# THE IMPACT OF THE EMOTIONAL TONE OF CONFRONTATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF CONFRONTERS OF SEXISM

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#### Abstract

Despite the numerous benefits associated with confronting sexism, many women refrain from doing so due to social consequences and negative perceptions. Utilizing an online scenario study, the present research further examines these perceptions, exploring whether a woman confronting with an angry, sad, or disgusted tone may impact how she is perceived on a series of traits related to likability, power, morality, masculinity, and age, whether the emotional tone of the confrontation impacts beliefs about her obligation to confront, and expectations of future behavior for both the confronter and the perpetrator. Findings revealed that an angry or disgusted confronter was perceived as more powerful than a sad confronter. Additionally, participants felt she was more obligated to confront when angry and anticipated future confrontations when disgusted. Notably, the emotional tone did not influence expectations regarding the perpetrator's future behavior. Discussion explores implications of these findings and suggests potential avenues for future research.

Keywords: confrontation, person perception, sexism, emotion, prejudice

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# THE IMPACT OF THE EMOTIONAL TONE OF CONFRONTATION ON PERCEPTIONS OF CONFRONTERS OF SEXISM

"Revolution is not a one-time event."

#### *—Audre Lorde*

Nearly two decades after the formation of the MeToo movement related to confronting perpetrators of sexual violence and six years after the #MeToo hashtag gained popularity on social media (Gregory, 2023), a Pew Research Center (2022) poll found that more than twice as many Americans support the movement (34%) than those who oppose it (14%) (Brown, 2022). This increased support for speaking up and challenging bias can provide many benefits for those involved as well as those who observe these confrontations (Czopp, 2019; Monteith et al., 2019). It can increase a woman's self-esteem and competence (Gervais et al., 2010) and decrease the use of sexist language by men (Mallet & Wagner, 2011). Furthermore, confronting prejudice can allow for nonprejudiced attitudes to become salient, causing even prejudiced individuals to avoid repeating biased actions after a confrontation (Mallet & Monteith, 2019). When confronting prejudice is normalized and consistent, social norms can induce prejudiced individuals to suppress their biases and internalize nonprejudiced ideas as their own values and beliefs. (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003; Crandall et al., 2002).

Despite the benefits of confrontation, confronting acts of prejudice is relatively rare (Dickter & Newton, 2013; Kawakami et al., 2019). For example, a daily diary study found that undergraduate women experienced between one to two sexist incidents a week (Swim et al., 2001), but only 16% of women who were targets of sexism directly confronted the perpetrator (Swim & Hyers, 1999). One reason why people may not confront bias is that taking such action can come with social costs (Cadieux & Chasteen, 2015; Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Swim & Hyers, 1999). Although a target of prejudice may attribute their treatment to bias, they might avoid making these claims publicly due to the fear of being labeled a "complainer" (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Stangor et al., 2002). Research has shown that these fears may be justified because targets of bias who confront prejudice are often perceived negatively (Rasinski & Czopp, 2010). In social contexts, where norms related to confronting sexism are less common and explicit (Bates, 2015), although participants report that targets should confront the perpetrator of a sexist comment, female targets who confront are still perceived less positively than women who remain passive (Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021). This research highlights a disconnect between expectations related to confrontation and evaluations of those who do confront.

# **Perceptions of Confronters**

Given the benefits of confronting sexism, it is important to understand factors and circumstances that impact the likelihood of confrontation. One possible factor that may influence the social costs of confrontation is the way in which a woman confronts sexism. Research examining how people confront prejudice indicates that different types of verbal confrontations can have implications for both the perpetrator and confronter (Chaney & Sanchez, 2022). For instance, studies that directed women to imagine themselves confronting a sexist comment found that the perceived effectiveness of the confrontation and feelings of autonomy for the women were moderated by the style in which they choose to confront. Women who confronted in an argumentative, educational, or empathic style perceived the confrontation to be more effective than women who used help-seeking or humor styles. Argumentative and educational styles also resulted in greater feelings of autonomy compared to other styles of confrontation. Furthermore, research examining verbal confrontations found that targets who engage in calm compared to hostile confrontations are rated more positively (Martinez et al., 2017). Other research found that men and women evaluated nonaggressive confrontations more favorably than aggressive confrontations (Becker & Barreto, 2014). Likewise, perceptions of confronters who used low versus high threat confrontation styles were rated less negatively by observers (Dickter, 2012).

### The Relationship Between Emotions and Confrontation

While this past work has investigated different confrontation styles, research has yet to focus on how the emotional tone of the confrontation can more specifically impact perceptions of the confronter and the efficacy of the confrontation. Prior work investigating the relationship between emotion and confrontation has primarily examined expected and actual emotional responses to observing an act of prejudice from the perspective of the target rather than the impact of the emotional tone of the confrontation (Dickter & Newton, 2013; Kawakami et al., 2009; Swim & Stangor, 1998; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). This research indicated that people expect to experience negative affect, such as anger, sadness, and disgust, in response to experiencing or witnessing bias (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006; Karmali et al., 2017; Kawakami et al., 2009; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001).

Research has previously reported strong evidence for angry responses to bias. For example, diary studies (Swim et al., 2001) and studies requiring participants to reflect on previous instances of social discrimination (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006) have found that anger is the dominant emotion when experiencing bias. Similarly, when asked to imagine themselves being interviewed by a man who asks sexist questions, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) found that most women predicted that they would feel anger. Further, these women also reported that they would likely confront the perpetrator verbally, leave the interview, or refuse to answer the inappropriate questions. Because anger is associated with experiencing bias, people may expect that when confronting bias, the confronter would express this emotion. For instance, previous studies using a reverse correlation method have generated and evaluated mental representations of a female confronter of sexism and found that, among other evaluations, images of female confronters were evaluated as angrier than women who do not confront (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Therefore, it is possible that a female target may express anger when confronting the perpetrator of bias.

However, anger may not be the only response to bias. People may also respond with sadness. Intergroup bias refers to a broad category of behaviors including discrimination and harassment and has been shown to cause negative affect emotions (MacKinnon, 1979). Specifically, challenging and experiencing prejudice and discrimination has been reported to cause feelings of sadness (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). In a study related to sexual harassment, for instance, high school aged girls reported feeling sad, embarrassed, and afraid from this mistreatment (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). In general, adolescents who experience sexual harassment report experiencing greater emotional distress including depression and depressive symptoms than adolescents who do not experience sexual harassment (Goldstein et al., 2007). However, research has shown that despite feelings of sadness during these experiences, targets of discrimination may be motivated to act if they perceive that what they have experienced will be costly to their social connections (Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). Furthermore, expressions of sadness can be effective strategies in conflict and negotiation situations with research showing that participants conceded more to sad expressers compared to neutral or angry expressers (Sinaceur et al., 2015). Therefore, it is possible that a female target may express sadness when confronting the perpetrator of bias.

Besides anger and sadness, another emotional response to bias is disgust. Disgust, which is associated with the revulsion and rejection of things that are offensive, can be related to moral issues (Haidt et al., 1997; Rozin et al., 2000). For example, when norms or social expectations are violated, participants report feelings of disgust (Rozin, 1999; Skitka, 2010). Notably, when asked to imagine themselves in various scenarios involving racial bias, Black students reported that they expected to feel disgust along with other negative emotions (Jones et al., 2014). Given the strong social norms against acting prejudiced against specific social categories in North America, such as women and particular racial/ethnic groups (Crandall et al., 2002), it is possible that when experiencing bias, people may be disgusted with others who do not act in accordance with this widely accepted code of conduct. Furthermore, expressions of disgust during confrontation and conflict function to punish and ostracize moral offenders and deter future inappropriate behaviors (Curtis & Biran, 2001; Haidt, 2003). It can act as a signal to others that a threat must be neutralized through avoidance or punishment (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Molho et al., 2017; Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009). Therefore, it is possible that a female target may express disgust when confronting the perpetrator of bias.

# **Characteristics of Confronters**

According to the Emotions as Social Information (EASI) Theory, these expressions of emotions are effective sources of social information that can provide outside observers with information on how to interpret a situation (Van Kleef, 2010). For instance, emotional expressions can inform observers on the expresser's feelings and appraisal of the situation (Ekman, 1993; Manstead & Fischer, 2001). Furthermore, appraisal theories of emotions also assert that perceivers use information from these emotional reactions to not only infer feelings in a situation but also the character of the individual involved (Hareli & Hess, 2010; Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Parkinson, 1999, 2001; Van Kleef, 2010). In this study, I examined how the emotional tone of a confrontation impacts perceptions of the woman confronting a sexist comment on a series of traits related to likeability, power, morality, masculinity, and age.

These traits were selected based on previous research on perceptions of women who confront. For instance, research on confrontation has found that female targets of sexism who confront are rated as less likeable than female targets who do not confront (Vaccarino &

Kawakami, 2021). Perceptions of power are also implicated when women confront sexism. Specifically, these women are typically rated as more powerful than women who do not confront (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Notably, research has demonstrated that when asked whether a woman should confront a perpetrator of sexism, participants overwhelming respond in the affirmative (Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021), suggesting a moral obligation to confront. However, women who confront are deemed as less moral than women who do not confront (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Because gender stereotypes associate men with dominant behaviors such as speaking out and classify confrontation as a masculine behavior (Eagly, 1989; Fiske et al., 2002), I also examined perceptions of masculinity when a woman confronts. Not surprisingly, past studies have found that women who confront a sexist comment were rated as more masculine than women who did not confront (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Finally, confrontation in general has previously been associated with age, with mental representations of women who confront compared to those who remain passive estimated as much older (Vaccarino et al, in preparation). Given that past research has examined the relationships between these traits and perceptions of women who confront, this thesis aimed to examine whether the emotional tone of the confrontation would impact these perceptions.

Although there is not a large literature of emotional tone of confrontations on perceptions of the confronter, several studies do suggest a relationship between these variables. For example, research using a reverse correlation paradigm has shown that participants who read a scenario about a woman confronting a sexist comment generate mental representations of an angry woman, even when the emotional tone is not explicit in her statement and the confronter is deemed less likeable (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Likewise, when a male leader expresses sadness while confronting sexism, he is perceived as more likeable compared to a male leader who does not express an emotion (Warren et al., 2021). Furthermore, research has shown that leaders are perceived positively but less in control when confronting with sadness compared to anger (Warren et al., 2022). Morality has also been linked with emotions, primarily anger and disgust (Rozin, 1999; Skitka, 2010), but it is unclear how the emotional tone of the confrontation may impact perceptions of morality per se. Research on masculinity has found that it can be impacted by expressions of anger and sadness (Bayet et al., 2015; Druschel & Sherman, 1999; Fischer, 1993; Hess et al., 2009), but research has not yet examined how the emotional tone of a confrontation can impact perceptions of masculinity of a confronting woman. Finally, while research has examined the relationship between anger or sadness and age (Hass et al., 2016; Philips, 2006; Stoner & Spencer, 1987), it is unclear how the emotional tone of the confrontation can impact perceptions of age.

While research suggests the importance of emotional tone of confrontations on perceptions, they have not explicitly manipulated power or examined its impact on perceptions of male confronters of bias. In the present research, I explicitly manipulate emotional tone of female confronters and examine its impact on a wide array of perceptions that are important to women in this context, including likeability, power, morality, masculinity, and age.

In summary, I predicted that perceptions of a woman who confronts will be impacted by the confronter's emotional tone. For likeability, I expected that a woman confronting a sexist comment in a sad than disgusted tone will be perceived as more likeable and that a woman confronting with disgust than anger will be perceived as more likeable. For power, I expected that a woman confronting a sexist comment in an angry than disgusted tone will be perceived as more powerful and that a woman confronting with disgust than anger will be perceived as more powerful. For morality, while exploratory, I expected that woman confronting in a disgusted than sad tone will be perceived as more moral and that a woman confronting with a sad than angry tone will be perceived as more moral. For masculinity, while exploratory, I expect that a woman confronting with an angry tone will be rated as more masculine than a woman confronting with a sad or disgusted tone, but there will be no differences for sad and disgusted tones. Finally, I expected that a woman confronting in a sad than angry tone will be estimated as older and a woman confronting with an angry than disgusted tone will be estimated as older.

Likeability	Sadness > Disgust > Anger
Power	Anger > Disgust > Sadness
Morality	Disgust > Sadness > Anger
Masculinity	Anger > Sadness = Disgust
Age	Sadness > Anger > Disgust

Table 1. Hypotheses for Likeability, Power, Morality, Masculinity, and Age

#### The Impact of Emotional Tone of Confrontation on the Obligation to Confront

An additional goal of the present research was to investigate whether the emotional tone of a confrontation would impact the belief that the target is obligated to confront. Prior research on confrontation has found that, across contexts, targets of sexism are expected to confront rather than remain passive (Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021). Injunctive norms about socially appropriate behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990) prescribe that targets of sexism *should* confront. This obligation to confront may be impacted by whether the emotional tone of the confrontation is considered appropriate for the situation. Research has shown that not only do people believe that prejudice should be confronted, but the confrontation itself is seen more favorably when the confronter is expressing an emotion that is appropriate for the situation (Warren et al., 2022).

Regarding appropriate emotions, qualitative research examining attitudes during the #MeToo movement found that rage and anger were common emotional responses considered appropriate while confronting sexual harassment (Page & Arcy, 2019). However, research has

found that perceivers believe that expressions of sadness in negative or dangerous situations indicate that the expressor wants to pause or leave, which may not be an effective technique for confronting prejudice (Berridge and Robinson, 2003). Research on conflict strategies has found that appropriateness and effectiveness in conflicts is strongly correlated (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). Furthermore, expressions of disgust can be considered prosocial indicators of a dangerous or otherwise offensive stimuli, possibly informing the perceivers of the potential for danger (Kurth, 2021), suggesting that a woman confronting with disgust may be seen as more obligated to warn group members of a possible danger. As such, I expected participants would rate a woman confronting with an angry tone as more obligated to confront compared to a woman confronting with a disgusted tone and a woman confronting with a disgusted tone would be rated as more obligated to confront compared to a woman confronting with a sad tone.

# The Impact of Emotional Tone on Expectations of Future Behavior for the Target and Perpetrator

An overarching goal of the current research was to understand how to encourage future confrontations. One factor that may encourage future confrontation is the emotional tone of the confronter. Not only do emotions act as social information (Van Kleef, 2010), but the functional forecast model (FFM) of emotion expression processing argues that emotional expressions can forecast future behavior of the expressor (Weisbuch & Adams, 2012). This study investigated whether the emotional tone of a confrontation impacted expectations of future behavior for the target.

Highlighting the impact of confrontation on future behavior is important because people are more likely to confront when they believe that people can change (Rattan & Dweck, 2010) and targets of prejudice who do not confront often report the belief that the confrontation will not change the perpetrator's future behavior (Rattan & Dweck, 2018). Given the many benefits of confrontation, such as reducing future prejudiced behavior for perpetrators of sexism (Czopp et al., 2006), this study also investigated whether the emotional tone of the confrontation impacted expectations of future behavior for the perpetrator.

Expectations of Future Behavior of the Target. Research examining social influence and prosocial behavior has found that observing prosocial behavior can play an important role in influencing the actions of the observer (Frey & Meier, 2004). Emotions play an important role in determining the future behavior of an individual. For example, expressions of anger convey to observers a heightened likelihood of approach behavior (Horstmann, 2003). In contrast, expressions of sadness have been associated with feelings of disempowerment, hopelessness, apathy, passivity, and inaction, feelings that may be disadvantageous in confrontations (Keltner et al., 1993). According to FFM (Weisbuch & Adams, 2012), these feelings may suggest to observers that a sad woman is less likely to pursue action in a situation. Expressions of disgust are considered to be motivated more by moral concern than self-interest and is considered a highly useful social behavior, suggesting that expressions of disgust may occur more readily in social contexts (Kupfer & Giner-Sorolla, 2017). Therefore, I expected that participants would indicate that a woman confronting in a disgusted tone would be perceived to be more likely to confront again in the future compared to a woman confronting in an angry tone. I also expected that participants would indicate that a woman confronting in an angry tone would be perceived to be more likely to confront again in the future compared to a woman confronting in a sad tone.

**Expectations of Future Behavior of the Perpetrator.** Research examining different types of confrontation have found that some styles of confrontation are perceived to be more effective at reducing incidents of sexism in the future (Chaney and Sanchez, 2022). Emotions may also impact expectations of future behavior for a perpetrator (Weisbuch & Adams, 2012). Given that research has shown that men have shown increased awareness of sexist behavior and

intentions to avoid it after experiencing the anger expressed during the #MeToo movement (Atwater et al., 2021), observers may believe that a perpetrator confronted by an angry woman may be motivated to avoid prejudiced behavior in the future. Likewise, expressions of sadness in social interactions signal to observers that the expresser is helpless, which has been shown to motivate prosocial and cooperative behavior (Clark et al., 1996; Frijda, 2007; Planalp, 1999; Sinaceur et al., 2015; Van Kleef et al., 2010). Therefore, observers may believe that the perpetrator may also be motivated to exhibit more prosocial and cooperative behavior when the woman confronts with sadness. Research examining expressions of disgust, however, has mainly focused on signaling information to observers rather than intending to change the behavior of the target of disgust (Hutcherson & Gross, 2011; Molho et al., 2017; Tybur, Lieberman, & Griskevicius, 2009). Therefore, I expected that participants would believe that the perpetrator of a sexist comment would be more likely to engage in the same behavior in the future when confronted by a woman expressing an angry tone compared to a disgusted tone and the perpetrator would be more likely to engage in the same behavior again when confronted by a woman expressing a disgusted tone compared to a sad tone.

# Method

### **Participants and Design**

The primary goal of this experiment was to investigate the impact of emotional tone of confrontation by a female target toward a male perpetrator on likeability, power, morality, masculinity, and age as well as obligations to confront and expectations of future behavior for the target and perpetrator. Participants were randomly assigned to emotion condition in a 3 Emotion (Anger vs. Sadness vs. Disgust) x 4 Trait (Likeability vs. Power vs. Masculinity vs. Morality) mixed design with Emotion as a between-subjects factor.

Using an effect size found in previous studies examining confrontation with a similar design ( $\eta 2 = 0.04$ ; Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021), an a priori power analysis in G\*Power with .80 power ( $\alpha = .05$ ) in G\*Power, indicated a sample size of 237 participants is required for the predicted Emotion x Trait interaction. To account for people who fail attention checks, have significant missing data, or are statistical outliers, we oversampled and recruited 300 participants using Cloud Research online platform. Participants were required to speak English and live in Canada or the United States. They were financially compensated according to the current United States federal minimum wage, \$0.97. After removing participants who failed the comprehension check<sup>1</sup> or indicated that they did not follow instructions, the data from 227 participants (121 female, 101 male, 5 nonbinary; age range: 18-80 years old,  $M_{age}$ = 40.51,  $SD_{age}$  = 13.50; race = 65% White/European, 10% Black/African, 7% East Asian, 7%, Latin American, 4% Southeast Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Other) was included in the data analysis.

#### Procedure

Using the online survey platform Qualtrics, participants were randomly assigned to one of three Emotion conditions (Anger, Sadness, Disgust). Across all conditions, participants were instructed to imagine the following scenario: *A man and a woman are at a park. The man says something sexist.* In the Anger condition, participants are informed, *The woman responds angrily: "That's not okay. That's sexist."* In the Sadness condition, participants are informed, *The woman responds sadly: "That's not okay. That's sexist."* In the Disgust condition, participants are informed, *The woman responds disgustedly: "That's not okay. That's sexist."* 

After reading the scenario, participants are asked what emotional tone the woman expressed during the confrontation. Participants were removed if they did not answer correctly. Participants subsequently evaluated the target on a series of traits related to likeability (*likeable, approachable, warm*), power (*powerful, competent, assertive*), morality (*moral, ethical,*  *honorable*), and masculinity (*masculine, feminine:* reverse-scored) on 9-point scales from to 1(not at all) to 9 (extremely). Participants were also asked to estimate the age of the target by selecting a number in a drop-down bar with a range of 15 or younger to 100.

To examine participant's belief that the target is obligated to confront, participants were instructed to respond to the item *"Should the woman have said something?" (Yes/No)* and *"Should the woman have responded the way she did?" (Yes/No)*. For purposes of the analyses, these responses were coded as support for confrontation (Yes vs. No).

To examine the belief of whether the confronter or perpetrator would behave in the same way in the future, participants responded to the items "Do you believe that the woman will engage in this behavior again?" (Yes/No) and "Do you believe that the man will engage in this behavior again?" (Yes/No)

For exploratory purposes, participants were also asked in an open-ended format why they believed the woman should have said something and why the woman or man would engage in the same behavior again.

#### Results

Before analyzing the trait ratings, I created an index for each construct. For likeability, I calculated the mean ratings of likeability, approachability, and warmth ( $\alpha = .79$ ). For power, I calculated the mean ratings of powerfulness, competence, and assertiveness ( $\alpha = .86$ ). For morality, I calculated the mean ratings of morality, ethicality, and honor ( $\alpha = .89$ ). Finally, for masculinity, I calculated the mean ratings of masculinity and femininity (with femininity reverse-scored; r = .42).

Trait ratings were subjected to a 3 Emotion (Anger vs. Sadness vs. Disgust) x 4 Trait (Likeability vs. Power vs. Morality vs. Masculinity) mixed ANOVA with Emotion as a betweensubjects variable. The main effect of Emotion was significant, F(2, 225) = 3.52, p = .03,  $\eta_p^2 =$  0.03. Simple effects analyses showed that participants who read about a woman confronting with an angry tone (M = 24.27, SD = 2.98) rated traits higher than participants who read about a woman confronting with a sad tone (M = 22.7, SD = 4.03), t(222) = 2.65, p = .009. Ratings of participants who read about a woman confronting with an angry or disgusted tone, however, did not differ (M = 23.64, SD = 3.87), t(222) = 1.10, p = .27. Ratings of participants who read about a woman confronting with a sad or disgusted tone also did not differ t(222) = -1.54, p = .13.

The main effect of Trait was also significant, F(3, 224) = 407.78, p < .001,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.65$ . Simple effects analyses showed that participants rated the confronting woman lower on likeability (M = 6.10, SD = 1.53) than power (M = 6.95, SD = 1.47), t(222) = -10.48, p < .001and morality (M = 7.28, SD = 1.44), t(222) = -14.06, p < .001. However, participants rated the confronting woman higher on likeability than masculinity (M = 3.28, SD = 1.47), t(222) = 17.01, p < .001. Participants also rated the confronting woman lower on power than morality, t(222) =5.53, p < .001, but higher on power than masculinity, t(222) = 22.92, p < .001. Finally, participants rated the confronting woman as significantly higher on morality than masculinity, t(222) = 24.50, p < .001.

The two-way Trait x Emotion interaction was also significant F(6, 225) = 3.59, p = .002,  $\eta_p^2 = .009$ , see Figure 1. To decompose the two-way interaction, I examined each trait separately. Using a Fisher's one-way ANOVA the effect of Emotional tone on ratings of likeability was not significant F(2, 223) = 0.52, p = .60.

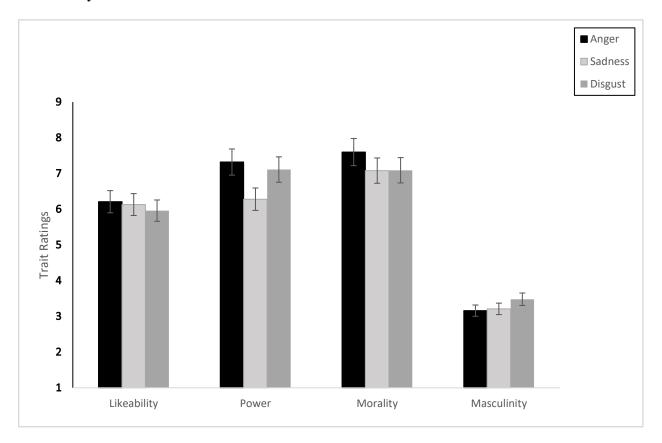
The effect of emotional tone on ratings of power was significant, F(2, 224) = 10.84, p < .001. Simple effect analyses showed that women who confronted with an Angry tone (M = 7.32, SD = 1.11) were rated as more powerful than women who confronted with a Sad tone (M = 6.28, SD = 1.66), t(224) = 4.50, p < .001. Women who confronted with a Disgusted tone (M = 7.11, SD

= 1.47) were also rated as more powerful than a woman who confronted with a Sad tone (M = 6.28, SD = 1.66), t(224) = -3.46, p = .002. Ratings of power for women who confronted with an Angry tone and Disgusted tone did not differ, t(224) = .943, p = .614.

On ratings of morality, the effect of Emotional tone was significant, F(2, 223) = 3.41, p = 0.04. However, simple effects analyses showed that there was no difference in ratings of morality between the anger (M = 7.60, SD = 1.30) and sadness (M = 7.08, SD = 1.43) groups t(223) = 2.21, p = .07, the anger and disgust (M = 7.09, SD = 1.55) groups t(223) = 2.24, p = .07, and the disgust and sadness groups t(223) = -0.04, p = .999.

Furthermore, the effect of emotional tone on ratings of masculinity was not significant, F(2, 224) = 1.07, p = .34.

Figure 1. Impact of Emotional Tone on Trait Ratings of Likeability, Power, Morality, and Masculinity



# Age of the Confronter

Another trait I examined was the estimated age of the confronter. A Fisher's one-way ANOVA determined that there was no significant difference in perceptions of age between the three Emotion groups, F(2, 137) = 0.15, p = .86.

# **Emotional Tone on the Target's Obligation to Confront**

I also examined whether participants believed that the target should confront the sexist comment in two ways. Across all three emotional tones, the majority of participants indicated that the woman *should* confront the man (Anger 98.9% Yes; Sadness 91% Yes; Disgust 94.6% Yes). A binary logistic regression showed that emotional tone on obligations to confront was not significant, F(2, 224) = 2.63, p = .074,  $r^2 = 0.02$ , when participants were asked if the woman should have confronted, see Figure 2. However, when participants were asked if the woman should have confronted with the emotional tone that she expressed, a binary logistic regressions showed that the emotional tone confront confront confrontation, F(2, 224) = 4.88, p = .008,  $r^2 = 0.04$ . Participants believed a woman who confronted with an angry tone was more obligated to confront (98.85%) than a sad tone (86.36%), B = 2.61, 95% CI [0.90, 5.54], z = 1.33, p = 0.150. The effect of emotional tone on obligation to confront when confronting in an Angry tone and Disgusted tone (B = .78, 95% CI [-0.34, 2.01], z = 1.33, p = .184) did not differ, see Figure 3.

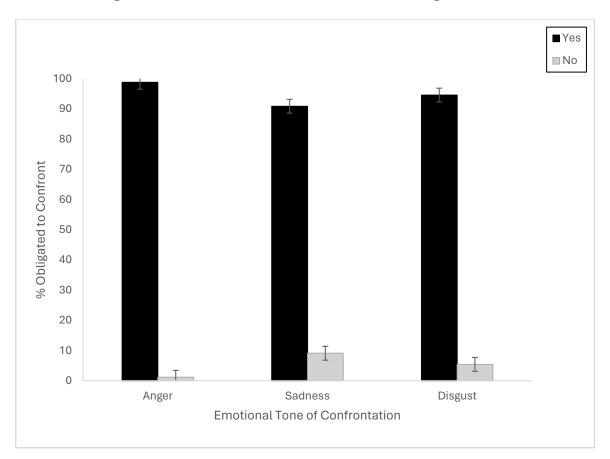
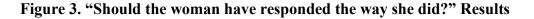
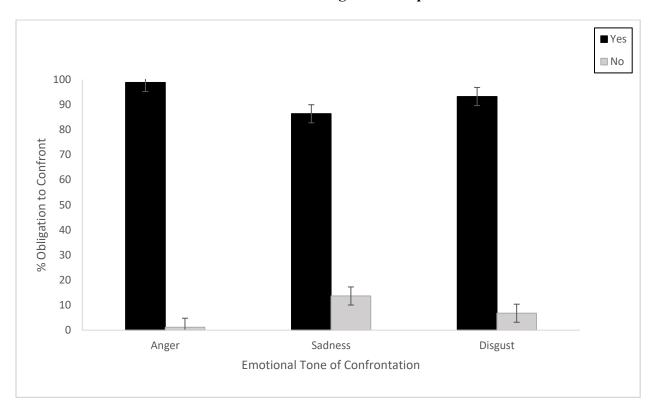


Figure 2. "Should the woman have said something?" Results





Perceived Likelihood of Future Behavior of Target and Perpetrator

To examine how the emotional tone of a confrontation impacts perceptions of future behavior for both the female target and the male perpetrator, a logistic regression analysis was conducted  $(F(2, 224) = 5.93, p = .003, r^2 = 0.050)$ . Participants were more likely to expect the woman to confront again when she used Disgust (98.65%) than Sadness (83.33%), B = 2.68, 95% CI [1.00, 5.60], z = 2.53, p = .011. However, the effect of emotional tone on expectations of future confrontation did not differ significantly when she confronted with an angry tone and sad tone (B= 0.99, 95% CI [-0.03, 2.11], z = 1.85, p = 0.64) or angry tone and disgusted tone (B = 1.69, 95%CI [-0.11, 4.64], z = 1.55, p = 1.22), see Figure 4.

I also conducted a logistic regression analysis related to the effect of emotion on the belief that a perpetrator would engage in sexist behavior again in the future. The effect of emotional tone of the confrontation was not significant, F(2, 224) = 1.11, p = .33,  $r^2 = 0.009$ , see

Figure 5.

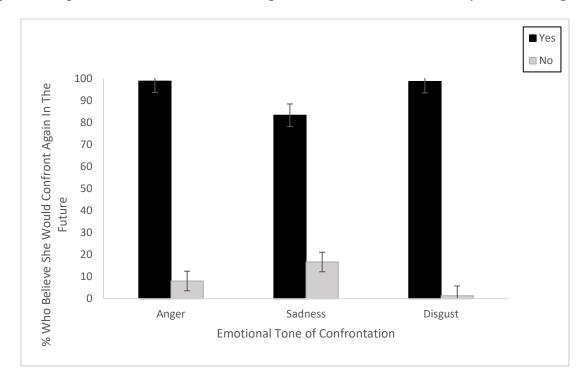
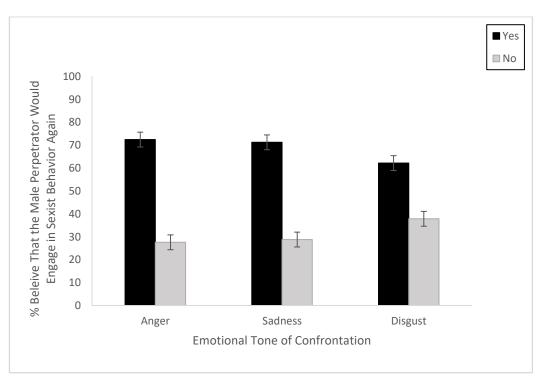


Figure 4. Impact of Emotional Tone on Expectations of Confrontation by Female Target





**Behavior of Male Perpetrator** 

# **General Discussion**

The goal of this research was to examine whether perceptions of women who confront sexist comments are impacted by the emotional tone of the confrontation. I also examined whether the emotional tone of confrontation impacted participant's belief that the women should have confronted in two ways. First, I examined whether the emotional tone of the confrontation impacted whether participants believed the woman should have confronted in general. To further probe how the emotional tone impacts this obligation to confront, participants were also asked whether she should have confronted *in the way that she did*. Finally, I also examined whether the emotional tone of the confrontation would impact perceptions of the future behavior of the target and perpetrator. Specifically, participants were asked whether the confronter would confront again in the future and whether the perpetrator would engage in sexist behavior again in the future.

### **Impact of Emotional Tone on Characteristics of Confronters**

The results related to the impact of emotional tone of confrontation on traits attributed to a woman who confronts sexism were limited to perceptions of power. Specifically, the results indicated that a woman who confronted a perpetrator of a sexist comment with an angry or disgusted tone was perceived as more powerful than a woman who confronted with a sad tone, but there was no difference in perceptions of power between an angry or disgusted tone. Although I expected that a woman confronting with an angry tone would be rated as more powerful than a woman confronting with a sad tone, I did not expect that there would be no differences between a woman confronting with an angry or disgusted tone. Because people experience greater recall of what people in positions of power say during situations of prejudice (Barreto et al., 2010), utilizing an angry or disgusted tone during a confrontation may make the confronting woman appear more powerful, making what she says during the confrontation more impactful.

Notably, the emotional tone did not moderate perceptions of likeability, morality, masculinity, or age. When examining likeability, I expected that participants would rate a woman confronting in a sad tone to be more likeable than a woman confronting with disgust, and a woman confronting with disgust to be more likeable than a woman confronting with anger. When examining morality, I expected that participants would rate a woman confronting with disgust as more moral than a woman confronting with sadness, and a woman confronting with sadness would be rated as more moral than a woman confronting with an angry tone. While results showed no difference in ratings of likeability or morality, it should be noted that mean ratings for morality and likeability were above the midpoint, suggesting that participants evaluated confronters positively on these traits regardless of the emotional tone of the confrontation. For ratings of masculinity, I expected that a woman confronting with an angry tone would be rated as more masculine than a woman confronting with a sad or disgusted tone, and there would be no difference in masculinity between a woman confronting with a sad or disgusted tone. Finally, I expected participants would rate a woman confronting with a sad tone as older than a woman confronting with a disgusted tone.

# **Impact of Emotional Tone on Obligations to Confront**

In order to examine whether the emotional tone of a confrontation would impact the belief that the target is obligated to confront, I asked participants two questions related to the target's response to the sexist comment. When asked whether the target should have confronted, the majority of participants indicated that she should have confronted the perpetrator. Notably, the emotional tone did not impact this effect. However, when asked whether the target should have confronted *in the way that she did*, results showed that participants believed the woman should have confronted more when her tone was angry rather than sad. There was no difference in obligations to confront between anger and disgust or sadness and disgust. One possible explanation for this finding may be due to how participants view the urgency of the confrontation. The Confronting Prejudiced Responses (CPR) Model proposes that part of the decision to confront requires labeling an incident as an "emergency" that requires immediate intervention (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Given that anger is associated with high certainty and perceived situational control (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) more than disgust and sadness, participants may prefer to see a woman confronting with anger in response to an emergency such as confronting prejudice. These results may be related to our findings on a woman confronting with anger appearing to be more powerful than a woman confronting with sadness. Expressing anger during a confrontation may signal to observers that a woman is more prepared to handle a potentially dangerous situation compared to a sad or disgusted woman.

# **Expectations of future behavior for target**

I also asked participants whether they expected that the target would engage in this behavior again. The results showed that participants believed that a woman who confronted with disgust was more likely to confront again in the future compared to a woman who confronted with sadness, but there was no difference in expectations of future behavior between anger and disgust or anger and sadness. Previous research has shown that disgust responses to socio-moral items intensify over time compared to anger or sadness responses (Simpson et al., 2006). This may explain why participants believe that a woman confronting with disgust in this situation may be motivated to confront again in the future. A woman who is motivated to confront sexism due to her feelings of disgust may continue to feel stronger disgust responses towards sexism over time, thus intensifying her motivations to confront. However, it is unclear why these expectations did not differ between disgust and anger.

# Expectations of future behavior for the perpetrator

Additionally, participants were also asked about their expectations for the future behavior of the perpetrator. The results showed that the emotional tone of the confrontation did not impact the expectations of the future behavior of the perpetrator. Across all three emotions, most participants believed that the man would engage in the same behavior in the future. One possible explanation for these findings may be related to mindsets about malleability, which refers to people's beliefs that certain human characteristics can be changed or stay fixed throughout their lives (Dweck, 1999). These beliefs are domain-specific (e.g. endorsement of sexist beliefs), are predictive of social outcomes, and dependent on consistent reinforcement over time (Dweck, 1999; Dweck et al., 1995; Levy et al., 2001). Prejudice, in particular, is believed by many to be due to personality and upbringing (Hodson & Esses, 2005), factors that are often seen as more difficult to change (Dweck, 1996). Given that the manipulation in this study consisted of a single scenario where the participants were not given information about the man's reaction to the confrontation (Does he get angry? Does he apologize?), it is possible that most participants believe that the perpetrator holds prejudicial beliefs which may not be malleable or may require more consistent confrontation over time. A survey from the Canadian Women's Foundation reveals that 70% of Canadians believe that Gen Z women are just as or more likely to experiences sexual harassment, suggesting that many people hold a pessimistic view on any significant decrease of sexist beliefs across generations (Cheung & Rodas, 2017). Therefore, I suspect that most participants may be pessimistic about the effectiveness of a single confrontation on reducing bias regardless of the emotional tone.

# **Future Direction**

Although the results provided some evidence to support my initial predictions, there are fewer differences in the impact of emotional tone on perceptions of a confronting women than originally expected. One possible explanation for these results may be the effectiveness of the manipulation. Despite specifying the emotional tone in each scenario, a comprehension check found that 34% of participants who read about the sadness confrontation indicated that the woman was confronting with anger. Although participants who responded incorrectly were not included in the analyses, it is possible that participants assume that a woman who confronts is angry in addition to the sadness or disgust emotions specified in the scenario. Research has shown a strong link between anger and confrontation, with mental representations of women who confront being seen as angrier than women who do not confront despite being given no information about emotion (Vaccarino et al., in prep). The manipulation used in the current research changed a single word between each scenario: *The woman says angrily/sadly/disgustedly, "That's not OK.* " Future research should use a more descriptive scenario to ensure that participants comprehend the emotion in the scenario accurately.

One way to increase the impact of the emotional tone is to include descriptions of facialbodily expressions of emotion. Basic emotion theory finds that emotional states are signaled with distinct expressive behaviors that are recognizable across cultures (Ekman, 1992; Ekman & Cordaro, 2011). Research on facial emotional expressions have identified universal facial movements that signal certain emotions to observers such as furrowed eyebrows, tense jaws, showing teeth to signal anger or depressed lip corners, downturned mouths, tears, and wrinkled foreheads to signal sadness (Cordaro et al., 2018; Keltner & Cordaro, 2015; Song et al., 2020). Body postures have also been shown to signal emotions to observers, such as raised shoulders, clenched fists, expanded chests to signal anger or a hanging head, collapsed upper

body, and crying to signal sadness (Dael et al., 2012; Darwin, 1965; Gross, 1994; Wallbott, 1998; Wilkowski, 2009). Providing extensive description of facial and body cues in the written scenario of the confronting woman could provide more context and make the emotion more salient for participants.

People also use vocalizations as important indicators of emotion in social situations (Keltner & Kring, 1998; Keltner et al., 2016; Scherer, 1986; Van Kleef, 2010). Vocalizations are words or sounds that are produced with the voice and research has shown that listeners show high accuracy rates on distinguishing emotional tones within speech (Juslin & Laukka, 2003). Notably, vocalizations of the 6 basic emotions (anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise) have been found to be recognizable cross-culturally, suggesting the importance and universality of recognizing emotions through vocalizations (Sauter et al., 2010). Therefore, exploring the use of an audio recording of a confrontation with different emotional tones, such as having participants listen to the recording of a male and female actor before making ratings of the actors, may be more impactful in a confrontation.

While the current research used a written and imagined scenario, it is important to examine how people respond to confrontation through actual behaviors and interpersonal interactions. Critically, research has shown that participants' perceptions of hypothetical scenarios of confrontation often misalign with actual judgements (Karmali et al., 2017; Swim & Hyers, 1999; Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021). For example, women often anticipate that they will confront the perpetrator of a sexist remark, but research has shown that these expectations are typically unfulfilled in real-world situations (Kawakami et al., 2019; Mallet & Montetith, 2019). Furthermore, while participants may expect to support confrontation and perceive confronters positively, research has shown that confronters are often perceived negatively when compared to nonconfronters (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). Therefore, future research should extend this work by investigating the impact of the emotional tone of a confrontation in real-world interactions given the extensive literature connecting emotions, facial-bodily postures, and vocalizations. For instance, participants could observe a male confederate make a sexist comment and female confederate confront him while expressing different emotions during an inperson group task, allowing the participants to see and hear the emotions of the female target. This may provide researchers with a more accurate depiction of how the emotional tone of a confrontation may impact perceptions of a woman who confronts.

Another avenue that may be productive to examine is online prejudice. A 2021 survey by Pew Research Center found that roughly four in ten Americans have experienced online harassment (Vogels, 2021). Given the prevalence of digital communication, it would also be interesting to examine how emotions impact perceptions of confronters in an online context. Previous research examining perceptions of confronters have utilized online group chats to expose participants to acts of sexism under the guise of an ostensibly unrelated group task (Vaccarino et al., in preparation). One benefit of an online group chat would be the ability to include emojis to depict emotions. Emojis are picture representations of facial expressions used to convey specific emotions through text, and previous research examining the use of emojis in a survival group task found that when available, participants always used emojis to communicate (Provine et al., 2007; Rivera et al., 1996). Furthermore, emojis are used often in socio-emotional contexts and participants choose emojis that are relevant to the situation (Derks et al., 2007). Importantly, research has shown that emojis are perceived accurately by the receiver (Neel et al., 2023). Therefore, future research should explore the use of emojis in an online group chat platform to determine if the experience of online prejudice and confrontation carries the same expectations and level of risk as personal interactions for the confronter.

# **Emotions Related to Confrontation**

The current research focused on examining the impact of anger, sadness, and disgust responses during confrontations. The decision to examine these three emotions in the context of confrontation was based on previous research examining common affective responses to prejudice (Hansen & Sassenberg, 2006; Karmali et al., 2017; Kawakami et al., 2009; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). However, the results show that there may be conceptual similarities between the emotions of anger and disgust. While research has characterized anger and disgust as distinctly different emotions (Ekman & Cordaro, 2011), some researchers believe that anger and disgust are conceptually related and show similar patterns of appraisals (Fridja et al, 1989; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). For example, anger and disgust are both high arousal, negative valence emotions (Haidt, 2003). Notably, while this thesis defines disgust as the revulsion or rejection of things that are offensive, it has been shown to sometimes be used by lay people as a synonym for "anger" (Nabi, 2002). As such, it is possible that our participants at times used anger and disgust as interchangeable constructs. Notably, participants appeared to see anger and disgust as similar concepts when rating the confronter on a series of traits, with results showing no differences between anger and disgust for any of the traits. However, participants appear to consider anger and disgust as different constructs when asked about the target's obligation to confront. Specifically, participants believed that the woman was more obligated to confront with an angry tone compared to a sad tone, but there was no difference for disgust and sadness. Considering the complex relationship between anger and disgust, it may be beneficial to exclude disgust and keep anger in future research, given that anger is the primary emotion related to experiencing and confronting prejudice.

Future research should also consider examining different emotions that may occur during confrontation. One possible emotion that may occur during a confrontation is fear. Research has

shown that women report feeling fear when experiencing prejudice and fear is especially likely as a response in contexts where the targets hold lower power positions than the perpetrator, such as a female target experiencing sexism from a male perpetrator (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Furthermore, a fearful response to a sexism may indicate to observers that the perpetrator has committed a more egregious act of sexism, which are judged as more confrontation-worthy (Ayres et al., 2009). Research on confrontation has also examined how fear of social backlash is a barrier to confronting prejudice (Kaiser & Miller, 2001; Stangor et al., 2002). Therefore, future research should examine perceptions of a target who confronts despite feelings of fear. Future research should also explore scenarios in which there is an absence of emotional response during the confrontation. Considering that all participants read about a woman expressing an emotion, it would be beneficial to contrast these results with a no emotion condition to determine if the observed outcomes are specifically linked to the display of any emotion.

Finally, it is important to examine how confronting prejudice can impact perceptions of a confronter through an intersectional lens. The current research focused on confronting sexism between a man and a woman but did not specify the race of the confronting woman. Research has already investigated the link between race and attitudes towards confronters and found that Black people who confront are perceived more negatively compared to Black people who do not confront (Czopp, 2019; Kaiser & Miller, 2001). Research has also investigated the link between emotions and race and found that anger is detected more readily on Black targets compared to White targets (Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2003). Furthermore, Black women in particular are often stereotyped as "Angry Black Women", which has been shown to impact perceptions such as leadership and competence (Motro et al., 2021). Therefore, a Black woman who confronts bias with an angry tone may not experience the same high ratings of likeability or morality that the results from the current research showed for an angry woman who confronts when race is not

specified. Future research should aim to disentangle how perceptions of confronters may be impacted by the many existing social identities a confronter may already hold.

### Conclusion

Previous literature on confronting prejudice has examined the social perceptions of women who confront sexism and found that despite negative social perceptions and backlash (Czopp & Monteith, 2003; Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021), there are social benefits for these women, particularly pertaining to perceptions of power (Vaccarino, in preparation). The current thesis showed that these perceptions of power are also impacted by the emotional tone in which the confrontation occurs, with confronters appearing more powerful when confronting in an angry or disgusted tone compared to a sad tone. Furthermore, the results showed that, while participants believed the target was obligated to confront for all three emotions, participants believed that an angry woman is more obligated to confront compared to a sad woman. Finally, results showed that participants believe that a woman confronting with disgust would be more likely to confront again compared to a sad confronter.

These findings shed light on how the emotional tone of a confrontation can impact societal expectations, stereotypes, and power dynamics related to how women are allowed to express themselves in the face of sexism. While emotions are inherent to the human experience, research on confrontation has shown that women are subjected to specific norms on how they are expected to articulate themselves, particularly during crucial situations such as addressing bias. While this study centered on expectations within a neutral context, namely a park, previous research has identified distinct expectations regarding how women are perceived during confronting confrontations in various contexts such as in an office (Vaccarino & Kawakami, 2021). Understanding these expectations for how women convey emotions in specific contexts is crucial, particularly as these expectations can carry significant meaning, especially in arenas such as political stages where expectations regarding how women should act in general become particularly pronounced.

During the 2016 United States presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton faced major scrutiny for her emotional responses to overt sexism. One notable example is when her opponent, Donald Trump alleged that she was "playing the woman card", suggesting that Clinton's candidacy relied solely on her gender (DelReal & Gearan, 2016). In response to her opponent's comments, Clinton addressed the issue during a campaign event where she emphasized the many challenges women face in various aspects of life. However, rather than focusing on the sexist comment made by her comment and Clinton's confrontation, journalists and critics focused on the emotional aspect of her speech. They were not sympathetic toward her emotional display, as they anticipated that it would contribute to the downfall of the campaign (Breslau, 2008; Noveck, 2007). Notably, this event appeared to demonstrate that women who are targets of sexism face the majority of harsh judgements for their emotional responses rather than the sexist actions of others that provoke the initial responses.

Although these preliminary findings did not provide strong evidence of the emotional tone of a confrontation impacting perceptions of the confronter, expectations to confront, and expectations of future behavior, future research is clearly necessary to examine the ongoing importance of this topic. For example, future research could benefit from moving away from written scenario studies and into in-person experiences as well as integrating different emotions. Overall, these findings emphasize the complex relationship between confrontation and emotions and underscores the importance of ongoing research in this field.

# Supplemental: Results for Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) and Univariate Tests for Likeability, Power, Morality, Masculinity, and Age

A one-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted to test the hypothesis that there would be one or more mean differences between Emotional Tone (Anger, Sadness, Disgust) and Trait Ratings. There was a significant effect of Emotional Tone on Trait Ratings, Wilks' lambda = 0.785, F(10, 428) = 5.50, p < .001,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$ . A series of one-way ANOVAs are included in the main text.

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