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Endorsing Precarious Manhood Beliefs Is Associated With Sexual Harassment Myths Acceptance in Italian Men and Women

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**Endorsing Precarious Manhood Beliefs Is Associated with Sexual Harassment Myths
Acceptance in Italian Men and Women**

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Abstract

The present study aimed to expand the understanding of the correlates of sexual harassment myths, a set of beliefs that serve to justify male perpetrators. Data collected among Italian adults ($N = 407$; 59.5% women) showed that individual levels of precarious manhood beliefs – according to which manhood is a social status that must be proven via public action – were related to greater sexual harassment myths acceptance in male and female respondents. Such associations were mediated by hostile sexism and benevolence toward men. Findings suggest that interventions to reduce tolerance of sexual harassment of women should target cultural views of manhood and counteract rigid models of masculinity and femininity.

Keywords: sexual harassment of women, sexual harassment myths acceptance, precarious manhood beliefs, ambivalent sexism, benevolence toward men

Endorsing Precarious Manhood Beliefs Is Associated with Sexual Harassment Myths

Acceptance in Italian Men and Women

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has emphasized the need for strong policies aimed at eradicating any forms of violence against women. Among them, the spread of global social campaigns has brought to the attention the prevalence of sexual harassment, intended as “any unwelcome sexual advance, unwelcome request for sexual favor, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behavior of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offense, humiliation or intimidation to the person” (WHO, 2011, p. 2).

According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2015), about 55% of women in the EU underwent sexual harassment at least once in their lifetimes. Such an estimate suggests that there is still considerable tolerance for sexual harassment of women (Brown et al., 2020). In social-psychological terms, tolerance has been conceptualized as acceptance of sexual harassment myths, a set of beliefs that serve to justify male perpetrators or even deny the occurrence of sexual harassment at all, such as the idea that women enjoy violent acts or exaggerate their claims (Diehl et al., 2014; Lonsway et al., 2008).

This study aimed to contribute to the understanding of the correlates of tolerance of sexual harassment of women, focusing on the role of cultural conceptualizations of manhood. According to the precarious manhood perspective (for a review, see Vandello & Bosson, 2013), manhood is a fragile social status that can be easily lost, and threats to manhood require men to publicly restore it by behaving up to social standards, even when this implies behaving aggressively. The present study examined whether the degree to which individuals have

internalized such a view of manhood – a notion known as precarious manhood beliefs (Bosson et al., 2021) – was associated with sexual harassment myths acceptance. It also examined whether such a relation was mediated by ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men (Glick et al., 2004; Glick & Fiske, 1996). Since even women, alongside men, often tolerate sexual harassment of women (e.g., Cowan, 2000; Menegatti et al., 2022; Moscatelli et al., 2021), we tested our assumptions in male and female respondents and explored whether gender worked as a moderator of the described relations.

The study was conducted in Italy, a country where patriarchal views of sexual abuse are still widespread. For instance, a nationally representative survey reported that almost 24% of Italians thought that women could trigger sexual abuse by the way they dress (ISTAT, 2019). Moreover, norms of precedence and toughness for men are still deep-seated, and views of manhood as an elusive status are higher than in most Western countries, as proved by recent cross-cultural evidence (Bosson et al., 2021).

Precarious Manhood Beliefs and Tolerance toward Sexual Harassment

Evidence from different branches of social sciences (e.g., Gilmore, 1990; Kimmel & Aronson, 2003; Wineguard et al., 2014) converges in highlighting that boys and men cannot count exclusively on physical or biological milestones but need to achieve their title of "real" (or dominant) men through some public actions. According to the precarious manhood perspective, manhood must be earned and, once achieved, is relatively easy to lose if a man enacts stereotypically feminine behaviors (e.g., showing excessive emotionality) or fails to display sufficient levels of prototypical masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008). In contrast, people typically

consider womanhood more directly connected to biological changes in women's lives (Vandello & Bosson, 2013).

Cultural variations related to the specific qualities and behaviors that a man needs to prove might be undoubtedly present (Gilmore, 1990), yet the idea that men must be tough and decisive tends to be prevalent, especially in contexts characterized by shared patriarchal ideologies. As a direct consequence, when masculinity is questioned, some men need to demonstrate their toughness and non-femininity in the eyes of others. For instance, studies showed that masculinity threats led to a greater tendency to justify gender-based discrimination (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Weaver & Vescio, 2015), increased intention to engage in sexual harassment against a virtual female interaction partner (Maass et al., 2003), or even higher likelihood to engage in sexual violence (Reidy et al., 2015).

Whereas most studies focused on men's reactions to masculinity threats (e.g., Maass et al., 2023; Weaver & Vescio, 2005), there is evidence that the view of manhood as a precarious status that needs to be repeatedly proved is prevalent and commonly understood around the globe (DiMuccio et al., 2017; Gilmore, 1990). A cross-cultural study involving 62 nations (Bosson et al., 2021) highlighted that precarious manhood beliefs are widespread across six continents. It also pointed out that individuals in countries with lower gender equality scores tend to view manhood as a social status that must be earned, demonstrated, and can easily be lost.

Notably, within a given country, there was not much difference between women and men in endorsing precarious manhood beliefs. In some nations – especially those characterized by lower levels of gender equality – women scored even higher in precarious manhood beliefs than men (Bosson et al., 2021). These findings support the contention that both boys and girls are

socialized to such a conception of masculinity as part of the general process of gender socialization (Vandello et al., 2013), through which they learn the norms, values, skills, and behavioral patterns required to be a woman or a man in the society (Hoominfar, 2021). Since early childhood, parents, teachers, and the media encourage boys and girls to join different activities and games, but boys are more harshly punished than girls for showing gender-atypical behaviors (Sirin et al., 2004; Witt, 2000). In adolescence, male peers use to challenge each other to show their masculinity by engaging in aggressive behaviors, risk-taking activities, and sexual conquest of girls, and ridicule or bully the boys who fail in such practices (Amin et al., 2018; Kågesten et al., 2016). Even during adulthood, men can experience severe backlash for engaging in traditionally feminine behaviors (Vandello et al., 2013). There is also cross-cultural evidence from 62 countries showing that individuals generally hold men to stricter gender rules and norms than women (Bosson et al., 2022).

Thus, boys and men learn to be attentive not to show gender-atypical behaviors and how to restore threatened masculinity (e.g., Bosson et al., 2009). Even though men are the actors in this scene, the idea that defying masculinity norms can result in severe consequences for men and that demonstrating such adherence in public is essential to regain one's threatened masculinity becomes a shared viewpoint among individuals of all genders who have been socialized within a specific societal context (Vandello & Bosson, 2013; Weaver et al., 2010). Accordingly, whereas most prior studies primarily explored the correlates of precarious manhood beliefs among men (e.g., Kroeper et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2023), our current research postulates that these beliefs can be adopted by individuals of any gender. When individuals embrace these beliefs, they may be more likely to align with ideologies that promote male

dominance over women, such as ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men. Similarly, they may be more prone to accept and justify sexual harassment of women, as it represents a way through which men affirm their power over women and, therefore, prove their adherence to masculinity norms (e.g., Mahalik et al., 2003).

Precarious Manhood Beliefs and Sexist Attitudes toward Women and Men

Whereas precarious manhood beliefs concern general views of manhood, ambivalent sexism and ambivalence toward men represent universally recognized beliefs and attitudes concerning the expected traits and roles of men and women (Glick et al., 2004). Both sets of attitudes imply a genuine combination of hostility and benevolence, which stems from the basic structure of traditional gender relationships whereby men's supremacy over women coexists with a strong interdependence between genders (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Specifically, hostile sexism represents an adversarial view of gender relations that justifies restrictions on women's roles and denigrates women who are perceived as seeking to usurp men's power. Benevolent sexism reflects instead the idea that women are necessary partners for men and the idealization of women as pure creatures who need men's protection. Despite its seemingly positive portrayal, benevolent sexism conveys a view of women as weak and suited for traditional gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Women's dependence on men may also foster ambivalent – i.e., hostile and benevolent – attitudes toward men (Glick et al., 2004). Hostility can derive from women's resentment toward men's domination within intimate relationships. Benevolence expresses admiration for men's role as protectors and implies the belief that men need women's maternal care and that women are incomplete without a romantic relationship with a man (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019). Both

hostility and benevolence toward men can be functional to the justification and maintenance of men's domination over women within a society, as proved by the positive correlations between the two constructs (Menegatti et al., 2022). Indeed, it has been noted that expressing hostility toward men is a means through which individuals can communicate their discontent about women's treatment within a society while acknowledging men's superiority; on their part, benevolent attitudes recognize men's prominent role in domains other than domestic ones (Chapleau et al., 2007).

As with precarious manhood beliefs, ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men are culturally transmitted and shared within society and are therefore endorsed by both men and women, even though to different degrees (Glick et al., 2004). Men usually show higher levels of hostile sexism against women, lower hostility toward men, and greater benevolence toward men than women do. In contrast, levels of benevolent sexism tend to be similar in men and women, or they are even higher in women than men, especially in societies with more traditional views of gender roles (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Bosson et al. (2021) found that ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men were positively associated with precarious manhood beliefs. According to the authors, all these notions capture distinct but related gender ideologies that have their roots in patriarchy, that is, a social system where men have more power and resources than women (Nash, 2020; Wood & Eagly, 2012). On the one hand, ambivalent views of women and men both mirror and rationalize the power imbalance favoring men over women. On the other, precarious manhood beliefs concern men's intra-gender hierarchy, as they define how the "real man" should be, granting this

label to those men who affirm their manhood in certain ways, including exerting power over women (Bosson et al., 2021).

Even though correlational evidence, like that of Bosson et al. (2021), does not allow to claim causation, there are reasons to assume that precarious manhood beliefs can be conceived as antecedents (rather than consequences) of ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men. As discussed before, from childhood, individuals internalize societal gender expectations and are made aware that boys and men are more penalized for violation of gender typicality than girls and women (Sirin et al., 2004; Witt, 2000). They also learn that threatened masculinity can be restored by adopting aggressive behaviors toward women or endorsing ideologies that implicitly subordinate them (Weaver & Vescio, 2015). Supporting our reasoning, De Zavala et al. (2021) found that precarious manhood beliefs predicted traditional gender views and ambivalent sexism. Additionally, as outlined before, there is experimental evidence that following a manhood threat, men reported higher levels of benevolent sexism, a greater tendency to sexualize women, and higher acceptance of gender inequalities (Dahl et al., 2015; Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016; Weaver & Vescio, 2015). Hence, we proposed that precarious manhood beliefs represent antecedents of ambivalent gender ideologies and tolerance of sexual harassment in men and women due to the common socialization of gender ideologies within society.

Sexual Harassment Myths Acceptance

Ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men, acknowledging men's domination in society and emphasizing women's traditional roles, might nurture tolerance of sexual abuse of women and, therefore, the endorsement of sexual harassment myths (Hill &

Marshall, 2018; Lonsway et al., 2008). Lonsway et al. (2008) conceptualized sexual harassment myths as “attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male harassment of women” (p. 600). People who endorse such myths tend to blame the woman for inviting or provoking a man’s approach and are more likely to think that the woman exaggerated her accusation against the man or even made it up. Further core dimensions of sexual harassment myths are the attribution of hidden motives to the accuser (e.g., ruining the perpetrator’s reputation), the belief that the woman could have stopped the man’s attention if she wanted it, and the idea that she enjoyed attention from a man (Diehl et al., 2014, 2018; Lonsway et al., 2008).

As one may expect, men are generally more tolerant of sexual harassment (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and are more likely to attribute ambiguous behavior to positive motives than women (Rotundo et al., 2001). Despite this difference in absolute terms, the levels of hostile sexism toward women were found to be associated with higher acceptance of sexual harassment and rape myths in both men and women (Cole, 2020; Hill & Marshall, 2018; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), and a reduced perception of social-sexual behavior as sexual harassment (Kessler et al., 2021; Zelin et al., 2022).

Evidence of a relationship between benevolent sexism toward women and tolerance towards sexual harassment is less consistent (e.g., Chapleau et al., 2007). Russell and Trigg (2004) found no relation between the two constructs. Others (Abrams et al., 2003; Viki et al., 2004) reported that benevolent sexism was related to increased blaming of a female rape victim and reduced rapist blaming in men and women. Finally, concerning ambivalent attitudes toward men, studies showed that in male and female respondents, benevolence (but not hostility) was

associated with rape myths acceptance (Chapleau et al., 2007) and with the endorsement of the idea that the perpetrator did not intend to rape (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019).

The Present Study

The present study aimed to understand possible correlates of tolerance of sexual harassment in Italian women and men by testing whether individual levels of precarious manhood beliefs were positively related to sexual harassment myths acceptance. It also examined the mediating role of ambivalent sexism and ambivalent attitudes toward men and explored whether such relations varied for female and male respondents.

While being aware that only experimental or longitudinal data allow establishing causality, as discussed earlier, it seems plausible that individuals first come to endorse beliefs in the elusive nature of manhood and then learn that adhering to sexist views that reaffirm women's subordination to men might be a way to acquire or restore manhood. Accordingly, men and women who endorse precarious manhood beliefs should be more prone to show sexist views of genders and justify men's "natural" proclivity to pay sexual attention to women, which represents a key element of sexual harassment myths.

The hypotheses are outlined in Figure 1. First, we expected a positive association between the endorsement of precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths acceptance (hypothesis 1). In line with Bosson et al. (2021), we expected that precarious manhood beliefs would be positively associated with hostile and benevolent sexism (hypotheses 2a-2b). Since, as mentioned, hostility and benevolence toward men represent means through which patriarchy is justified within society (e.g., Chapleau et al., 2007), precarious manhood beliefs should also be positively associated with hostility and benevolence toward men

(hypotheses 2c-2d). Based on previous studies showing that hostile sexism was related to higher tolerance of sexual abuse (Cole, 2020; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), we expected hostile sexism to mediate the relationship between precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths acceptance (hypothesis 3a). Given the mixed results reported in previous studies (Abrams & Vicki, 2003; Russell & Trigg, 2004), we advanced no hypotheses concerning the mediational role of benevolent sexism.

Figure 1 about here

Concerning ambivalent attitudes toward men, based on previous evidence (Chapleau et al., 2007; Menegatti et al., 2022; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019), we expected benevolence (but not hostility) toward men to work as a mediator of precarious manhood beliefs (hypothesis 3b). The moderation of gender has an exploratory nature; thus, no specific hypotheses were advanced.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The research was approved by the Bioethical committee of the first author's University and was conducted in compliance with APA ethical standards. Data were collected in September-November 2019 using the SurveyMonkey platform. The data were gathered as part of a large cross-cultural project (see BLINDED FOR REVISION); the measure of sexual harassment myths acceptance was included in the questionnaire employed by two collection sites in Italy (BLINDED FOR REVISION). The dataset presented in this study can be found in online repository at https://osf.io/m8efk/?view_only=080163d70db14da0a7f452e996d5a707

Four hundred and thirty-three university students filled out the questionnaire. Nineteen respondents were excluded as they failed at more than one of three attention checks; 7 were excluded as they did not indicate their gender. The final sample consisted of 407 participants (242 women, 165 men; $M_{\text{age}} = 21.07$, $SD = 3.58$; range 18–51 years old; 400 of Italian nationality, 5 with dual citizenship, 2 did not respond). They were enrolled in different degree programs (64.9% in Psychology, 11% in STEM programs, 7.1% in Social Sciences or Humanities programs, and 17% in other degree courses). A sensitivity analysis conducted with G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) showed that our sample was sufficient to detect effects of $f^2 = .10$ (corresponding to $R^2 = .09$), assuming an alpha of .05 and a power of .95.

Measures

The order of measures was randomized, except for the measure of sexual harassment myths acceptance, which was presented after the others. All the measures were administered in Italian. The items of the precarious manhood beliefs measure were translated from English to Italian following the back-translation procedure (van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). The Italian versions were already available for all the other measures, as detailed below. Completing the questionnaire, which included more measures than those considered here, took approximately 40 minutes.

Precarious Manhood Beliefs

The measure of precarious manhood beliefs consisted of four items from Vandello et al. (2008), assessing participants' beliefs about the nature of manhood as difficult to earn ("Other people often question whether a man is a 'real man'") and easy to lose ("It is fairly easy for a man to lose his status as a man"). The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7

(*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher levels of precarious manhood beliefs ($\alpha = .66$).

Hostile and Benevolent Sexism

Hostile sexism and benevolent sexism were measured using 6 items from the Italian short version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory selected as they had factor loadings $>.50$ (Rollero et al., 2014; see also Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020). The 3 items of hostile sexism assessed sexist antipathy toward women (e.g., “Women seek to gain power by getting control over men”). The 3 items of benevolent sexism measured positive but patronizing attitudes toward women (e.g., “Women should be cherished and protected by men”). The response scale ranged from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*); higher scores indicated higher levels of hostile ($\alpha = .75$) or benevolent ($\alpha = .66$) sexism.

Hostility and Benevolence toward Men

Hostility and benevolence toward men were measured using 6 items from the Italian short version of the Ambivalence toward Men Inventory (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2020; Rollero et al., 2014). The 3 items of hostility assessed resentment toward male dominance (e.g., “Men usually try to dominate conversations when talking to women”); the items of benevolence concerned appreciation toward men as protectors (e.g., “Men are more willing to put themselves in danger to protect others”; 0 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicated greater hostility ($\alpha = .54$) or benevolence ($\alpha = .62$) toward men.

Sexual Harassment Myths Acceptance

Tolerance toward sexual harassment against women was measured through the Illinois Sexual Harassment Myth Acceptance Scale (Lonsway et al., 2008). Based on the Italian version

of the scale used by Moscatelli et al. (2021), the measure consisted of 19 items (e.g., “If a woman is sexually harassed, she must have done something to invite it”; 1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*) and was considered as a single construct ($\alpha = .88$).

Sexual Orientation

Participants were asked to self-define their sexual orientation (“heterosexual,” “mainly heterosexual,” “bisexual,” “mainly homosexual,” “homosexual,” and “other”). Two hundred and eighty respondents self-defined as heterosexual, whereas 127 self-defined as other than exclusively heterosexual (76 self-identified as mainly heterosexual, 18 as bisexual, 10 as mainly homosexual, 9 as homosexual, and 12 as other).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics and the results of a series of t-tests comparing male and female respondents. Male respondents scored higher than female respondents on precarious manhood beliefs, hostile and benevolent sexism, benevolence toward men, and sexual harassment myths acceptance. Hostility toward men was lower in male than female respondents. Table 2 shows bivariate correlations.

 Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

Moderated Mediation Analysis

The hypotheses were tested using Hayes's (2013) PROCESS macro with 5000 bootstrap samples. All variables were standardized to z-scores. Since there is some evidence that being exclusively heterosexual is related to greater acceptance of rape myths in men (e.g., Worthen, 2021), sexual orientation (recoded as 0 = not exclusively heterosexual, 1 = exclusively heterosexual) was inserted as a covariate in the analyses. Findings for the covariate variable are reported in Supplementary material.

To test whether the levels of precarious manhood beliefs were positively associated with sexual harassment myths acceptance when the mediators were not considered (hypothesis 1), we ran a moderated regression analysis using model 1. Precarious manhood beliefs were entered as predictor, sexual harassment myths acceptance as outcome, and gender (0 = woman, 1 = man) as moderator. The model was significant, $R^2 = .21$, $p < .001$. Precarious manhood beliefs were positively related to sexual harassment myths acceptance, $\beta = .25$ ($SE = .05$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [.16, .34]. Gender had a direct impact on sexual harassment myths acceptance, $\beta = .33$ ($SE = .05$), $p < .001$, 95% CI [.24, .42], due to men's higher endorsement of sexual harassment myths compared to women, whereas it did not moderate the link between the predictor and the outcome variable, $\beta = .06$ ($SE = .05$), $p = .187$, 95% CI [-.03, .15].

To test hypotheses 2-3, a moderated mediation analysis was run using model 59. We tested whether precarious manhood beliefs, inserted as the predictor, were related to sexual harassment myths acceptance through the four proposed parallel mediators (hostile sexism, benevolent sexism, hostility toward men, and benevolence toward men). Gender was inserted as

a moderator of all the links between the model variables. Table 3 shows direct and interaction effects; Table 4 reports conditional indirect effects.

Table 3 about here

Table 4 about here

As expected, endorsing precarious manhood beliefs was related to higher levels of hostile and benevolent sexism (hypothesis 2a-2b) and greater hostility toward men (hypothesis 2c), whereas they were not significantly associated with benevolence toward men in the whole sample (hypothesis 2d). Mimicking t-test results, gender had significant direct effects on all the proposed mediators but benevolence toward women. Moreover, it moderated the relationship between precarious manhood beliefs and three of the proposed mediators (i.e., hostile sexism, hostility toward men, and benevolence toward men). Endorsing precarious manhood beliefs was more strongly related to hostile sexism toward women and benevolence toward men in male than female respondents, as shown by the conditional effects ($\beta = .47, SE = .07, p < .001, 95\% CI [.32, .61]$, for men; $\beta = .21, SE = .06, p < .001, 95\% CI [.10, .33]$, for women). Moreover, precarious manhood beliefs were significantly associated with higher levels of hostility toward men in female (but not male) respondents, as the conditional indirect effects were significant for female respondents, $\beta = .32, SE = .06, p < .001, 95\% CI [.20, .44]$ and not significant for male respondents, $\beta = .10, SE = .08, p = .188, 95\% CI [-.05, .26]$. Conversely, precarious manhood

beliefs were significantly related to benevolence toward men in male respondents, $\beta = .38$, $SE = .08$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.22, .53], but not in female respondents, $\beta = .05$, $SE = .06$, $p = .431$, 95% CI [-.07, .16].

Hostile sexism and benevolence toward men were significantly related to sexual harassment myth acceptance. Gender – in addition to being directly related to sexual harassment myth acceptance – significantly moderated the former path: In fact, hostile sexism had a stronger relationship with sexual harassment myths acceptance in men than in women, as revealed by the conditional indirect effects ($\beta = .46$, $SE = .07$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.33, .60], for men; $\beta = .14$, $SE = .07$, $p = .037$, 95% CI [.01, .28], for women; see Table 3).

While the direct positive relationship between precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment toward women remained significant – revealing partial mediation – there were significant moderated mediation effects through hostile sexism (hypothesis 3a) and benevolence toward men (hypothesis 3b). Hostile sexism accounted for the relationship between precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths acceptance in both male and female respondents, but its mediating effect was stronger for male respondents, as shown by the conditional indirect effects reported in Table 4. The index of moderated mediation through hostile sexism was .19, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [.089, .293].

Benevolence toward men accounted for the relationship between precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths in male respondents only, with the conditional indirect effect being significant for male but not for female respondents (see Table 4). The index of moderated mediation through benevolence toward men was .09, $SE = .05$, 95% CI [.004, .190].

Overall, these findings highlighted that the more male and female respondents endorsed precarious manhood beliefs, the more they showed acceptance of sexual harassment myths, and such association was partially mediated by hostile sexism. For male respondents, benevolence toward men worked as a further partial mediator. Even though cross-sectional evidence does not allow to exclude alternative mediational paths, bootstrapped hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to highlight the unique contribution of precarious manhood beliefs, ambivalent sexism, and ambivalent attitudes in predicting sexual harassment myths acceptance. Such additional analyses, which are reported in Supplementary material (Tables 1S and 2S), provide further support for the proposed mediational paths where precarious manhood beliefs work as predictor (rather than mediator) of ambivalent sexism and ambivalence toward men.

Discussion

The present study contributes to shedding light on the correlates of tolerance of sexual harassment (e.g., Brown et al., 2020; Lonsway et al., 2008) by showing that men are more prone to justify sexual harassment of women if they consider manhood as an elusive social status and by revealing the role played by hostile sexism and benevolent attitudes toward men. Even in women, endorsing beliefs on the precariousness of manhood might feed tolerance of sexual harassment, a process accounted for by increased hostility toward women.

The findings supported the general expectation that individual levels of precarious manhood beliefs were related to greater acceptance of sexual harassment myths. However, they revealed partly different mediational paths for women and men. The relation between the levels of precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths acceptance was accounted for by

hostile sexism in both male and female respondents. Benevolence toward men also worked as a mediator in male respondents.

These findings complement evidence on the impact of masculinity threats (e.g., Weaver & Vescio, 2015) by pointing out that both men and women who endorse precarious manhood beliefs show higher tolerance of sexual harassment of women. Moreover, they extend previous research on the correlates of acceptance of sexual harassment myths (e.g., Hill & Marshall, 2018). While the finding that hostile sexism predicts tolerance of sexual harassment is not new (e.g., Hill & Marshall, 2018), this study is the first to reveal that such a relationship might have its roots in cultural beliefs of manhood. Even though – coherently with previous evidence (Glick et al., 2004; Lonsway et al., 2008) – women in the present study showed lower levels of precarious manhood beliefs, sexism, and sexual harassment myths acceptance compared to men, sharing beliefs about the elusiveness of manhood seems to be accompanied by greater hostile sexism and more lenient views of sexual harassment of women in both women and men.

Notably, benevolence toward men partly accounted for men's tendency to downplay the responsibility of male perpetrators in the sexual harassment of women. Thus, the endorsement of a representation of men as needy of women's domestic and maternal care can be a strategy through which men gently reaffirm their higher social status (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019) and, at the same time, a way to justify men's mistreatment of those women who somehow "betrayed" their maternal allure by "inviting" sexual attentions.

In female (but not male) respondents, precarious manhood beliefs were associated with hostility toward men, suggesting that women who recognize men's need to fight for their reputation are also more aware of men's stronghold on the social hierarchy. Nevertheless,

resentment for men's domination appears unrelated to the attribution of responsibility to male perpetrators and does not imply solidarity with female victims of sexual harassment. This finding aligns with claims that hostility toward men can work as a "safe jab" that allows women to express their dissatisfaction with men's treatment while acknowledging the inevitability of men's domination over women (Chapleau et al., 2007).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

As mentioned, the reliance on cross-sectional data limits the possibility of inferences on the causal direction of the effects. Even though previous experimental evidence on masculinity threats' effects (e.g., Weaver & Vescio, 2015) makes us relatively confident of the proposed paths, experimental studies are needed to corroborate the present findings. Moreover, our study only included university students. Since there is evidence that younger age and increased education predict lower sexism (Fernández et al., 2004; Rollero, 2013), including older, less educated respondents might increase the generalizability of the present results. Related to this, it would be intriguing to explore whether the patterns we observed varied according to the respondents' geographic area of origin. For example, some studies highlighted greater endorsement of traditional gender role acceptance and rape myths acceptance in rural than urban areas (King & Roberts, 2011; Logan et al., 2005) or – in the Italian context – in Southern than Northern regions (ISTAT, 2019; Ostuni et al., 2022). Whereas the current data do not allow to consider possible variations due to respondents' residence area, further studies might address this issue.

Traditional gender stereotypes and patriarchy in Italy are still pervasive (e.g., Mazzuca et al., 2022; Pagliaro et al., 2020). Future studies might test whether the relations we observed

emerge even in more gender-equal cultural contexts. They might also consider how precarious manhood beliefs decline within a given society in a more refined way. Mahalik et al. (2003) identified eleven masculinity norms shared in Western countries, which concern different domains (e.g., men's relationships with women, social achievements, or tendency to take risks). It seems plausible that individuals who endorse norms that prescribe men to try to seduce women at all costs (the "playboy" norm) would be particularly prone to tolerate sexual harassment of women, whereas endorsing norms such as "primacy of work" might have different repercussions.

To date, research has mainly focused on men's responses to masculinity threats (Vandello & Bosson, 2013). Based on our findings that precarious manhood beliefs were associated with increased sexual harassment myths acceptance in both men and women, one may wonder how women would react to situations that threaten manhood. It seems plausible that women who have been socialized to a precarious view of manhood feel gratified for being accompanied by respected and powerful men (e.g., Ahmetoglu & Swami, 2012). Thus, women's levels of precarious manhood beliefs might be associated with their wish to see men close to them as dominant and with a tendency to justify the gender social hierarchy, even by defending men whose masculinity is under threat. Future studies could also examine whether women high in precarious manhood beliefs are more likely to justify sexual harassment perpetrated by men who were threatened in their masculinity reputation and to consider threats to manhood as "extenuating circumstances" for men who committed sexual abuse of women.

Prevention and intervention implications

The present findings might have important implications for interventions aimed at enhancing men's and women's sensitivity to sexual harassment and contrasting the endorsement

of beliefs that justify it. In particular, they highlight the need for interventions focused on cultural views of masculinity and gender relations, especially in societies where traditional and patriarchal views are still pervasive. In such contexts, children might soon learn that manhood depends on individuals' traits and behaviors. Since early childhood, a boy is likely to be overtly reminded that he should "put on the big boy pants" and not be emotional or "a pussy". Frequent exposure to such expectations not only puts pressure on boys who display undesirable "feminine" behaviors but can also translate into the idea that women are weaker and inferior to men. Teachers, educators, and professionals should be made aware of the repercussions of such views of manhood (and womanhood) so that they can favor the recognition and the change of these beliefs in children and their families. If children learn to recognize the injustice embedded in the gender system, they might become able to imagine and build a fairer and less overwhelming view of gender roles (Pacilli, 2020). Moreover, counteracting the belief that men are held to prove their masculinity might contribute to reducing men's proclivity to engage in aggressive behaviors and violence against women.

Finally, it is worthy to reason about how legislation addresses sexual harassment against women and protects victims. In Italy, the recent implementation of the so-called Red Code represents a big step forward in the protection of the victims of sexual and domestic violence (Law 19 July 2019, n. 69). However, certain aspects of this legislation appear less favorable to victims compared to laws in other countries. For instance, in Italy, victims have a 12-month window to report incidents, whereas they have 10 years in Spain and 30 years in France (Carboni, 2023). Moreover, CEDAW – the United Nations Committee that monitors the convention for the elimination of all discrimination against women – has repeatedly reported that

sexist ideologies are still prevalent in Italian court sentences. This perpetuates a violation of the principle of gender equality before the law, making it challenging for victims of violence to navigate the legal process and receive fair treatment (Alley Oop, 2022).

Similarly, Italy appears to show more tolerance for sexual misconduct not involving rape compared to other countries (Moscatelli et al., 2021), as evidenced by recent acquittals of accused perpetrators: For instance, a manager was acquitted due to the victim's psychological issues related to her weight, and a janitor was acquitted because the groping of a female student was deemed “fleeting” (Sacchettoni, 2023). On a brighter note, however, at the time of writing this article, a bill on contrasting sexual harassment at work is being discussed in the Italian Parliament, proving the increasing awareness of the problem within society. Moreover, since 2022, a national plan for the implementation of programs aimed at re-educating men who committed domestic and gender-based violence was financed, leading to the creation of CUAVs (Centers for Male Perpetrators or Potential Perpetrators of Violence).

All in all, these considerations highlight the importance of fighting a masculine, patriarchal culture from the roots to improve women’s conditions. The present research can contribute to the current debate on how to eradicate violence against women as it points out the importance of recognizing and contrasting dysfunctional and dangerous gender ideologies within a society.

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Table 1. Means (standard deviations) of the study variables and comparisons between women and men.

Measure	Total sample	Women	Men	<i>t</i>
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	
1. Precarious manhood beliefs	4.24 (1.31)	4.09 (1.34)	4.46 (1.23)	-2.79**
2. Hostile sexism	1.33 (1.13)	1.05 (1.01)	1.72 (1.18)	-6.13***
3. Benevolent sexism	2.18 (1.25)	2.06 (1.28)	2.36 (1.17)	-2.43*
4. Hostility toward men	2.74 (1.09)	2.97 (1.08)	2.40 (1.00)	5.40***
5. Benevolence toward men	1.22 (1.00)	1.05 (0.90)	1.48 (1.09)	-4.32***
6. Sexual harassment myths acceptance	1.94 (0.71)	1.72 (0.56)	2.26 (0.78)	-8.15***

Note. ****p* < .001; ***p* < .01; **p* < .05

Table 2. Correlations among the study variables in the total sample and in the women and men subsamples.

Measure	Total sample					Women					Men				
	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Precarious manhood beliefs	.35***	.27***	.20***	.17***	.30***	.27***	.23***	.33***	.07	.27***	.43***	.31***	.11	.27***	.28***
2. Hostile sexism		.46***	.05	.54***	.55***		.51***	.24***	.46***	.41***		.34***	.01	.40***	.58***
3. Benevolent sexism			.35***	.57***	.31***			.50***	.61***	.32***			.23***	.51***	.27***
4. Hostility toward men				.15**	-.04				.24***	.15*				.14	-.03
5. Benevolence toward men					.48***					.44***					.47***
6. SH myths acceptance					1					1					1

Note. SH = sexual harassment. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 3. Direct and interaction effects of the moderated mediation analysis

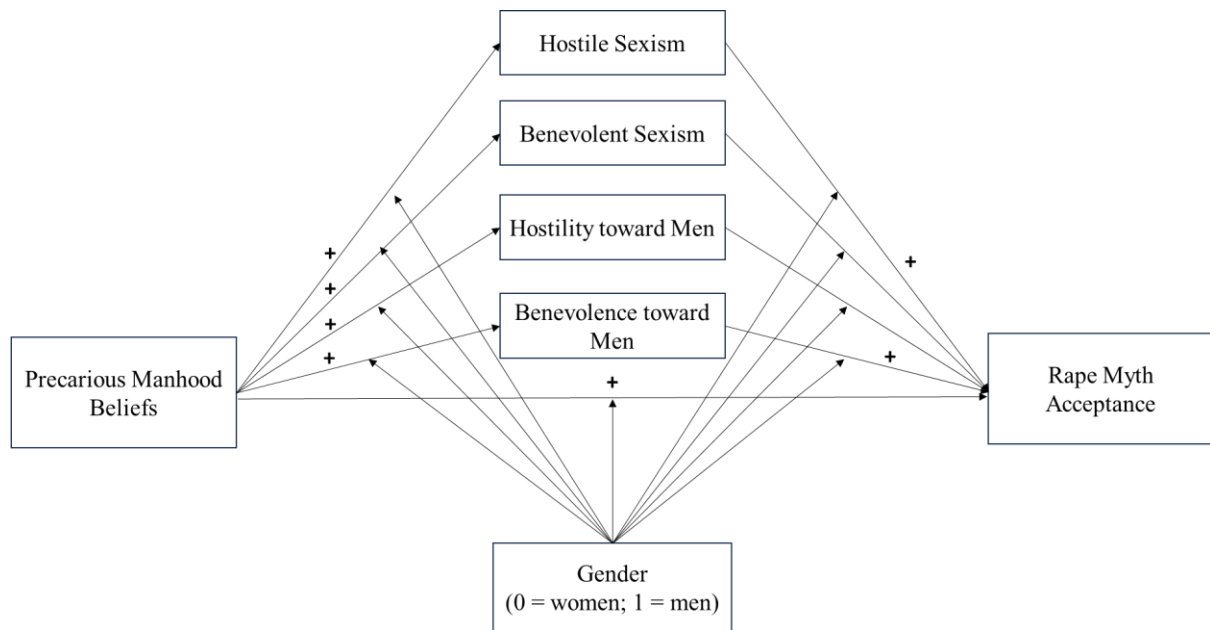
	Hostile sexism		Benevolent sexism		Hostility toward men		Benevolence toward men		SH myths acceptance	
	β (SE) [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	β (SE) [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	β (SE) [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	β (SE) [95% CI]	<i>p</i>	β (SE) [95% CI]	<i>p</i>
Direct effects										
Precarious manhood beliefs	.21 (.06) [.10, .32]	< .001	.21 (.06) [.09, .32]	< .001	.33 (.06) [.21, .44]	< .001	.05 (.06) [-.07, .16]	.399	.18 (.05) [.08, .28]	< .001
Hostile sexism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.14 (.07) [.01, .28]	.035
Benevolent sexism	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.06 (.07) [-.20, .08]	.389
Hostility toward men	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.05 (.06) [-.17, .06]	.368
Benevolence toward men	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.40 (.08) [.25, .55]	< .001
Gender	.45 (.09) [.27, .63]	< .001	.10 (.10) [-.09, .29]	.266	-.58 (.96) [-.76, -.38]	< .001	.31 (.10) [.12, .50]	.002	.38 (.08) [.21, .54]	< .001
Interaction effects										
Precarious manhood beliefs × gender	.26 (.09) [.07, .44]	.005	.09 (.97) [-.10, .28]	.352	-.23 (.10) [-.42, -.04]	.026	.33 (.10) [.13, .52]	.001	-.17 (.09) [-.34, .01]	.056
Hostile sexism × gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.32 (.10) [.13, .51]	.001
Benevolent sexism × gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	.06 (.10) [-.15, .26]	.583
Hostility toward men × gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.04 (.09) [-.21, .14]	.695
Benevolence toward men × gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.12 (.10) [-.32, .09]	.263
		$R^2 = .22, p < .001$		$R^2 = .14, p < .001$		$R^2 = .14, p < .001$		$R^2 = .13, p < .001$		$R^2 = .45, p < .001$

Note. SH = Sexual harassment. Standardized coefficients are reported.

Table 4. Conditional indirect effects of the relationships between precarious manhood beliefs and sexual harassment myths acceptance through the proposed mediators for men and women respondents

Mediator	effect (SE) [95% bootstrap CI]
Hostile sexism	
Men respondents	.22 (.05) [.13, .32]
Women respondents	.03 (.02) [.01, .07]
Benevolent sexism	
Men respondents	-.01 (.03) [-.06, .06]
Women respondents	-.01 (.02) [-.05, .02]
Hostility toward men	
Men respondents	-.01 (.01) [-.04, .01]
Women respondents	-.02 (.02) [-.05, .01]
Benevolence toward men	
Men respondents	.11 (.04) [.03, .20]
Women respondents	.02 (.02) [-.02, .06]

Figure 1. Hypothesized moderated mediation model. Expected positive associations are indicated by the +. No specific hypotheses were formulated when the signs are not indicated.



Author Biographies

Silvia Moscatelli, PhD, is an Associate Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Bologna, Department of Psychology. She is mainly interested in gender-related issues, such as gender discrimination at work, sexualization of women and tolerance of sexual harassment, the correlates of gender inequalities, and the antecedents of collective action to overcome sexism.

Silvia Mazzuca is a postdoctoral researcher. Her main research interests lie in the area of interpersonal dynamics of emotions. She has also conducted research on gender-related issues, such as gender inequality, women's empowerment, gender violence, and gender norms and beliefs.

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Chiara Bertolli holds a PhD in Psychological Sciences awarded by the University of Padova, Department of Developmental and Socialization Psychology (Italy). Her research area focuses on gender stereotypes and under-representation of women in politics.

Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka works as an Associate Professor and Head in the Division of Cross-Cultural Psychology and Psychology of Gender at the University of Gdańsk (Poland). Her main area of research interest focuses on cultural cues fostering gender equality within societies worldwide. She also conducts research on the backlash against communal men and the universality of precarious manhood.

Alessandra Sacino, PhD, is a psychologist in private practice in Genoa, Italy, specializing in the mental health of young people and LGBTQIA+ health and experiences. During her post-doctoral research at the University of Bologna, Italy, her research focused on objectification, sexualization, risk perception and harassment experienced by young women.

Michela Menegatti is an Associate Professor in Social Psychology at the University of Bologna. Her research interests include the underlying mechanism of gender discrimination at work, the use and the effects of sexist and gender-fair language, the motivational processes that lead women and men to endorse collective actions for gender equality.