	–											
5. Hostile Sexism	2.9	1.0	0.28	0.34	0.19	-0.05	–										
6. Benevolent Sexism	3.1	1.0	0.30	0.25	0.26	0.08	0.47	–									
7. Narcissism	0.2	0.2	0.35	0.44	0.47	0.37	0.22	0.23	–								
8. Traditional Style	3.3	1.0	0.21	0.24	0.17	-0.00	0.44	0.49	0.15	–							
9. Physical Style	3.6	1.4	0.49	0.41	0.77	0.39	0.16	0.25	0.42	0.17	–						
10. Playful Style	3.6	1.3	0.51	0.42	0.66	0.15	0.11	0.18	0.30	0.04	0.56	–					
11. Sincere Style	5.7	0.9	0.14	-0.03	0.23	0.13	-0.15	0.00	-0.03	-0.04	0.27	0.22	–				
12. Polite Style	5.0	0.9	0.03	-0.02	0.02	-0.02	0.17	0.18	-0.05	0.31	0.06	-0.05	0.33	–			
13. SocDesir-SDE	3.9	1.0	0.04	0.01	0.11	0.49	-0.04	-0.04	0.28	0.09	0.27	-0.02	0.01	0.03	–		
14. SocDesir-IM	4.4	1.0	-0.17	-0.20	-0.21	0.09	-0.10	-0.10	-0.21	0.04	-0.11	-0.24	0.10	0.15	0.44	–	
15. Male	0.5	0.5	0.23	0.21	0.12	-0.05	0.29	0.29	0.14	0.03	0.09	0.09	-0.03	-0.10	0.07	-0.08	–

Note. Correlations greater than or equal to 0.10, 0.14, and 0.18 are significant at levels of  $p < .05$ ,  $p < .01$ , and  $p < .001$ , respectively.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , † $p < .10$ .

<sup>a</sup> SSB = Social Sexual Behavior, SHB = Sexual Harassment Behavior, SSI = Social Sexual Identity.

men ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ) than women ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ),  $t(497) = 3.31$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.30$ .

## 2.5. Mediation analysis

We next examined whether SSI internalization mediates the gender difference in SSB tendencies, over and above MI internalization. To test this possibility (Hypothesis 3), we conducted a simultaneous mediation model for gender and SSB including both SSI and MI internalization as potential mediators. The analysis utilized 10,000 bootstrapped samples (using Hayes' PROCESS Model 4). SSI emerged as a statistically significant mediator (95 % CI [0.03, 0.13]), as did MI (95 % CI [0.01, 0.09]). These results confirm that men's greater internalization of SSI into their self-concept partially mediates their greater tendencies to initiate SSB relative to women. This pattern emerged over and above the influence of men's lesser internalization of MI, which also partially mediates the gender difference in SSB tendencies.

## 2.6. Discussion

The study demonstrates that chronic tendencies to initiate SSB are greater for men than women and that SSI internalization mediated this gender difference. Men internalized SSI into their self-concept more than women and men initiated SSB more than women. These effects held over and above known gender differences in moral identity (which men internalize less into their self-concept than women). We note that the data are correlational, so mediation analysis should be interpreted with caution.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.7. Study 1b

Study 1b manipulated identity salience through a randomized, between-subjects experimental design. One key pre-registered prediction was that increasing the salience of SSI would increase SSB intentions (Hypothesis 1). We expected this increase to hold when controlling for MI and compared to a control condition that did not

<sup>8</sup> Consistent with Bem's (1972) seminal self-perception theory, which posits that individuals come to know themselves by observing their own behaviors, we expect a bidirectional relationship between SSI and SSB, such that, in addition to SSI strength increasing SSB, greater SSB is expected to increase SSI strength. We note that reverse mediation is not a useful strategy for testing the tenability of a mediation model (Thoemmes, 2015; Lemmer & Gollwitzer, 2017), and thus our analyses focus on the former direction rather than the latter and Study 1b uses an experimental design to test the direction of causality.

utilize interpersonal terms. We also pre-registered the prediction that the momentary salience of SSI in the working self-concept would mediate the increase in SSB in the SSI salience condition. Finally, we tested whether gender differences in SSB tendencies emerge (Hypothesis 2) and, if so, are mediated by differences in the momentary salience of SSI strength (Hypothesis 3).

## 2.8. Method

### 2.8.1. Participants and design

We recruited 754 participants from Prolific Academic who indicated that they live within the United States and self-identified as heterosexual. Participants earned \$0.70 to complete the survey. The sample included 374 men, 377 women, 1 gender non-binary, and 2 who preferred not to say. As gender was a factor in our analyses, necessitating sufficient representation for each level, only participants who identified as men or women were included. As pre-registered, 18 participants were excluded based on failing a manipulation check that asked them to select a word that had appeared on the list they saw (desk, sex appeal, or compassionate). None of the participants missed a second manipulation check asking them to identify the name of their coworker (Dave or Vicki). The final sample included 733 participants (50.5 % women). Ethnicity of the final sample was 73 % Caucasian, 6 % African American, 7 % Hispanic, 10 % Asian, 0.4 % Native American, and 3 % who selected "other" as a category. Average age was 38.2 years ( $SD = 14.7$ ). Participants reported having "a moderate amount" of work experience, averaging 2.8 ( $SD = 1.1$ ) on a scale from 1 (none at all) to 5 (a great deal). The study involved one identity salience factor with three levels (SSI, MI, control).

### 2.8.2. Experimental manipulation

To manipulate identity salience, we used a paradigm from Reed et al.'s (2007) investigation of moral identity. In the MI salience condition, participants were presented with the identical list of eight words from Study 1a. In the SSI salience condition, we trimmed the phrases used in Study 1a as follows: "sex appeal," "flirtatious," "irresistible," "body language," "charm," "playful," "big flirt," and "personal assets." Control condition words were adapted from Reed et al.: "book end," "car," "chair," "computer stand," "desk," "pen holder," "street," and "tabletop." Whereas participants in Study 1a contemplated an individual with the selected characteristics, in the present study aimed at increasing the salience of the identity, participants were asked to construct a story about themselves using each word or phrase.



2.8.3. Measures

**Social Sexual Behavioral Intentions.** We used the identical SSB measure described in Study 1a ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

**Social Sexual Identity Strength.** Based on pilot work examining common language for describing people in a manner consistent with our conceptualization of social sexuality (i.e., flaunt their sexuality), we generated a 10-item measure of SSI strength using a 7-point Likert-scale with endpoints of “strongly disagree” and “strongly agree” ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).<sup>9</sup> Sample items include “I am a big flirt” and “I often flirt to persuade people to see my point of view.” All items were positively worded such that greater endorsement corresponded with stronger SSI in the working self-concept. Appendix A provides the complete list of items.

2.8.4. Results

The Supplemental Materials (Table 2) provides descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables.

2.8.5. Social sexual behavior

An ANOVA including identity salience and participant gender as between-participants factors revealed two main effects. Replicating the previous study, men ( $M = 1.8, SD = 1.1$ ) reported more SSB intentions than did women ( $M = 1.4, SD = 0.7$ ),  $F(1, 727) = 34.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ . Second, in line with Hypothesis 1, participants in the SSI salience condition ( $M = 1.8, SD = 0.9$ ) reported greater SSB intentions than did participants in the MI salience ( $M = 1.5, SD = 1.0$ ) and control ( $M = 1.6, SD = 0.8$ ) conditions,  $F(2, 727) = 4.77, p = .009, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$  (see Fig. 2a). Analyses of simple effects confirmed that SSB intentions were greater in the SSI salience condition than in both the MI salience ( $t(730) = -2.45, p = .015, d = 0.22$ ) and control ( $t(730) = -2.27, p = .023, d = 0.21$ ) conditions. The difference in SSB intentions between the moral identity and

Table 2

Regression Analyses for Predicting Social Sexual Behavior and Sexual Harassment (Study 2).

Predictor Variable	Dependent Variables <sup>a</sup>					
	SSB			SHB		
	B	SE	$\beta$	B	SE	$\beta$
(Constant)	-0.50	0.48		0.76	0.39	
Male	0.28	0.11	0.12**	0.15	0.09	0.08 <sup>†</sup>
Social Sexual Identity	0.20	0.06	0.22**	0.13	0.05	0.18*
Sense of Power	-0.06	0.06	-0.05	-0.16	0.05	-0.16**
Hostile Sexism	0.11	0.06	0.09 <sup>†</sup>	0.14	0.05	0.15**
Benevolent Sexism	0.06	0.06	0.05	-0.04	0.05	-0.04
Narcissism	0.60	0.31	0.10*	1.29	0.25	0.27***
Traditional Flirt Style	0.09	0.06	0.07	0.10	0.05	0.11*
Physical Flirt Style	0.09	0.06	0.10	0.08	0.05	0.12 <sup>†</sup>
Playful Flirt Style	0.24	0.05	0.24***	0.13	0.05	0.17**
Sincere Flirt Style	0.06	0.06	0.05	-0.08	0.05	-0.08
Polite Flirt Style	-0.02	0.06	0.05	-0.03	0.05	-0.03
SocDesir-SDE	-0.03	0.07	-0.02	-0.03	0.06	-0.03
SocDesir-IM	-0.01	0.06	-0.01	-0.00	0.05	-0.00
$R^2$ ( $R^2_{adjusted}$ )	0.42*** (0.40)			0.40*** (0.38)		

\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \* $p < .05$ , <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . <sup>a</sup> SSB = Social Sexual Behavior, SHB = Sexual Harassment Behavior.

<sup>9</sup> The Supplemental Materials include the results of a 10-sample pilot study ( $n = 1929$ ) that includes exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supporting our treatment of the scale as a unidimensional measure of social sexual identity. While the CFA suggests a slightly better fit for the two-factor solution, the one-factor solution has acceptable fit and is more parsimonious and therefore preferred theoretically. For readers interested in exploring the two factors separately, items 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 10 reflect the “SSI-hedonic” factor and items 5, 6, 8, and 9 reflect the “SSI-strategic” factor. See Appendix A for a complete list of items.

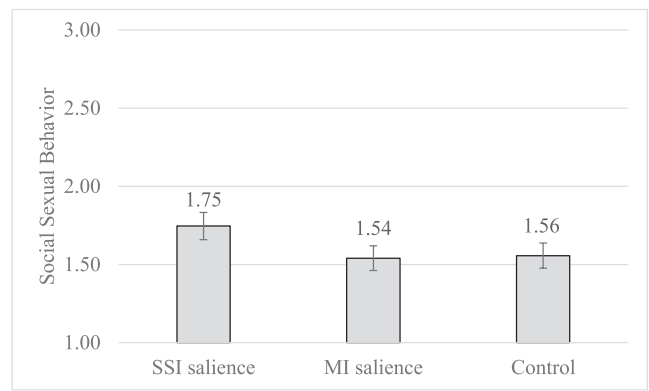


Fig. 2a. SSB intentions by identity salience condition in Study 1b. Error bars indicate +/- one standard error.

control conditions was not significant,  $t(730) = -0.20, p = .842, d = 0.02$ . The interaction was not significant ( $p = .134$ ).

2.9. Social sexual identity strength

Using ANOVA with identity salience and participant gender as between-participants factors, the only significant effect to emerge was a main effect for identity salience condition,  $F(2, 727) = 4.58, p = .011, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . As shown in Fig. 2b, SSI was stronger in the social sexual identity salience condition ( $M = 3.2, SD = 1.4$ ) than in the moral identity salience ( $M = 2.9, SD = 1.4$ ;  $t(730) = -2.96, p = .003, d = 0.27$ ) and control ( $M = 3.0, SD = 1.3$ ;  $t(730) = -2.14, p = .033, d = 0.19$ ) conditions. The difference in SSI between the moral identity and control conditions was not significant,  $t(730) = -0.85, p = .393, d = 0.08$ . No other effects approached significance ( $ps > 0.686$ ).<sup>10</sup>

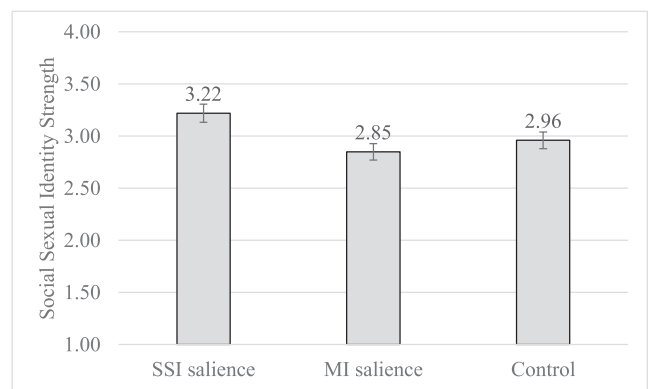


Fig. 2b. SSI by identity salience condition in Study 1b. Error bars indicate +/- one standard error.

<sup>10</sup> We reran the experiment ( $n = 511$ ) with just the SSI salience and control conditions and observed main effects for both gender ( $F(1, 507) = 25.49, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.05$ ) and identity salience condition ( $F(1, 507) = 7.59, p = .006, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$ ), but no interaction ( $p = .625$ ). Directionally, men had stronger SSI than women (Hypothesis 2) and participants in the SSI salience condition had stronger SSI than participants in the control condition (Hypothesis 4). We found support for both mediation models tested: first, SSI mediates the link between identity salience condition and SSB tendencies [95% CI: 0.02, 0.10]; second, SSI mediates the link between gender and SSB [95% CI: 0.01, 0.15], as the 95% confidence intervals did not bridge zero (Hypothesis 3). This replication study is reported in the Supplemental Materials (p. 21–24).

## 2.10. Mediation analyses

We tested whether momentary SSI strength could help to explain why individuals who had written about themselves acting with SSI characteristics intended to engage in more SSB than individuals who described themselves with non-SSI characteristics, comparing the SSI salience and control conditions. We conducted a bootstrapping analysis of mediation with 10,000 resamples using Model 4 (Preacher & Hayes, 2004) predicting SSB intentions with SSI as a mediator. The 95 % confidence interval did not bridge zero [0.01, 0.14], providing evidence that SSI strength mediated the relationship between the experimental condition and SSB intentions.

## 2.11. Discussion

Drawing from social cognitive paradigms designed to measure the chronic self-concept (Aquino & Reed, 2002) and manipulate the working self-concept (Reed et al., 2007), Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate a robust pattern by which SSI strength corresponds with greater intentions to initiate SSB. By comparing the effects of SSI to MI using paradigms from past identity research, Study 1a demonstrates that individuals who tend to initiate SSB have lower internalization of MI than individuals who tend not to initiate SSB. However, Study 1b's experimental design did not find that strengthening MI in the working self-concept causes SSB intentions to decrease. Instead, it had no effect on SSB tendencies and was indistinguishable from the control condition. We also found support for the prediction that SSI strength is a novel mediator of gender differences in SSB tendencies, a finding we continue to explore in subsequent studies.

## 3. Study 2

Study 2 aimed to replicate and extend Study 1a and 1b's key finding that SSI strength increases SSB tendencies (Hypothesis 1) using a naturalistic design. In addition, Study 2 aimed to test for gender differences in SSI strength (Hypothesis 2) and to explore SSI's role in explaining gender differences in SSB tendencies (Hypothesis 3). In addition to measuring SSB that is welcomed by recipients (Sheppard et al., 2020), in Study 2 we also measured sexual harassment behavior (SHB), an unwelcomed type of SSB. Because SSI is a general self-perception, we expected it to predict a broad spectrum of social sexual behaviors.

To examine whether SSI strength predicts SSB to a novel degree, we measured several conceptually related constructs that are known to be related to problematic SSB (i.e., SHB). First, we measured personal sense of power (PSP), a subjective sense of the capacity to influence others (Anderson et al., 2012; Galinsky et al., 2003). Given power is often invoked to explain harassment, we thought it important to control for subjective feelings of interpersonal influence and control. Second, we measured ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996), which has been theorized to underlie sexual harassment (Fiske & Glick, 1995). Third, we measured narcissism (Campbell et al., 2011; Emmons, 1987; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), which has been shown to predict sexual harassment proclivities (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2016). Fourth, we controlled for individual differences in communication styles used to convey romantic interest (Hall et al., 2010), as doing so enables us to confirm that the hypothesized link between SSI and SSB cannot be reduced to *how* individuals choose to communicate sexual interest. Finally, we controlled for socially desirable response tendencies to rule out the possibility that women simply underreport their private SSI strength and intentions to initiate SSB.

### 3.1. Methods

#### 3.1.1. Participants

We recruited 400 Prolific Academic workers with an average age of 34.2 years ( $SD = 12.8$ ); six participants failed an attention check and

were thus omitted, leaving a final sample of  $n = 394$  (206 women, 188 men). Participants were paid \$1.50 to complete the survey. Sample ethnicity included: 65 % Caucasian, 7 % African American, 15 % Asian, 10 % Latino/Hispanic, 1 % Native American, and 3 % who selected other categories. The sample was 96 % heterosexual. Participants reported having, on average, "a moderate amount" of work experience ( $M = 2.6$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ) on a scale from 1 (*none at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

#### 3.1.2. Measures<sup>11</sup>

**Materials.** Participants were recruited for a study of workplace behavior and societal attitudes. In addition to measures of SSI and SSB, we included standard measures of a variety of personality and attitudinal variables, in randomized order. Given the study was correlational, we did not have any conditions and all participants completed all measures.

**Social Sexual Identity.** We used the identical 10-item measure reported in Study 1b ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ).

**Social Sexual Behavioral Tendencies.** We used the identical SSB measure from the previous studies ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ).

**Sexual Harassment Behavioral Tendencies.** To measure SHB, we used a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-DoD-s, Fitzgerald et al., 1995) ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ). After eliminating 3 items that were not sexual, we adapted the remaining 13 items to measure the extent to which participants reported having initiated these behaviors, instead of receiving them as in the original scale. Sample items include, "Found a way to punish a coworker who was not sexually cooperative," and, "Tried to create a romantic or sexual relationship with a coworker." We did not label the behaviors as sexual or harassing and we did not specify the gender of recipients. Response scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). The adapted scale is reported in the Supplemental Materials.

**Sense of Power.** Sense of power was measured with Anderson et al.'s (2012) 8-item scale ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ). A sample item is, "In my relationships with others, I can get them to do what I want." Response scale ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). Higher values represent greater sense of power.

**Ambivalent Sexism.** We measured sexist attitudes with the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996;  $\alpha_{hostile} = 0.90$ ;  $\alpha_{benevolent} = 0.86$ ). The measure includes 22 statements, half of which reflect hostile attitudes while the other half reflects benevolent attitudes. A sample hostile statement is, "Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash." A sample benevolent statement is, "Every man ought to have a woman whom he adores." Participants rated each statement on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). We scored benevolent and hostile sexism separately.

**Narcissism.** We included the NPI-16 short measure of narcissism (Ames et al., 2006). The scale involves 16 forced-choice selections between two statements indicative of high versus low narcissism (e.g., "I am apt to be a showoff if I get the chance" versus "I try not to be a showoff"). The proportion of narcissistic responses selected was computed ( $M = 0.2$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ). The scale showed adequate reliability ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ).

#### 3.1.3. Control measures

**Flirting Styles Inventory.** We also included the Flirting Styles Inventory (Hall et al., 2010), a measure used to tap how individuals communicate romantic interest. Communication of romantic interest has been distinguished by five flirting styles: traditional, physical, sincere, playful, and polite. A traditional flirting style involves behaving within ascribed gender roles, wherein men are the aggressors and

<sup>11</sup> Consistent with Sheppard et al. (2020), we also included a question after both the SSB and SHB measures asking who was the primary recipient of these workplace behaviors, but we chose not to analyze those measures because we had no clear prediction regarding them. See the Supplemental Materials for descriptive analyses.

women are relatively passive and resistant. For example, an item states, “I wish we could go back to a time where formal dating was the norm.” The physical flirting style measures the degree to which individuals express comfort with expressing their sexual desire physically. A sample item includes, “I am good at using body language to flirt.” The sincere flirting style involves seeking an emotional connection by mutual self-disclosure to meet intimacy goals, for example, “I really enjoy learning about another person’s interests.” The playful flirtation style views flirting as fun and not necessarily tied to commitment goals. A sample item includes, “Flirting can be harmless fun.” The polite flirting style, which is rule-governed and suggests caution is warranted in communicating sexual interest. A sample item includes, “When dating, people should always be polite and use proper manners.” Respondents evaluated each statement on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). We expected SSI to correlate positively with all five of the communication styles, which we scored separately, but for the effects of SSI on SSB to emerge over and above these measures.

**Socially Desirable Responding.** We included the 16-item Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding Short Form (BIDR-16; Hart et al., 2015) to ensure this tendency cannot account for observed gender differences. This measure includes two components that we scored separately: self-deceptive enhancement (SDR-SDE) and impression management (SDR-IM). Response scales range from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*). The scale showed adequate reliability for both subscales ( $\alpha_{SDE} = 0.73$ ;  $\alpha_{IM} = 0.73$ ).

### 3.1.4. Results

Table 1 provides zero-order correlations among variables.

**3.1.4.1. Social sexual identity predicting social sexual behavior.** We next conducted a series of linear regression analyses predicting each measure of SSB separately. Table 2 describes the full results. Consistent with Hypothesis 1, SSI predicted both forms of SSB, even after controlling for several related constructs. Specifically, SSI predicted both SSB ( $t(384) = 5.31, p < .001$ ) and SHB ( $t(384) = 2.20, p = .028$ ), and these relationships held when controlling for sense of power, sexism, narcissism, flirting styles, and the tendency for socially desirable responding. Consistent with our pre-registered predictions, gender significantly predicted both SSB ( $t(384) = 5.61, p < .001$ ) and SHB ( $t(390) = 4.71, p < .001$ ), over and above other theoretically-relevant individual difference measures. Results are robust to controlling for demographic measures, including age and work experience. See the Supplemental Materials for a full reporting of this analysis.

**3.1.4.2. Gender differences in mean scores.** Table 3 summarizes gender differences for each individual difference measure. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, men scored higher than women on the SSI measure. Small-to-medium effect sizes were observed for SSB and SHB, with men scoring higher than women on both measures. The gender difference in narcissism was small in magnitude, with men scoring higher than women. The gender difference in sense of power was not significant. Medium-to-large effect sizes were observed for hostile and benevolent sexism, with men scoring higher than women on both measures. Gender differences in the Flirt Style Inventory were not significant with one exception, as women scored higher than men in the polite flirting style. All effect sizes remain consistent after controlling for socially desirable responding.

**3.1.4.3. Mediation analysis.** We examined whether SSI mediates gender differences in social sexual behavior over and above the other predictors (Hypothesis 3). To test this possibility, we conducted separate simultaneous mediation models for SSB and SHB including SSI, sense of power, hostile and benevolent sexism, narcissism, and the flirting styles. The analysis utilized 10,000 bootstrapped samples (using Hayes’s (2013) PROCESS Model 4). For SSB, SSI emerged as the sole statistically

significant mediator (95 % CI [0.01, 0.15]) as the confidence interval for all other predictors bridged zero. For SHB, SSI (95 % CI [0.00, 0.10]), hostile sexism (95 % CI [0.03, 0.15]), and narcissism (95 % CI [0.02, 0.15]) emerged as significant simultaneous mediators. All of the remaining potential mediators’ confidence intervals bridged zero, indicating that they did not mediate the gender difference in SHB.

### 3.2. Discussion

The current study offers further support for our key prediction that SSI strength predicts SSB (Hypothesis 1), and uniquely accounts for gender differences in these workplace behavioral tendencies (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Study 2 demonstrated empirically that our measure of SSI strength is general enough that it can capture a broad range of SSB tendencies, including those that might be welcomed and those that are especially likely to be interpreted as SHB. The predictive power of SSI emerged above and beyond a variety of conceptually related attitudinal and personality variables, including sense of power, hostile and benevolent sexism, narcissism, flirtatious communication styles, and controlling for socially desirable responding tendencies. SSI strength also emerged as the sole mediator of the relation between gender and SSB and as a significant mediator between gender and SHB, as did known predictors including hostile sexism and narcissism.

Taken together, the results from the first three studies highlight the importance of the SSI construct for explaining a wide range of social sexual behavior tendencies, and for mediating gender differences in SSB. In the next two experiments, we turn to examining situational moderators of the gender difference in SSB, aiming to identify motivations and situations that reduce men’s SSB. We also further explore the mediating role of SSI strength in explaining gendered patterns of SSB.

## 4. Study 3

The previous set of studies established that SSI strength corresponds with greater intentions to engage in both potentially welcomed and unwelcomed forms of SSB, and that gender differences in the strength of SSI underlie gender differences in the initiation of SSB. In Study 3, we turned to examining a boundary condition that we theorized would mitigate gender differences in SSB. As a situational moderator, we focused on interpersonal motives.

In Study 2, gender differences in SHB, the more problematic form of SSB, were mediated by SSI strength, hostile sexism and narcissism, suggesting men’s greater tendency to initiate problematic forms of SSB could reflect men’s greater activation of self-enhancement motives (i.e., power, image, self-interest). If so, then SSI strength should mediate gender differences in SSB intentions when pursuing self-enhancement goals. Further, activating a self-transcendence goal (i.e., affiliation, benevolence) might mitigate gender differences in SSB intentions by temporarily reducing men’s SSI strength. By testing interpersonal motives as a situational moderator, the study could provide further support for SSI strength as an underlying mechanism (Spencer et al., 2005).

Because our prior studies measured SSB intentions using adapted versions of existing scales, we sought to extend our exploration of SSB by developing a novel behavioral dependent measure that we used in Studies 3 and 4. Specifically, we created a dependent measure comprising the tendency to ask questions laden with sexual innuendo (Pinker et al., 2008; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).

We pre-registered the predictions that (a) men will initiate more SSB than women, and (b) SSI strength will mediate this gender difference (Hypothesis 3). By manipulating interpersonal motives, we were able to test whether SSI strength is greater when pursuing self-enhancement goals (i.e., power motive) compared to self-transcendent goals (i.e., affiliative motive) (Hypothesis 4). Finally, we tested whether desire for self-transcendence moderates the expected direct effect of gender on SSB by decreasing men’s SSI strength compared to when they desire self-enhancement (Hypothesis 5).

**Table 3**  
Gender Differences for Measures in Study 2.

Measure <sup>a</sup>	Overall		Men		Women		<i>t</i> -stat	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i> [95 %CI]
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
SSB	2.3	1.2	2.6	1.4	2.0	1.0	4.71	<0.001	0.48 [0.28, 0.61]
SHB	1.5	1.0	1.8	1.2	1.4	0.6	4.16	<0.001	0.42 [0.25, 0.51]
SSI	3.5	1.4	3.7	1.4	3.4	1.3	2.36	0.019	0.24 [0.04, 0.42]
Sense of Power	4.4	1.0	4.3	1.0	4.4	1.0	-1.04	0.299	-0.11 [-0.25, 0.03]
Hostile Sexism	2.9	1.0	3.2	0.9	2.6	1.0	6.10	<0.001	0.61 [0.48, 0.74]
Benevolent Sexism	3.1	1.0	3.4	0.9	2.9	1.0	5.95	<0.001	0.60 [0.48, 0.74]
Narcissism	0.2	0.2	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	2.82	0.005	0.31 [0.28, 0.33]
Traditional Flirt Style	3.3	1.0	3.3	0.9	3.3	1.1	0.65	0.515	0.07 [-0.05, 0.22]
Physical Flirt Style	3.6	1.4	3.7	1.4	3.4	1.3	1.75	0.080	0.18 [-0.02, 0.36]
Playful Flirt Style	3.6	1.3	3.7	1.3	3.5	1.2	1.68	0.093	0.17 [-0.01, 0.34]
Sincere Flirt Style	5.7	0.9	5.7	0.9	5.7	0.9	-0.61	0.544	-0.07 [-0.20, 0.06]
Polite Flirt Style	5.0	0.9	4.9	1.0	5.1	0.9	-1.98	0.048	-0.21 [-0.35, 0.09]
SocDesir-SDE	3.9	1.0	4.0	1.0	3.8	1.0	1.35	0.178	0.14 [ 0.01, 0.27]
SocDesir-IM	4.4	1.0	4.3	1.0	4.4	1.1	-1.60	0.111	-0.16 [-0.29, -0.01]

<sup>a</sup> SSB = Social Sexual Behavior, SHB = Sexual Harassment Behavior, SSI = Social Sexual Identity.

#### 4.1. Method

##### 4.1.1. Participants

The initial sample included 796 participants (463 men and 333 women) from Mturk who each received \$1.50 for completing the study. After removing 190 participants for failing one or more manipulation and/or attention checks, our final sample included 607 participants (357 men, 250 women). The sample was 68 % Caucasian, 11 % African American, 9 % Asian, 6 % Latino/Hispanic, 4 % Native American, and 3 % who selected other categories. The mean age of respondents was 34 years (*SD* = 9.9).

##### 4.1.2. Procedure and design

Participants imagined themselves getting acquainted with a new coworker of the opposite gender. We manipulated the interpersonal motives individuals were asked to adopt with four sets of instructions (social power motive, agentic motive, affiliative motive, control condition).<sup>12</sup> Participants in the social power motive condition were told that they were motivated to demonstrate that they were more important in the workplace than their coworker. Participants in the agentic motive condition were told that they were motivated to demonstrate an action orientation and effectiveness at pursuing their personal goals. Participants in the affiliative motive condition were told that they were motivated to demonstrate that they would be helpful and wanted a positive relationship with their coworker. Participants in the control condition were not given any motive instructions. Because two conditions (social power motive, agentic motive) were designed to activate vertical motives related to self-enhancement goals and two conditions (affiliative motive, control condition) were designed to activate horizontal motives related to self-transcendence goals, we considered collapsing into two conditions as theoretically justifiable.

##### 4.1.3. Pretest

We conducted a pre-registered pretest (*n* = 250) to confirm that the interpersonal motives manipulation had its intended effects, such that: a) both the agentic motive and social power motive conditions instigated greater self-enhancement motives compared to a control condition, and b) the affiliative motive and control conditions instigated greater self-transcendence motives compared to the agentic motive and social power motive conditions. After manipulating interpersonal motives in a manner identical to the present study, we measured self-enhancement and self-transcendence motives on 7-point Likert scales by asking two

questions in randomized order: "To what extent do you agree or disagree that you are motivated in this interaction with your new coworker to pursue self-interest, achievement, image, and power?" (self-enhancement) and "To what extent do you agree or disagree that you are motivated in this interaction with your new coworker to promote your coworker's interest and success and pursue affiliation and benevolence?" (self-transcendence). We conducted separate *t*-tests to compare each experimental condition to the control condition. As predicted, self-enhancement motive was stronger in both the agentic motive (*M* = 5.2, *SD* = 1.3, *t*(245) = 3.49, *p* = .001, *d* = 0.68) and the social power motive (*M* = 5.5, *SD* = 1.8, *t*(245) = 4.47, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.76) conditions compared to the control condition (*M* = 4.2, *SD* = 1.5). The affiliative motive condition (*M* = 3.8, *SD* = 1.5) did not differ from the control condition, *t*(245) = 1.67, *p* = .096, *d* = 0.30). We ran similar analyses for the activation of the self-transcendence motive. Both the agentic motive (*M* = 4.2, *SD* = 1.7, *t*(245) = 4.56, *p* < .001, *d* = 0.80) and social power motive (*M* = 3.0, *SD* = 1.8, *t*(245) = 8.94, *p* < .001, *d* = 1.54) conditions activated self-transcendence less than the control condition (*M* = 5.4, *SD* = 1.3). The affiliative motive (*M* = 5.7, *SD* = 1.1) and control conditions did not significantly differ, *t*(245) = 1.05, *p* = .296, *d* = 0.24. Satisfied that, relatively speaking, the agentic and social power motive conditions activated greater self-enhancement motives and that the affiliative and control condition activated greater self-transcendence motives, we collapsed into two conditions (self-enhancement, self-transcendence). Please see the Supplemental Materials for a full reporting of the pretest.

##### 4.1.4. Dependent Measures<sup>13</sup>

**SSB Intentions.** To measure SSB, we adapted the "computer harassment paradigm" (Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Diehl et al., 2012; Maass et al., 2003; Siebler et al., 2008). This standard approach to studying sexual harassment in the lab presents perpetrators the opportunity to engage in inappropriate SSB in an involving and realistic situation with minimal ethical risks. Typically, men are led to believe they are interacting in an online chat room with women who do not in fact exist. We modified this paradigm in two ways. First, in contrast to past research that was limited to all-male samples, we recruited both men and women given our interest in gender. Second, while past research has measured sexual touching (Pryor, 1987), the telling of sexist jokes (Siebler et al., 2008), sexual glances (Logel et al., 2009), and the sending

<sup>12</sup> Our pre-registered data analysis plan stated that we would examine gender differences in SSB within each goal condition. See the Supplemental Materials for analyses broken down by the four original conditions.

<sup>13</sup> We also measured personal sense of power (Anderson et al., 2012), single-item measures of perceived relative power and perceived attractiveness of partner, and an adapted measure of Gelfand et al.'s (2006) relational capital measure. See the Supplemental Materials for further detail on those results. We do not describe them here as they were not central to our hypotheses.

of pornographic images (Maass et al., 2003), in the present study we examined the asking of sexually loaded questions during the initiation of a workplace relationship.

We had three goals in developing this measure. First, we sought to generate a measure that captured the theoretical essence of SSB as an influence tool with the potential to generate psychological, emotional, and relational effects (Aquino et al., 2014). Second, we aimed to design questions that would be perceived as inappropriate (i.e., consistent with sexual harassment). Third, we sought a measure that participants would respond to candidly to obviate floor effects. Through careful pretesting, we generated a task that achieves these objectives. The task involved making 12 pairwise choices between two questions. Pretesting revealed that eight of the questions met the criteria for problematic SSB, meaning they were rated as sexual in nature and inappropriate. The experimental items were rated as higher both in an absolute sense (relative to the midpoint of the pretest rating scales) and in a relative sense (compared to the paired non-sexual questions). An example was a choice between asking whether their interaction partner had ever had a workplace conflict (a control question) versus whether their interaction partner had ever had a workplace relationship (an SSB question). The remaining choices were treated as control items as they did not meet these criteria. Our behavioral measure was the proportion of times participants selected the SSB questions over the non-sexual questions. Appendix B reports the eight SSB questions and their paired control questions. The Supplemental Materials report the pretest results.

**SSI.** After selecting questions for their task partner, participants completed the identical SSI measure introduced in Study 1b.

#### 4.1.5. Results

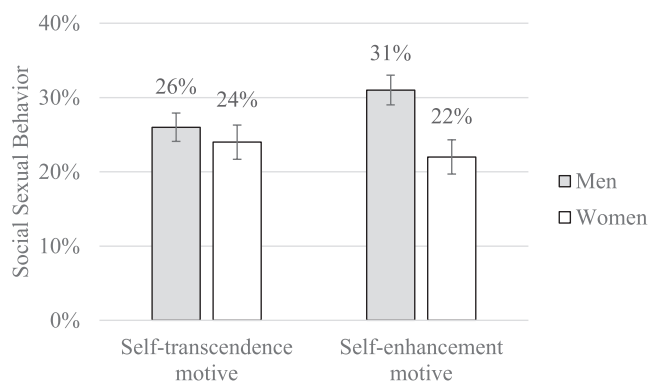
The Supplemental Materials (Table 3) provide descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables.

**4.1.5.1. SSI strength.** We conducted an ANOVA with gender and interpersonal motive as between-participants factors. Two significant effects emerged. First, in support of Hypothesis 2, SSI strength was greater for men ( $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) than women ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ),  $F(1, 603) = 6.80$ ,  $p = .009$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . Second, in support of Hypothesis 4, SSI strength was greater in the self-enhancement motive condition ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ) than in the self-transcendence motive condition ( $M = 3.7$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ),  $F(1, 603) = 6.67$ ,  $p = .010$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . The interaction was not significant ( $p = .645$ ).

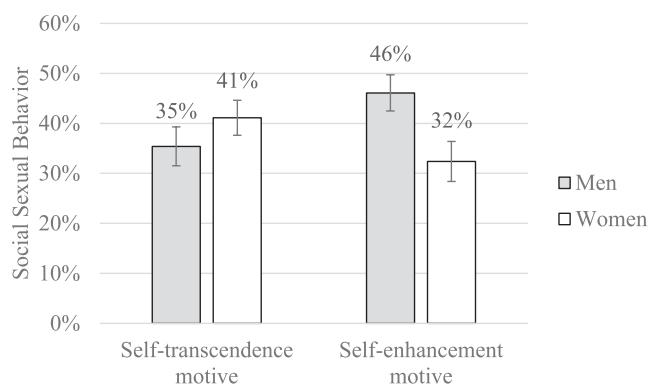
**4.1.5.2. SSB Intentions<sup>14</sup>.** We conducted an ANOVA including gender and interpersonal motive as between-participants factors, which revealed a main effect for gender with men ( $M = 0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ) intending to initiate more SSB than did women ( $M = 0.2$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ),  $F(1, 603) = 7.22$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . The main effect of interpersonal motive on SSB intentions was not significant,  $F(1, 603) = 0.82$ ,  $p = .366$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.00$ . The hypothesized (Hypothesis 5) gender and interpersonal motive interaction was in the predicted direction but non-significant,  $F(1, 603) = 3.56$ ,  $p = .060$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ .<sup>15</sup> As depicted in Fig. 3, men ( $M = 0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ) intended to initiate more SSB than did women ( $M = 0.2$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ) in the self-enhancement motive condition,  $t(603) = 3.17$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $d =$

<sup>14</sup> The potential range of scores was 0 to 1, and this is what we observed. Sixty-eight percent of participants sent at least one of the eight possible SSB questions (67% of men vs 68% of women).

<sup>15</sup> To be consistent with earlier studies, we also examined results excluding participants who were not heterosexual (note: this exclusion was not pre-registered). In this subsample ( $n = 554$ ), only the gender X interpersonal motive interaction predicting SSB was statistically significant,  $F(1, 550) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ . Men ( $M = 0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ) engaged in more SSB than women ( $M = 0.2$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ) in the self-enhancement motive condition ( $F[1, 550] = 7.32$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.01$ ) but not in the self-transcendence motive condition,  $F(1, 550) = 0.01$ ,  $p = .94$ ,  $\eta_p^2 < 0.01$ .



**Fig. 3.** SSB initiation (i.e., proportion of SSB questions selected) by interpersonal motive and gender (Study 3). Error bars represent + / - one standard error.



**Fig. 4.** SSB initiation (i.e., proportion of SSB questions selected) by interpersonal motive (power condition) and gender (Study 4). Error bars represent + / - one standard error.

0.38; in the self-transcendence motive condition, the gender difference was not significant ( $M_{male} = 0.3$  (0.3) v.  $M_{female} = 0.2$  (0.2),  $t(603) = -0.58$ ,  $p = .564$ ;  $d = 0.07$ ). Broken down by gender, men's SSB intentions varied across interpersonal motive conditions [ $t(603) = -2.17$ ,  $p = .031$ ,  $d = 0.21$ ], but women's did not [ $t(603) = 0.64$ ,  $p = .522$ ,  $d = 0.09$ ].

**4.1.5.3. Mediation analyses.** First, we conducted a mediation analysis to test whether SSI strength mediated the relationship between gender and SSB intentions (Hypothesis 3) using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS Model 4 with 10,000 bootstrapped resamples. SSI strength emerged as a significant mediator of the relationship between gender and SSB intentions (95% CI [0.00, 0.04]).

Second, we conducted an exploratory moderated mediation analysis to test Hypothesis 5, which predicts an increase in men's (but not women's) SSB intentions when desiring self-enhancement, mediated by men's greater SSI strength. To do so, we utilized 10,000 bootstrapped resamples using Hayes' (2013) PROCESS Model 5). As the 95% confidence interval did not bridge zero [0.004, 0.039], the hypothesis was supported.

#### 4.1.6. Discussion

Using a novel measure of SSB involving asking a task partner sexually inappropriate questions during a get-acquainted interaction, we replicated the previous studies' finding that men intended to initiate more SSB than women, and this gender difference was mediated by the greater accessibility of social sexuality in men's working self-concept (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Consistent with Hypothesis 4, we also found that the manipulation of interpersonal motives had a direct effect on SSI strength, with the pursuit of self-enhancement goals increasing the

strength of SSI in the working self-concept relative to the pursuit of self-transcendence goals. Finally, we found some evidence of the predicted link between desire to self-enhance and SSB intentions for men but not women (Hypothesis 5). This pattern is consistent with prior research showing more variability in behavior for individuals who have relatively stronger internalization of the relevant identity, which in this case is men's greater SSI strength. We also note that men's desire for self-enhancement led for them to ask more sexually inappropriate questions.

## 5. Study 4

The previous study demonstrated that activating self-transcendent goals decreased men's but not women's SSB intentions, thus mitigating the gender difference in SSB intentions. SSI strength mediated the gender difference in SSB when pursuing self-enhancement goals, but not when individuals were seeking self-transcendent goals. In Study 4, we attempted a conceptual replication that manipulated self-enhancement goals indirectly via social power roles.

We build on research demonstrating that, in collaborative settings including teams and organizations, social power may promote social responsibility (Chen et al., 2001; Fleischmann & Lammers, 2020; Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2019; Winter & Barenbaum, 1985). If holding social power promotes self-transcendence goals (i.e., benevolent norms encouraging power holders to take care of others), then, somewhat ironically, occupying high-power roles might mitigate the gender difference in SSB tendencies by momentarily suppressing men's chronic tendencies. This proposed pattern whereby high power mitigates gender differences in SSB would be consistent with claims made within the broader social power literature (Rucker & Galinsky, 2016; Rucker et al., 2018) that high power suppresses gender differences. By contrast, we might expect that self-enhancement motives are especially active under low-power conditions, thus prompting men to initiate more SSB.

We pre-registered the prediction that men in low-power positions will initiate more SSB than women in low-power positions and for SSI to mediate this relationship (Hypotheses 3 and 5). By contrast, we did not expect gender differences in SSB to emerge in high-power positions. To test these predictions, we manipulated boss versus subordinate roles within cross-sex dyads and examined individuals' actual SSB in the lab, directly before an anticipated face-to-face interaction with their task partner, who they were led to believe was in the next room. Doing so allows us to examine the relation between gender and social power in predicting SSB when individuals expect to interact directly with targets.

### 5.1. Pretests

Before proceeding to the main experiment, we conducted two pretests to confirm that the social power manipulation had its intended effects, which is for low power to instigate self-enhancement motives (i.e., a desire for power) and for high power to instigate self-transcendence motives (i.e., adoption of benevolent norms). After manipulating social power in a manner comparable to the present study, we measured desire for power using a 6-item measure from Lammers et al. (2016) ( $n = 291$ ). As predicted, the self-enhancement motive was stronger in the low-power condition ( $M = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) than control ( $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $t(288) = 3.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ ) and high-power ( $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $t(288) = 3.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.52$ ) conditions,  $F(2, 288) = 8.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.06$ . The high-power and control conditions did not significantly differ,  $t(288) = 0.18$ ,  $p = .855$ ,  $d = 0.02$ .

In a second pretest ( $n = 285$ ), we again manipulated social power in a manner consistent with the present study and then measured benevolent norms using a 5-item measure from Tost & Johnson (2019). As predicted, benevolent norms were stronger in the high-power condition ( $M = 5.5$ ,  $SD = 0.7$ ) than control ( $M = 4.9$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ,  $t(282) = 4.57$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.82$ ) and low-power ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ,  $t(282) = 6.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.83$ ) conditions,  $F(2, 282) = 20.05$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$ . The low-power and control conditions did not significantly differ,  $t(282) =$

1.60,  $p = .110$ ,  $d = 0.21$ . We also found that participants in the high-power condition reported greater endorsement of benevolent norms compared to participants in the control and low-power conditions, who did not significantly differ.

Taken together, these pretests confirm that the current manipulation of social power had their intended effects on participants' motives. Please see the Supplemental Materials for a full reporting of both pretests.

## 5.2. Method

### 5.2.1. Participants and design

The experiment included a manipulation of self-transcending (versus self-enhancing) motive by varying level of social power. The study utilized a 2 (social power: high, low)  $\times$  2 (gender: male, female) between-participants design. We recruited 204 undergraduate business students to participate in a laboratory experiment in exchange for partial course credit. One participant was excluded due to experimenter error, leaving a final sample of  $n = 203$  (101 men, 102 women). We also gathered a non-contemporaneous control sample ( $n = 162$ , including 72 male and 90 female) in which social power was not manipulated, which we analyzed after reporting the experimental findings. The control sample came from the identical undergraduate population as the main experiment; control participants also received partial course credit in exchange for participation. The final sample was 29 % Caucasian, 1 % African American, 56 % Asian American, 9 % Latino/Hispanic, and 5 % who selected other categories. The vast majority (92 %) of respondents were in the age bracket of 18–24, with 4 % age 25–29, and 2 % age 30 +.

### 5.2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited for a study about teamwork. Upon arrival to the lab, participants were assigned to individual study rooms and consented to work with another research participant on a series of face-to-face workplace tasks. Participants were told their partner was stationed in an adjacent study room and that, before meeting in person, they would exchange personal information with each other through handwritten profiles. The experimenter handed participants a single sheet of paper that asked them to share demographic data (i.e., year in school, gender, and major) and personal information (up to 3 of each of the following: life goals, role models, personality traits admired most in others, most used apps on phones). Participants also rated themselves on a variety of personal characteristics, including attractiveness, intelligence, and sense of humor. Endpoints were "significantly below average" and "significantly above average." Participants were instructed to open their door when done so that the experimenter could retrieve their profile to share it with their partner. We did not score participants' profiles as they were only included to increase the believability of the partner's bogus profile. Unlike past research that has relied on hypothetical work partners to simulate social interaction, in the present study participants came into the laboratory and were led to believe that they would soon work with the person in the adjacent room on a series of face-to-face tasks. This information was provided before participants were given the opportunity to sexually harass, thereby creating a more psychologically realistic situation to examine behavior than in past research.

**Partner Description.** After a few minutes, the experimenter returned with the partner's handwritten profile. To increase the salience of their partner's gender, we recruited men and women with gender-stereotypical penmanship to transcribe the standardized information presented about their partner (e.g., sophomore, Econ major). Participants were always paired with a cross-sex partner who was described as above average in physical attractiveness and who reported frequently using the dating app Tinder, indicating sexual availability, in keeping with past research examining sexual harassment (Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Diehl et al., 2012; Maass et al., 2003; Siebler et al., 2008; Williams et al., 2017).

**Social Power Manipulation.** Participants submitted their handwritten profile to the experimenter and then completed a bogus leadership assessment before receiving their partner's profile. In addition to completing several face-valid scales of leadership potential, participants completed an open-ended essay describing past leadership experiences (adapted from Anderson & Berdahl, 2002) to reinforce the belief that their assignment to the role of boss or subordinate was based on their responses. In reality, participants were randomly assigned to role. To emphasize the boss's control over resources, a key aspect of situational power (Keltner et al., 2003), participants in both roles were told that they would work with their partner on a series of tasks "determined by the boss." Only participants in the high-power role were told that they earned their role because of "exemplary leadership potential." Consistent with past research manipulating power in two parts (Galinsky et al., 2003), the social power manipulation was reinforced by having participants recall an experience with power in a short essay. Participants in the high-power role recalled a time when they had power over others and participants in the low-power role recalled a time when others had power over them. The Supplemental Materials provides the full text of the manipulations.

### 5.2.3. Dependent Measures<sup>16</sup>

We used the identical measure of SSB from Study 3. We then measured SSI strength, as first described in Study 1b. After all dependent measures were collected, participants responded to a manipulation check of social power: "Who had more power today, you or the other participant with whom you were paired?" Response scale ranged from 1 (*I definitely had more power*) to 7 (*Other person definitely had more power*). We reverse-scored the measure so that higher scores indicate more relative power.<sup>17</sup>

### 5.2.4. Results

As all dependent measures were completed independently, the individual was the unit of analysis. A few participants did not complete all measures, thus accounting for slight variation in the degrees of freedom reported below. The Supplemental Materials (Table 4) provide descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables.

### 5.2.5. Manipulation check

Participants in the high-power condition ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) reported more social power than participants in the low-power condition ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ),  $t(131) = 8.19$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.42$ . Thus, the manipulation of social power was successful.

### 5.2.6. Initiation of SSB

We conducted a 2 (Gender)  $\times$  2 (Social Power Condition) between-participants ANOVA. In support of Hypothesis 5, the predicted gender  $\times$  social power interaction emerged as significant,  $F(1, 197) = 6.68$ ,  $p = .011$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ . In the low-power condition (which activates self-enhancement goals), men's ( $M = 0.5$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ) initiation of SSB was greater than women's ( $M = 0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ),  $t(197) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $d = 0.53$ . In the high-power condition (which activates self-transcendence goals), the gender difference in SSB initiation was non-significant ( $M_{men} = 0.4$ ,  $SD = 0.3$  versus  $M_{women} = 0.4$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ),  $t(197) = -1.09$ ,  $p = .277$ ,  $d = 0.21$ . We also broke down the interaction by gender. Compared to the high-power condition, men's SSB initiation was greater

in the low-power condition,  $t(197) = -2.03$ ,  $p = .044$ ,  $d = 0.38$ . The difference in women's initiation of SSB did not significantly differ by social power condition,  $t(197) = 1.63$ ,  $p = .105$ ,  $d = 0.36$ . Neither of the main effects emerged as significant ( $ps > 0.28$ ). Fig. 4 depicts the results.

### 5.2.7. SSI strength

We conducted an ANOVA on SSI strength with participant gender and social power condition as between-subject factors. The main effect of gender ( $F[1, 197] = 7.95$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$ ) was subsumed by a significant gender  $\times$  social power interaction,  $F(1, 197) = 3.97$ ,  $p = .048$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ . In the low-power condition, men ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) reported stronger SSI than women did ( $M = 3.5$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(197) = 3.38$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.51$ . In the high-power condition, men's ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ) and women's ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ) SSI did not significantly differ,  $t(197) = 0.59$ ,  $p = .556$ ,  $d = 0.12$ . Breaking down the interaction by gender, women's SSI was stronger in the high-power condition than the low-power condition,  $t(197) = 2.54$ ,  $p = .012$ ,  $d = 0.48$ ; men's SSI did not vary across social power conditions,  $t(197) = -0.28$ ,  $p = .780$ ,  $d = 0.06$ . Finally, contrary to Hypothesis 4 and the results of Study 3, we did not observe a main effect of condition on SSI ( $p = .112$ ).

### 5.2.8. Moderated mediation analysis

We examined whether the gender  $\times$  social power interaction predicting SSB is mediated through SSI. The analysis utilized 10,000 bootstrapped samples (using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS Model 8<sup>18</sup>) with SSI as the mediator. As expected, SSI mediated the effect of gender on SSB for the low-power condition (95 % CI [0.01, 0.07]). For the high-power condition, SSI was not a significant mediator (95 % CI [-0.02, 0.03]). Overall, the moderated mediation model by SSI was supported (95 % CI [0.01, 0.07]). These results show that men's greater initiation of SSB when occupying low, but not high, power roles was explained by SSI strength, supporting Hypotheses 3 and 5. Fig. 5 depicts the moderated mediation analysis.

### 5.2.9. Additional analyses with control condition

Although the control condition was collected non-contemporaneously, it could help to establish the effects of low versus high power. After adding the control condition, we first confirmed that social power influenced relative power perceptions,  $F(2, 288) = 47.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.25$ . Participants in the control condition ( $M = 4.2$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) reported more power than those in the low-power condition ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ;  $t(291) = 2.43$ ,  $p = .016$ ,  $d = 0.38$ ) and less power than those in the high-power condition ( $M = 5.3$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ;  $t(291) = 8.22$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.11$ ).

**SSB.** The key gender  $\times$  social power interaction remained significant after adding in the control condition,  $F(2, 357) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .019$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$ . In the control condition, men's ( $M = 0.5$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ) SSB was greater than women's ( $M = 0.4$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ),  $t(357) = 1.99$ ,  $p = .047$ ,  $d = 0.33$ . Similarly, in the low-power condition, men's ( $M = 0.5$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ) SSB was greater than women's ( $M = 0.3$ ,  $SD = 0.2$ ),  $t(357) = 2.69$ ,  $p = .007$ ,  $d = 0.53$ . In the high-power condition, the gender difference in SSB was non-significant ( $M_{men} = 0.4$ ,  $SD = 0.3$  versus  $M_{women} = 0.4$ ,  $SD = 0.3$ ),  $t(357) = -1.15$ ,  $p = .251$ ,  $d = 0.21$ .

**SSI.** When we reran the above analysis including the control condition, the only significant effect to emerge was a main effect for gender,  $F(1, 356) = 11.58$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ .

### 5.2.10. Discussion

Study 4 provides behavioral evidence in support of several hypotheses. First, while our previous studies found support for an overall

<sup>16</sup> We also measured personal sense of power (Anderson et al., 2012) and an exploratory measure of selecting a task to work on with their partner. Notably, SSB did not positively predict subjective feelings of power (see the Supplemental Materials), suggesting it serves external impression management goals rather than internal affirmations of power. See the Supplemental Materials for further detail.

<sup>17</sup> Due to a glitch in the survey administration, the manipulation check was collected for only a subset of the sample.

<sup>18</sup> Because the interaction emerged for both the proposed mediator (SSI) and the outcome variable (SSB), we used Model 8. However, the results are also significant with Model 5 (95% CI [0.003, 0.040]), which was utilized in Study 3.

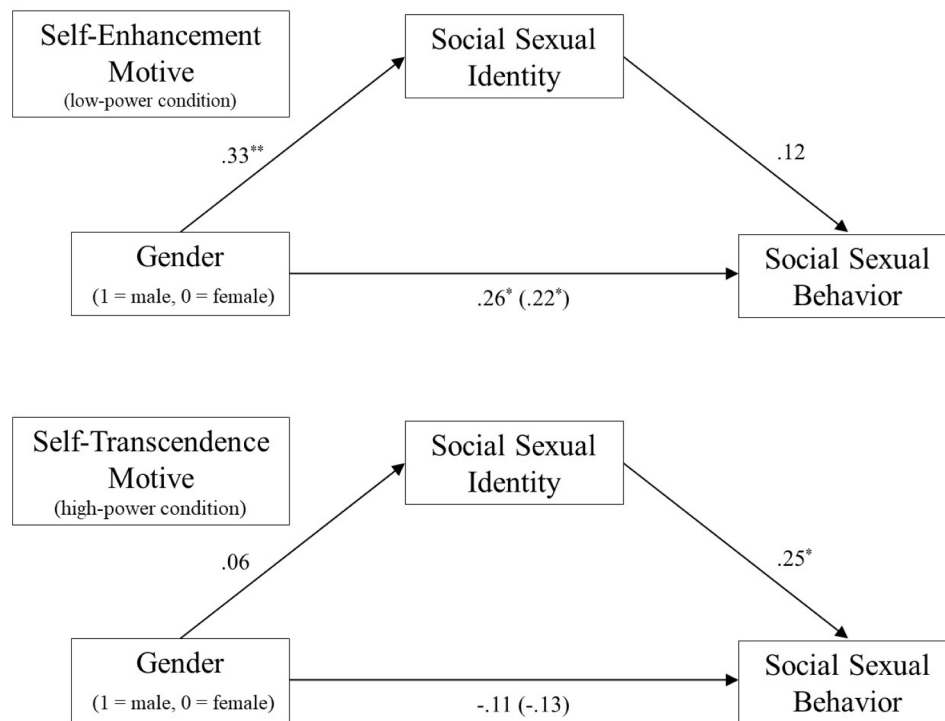


Fig. 5. Moderated mediation analysis in Study 4 (PROCESS Model 8). Depicts unstandardized regression coefficients from analyses using standardized variables. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

gender difference in SSI, in the current study the main effect was subsumed by an interaction with social power condition. The pattern of the interaction was such that the expected gender difference in SSI strength emerged in the low-power condition but was mitigated entirely in the high-power condition. We also found support for moderation of the direct effect of gender on SSB by social power condition (Hypothesis 5), which our pretests show activate different interpersonal motives. When self-enhancement motives are active (in low-power roles), SSI strength mediated men's greater initiation of SSB (Hypothesis 3). However, we failed to find support for self-enhancement motives strengthening SSI (Hypothesis 4). Overall, this supports a social-cognitive account of social sexuality in the workplace, an approach that explains *when* and *why* men and women diverge in their tendencies to initiate SSB. The results support our theory centering on the role of the self-concept in explaining men's greater SSB relative to women's under low-power conditions. When situations increase self-transcendence goals (i.e., benevolent norms), men's greater tendency to initiate SSB is suppressed, as is the gender difference in SSI strength. While the high-power condition mitigated gender differences, we found that gender differences were maintained under the low-power and control conditions. Instead, the gender difference in SSB was maintained in the low-power condition, with men initiating more SSB than women. Overall, this pattern of results comports with social-cognitive principles that situational moderators have stronger effects on individuals for whom a particular identity is especially central in their self-concept, which in the case of SSI, is men.

## 6. Study 5

In the final experiment, we examined the implications of subordinate men's SSB for their perceived power relative to a female boss. We expected that the initiation of SSB could enhance men's perceived power (Hypothesis 6). If so, then SSB can be understood as functional for self-enhancing impression management goals, despite other dysfunctional consequences. Just as narcissists engage in seemingly dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors to procure admiration (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001), low-power men may engage in seemingly dysfunctional SSB

behaviors to appear (momentarily) powerful in the eyes of others. We anticipate SSB to affect power perceptions by generating SSI and masculinity perceptions through a sequential process. By violating norms of impersonal professionalism (Uhlmann & Sanchez-Burks, 2014), SSB might demonstrate flirtatious agency, and ultimately masculinity, given the link between agency and masculinity documented by prior work (e.g., Rudman & Glick, 2001). To explore the harm caused by this potentially pernicious behavior, we also measure the expected impact on the female bosses' positive and negative affect.

### 6.1. Method

#### 6.1.1. Participants

Students ( $N = 225$ ) enrolled in an undergraduate business course at a private, southeastern university in the United States completed the study for partial course credit. Twenty-one people (9%) missed at least one of two questions checking for reading comprehension and were excluded from analyses, consistent with the pre-registration. The final sample ( $n = 204$ ) included 114 men (56%) and 90 women (44%) with a mean age of 19.69 years ( $SD = 1.15$ ). Fifty-five percent were White/Caucasian, 25% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% were Hispanic/Latino, 6% were Black/African American, 1% were Native American, and 6% indicated "other" categories.

#### 6.1.2. Design and Procedure

The study utilized a two-condition (SSB vs Control), between-participants design. Participant gender varied naturally. Participants read of a 26-year-old man named David who worked in San Francisco, California for a venture-backed start-up company making drones. Participants read some basic background information about David's education, hometown, and hobbies. Then, they read of his boss, 27-year-old Vanessa. To get acquainted before working together, Vanessa invited David to a coffee meeting.

In both conditions, David opened the meeting by asking, "What's your idea of an effective team?" and Vanessa responded, "I think that great teammates are those who are passionate, cooperative, and willing



to work hard. Passion is really important.” David’s response to Vanessa represented our key manipulation. In the SSB condition, participants read that David responded with, “Passion? I can definitely offer you passion...Have you ever worked with someone you wanted to date? I am curious who you find attractive.” This statement was adapted from the question-asking task used in Studies 3 and 4. In the Control condition, participants read that David responded with, “Hard work? I can definitely offer you a strong work ethic...Have you ever worked with someone you thought was a star? I am curious who you find it easy to work with.” In both conditions, Vanessa received an urgent phone call and excused herself before she could respond.

### 6.1.3. Measures

After reading the scenario, participants reported their perceptions of David and then Vanessa on a variety of measures. Individual items for each measure were presented in counterbalanced order.

**Relative Power.** Immediately after reading of the conversation over coffee (where the experimental manipulation took place), participants responded to two items comprising the measure of relative power. First, participants reported their perceptions of David and Vanessa’s relative power using a scale from 1 (*Vanessa has much more power*) to 7 (*David has much more power*). Second, participants indicated who controlled the interaction using a scale from 1 (*Vanessa is much more in-control*) to 7 (*David is much more in-control*).

**SSI Strength.** Participants rated David’s SSI strength using the ten items from the SSI measure described in prior studies (e.g., “David is not afraid to use whatever personal assets he has to get his way”) ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

**Gender Identity.** Participants reported how masculine and feminine they perceived David to be using items drawn from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (Bem, 1981). The masculinity measure included the following seven items: masculine, dominant, strong, assertive, willing to take risks, aggressive, and unpredictable ( $\alpha = 0.75$ ). The femininity measure included these seven items: feminine, timid, weak, sensitive to others’ needs, sincere, friendly, and tactful ( $\alpha = 0.59$ ). The response scales ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

**Expected Positive and Negative Affect.**<sup>19</sup> Participants reported how they would feel after this conversation if they were Vanessa using the 20 items from the PANAS (Watson et al., 1988) using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*very much*). One 10-item scale formed positive affect ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) and another 10-item scale formed negative affect ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ).

**Manipulation Check.** At the end of the survey, we assessed the effectiveness of our experimental manipulation. Participants indicated whether the interaction was inappropriate and sexual using a scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*entirely*).

### 6.1.4. Results and discussion

The Supplemental Materials (Table 5) provides descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among variables. Analyses were first conducted using ANOVA with between-participant factors for condition and participant gender. Because no significant effects emerged for participant gender, we report results collapsed across this factor.

### 6.1.5. Manipulation check

We first tested the effectiveness of our manipulation. The social interaction was perceived to be more sexual and inappropriate in the SSB condition ( $M = 3.8$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ) than in the control condition ( $M = 1.9$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ,  $t[202] = 16.31$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 2.29$ ), indicating that our manipulation of SSB was effective.

<sup>19</sup> We also measured expected positive ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ) ( $t[202] = -0.08$ ,  $p = .939$ ,  $d = -0.01$ ) and negative affect ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ) ( $t[202] = 1.77$ ,  $p = .079$ ,  $d = 0.25$ ) for David, but the SSB manipulation had non-significant effects for both outcomes.

### 6.1.6. Perceived relative power

We then examined the implications of SSB for perceptions of relative power. The male subordinate was perceived as having more power in the SSB condition ( $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 1.2$ ) than the control condition ( $M = 3.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ),  $t(202) = 2.09$ ,  $p = .038$ ,  $d = 0.29$ .

### 6.1.7. Perceived SSI strength

Following SSB ( $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ), the male subordinate was perceived to have a stronger SSI than in the control condition ( $M = 4.0$ ,  $SD = 1.0$ ),  $t(202) = 3.32$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.47$ .

### 6.1.8. Gender identity

We next explored whether the male subordinate’s SSB led him to be seen as more masculine. In the SSB condition, he was viewed as more masculine ( $M = 5.0$ ,  $SD = 0.8$  v.  $M = 4.5$ ,  $SD = 0.8$ ,  $t[202] = 4.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.60$ ) and less feminine ( $M = 3.0$ ,  $SD = 0.60$  v.  $M = 3.6$ ,  $SD = 0.65$ ,  $t[202] = -6.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.95$ ) than in the control condition.

### 6.1.9. Sequential mediation analysis

Using Preacher and Hayes’ (2008) method, we then explored whether a perceived increase in SSI strength could explain SSB’s effects on men’s perceived masculinity and perceived power (Hypothesis 5). Specifically, we tested a model involving SSB  $\rightarrow$  SSI strength  $\rightarrow$  masculinity  $\rightarrow$  perceived power. Using PROCESS Model 6 (Hayes, 2013), we entered SSB condition as the explanatory variable, SSI strength and perceived masculinity as sequential mediators, and perceived power as the outcome variable. The bootstrap analysis with 10,000 resamples yielded a 95 % confidence interval that excluded zero for the four-variable model [0.01, 0.09]. Fig. 6 illustrates these results. When masculinity enters prior to SSI strength in the analysis, the 95 % confidence interval bridges zero [-0.04, 0.03]. These analyses provide evidence that increases in SSI strength help to explain why low-power men who initiate SSB towards high-power women are perceived to be more masculine and, in turn, more powerful.

Whereas Study 3 demonstrated that adopting a power motive increased SSB, these results suggest that doing so can effectively create powerful impressions in the eyes of others.

### 6.1.10. Positive and negative affect

Finally, we explored the expected impact of SSB on Vanessa’s positive and negative affect. SSB was anticipated to reduce Vanessa’s positive affect ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 1.5$  v.  $M = 5.7$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ),  $t(202) = -5.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.77$ . SSB was also expected to increase Vanessa’s negative affect ( $M = 5.6$ ,  $SD = 2.0$  v.  $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ),  $t(202) = 6.51$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.91$ .

### 6.1.11. Discussion

In support of Hypothesis 6, we found support for the idea that low-power men’s initiation of SSB towards high-power women, as we observed in Study 4, may function to influence social perceptions of power. Specifically, by engaging in SSB, the momentary gap in perceived power between subordinates and bosses is smaller than under baseline conditions. This suggests that, to reduce inappropriate SSB, men may need to consciously adopt self-transcendent goals to avoid behaviors that lead to self-enhancement. In addition, SSB was expected to negatively impact the emotional state of a female boss along both dimensions of affect, indicating one type of harm potentially caused by SSB.

## 7. General discussion

### 7.1. Summary of results

Six studies adopt a social cognitive approach to explaining gender differences in SSB. Our studies provide converging evidence that social sexual identity is a novel and important construct for understanding

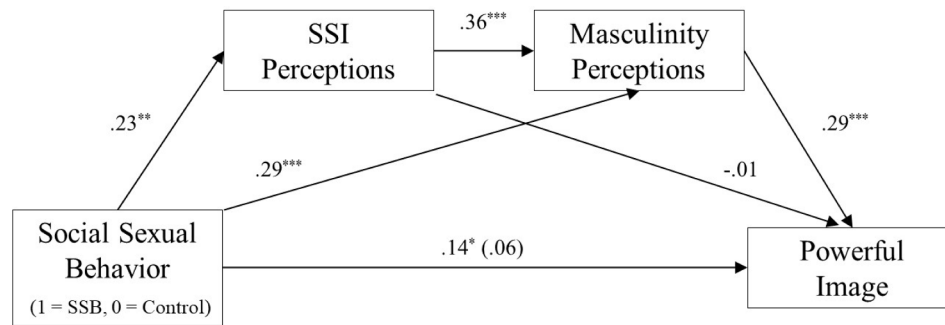


Fig. 6. Sequential mediation analysis in Study 5 (PROCESS Model 6). Depicts unstandardized regression coefficients from analyses using standardized variables. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

gendered patterns of social sexual behavior in workplace settings. We first established a link between social sexual characteristics in the self-concept and the tendency to initiate SSB. Study 1a established that the chronic accessibility of SSI corresponds with greater intentions to initiate SSB, a pattern that held even controlling for moral identity; Study 1b manipulated the momentary accessibility of SSI in the working self-concept and established its causal role in SSB intentions and ruled out moral identity's causal role in SSB tendencies. Study 2 further established the novel predictive power of SSI in predicting a broad range of SSB intentions, including behaviors that might be welcomed and those associated with sexual harassment, even when controlling for individual differences in narcissism, ambivalent sexism, personal sense of power, flirtatious communication styles, and socially desirable responding. In this first series of studies, we also observed that SSI strength mediates men's greater propensity to initiate SSB.

Next, we examined potential boundary conditions of the gender gap in SSB. To do so, we utilized social cognitive principles that distinguish between self-enhancement versus self-transcendent goals. Study 3 manipulated these interpersonal motives and found that SSI strength decreases when pursuing self-transcendence (i.e., affiliation, benevolence) compared to self-enhancement (i.e., power, agency), and gender differences in SSB intentions were mitigated when pursuing self-transcendence. We then extended our examination by manipulating social power roles (high versus low) in Study 4. Before doing so, we conducted two pretests to confirm that self-enhancement goals are activated when occupying a low-power role and self-transcendent goals are activated when occupying a high-power role within the context of a collaborative work environment. We conceptually replicated the pattern observed in Study 3, with the gender difference in SSB emerging under low-power roles, but mitigated entirely under high-power roles. While SSI strength mediated the gender difference in SSB when occupying low-power roles, occupying a high-power role eliminated the gender gap in SSI strength. The final experiment (Study 5) was designed to test whether men's greater initiation of SSB is successful in the shaping the focal actor's powerful image. By manipulating whether a low-power man initiates SSB (versus non-SSB) toward a high-power woman, we found that the use of SSB increased momentary perceptions of the focal male actor as being flirtatious, masculine, and powerful.

## 7.2. Implications for theories of social sexual behavior

Our research makes several important contributions to theories of social sexual behavior. While SSB may be low-frequency events, they have the potential to cause significant harm. In past research examining characteristics of focal actors that predict the most pernicious forms of SSB (i.e., sexual harassment), the emphasis has been on explaining these patterns in terms of ethical lapses, sexual drive, and abuse of power. We introduce a novel explanation for SSB that is grounded in the self-concept. We build on Markus's (1977) self-schemata theory. Markus defined self-schemata as "cognitive generalizations about the self,

derived from past experience, that organize and guide the processing of the self-related information contained in an individual's social experience." Based on this definition, we examined self-schemata about the self as a social sexual being. While people might not always identify as a flirt, we demonstrate when they do so and what effect this has on their behavior. Specifically, we demonstrate that adopting a self-definition as an individual who leverages sex-appeal in pursuit of personally valued gains causes individuals to initiate more SSB. Our research also helps to unite disparate streams of SSB research as, until now, researchers have mainly studied enjoyed forms of SSB (e.g., Sheppard et al. 2020) in isolation from more overtly hostile forms of sexual behavior (e.g., Berdahl, 2007). Our research has the potential to unite these streams of literature by identifying SSI as a novel mechanism underlying a broad range of both potentially welcomed and unwelcomed forms of SSB.

In addition to demonstrating a link between individual differences in chronic internalization of SSI traits and SSB behaviors, we build on theories of the self as highly malleable (Markus & Kunda, 1986; Oyserman, 2001). We are the first to our knowledge to provide an empirical test of the intrapsychic processes that mediate situationally variant gender differences in social sexual behavior. In contrast to previous approaches which portray SSB as an automatic outcome of certain individual differences (e.g., Bargh et al., 1995; Pryor et al., 1993), our research recognizes the role of self-regulation in accord with one's personal identity. By introducing and developing the construct of social sexual identity and exploring how its strength in the working self-concept varies across situations, we take an important step toward understanding the subjective phenomenological experience of individuals when engaging in SSB, and in so doing, we move towards a more agentic theory of SSB.

We move beyond individual difference explanations for men's greater initiation of SSB by applying social-cognitive principles to this domain. We theorize about *when* gender gaps emerge by distinguishing between self-enhancement goals (i.e., extrinsic goals involving self-interest, achievement, image, and power) and self-transcendence goals (i.e., intrinsic goals involving the pursuit of affiliation and benevolence), a distinction grounded in circumplex models of goals (Grouzet et al., 2005; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz & Boehnke, 2004). While self-enhancement goals strengthen SSI for men and women alike, we find that the initiation of SSB when pursuing self-enhancement is a tactic utilized by men more than women and provide some evidence to suggest this is because SSB signals masculinity. While past research has shown that initiating SSB can signal power in a bargaining context (Kray & Locke, 2008; Kray et al., 2012), the present research demonstrates for the first time that SSB may be a route for men to increase their influence (Cheng et al., 2013; Cheng & Tracy, 2014) and establish masculine credentials (Brescoll et al., 2012).

## 7.3. Implications for theories of gender

Our research moves beyond merely identifying gender differences to

addressing “the more demanding question of why the sexes sometimes differ considerably and at other times differ moderately or minimally or do not differ at all” (Eagly, 1995, p. 148). By adopting a social-cognitive model, our research describes the interplay of chronic differences in the salience of one aspect of the self-concept (e.g., social sexual identity) and situational circumstances (e.g., interpersonal motives and social power roles) that combine to turn on and off gender differences in SSB. Chronic gender differences emerged for accessibility of social sexual traits in the self-concept, a pattern consistent with men as the primary perpetrators of harassment (Gutek, 1985). However, women initiated SSB to non-trivial degrees and the effect sizes of gender differences were generally small-to-medium. This finding is important for tempering sexist attitudes. Both men (Glick & Fiske, 1999) and women (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Hall et al., 2005) face stereotypes related to SSB, with men portrayed as sexually deceptive and highly prone to sexual harassment (Glick & Fiske, 1999) and women portrayed as manipulative flirts (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Hall et al., 2005). In fact, men and women behave identically in some situations. Specifically, when pursuing self-transcendent goals and when occupying high-power positions, men’s SSB decreased to levels comparable to women, and the gender difference was mitigated entirely. By examining gender differences in concert with the situational context, we hope to avoid two common errors: exaggerating gender differences (*alpha bias*) and minimizing gender differences (*beta bias*) (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988).

While prior research has speculated that women may be especially prone to compensating for their low power by engaging in “strategic sexual performances” (i.e., flirting to gain influence) (Aquino et al., 2014; Watkins et al., 2013), we are the first to our knowledge to test this proposition experimentally. In fact, we demonstrate that low-power men initiate more “strategic sexual performances” than low-power women. Furthermore, our findings speak to sexual exchange theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004), which claims that women are endowed with greater ‘erotic capital’ (Hakim, 2010) likely to be leveraged when occupying low-power positions (Aquino et al., 2014). Contrary to principles of sexual exchange, we find that women’s initiation of SSB was not greater when in low-power positions. In fact, in low-power roles, women initiated *less* SSB than men. Previous research has cast doubt on the accuracy of sexual exchange theory (Rudman & Fetterolf, 2014), and the current research provides some disconfirming evidence from a task-oriented setting.

Our findings are consistent with prior research noting aggressive behavior by low-power men (Berdahl, 2007; Brescoll et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2017). Because social sexual identity mediated the results, our construct offers a more thorough understanding of the dynamic between low-power men and high-power women. Specifically, seeing oneself as sexually agentic may be one way for low-power men to maintain sexist gender relations. Low-power men’s inappropriate SSB is consistent with robust evidence that powerful women, by virtue of their status incongruity, incur backlash (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Rudman et al., 2012). Low-power men’s inappropriate SSB may discourage women from acting with power.

We have considered the possibility that our scale is biased to measure a masculine form of social sexual identity but we note that the items on the scale are fairly abstract (e.g., “body language” can mean many things, so it can accommodate men’s (stereotypical) tendency to puff up their chests as well as women’s (stereotypical) tendency to hike up their skirts). More importantly, the fact that the social power manipulation in Study 4 reveals that occupying a high-power role (but not low-power role) mitigates the gender difference in SSI entirely bolsters our claim that it is not measuring an aspect of identity or a behavioral tendency that is inherently masculine. Indeed, ancillary analyses of Study 4 show that our results are robust to controlling for gender identity. When women occupy high-power roles, the strength of their social sexual identity is comparable to high-power men’s. The fact that we see gender differences in Study 2 after controlling for socially desirable response tendencies suggests the gender difference in SSI is not simply a function

of women being reluctant to admit to initiating SSB.

#### 7.4. Implications for theories of power

Our results call into question seminal theories proposing high power as a central cause of inappropriate SSB. Those theories suggest the automatic activation of the sexual mating motive when power is primed, but previous research designs exploring this link are limited. Typically, the concept of power is activated without manipulating powerful roles or the high-power perspective is held constant in vignettes measuring tendencies to engage in sexually coercive behavior (Bargh et al., 1995; Pryor, 1987; Pryor & Stoller, 1994). Considering this issue, it is not possible to draw conclusions about the causal role of high versus low levels of social power per se. Perhaps the biggest theoretical advance of the present research is to move beyond the assumption that sexual harassment is predominantly the result of the disinhibiting effects unleashed by holding high power positions (Keltner et al., 2003). Prior research has shown that, within high social power roles, only individuals who are chronically low in sense of power experience elevated SSB rates. At least when power holders adopt benevolent norms (Tost, 2015; Tost & Johnson, 2019), men’s greater propensity to initiate SSB is curbed to levels comparable to women.

Our research also responds to a recent call to move beyond a psychology of high power to better understand the dynamics of low power (Schaerer et al., 2018). This call is especially relevant to theories of sexual harassment because focusing on harassment by the powerful neglects potentially problematic SSB being initiated at various levels of organizational hierarchies, and our SSI construct can help to explain when and why it emerges. Our finding that a gender difference in SSB emerges under low-power but not high-power roles challenges the view that gender differences merely reflect power differences. For example, Galinsky (2018) stated, “If men score higher on some dimension than women, if we take people into the laboratory and we randomly assign them to a high-power condition and some people to a low power condition, those randomly assigned to the high-power condition will score higher on that attribute. Or, if women score higher on an attribute than men and we randomly assign people to these power conditions, those in the low-power condition will score higher on the attribute.” By including a low-power condition in addition to the typically studied high-power condition, we were able to test whether gender differences in SSB map onto power differences. While high-power women behaved similarly to high-power men, men engaged in more SSB than women in the low-power condition, suggesting gender differences in SSB tendencies do not simply reflect power dynamics.

Our research highlights an important tension between Winter’s (1988) seminal power motive work and the highly influential approach-inhibition theory of power (Keltner et al., 2003). The latter, currently dominant perspective treats power as a spectrum, with greater power disinhibiting behavior (Keltner et al., 2003; Magee & Smith, 2013). In contrast, Winter’s work emphasizes desire for power, a motivational factor that high-power positions may or may not quell. Our findings suggest that sexual harassment more often reflects men’s desire for power, not the disinhibiting effects of high power. This insight stands in contrast to prior research that has found would-be harassers to enjoy disproportionate control over resources in the workplace (Fiske & Glick, 1995) and that activating the concept of power can unleash sexual harassment through the automatic association between power and sex (Bargh & Raymond, 1995; Pryor, 1987). Our results point to the importance of studying desire for power alongside level of power.

Winter (1988) found that the power motive increases men’s but not women’s profligate behaviors including drinking, gambling, and physical aggression. We contribute knowledge to this domain, showing that the power motive increases men’s (but not women’s) initiation of SSB. This research points to the need to disentangle desire for power from level of power to understand fully the effects of power on behavior.

## 7.5. Limitations and future directions

### 7.5.1. SSB initiation versus receipt

Our studies focus on *initiated* SSB because of its relatively objective nature and its potential correspondence with harassment. Still, identifying SSB is a subjective, perceptual process that depends on both speaker and target gender (Hehman et al., 2022). When and why women and men diverge in perceptions of SSB is worth further study. Generally, men and women perceive SSB similarly (Abrahams, 1994) and report identical levels of *received* SSB (Sheppard et al., 2020), but because men have the tendency to label women as ‘seductresses’ in prototypically masculine work environments (Kanter, 1977), men’s reports of received SSB in task environments might be inflated. Two facts corroborate this idea: Women reduced their SSI in low-power positions and women are over-represented in low-power positions at work. However, it is a question for future research to answer definitively.

### 7.5.2. Impact of SSB initiators’ sexual orientation

Base rates of SSB might vary by sexual orientation, an issue we could not explore with our overwhelmingly heterosexual samples. Investigating the impact of sexual orientation could help to delineate how sexual attraction figures into the observed effects (cf. Diehl et al., 2018). The Supplemental Materials provide analyses suggesting sexual attraction failed to predict SSI strength and SSB. We also report a supplemental study that regresses SSI on SSB, as in Study 2, while controlling for sociosexual orientation (Simpson & Gangestad, 1991), a construct measuring the degree to which individuals are interested in uncommitted sex. Sociosexual orientation failed to emerge as a significant predictor of SSB, suggesting habitual flirting cannot be reduced to sex drive. Still, our studies do not examine same-sex interactions and it is unclear whether our results hold for them. It is possible that our effects emerge only when mutual sexual attraction is a possibility (i.e., in cross-sex heterosexual dyads or same-sex homosexual or bisexual dyads). However, sexual attraction and sexual harassment are often disconnected (Berdahl, 2007), so it is possible that these patterns emerge in same-sex dyads too.

### 7.5.3. The impact of social norms and cultural background

As the ripples of #MeToo reverberate throughout society, it is interesting and important to consider whether the interactive patterns observed between gender and power will become less relevant over time as culture changes and women become increasingly empowered (e.g., Eagly et al., 2020; Luo & Zhang, 2022; Williams & Ceci, 2015). Such longstanding societal trends towards equality may be suppressing high-power men’s initiation of SSB. To address this question, we took advantage of a multi-year investigation of SSI (described in Supplemental Materials) with data gathered among undergraduate business students over a 7-year period. Consistent with prior research showing that social contextual factors (e.g., permissive norms, role models, opportunity to harass) influence men’s SSB tendencies (Pryor, 1987; Pryor et al., 1993; Pryor et al., 1995), we found a significant negative correlation between year measured and SSI strength for men ( $r[878] = -0.108, p = .001$ ) but not for women ( $r[1038] = -0.027, p = .388$ ), a difference in correlation magnitude that is marginally statistically significant ( $z = 1.77, p = .077$ ). While this is an encouraging sign that men can change their self-concept to reduce their risk of creating problematic work relationships, we note that even relatively recent data collection efforts (post-#MeToo) continue to show a gender difference in SSI strength and a consistent relationship between SSI strength and both SSB intentions, with SSI strength mediating gender differences in these behavioral tendencies. Future research that further unpacks these trends as a function of social power is important. It may be that these normative changes are not as salient when occupying low-power roles considering the outsized attention (and potential harm) dedicated to high-power men’s transgressions.

Just as cultural background influences responses to sexual

harassment (Cortina & Wasti, 2005; Wasti & Cortina, 2002), it could also influence the development of social sexual identity. Future research could investigate the influence of cultural dimensions on the size of gender differences in social sexual identity. In patriarchal cultures high in ambivalent sexism, asymmetric standards for men’s and women’s sexuality could exacerbate the gender difference in social sexual identity. In contrast, egalitarian cultures that do not shame women’s sexuality and encourage women’s agency might eliminate the gender difference in social sexual identity. Still, the relationship between this aspect of personal identity and culture is likely to be complex because women in male-dominated cultures are often expected to be flirtatious (Prentice & Carranza, 2002), a prescription likely to strengthen women’s social sexual identity. Separately investigating cultural dimensions such as patriarchal gender norms, ambivalent sexism, power distance, collectivism, and honor culture could help to delineate when gender differences in social sexual identity emerge and illuminate the patterns of socialization that cause them.

In addition to illuminating when gender differences emerge, these factors might contribute to higher base rates of SSB than in our laboratory settings, and future research is necessary to know whether our findings generalize in likely rare settings with high levels of SSB in the post #MeToo era. If SSI helps to rationalize SSB, then stronger SSI may be unnecessary to enable SSB when it is consistent with social norms. However, if SSB does inform levels of SSI (Bem, 1972), then few instances might emerge where people engage in SSB without exhibiting strong SSIs.

## 8. Conclusion

We help to illuminate what men are thinking when they engage in the types of behaviors seen in the #MeToo news—namely, they conceptualize themselves as flirts, especially when they want to claim a powerful identity. The SSI construct illustrates the importance of personal identity for causing SSB tendencies. SSI illuminates when SSB emerges over and above several commonly invoked predictors (e.g., sexism, narcissism, power). Despite long-standing claims to the contrary (e.g., Kipnis, 1972), holding power itself does not corrupt, at least in our studies. Instead, the desire for power corrupts by hijacking the most intimate domain of human behavior, sexuality, to serve as a strategy for increasing influence in human relationships. While sexual behavior at work is sometimes welcome, we contend that it is at risk of entering the domain of harassment when it is driven by momentary desires to enhance the self.

### Author note

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### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Laura J. Kray:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Funding acquisition. **Jessica A. Kennedy:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Funding acquisition. **Michael Rosenblum:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Appendix A

### Social sexual identity dependent measure in studies 1b-5

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statements:

1. I am a big flirt.
2. Flirting comes naturally to me.
3. I know how to turn on the charm.
4. I enjoy flirting with others.
5. I often flirt to persuade others to see my point of view.
6. I am not afraid to use my personal assets to get my way.
7. I am playful with members of the opposite sex.
8. When I want something from someone, I know how to be irresistible.
9. I know how to use body language to my advantage.
10. I have sex appeal.

## Appendix B

### Social sexual behavior dependent variable in studies 3 and 4

Non-SSB questions	SSB questions
Have you ever had a workplace conflict?	Have you ever had a workplace relationship?
What's your idea of a good job?	What's your idea of a good time?
Would you rather give a public speech or hold your breath?	Would you rather shoplift or take a nude stroll?
Are you more introverted or extraverted?	Are you more dominant or submissive?
What are you looking for in a teammate?	What are you looking for in a mate?
Are you better at math or writing?	Are you better at giving or receiving?
Are you good at meeting deadlines?	Are you good at setting boundaries?
Do you like to make speeches?	Do you like to make the first move?
<i>Note.</i> These questions were asked in the context of a cross-sex dyadic workplace "get-acquainted" task.	

## Appendix C. Supplementary material

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://OSF.IO/DHNMZ/>.

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