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Despite the progress American women have made in other arenas, they still remain underrepresented in top leadership positions in both the public and private sectors, thus contributing to their marginalized status in these domains. Although people do not expect to encounter women in positions of power, a solely cognitive process cannot fully account for the negative interpersonal characterizations and poor leadership evaluations (i.e., backlash) that female leaders disproportionately receive. Rather, recent evidence suggests that because female leaders are seen as gender norm deviants who threaten the gender status hierarchy, the backlash they encounter more likely constitutes a motivated process whereby perceivers’ negative evaluations stem from a desire to maintain the status quo (i.e., gender inequality). Here, we expand on this work by proposing that a desire to defend the gender hierarchy causes people to feel negative moral emotions when encountering powerful women who display dominance and/or agency which, in turn, causes backlash effects against such individuals. Study 1 finds that morally laden negative affect explains why evaluators penalize dominant female leaders, but not dominant male leaders. Studies 2 and 3 then manipulate this mediator via the use of disgust primes. Given that embodied disgust amplifies moral judgment severity, we hypothesized that if moral emotions underlie gender backlash, enhanced feelings of disgust should result in harsher penalties for leaders in

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gender-incongruent roles than those in gender-congruent roles as only the former violate core gender norms that undermine the status quo. Indeed, compared to a neutral prime, disgust primes (taste in Study 2, visual in Study 3) resulted in lower leadership evaluations and liking of only the gender deviant targets. We discuss the implications of these findings for organizational interventions and female leaders’ impression management strategies.

“In all sides of the political spectrum, evangelicals respond with a surprising amount of disgust upon hearing Hillary’s name . . . She symbolizes much that runs against their beliefs: abortion rights advocacy, feminism and, conversely, a rejection of biblical ideas of femininity and womanhood.” (Bailey, 2016)

In November of 2016, Republican Donald Trump pulled off an unexpected and stunning defeat of Hillary Clinton, the first female presidential candidate from a major political party.

Although the reasons for her loss were complex, one of the more salient factors that emerged throughout the campaign centered on Clinton’s gender. Indeed, the intense vitriol leveled at Clinton revealed an unprecedented level of intense opposition that was uniquely gendered. Slogans such as “Life’s a Bitch: Don’t Vote for One,” “KFC Hillary Special: 2 Fat Thighs, 2 Small Breasts . . . Left Wing,” and “Trump That Bitch!” appeared on t-shirts, pins, and other widely-available merchandise throughout the campaign. Just weeks before the election, a feature article in the Atlantic analyzed the gender-based vitriol Clinton was experiencing and concluded that “(s)tandard commentary about Clinton’s candidacy—which focuses on her email server, the Benghazi attack, her oratorical deficiencies, her struggles with ‘authenticity’—doesn’t explain the intensity of this opposition. But the academic literature about how men respond to women who assume traditionally male roles does. And it is highly disturbing.” (Beinhart, 2016).

In brief, the academic literature on this topic demonstrates that, even today, leadership is viewed as a masculine pursuit, more typical of and appropriate for men than for women (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari, 2011). Women leaders are thus subject to the same social and economic penalties—that is, “backlash effects”—that befall women who behave in gender stereotype-incongruent ways (Brescoll, 2011). Such “gender deviants” are seen as cold and unlikable. They also receive lower salaries, poorer leadership evaluations, and are less likely to be hired or promoted than those who conform to gender stereotypes (Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010).

There is little doubt that Hillary Clinton suffered from such broadly defined backlash effects in her bid for president. But much more interesting is the particularly extreme, unprecedented, and gender-driven hostility that she experienced as it provides a compelling example of how strong moral emotions—contempt, disgust, revulsion and righteous anger—may help explain why women leaders still face discrimination, even when they are seen as sufficiently competent, agentic, and experienced. Although it may seem obvious that these emotions played
a key role in the prejudice that Clinton experienced, in explaining the causes of prejudice against female leaders more generally, the academic literature has focused much more on how the way we think about such women affects our behavior toward them than the way we feel about them (Brescoll, 2016). The most prominent theories of prejudice against female leaders, and nearly all of the empirical work on backlash effects, have concentrated on the role of gender stereotypes in producing prejudice, but largely ignored the role of people’s emotional reactions to, and moral judgments of, women who assume traditionally male roles.

Here we attempt to begin to fill this gap by linking the gender backlash and moral psychology literatures. The goal of this article is to offer initial empirical support for the idea that negative moral emotions can help explain why women leaders (and gender deviants, more generally) experience prejudice. Specifically, we show that people feel moral outrage—contempt, disgust, revulsion, and disdain—toward women leaders who behave in a dominant, masculine manner (Study 1), and that making people feel disgusted (as a way to prime moral emotions) increases their willingness to penalize agentic female leaders who are successful in a male role (Studies 2 and 3).

Explanations for Backlash Effects

The most prominent theories that address prejudice against women leaders (e.g., Heilman’s [1983] “lack of fit” model, Eagly and Karau’s role incongruity theory of prejudice against female leaders [2002], etc.), all posit that gender stereotypes play a central role in the discrimination that agentic women leaders face. Although people believe that, compared to men, women are more communal (warm, kind, nurturing, etc.), they also believe that women are less agentic (i.e., ambitious, dominant, independent, etc.). Since leadership roles require agency, women are oftentimes marginalized in such roles—seen as less well-suited for them, and thereby less legitimate. Unfortunately, however, women’s inherent “lack of fit” cannot be simply resolved by having women behave in a more agentic, dominant way, as such behavior results in them being seen as cold and unlikable and thus, also, frequently undeserving of other organizational rewards (e.g., being hired, promoted, paid fairly, etc.).

A recent meta-analysis of studies documenting such backlash effects (Williams & Tiedens, 2016) found support for the basic idea that women are penalized for explicitly enacting dominance and agency whereas men are not. A careful examination of this body of research reveals that, although only a minority of backlash studies overtly tested the psychological process underlying these effects, nearly all that did focused on people’s beliefs about the traits that the gender deviant targets in their studies possessed to explain why these individuals were punished. While only three studies explicitly examined the role of perceiver’s
affect, two of these assessed perceiver’s nonverbal affective reactions (e.g., head nods, eye contact, smiling, etc.), which the authors (appropriately) conceptualized as outcome, rather than process, variables.

Given the central explanatory role of gender stereotypes in the backlash literature, it is important to note that these beliefs about men and women have undergone some change in the last 30 years. Specifically, the most consistent and dominant trend to emerge is that people believe that women have become significantly more agentic and assertive (Twenge, 2001). For example, a recent study attempting to replicate the original Think Manager, Think Male findings revealed a considerable change in people’s views of the typical characteristics of women over the past three decades (Duehr & Bono, 2006). People have come to view women as much more agentic and thus possessing more of the task-oriented characteristics essential for leadership. If stereotypes are changing to the extent that women are viewed as sufficiently agentic to hold leadership positions, then discrimination against women leaders should be diminishing as well, since the belief that women are seen as insufficiently agentic has been proposed as a primary driver of such discrimination (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Moreover, backlash effects should also show signs of decline as this behavior should be seen as much less of a violation of feminine stereotypes.

However, a recent meta-analysis of backlash effects (Williams & Tiedens, 2016)—and the public examples of prejudice that prominent female leaders, such as Hillary Clinton, have experienced in recent years—do not bear out this prediction.

**A Motivated Explanation for Backlash Effects**

One recent theory of backlash effects—the Status Incongruity Hypothesis (SIH; Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, & Nauts, 2012)—can help explain this paradox, and also provide a rationale for why moral emotions could trigger backlash against female leaders, and gender deviants more generally. Unlike all other theories of prejudice against women leaders, the SIH offers a motivated explanation for the penalties dominant women experience. Specifically, the SIH proposes that backlash effects are driven by people’s desire to uphold the status quo in which women are ascribed lower status than men. When women display agency (ambition, independence, assertiveness), they are exhibiting masculine competencies, which inherently discredits the idea that men have more power, resources and status than women for legitimate reasons. Thus, agentic women incur backlash because they threaten the legitimacy of the gender hierarchy. In support of these ideas, Rudman et al. (2012) found that when people felt that the status quo was under threat, they imposed harsher penalties on agentic women. Thus, the SIH would predict that even if beliefs about women’s agency are changing such that they are seen as sufficiently agentic for leadership roles, women should still
experience backlash when they display agency because such penalties are due to women’s violation of the gender status hierarchy—and not to their violation of the feminine gender role.

Additionally, the SIH supports our key hypothesis that negative moral emotions can help explain why women leaders are penalized for dominant behavior. A woman who displays agency threatens the legitimacy of the gender hierarchy and thus signals that she does not have concern and respect for the existing social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships (Haidt, 2003). Violating the status quo in this way taps into a core moral value for people (i.e., respecting a hierarchy) which, in turn, should elicit predictable moral emotions (i.e., contempt, disgust, revulsion, disdain; Haidt, 2003). Haidt et al. propose that this particular value (i.e., respecting a hierarchy) comprises one of the six foundations of morality, and find that people experience other-focused negative moral emotions in response to those who violate this particular moral foundation. Likewise, reassuring people that the status quo is fair and legitimate significantly decreases their feelings of moral outrage (Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). Finally, some evidence suggests that moral disgust can arise from feeling as though one’s cultural values are under threat. For example, Cottrell and Neuberg (2005) mapped out the relationships between specific emotional responses and the distinct threats posed by different social groups and found that people experience disgust when they feel a particular out-group poses a contamination threat (e.g., to cultural values). Thus, in Study 1, we test our hypothesis that people will report feeling other-focused negative moral emotions toward dominant women, including contempt, disgust, disdain, and revulsion (Haidt, 2003), and that this moral outrage should help explain why such women experience social and economic penalties.

**Disgust Heightens Moral Judgments**

In the current research, we attempt to determine whether backlash reactions are driven by moral evaluation processes in two ways—first, by assessing whether feelings of moral outrage mediates backlash effects, and, second, by using disgust as a methodological tool to show that it increases the severity of penalties levelled on gender deviants. The latter approach draws on recent research showing that heightened feelings of disgust can increase the severity of moral judgments. Disgust is a basic human emotion associated with avoidance, rejection, or distancing of some negative stimulus and is often elicited following the intentional violation of cherished moral principles (e.g., Haidt, 2003). People even socially reject and feel disgust toward individuals who have simply behaved in subjectively inappropriate ways (Hodson & Costello, 2007). As such, backlash against gender norm deviants may also be tied to this process.
Moreover, a number of studies have found that moral judgment severity increases after heightened feelings of disgust, via taste primes (Eskine, Kacinik, & Prinz, 2011), event recall, visual primes, olfactory primes (Schnall, Haidt, Clore, & Jordan, 2008), or hypnotically induced somatic primes (Wheatley & Haidt, 2005). Such embodied feelings of disgust affect moral evaluations by amplifying the “gut feelings” of disgust that follow from observation of immoral behavior (Haidt, 2003). Importantly, the effects of disgust primes are distinct from negative affect more broadly, and only influence judgment of moral domains (Schnall et al., 2008).

Drawing on this evidence that disgust primes elicit harsher judgments in uniquely moral domains (Schnall et al., 2008), in Studies 2 and 3 we use disgust as a methodological tool to determine whether there are moral evaluation processes underlying reactions to counter-stereotypical targets. If backlash occurs because gender deviants threaten the legitimacy of the gender hierarchy and people feel moral outrage as a result, then priming disgust should moderate the reactions to these counter-normative targets. We investigate this idea in the context of sex-typed employment domains. Specifically, we examine the leadership evaluations of successful men and women in sex-typed work roles that are either congruent or incongruent with target sex (Heilman & Wallen, 2010) and test to see if evaluations are moderated by taste-based (Study 2) and visual-based (Study 3) disgust primes. We predict that priming disgust will result in lower leadership evaluations of stereotype-incongruent targets compared to a neutral prime, but will not affect leadership evaluations of stereotype-congruent targets.

**Study 1: Can Moral Emotions Help Explain Backlash Against Voluble Female Leaders?**

The primary purpose of Study 1 was to investigate whether moral outrage explains why people penalize female leaders who display dominance. Specifically, we conducted a conceptual replication of findings that female CEOs who talk a lot in organizational contexts (e.g., meetings) are less likely to be given power, status, and independence than male CEOs who engage in the identical behavior. More importantly, Study 1 also borrowed measures from Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) to investigate whether moral outrage would mediate the penalties experienced by these female leaders who were portrayed as “dominating” the floor. We hypothesized that people would be less likely to vote for a highly voluble female politician compared to an equally dominant male politician because only her behavior would elicit “moral outrage” (i.e., contempt, disgust, revulsion, disdain), as dominance displays by women signal a lack of concern and respect for the existing social order and obligations of traditional hierarchical relationships and roles (Haidt, 2003).
Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 103 women and 91 men recruited from a database maintained by a northeastern University who participated in exchange for a monetary payment. The sample was relatively diverse (64% identified as White, 18% Asian, 4% Latino, 11% African-American, and 1% “Other”\(^1\)), ranging in age from 18 to 80 years old (mean age = 36.69, SD = 12.09), and occupying a wide range of occupations spanning both blue and white collar-type jobs, with 39% reporting that they had been in a supervisory role at some point in their working lives. The study consisted of a 2 (male vs. female politician) \(\times\) 2 (high vs. average volubility) between-subjects design, with participants randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. Participants first read a brief biosketch about a politician modeled on Okimoto and Brescoll (2010) and then completed the manipulation check and dependent measures. Besides changing the gender of the politician named in the biosketch (either John or Ann Reynolds), the biosketches were altered such that the politician was presented as talking more than average or an average amount (Brescoll, 2011).

Measured Variables

Voting preference. Participants’ likelihood of voting for the target politician was assessed by two items: “If you had to choose now, would you vote for this person?” and “Would you want this person to be your politician?” (1 = definitely not, to 11 = definitely).

Negative moral emotions. To assess participants’ affective reactions to the targets, they were presented with five emotions (contempt, disdain, anger, disgust, revulsion; Okimoto & Brescoll, 2010) and asked to rate the extent to which the target elicited that particular emotion in the current moment (1 = not at all, 7 = very much, \(\alpha = .95\)).

Manipulation Check

Participants answered two questions as a check on whether the manipulation conveyed the intended information: “What was the gender of the politician you just read about?” and “Did Senator Reynolds speak more, less or about the same\(^1\)?

\(^{1}\)Five participants did not disclose their race/ethnicity.
as his/her colleagues?” While all participants successfully answered the first question, six did not correctly identify the volubility level of the politician they had just read about and were thus removed from the analyses.

Results and Discussion

Participant gender did not moderate the main pattern of results; thus, data were collapsed across gender for all subsequent analyses. A 2 (target gender) × 2 (volubility level: talking more vs. an average amount relative to their colleagues) ANOVA revealed, as predicted, only a significant interaction between target gender and volubility for participants’ voting preferences, \( F(1, 184) = 6.38, p = .012 \). As hypothesized, participants were less likely to vote for the highly voluble woman (\( M = 5.39, SD = 1.62 \)) than the highly voluble man (\( M = 6.45, SD = 1.99 \)), \( t(92) = -3.06, p = .003 \), and the woman of average volubility (\( M = 6.34, SD = 1.56 \)), \( t(92) = 2.88, p = .005 \). But participants’ voting preferences for the male politicians were unaffected by whether he was highly voluble or not (\( M = 6.18, SD = 1.89 \)), \( t(92) = 0.87, p = .55 \).

Negative Moral Emotions

In a 2 × 2 ANOVA, the predicted interaction between target gender and volubility emerged, \( F(1,184) = 5.87, p = .016 \). Participants reported significantly more moral outrage toward the high volubility female politician (\( M = 2.83, SD = 1.57 \)) than the high volubility male politician (\( M = 1.86, SD = 1.29 \)), \( t(92) = -3.26, p = .002 \), and the average volubility female politician (\( M = 1.88, SD = 1.26 \)), \( t(92) = -3.21, p = .002 \). The amount of negative moral emotions participants felt toward the male politicians did not significantly vary based on whether he was highly voluble or not (\( M = 1.86, SD = 1.23 \)), \( t(92) = 0.03, p = .92 \).

Mediation Analysis

More to the point, mediation analyses revealed that moral outrage toward the high volubility female politician appeared to help explain why participants were less likely to say they would vote for her than the high volubility male politician. First, for only female politicians, high volubility was negatively associated with participants’ willingness to vote for them, \( \beta = -0.29, t(92) = -2.88, p = .005 \), and positively associated with participants’ negative moral emotions toward them, \( \beta = 0.32, t(92) = -3.22, p = .002 \). Finally, results indicated that the mediator, negative moral emotions, was negatively associated with the likelihood of voting for the voluble female politician, \( \beta = -0.45, t(92) = -3.34, p = .002 \). However, for the voluble male politician and the male and female politicians of average volubility, these \( a \) and \( b \) paths were not significant, suggesting that negative moral...
emotions may not be a factor in explaining individuals’ willingness to vote for them. But because these a and b paths were significant for the highly voluble female politician, mediation analyses were performed using the bootstrapping method with biased-corrected confidence estimates. In this study, we obtained the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effects with 5,000 bootstrap resamples. As hypothesized, results from this analysis confirmed the mediating role of negative moral emotions on individual’s reduced likelihood of voting for a highly voluble female politician (95% CI = 0.15–0.90). Furthermore, these results also showed that the direct effect of volubility on the willingness to vote for the female politician became nonsignificant when controlling for moral outrage, $\beta = 0.45$, $t(92) = 1.49$, $p = .14$, thus suggesting full mediation, and that negative moral emotions may help account for backlash effects against female leaders.

**Study 2: Can a Taste-Based Disgust Prime Increase Backlash Effects for Gender Deviants?**

Study 1 demonstrated that people were less likely to vote for a female leader who behaved in a dominant manner compared to a male leader behaving the same way, and a female leader who was not presented as dominant. More importantly, the moral outrage people felt toward the dominant female leader explained why they were less likely to vote for her, supporting our novel prediction that negative moral emotions can play an explanatory role in backlash effects. The primary goal of Studies 2 and 3 was to conceptually replicate this process by manipulating, (rather than measuring) the mediating variable (via a taste-based and a visual disgust prime designed to elicit negative moral affect) and then assessing whether people primed with this negative moral affect (disgust) were more likely to penalize gender deviant targets.

Study 2 also tested the boundary of these effects by including not only female targets, but also male targets, and by using a much more subtle experimental manipulation of threat to the gender status hierarchy. Specifically, targets were not described as explicitly engaging in dominance behavior, but rather were simply described as being successful in a gender atypical domain. The SIH uniquely predicts that men will experience backlash effects to the extent that their behavior undermines the gender status hierarchy. Thus, men who are seen as weak, soft, or otherwise low in status (e.g., by occupying a lower-status feminine work role that requires communality), may be penalized similar to women who are seen as domineering, controlling or (attempting to be) high in status (e.g., by occupying a high-status masculine work role that requires agency).

Thus, in Study 2, we tested whether tasting a disgusting drink during the study would affect participants’ leadership evaluations of stereotype congruent versus incongruent targets. Participants were presented with information about a successful employee (male or female) in either a male-sex-typed (finance) or
female-sex-typed (counseling) occupation. Thus, the targets were depicted as either gender-congruent (male target + male role, female target + female role) or gender-incongruent (male target + female role, female target + male role). In addition, for half of the participants, a taste-based disgust prime was administered immediately prior to evaluating the target. We anticipated that priming disgust would diminish the evaluations the gender-incongruent targets, but not the gender-congruent targets. Evidence of this pattern would suggest that moral-emotional processes may underlie backlash against gender stereotype-incongruent targets.

**Methods**

*Participants and Procedure*

Fifty-two males and sixty-eight females ($M_{age} = 21.0; SD = 3.72$) participated in a study employing a $2$(disgust prime vs. control) $\times$ $2$(target gender) $\times$ $2$(male-vs. female-sex-typed occupation) between-subjects design. Participants were told that the study investigated how taste influences memory for first impressions, and that the study would require a taste-test and an evaluation task requiring them to read about and evaluate a short website biography of a businessperson. After reading the biography, participants completed memory questions as part of the cover story, and reported their impressions of the target.

*Manipulated Variables*

**Disgust prime.** Feelings of disgust were induced by a taste manipulation adapted from recent research showing that physical disgust (especially taste) can induce feelings of moral disgust (Eskine et al., 2011). In the control condition, participants drank water when instructed. However, in the disgust condition, participants drank “bitter fish soda” consisting of soda water, fish sauce, and Swedish bitters. Participants were informed of possible drink ingredients prior to the study; therefore there was no systematic withdrawal from the study.

Participants were instructed to drink one ounce of their assigned drink prior to reading the biography stimuli, and again immediately before beginning the questionnaire. In the debriefing, when asked to describe the substance they were asked to drink, participants in the disgust condition correctly described the drink contents (e.g., “bitter,” “fishy”), and 44% also volunteered their view that the drink was disgusting (e.g., “yucky,” “repulsive”).

**Sex-typed role.** In the male-sex-typed condition, the biography depicted a successful Financial Affairs Officer who also had male-sex-typed, agentic attributes (e.g., “tough, competitive nature,” with “driving ambition to power and status”). In the female-sex-typed condition, the biography depicted a
successful Employee Relations Counselor, an occupation shown to be female-sex-typed (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). The female sex-typed target was also depicted as having female-sex-typed, communal attributes (e.g., a “warm, empathetic nature,” with “sensitivity to the concerns of employees”). Note that, irrespective of sex-type, all targets were described as successful (i.e., CEO endorsement as “one of the most effective people I have worked with”).

Measured Variables

**Manipulation check.** To test the effectiveness of the manipulation of gender norm congruence, participants evaluated targets (7-point bipolar adjectives, averaged into scales) on male-sex-typed agency (unassertive–assertive, weak–strong, not tough–tough, and submissive–dominant; $\alpha = .83$) and female-sex-typed communality (not understanding–understanding, insensitive–sensitive, and not supportive–supportive; $\alpha = .87$).

**Leadership conferral.** Participants answered (1 = not at all; 7 = very much): “How much do you think you would want this person to be your boss?” and “Would you want this person as your boss?” ($\alpha = .79$).

Results and Discussion

To verify the gender norm congruence manipulation (i.e., sex-type role), we first examined its effect on judgments of agency and communality. For the check of agency, the Financial Affairs Officer ($M = 5.60$, $SD = 1.09$) was seen as having significantly higher agency than the Employee Relations Counselor ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 1.09$), $t(118) = 6.51, p < .001$. Similarly, for the check of communality, the Employee Relations Counselor ($M = 5.21$, $SD = 1.37$) was seen as having significantly higher communality than the Financial Affairs Officer ($M = 3.53$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(118) = 6.51, p < .001$. Thus, the male versus female sex-type manipulation effectively varied the perceived agency and communality of the targets, constructs central to prescribed gender norms.

To test our primary hypothesis, we recoded the combined manipulations of target gender and target sex-type role into gender-congruent (male target + male role, female target + female role) versus gender-incongruent (male target + female role, female target + male role) conditions. Participant gender did not moderate the main pattern of results; thus, data were collapsed across gender for all subsequent analyses.

For leadership conferral, no main effects of gender congruence, $F(1,116) = 0.14, p = .71$, or disgust prime, $F(1, 116) = 0.47, p = .49$, were found. However, there was a significant two-way interaction, $F(1, 116) = 6.08, p = .015$ ($\eta^2$ partial = .05). Cell-by-cell planned comparisons indicated that in the gender-congruent
conditions, leader conferral did not differ between the disgust ($M = 4.64, SD = 1.42$) and control ($M = 4.14, SD = 1.83$) conditions, $p = .22$. However, in the gender-incongruent conditions, leader conferral was significantly lower after the disgust prime ($M = 3.94, SD = 1.51$) compared to control ($M = 4.72, SD = 1.30$), $p < .05$ (Figure 1).

**Study 3: Can a Visual Disgust Prime Increase Backlash for Agentic Female Leaders?**

In Study 3, we examined leadership evaluations (economic penalties) and liking (social penalties) of a successful male and female managers employed in a male-sex-typed occupation (finance). At the same time, in the periphery of the study stimulus, participants were shown a picture that was disgusting, fear-inducing, or neutral. We anticipated that priming disgust (but not fear) would diminish evaluations of the female target (incongruent), but not the male target (congruent). Furthermore, because the visual prime used in this study was considerably more subtle than the one used in Study 2 (i.e., tasting a disgusting drink), we included a measure of disgust sensitivity to investigate the possibility that such a subtle manipulation would only be effective for those whom are inherently quite sensitive to the impact of subtly disgusting stimuli such as the one we employed in the current study.

**Methods**

**Participants and Procedure**

A total of 86 males and 142 females ($Mage = 34; SD = 12$) participated in a study employing a 3(prime: disgust, fear, control) $\times$ 2(target gender)
between-subjects design. As in Study 2, participants viewed a business website depicting a successful Vice President of Financial Affairs. This male-sex-typed role was held constant such that all male targets were gender-congruent while all female targets were gender-incongruent. Additional 7-point scale checks verified that the job was seen as prestigious ($M = 6.12, SD = 0.95$) and masculine ($M = 5.19; SD = 1.36$). After reading the biography, participants completed memory questions as part of the cover story, and reported their impressions of the target.

**Manipulated Variable**

*Disgust prime.* The presence/absence of a supraliminal disgust prime was included by varying the picture in a banner advertisement adjacent to the website text. In the disgust condition, the banner ad was for an insect extermination business showing a photograph of a fly and maggots on a tablecloth. In the fear condition, the extermination advertisement showed spiders. In the control condition, the advertisement was for an investment firm showing non-specific geometric figures.

A pilot study was conducted to verify the emotive nature of the priming stimuli. Pilot participants ($N = 50$) were recruited from Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk crowdsourcing platform, shown the photograph stimuli from all three conditions (randomized order: fly, spider, control), and asked to indicate (1 = none, 4 = a lot) if the picture could be described as disgusting (i.e., disgusting, repulsive, nasty, revolting; $\alpha = .90, .91, .75$, respectively) or fearful (i.e., frightening, scary, terrifying, horrific; $\alpha = .95, .97, .80$, respectively). As expected, respondents indicated the disgust stimuli (i.e., fly; $M = 3.40, SD = 0.76$) to be significantly more disgusting than fear stimuli (i.e., spider; $M = 2.90, SD = 0.84$), $t(49) = 4.49, p < .001$. Conversely, the disgust stimuli (i.e., fly; $M = 2.13, SD = 0.99$) was significantly less fearful than fear stimuli (i.e., spider; $M = 3.14, SD = 0.91$), $t(49) = 7.44, p < .001$. The control stimuli was neither disgusting ($M = 1.035, SD = 0.16$) nor fearful ($M = 1.02, SD = 0.11$), bottoming out the scales with little variance, and with significantly less disgust and fear than the other two conditions, $ts(49) > 7.00, ps < .001$.

**Measured Variables**

*Competence.* Participants evaluated the targets’ competence with the average of three 7-point bipolar adjective ratings (ineffective–effective, incompetent–competent, not capable–capable; $\alpha = .86$).

*Likability.* Participants evaluated target likeability and warmth with the average of two 7-point bipolar ratings (not likeable–likeable, cold-warm), and three scale ratings (e.g., “How warm do you think this person is?” 1 = not at all; 7 = very much; $\alpha = .92$).
Leadership conferral. This measure was identical to the one used in Study 2.

Disgust sensitivity. We measured individual differences in disgust sensitivity (body, hygiene, and contagion subscales) which included items such as “If I see someone vomit, it makes me sick to my stomach.” Items were averaged to form a composite scale (α = .86).

Results and Discussion

Again, participant gender did not moderate the main pattern of results; thus, data were collapsed across gender for all analyses. We employed regression techniques to allow for examination of disgust sensitivity as a continuous moderator variable (Aiken & West, 1991). Disgust sensitivity was centered, and the manipulated variables were centered effect-coded to indicate the influence of disgust (fly = .67, spider = –.33, control = –.33) and fear (fly = –.33, spider = .67, control = –.33) versus control. Predictors were then crossed to form two- and three-way interactions (Table 1).

For the measure of competence, there were no significant effects. Consistent with the majority of backlash studies that measure competence (Williams & Tiedens, 2016), we also found that competence ratings did not differ as a function of gender norm-congruence, disgust/fear primes, disgust sensitivity, or any of their interactions.

For the measure of likability, there was a main effect of the fear prime, β = 0.15, t = 2.04, p = .043; participants primed with fear were more likely to say that the target was likable/warm. This reaction to the fear prime did not vary by target gender norm-congruence or disgust sensitivity (i.e., no significant interactions). In contrast, there was a significant two-way interaction between the disgust prime and gender norm-congruence, β = –0.15, t = 2.06, p = .041, as well as a marginal two-way interaction between disgust sensitivity and gender norm-congruence, β = –0.12, t = 1.85, p = .066. However, these were qualified by a significant three-way interaction between disgust prime, disgust sensitivity, and gender norm-congruence, β = –0.20, t = 2.65, p = .009. Slope analysis indicated that the disgust prime had no effect on liking when participants were low in disgust sensitivity, for either gender-congruent (β = –0.01, t = –0.03, p = .975) or gender-incongruent targets (β = 0.10, t = 0.69, p = .494). In contrast, when disgust sensitivity was high, the disgust prime resulted in a marginal increase in liking for gender-congruent targets (β = 0.30, t = 1.80, p = .074), and a significant decrease in liking for gender-incongruent targets (β = –0.41, t = –2.86, p = .005).

For our primary dependent variable of interest, leadership conferral, there was no significant effect of or interactions with the fear prime. In contrast, there was a significant two-way interaction between disgust sensitivity and gender
norm-congruence, $\beta = -0.15$, $t = 2.18$, $p = .031$, which was further qualified by a three-way interaction between disgust prime, disgust sensitivity, and gender norm-congruence, $\beta = -0.17$, $t = 2.14$, $p = .034$. Slope analysis (Figure 2) indicated that the disgust prime had no effect on leader conferral when participants were low in disgust sensitivity, for either gender-congruent ($\beta = 0.03$, $t = 0.21$,
p = .838) or gender-incongruent targets (β = 0.14, t = 0.98, p = .326). When disgust sensitivity was high, the disgust prime still had no effect on leader conferral for gender-congruent targets (β = 0.21, t = 1.24, p = .217); however, supporting our theory that moral emotional process may help explain backlash against agentic women, the disgust prime resulted in a significant decrease in leader conferral for gender-incongruent targets (β = –0.35, t = 2.36, p = .019).

General Discussion

The current research substantiates the theoretical argument that backlash against female leaders who display dominance is a motivated process whereby perceivers’ negative evaluations ultimately stem from a desire to preserve and maintain the gender status hierarchy. When people encounter a dominant, agentic woman in a powerful role, they may feel a range of negative moral emotions toward her (i.e., contempt, disdain, disgust, and revulsion) because she is seen as someone who threatens the gender status hierarchy. Consistent with this idea, Study 1 demonstrated that the moral outrage people felt toward the dominant, agentic female leader explained why they were less likely to vote for her. Furthermore, because the agency she is exhibiting is viewed as a typically masculine competency, her behavior discredits the notion that men inherently deserve more power, status and access to resources than women, and also suggests that she may actually constitute a legitimate threat to male dominance.
In this article, we also offer the first evidence that backlash reactions involve moral evaluation processes associated with feelings of disgust. Given that embodied disgust amplifies moral judgment severity, we hypothesized that if moral emotions underlie gender backlash, enhanced feelings of disgust should result in harsher penalties for gender incongruent targets (men in female sex-typed-roles, and women in male sex-typed-roles) than gender congruent targets (women in female sex-typed-roles, and men in male sex-typed-roles) as only the former violate core gender norms that undermine the gender status hierarchy. Indeed, when judging business professionals, enhancing participants’ feelings of disgust resulted in lower leadership evaluations and liking of only the gender deviant targets. Notably, both taste-based and visual disgust primes (vs. neutral controls) had this effect, although visual disgust primes only influenced backlash reactions among participants high in disgust sensitivity, suggesting that taste-based disgust reactions were more universal among participants than reactions to disgusting pictures. Given that disgust primes only elicit harsher judgments in moral domains (Schnall et al., 2008), the negative effect that feelings of disgust had on evaluations of gender incongruent (but not congruent) targets implicates underlying moral emotional processes in backlash effects.

Limitations and Future Directions

One limitation of the current studies centers on their generalizability. First, since the targets in our experiments had White names, it is not clear whether our findings would apply to women of color in leadership positions. Second, since all of our participants were either North American (Studies 1 and 3) or Australian (Study 2), it is uncertain whether our effects would replicate in other parts of the world. However, if our basic theory is correct, then our effects should apply in cultures that possess similar prescriptive gender stereotypes and are also male-dominated (i.e., having a strong gender hierarchy).

Additionally, although Study 3 assessed individual differences in participants’ disgust sensitivity, there are likely other key individual differences that would moderate our effects. Specifically, we would expect that people who strongly endorse the belief that social hierarchy is necessary and important—that is, social dominance orientation (SDO)—should be especially likely to discriminate against agentic women following exposure to a disgust prime because one’s desire to uphold the gender status quo is the ultimate motivation underlying the moral disgust reactions to agentic female leaders. Future research should explore these possibilities.

Future research should also explore the role of moral anger in producing these effects. Although the visual and taste-based primes used in Studies 2 and 3 likely tapped bodily disgust in a traditional sense, the measure of negative moral emotions used in Study 1 (self-reported feelings of not just disgust, but also
contempt, disdain, revulsion, and anger toward the targets) were likely tapping a broader construct of negative moral emotions that included moral anger, or a special sub-emotion that Russell and Giner-Sorella (2013) term “non-bodily moral disgust” that blends concepts of moral anger and moral disgust. Addressing this limitation in future research is important as past work has shown that moral anger and moral disgust are distinct in key ways (Russell & Giner-Sorella, 2013)—and this may have implications for ultimately reducing backlash effects. For example, although past work has found that moral disgust is difficult to reduce, moral anger is quite responsive to changes in circumstances. Thus, having people think about the factors (e.g., extenuating circumstances) that would change their negative moral evaluations of a particular behavior causes them to feel less moral anger about that particular action (Russell & Giner-Sorolla, 2011). Perhaps asking perceivers to do this when evaluating agentic female leaders would lead to a reduction in backlash effects, similar to how mindfulness interventions have been shown to decrease prejudice and stereotyping (Lueke & Gibson, 2015).

**Implications for Organizations and Marginalized Leaders**

The theoretical specification of gender backlash as arising from moral evaluation processes is critically important for understanding how to address the social issue. For one, it is likely that increasing numbers of stereotype incongruent targets in the workplace (i.e., changing the descriptive stereotypes) will be ineffective in eliminating biases against them. Indeed, people’s perception that women have become more agentic over the last 30 years (i.e., a change in the descriptive stereotype about female agency) has not resulted in a corresponding decrease in backlash against agentic women. Likewise, if morally-laden negative affect and a desire to defend the status quo drives backlash effects, then traditional diversity interventions that rely on educating people about their (value-neutral) “blindspots” (i.e., implicit stereotype-driven biases) may be insufficient for reducing prejudice. Instead, it may be necessary to employ automated organizational processes and procedures that circumvent biases by reducing reliance on individual-level decision-making (Bohnet, 2016; e.g., removing names and other information that reveal one’s demographic background from resumes when hiring, conducting audits of the language used to evaluate male and female leaders to check for systematic gender biases, and providing transparent salary information to help reduce gender biases in the negotiation process).

Furthermore, individual female leaders who find themselves marginalized by backlash effects may consider employing impression management strategies that do not just focus on “dialing up warmth,” as communality deficits may not be the ultimate source of their problems. Rather, an effective strategy would undercut dominance perceptions by shifting others’ attributions for their behavior. For example, a female leader could make it clear to others that her occupancy of a
dominant role is not due to her own personal desire to wield power over others, but rather due to her desire to help others, or to help a particular social cause or organizational goal. Additional ways to undercut dominance perceptions include making it clear that one’s leadership position may only be temporary—that it will only be occupied so long as the cause or organizational goal one is working for is achieved; that one did not actively seek out the role—rather, others either “asked” her to assume the role (or put her in it); and also that one is willing to “share” power to the extent that this is possible. Importantly, such impression management strategies should be undertaken only to the extent that they are actually true for the individual employing the strategy. Nonetheless, even if these exact strategies are not applicable, if female leaders pursue the general goal of undermining dominance perceptions, it may help them avoid backlash effects—which would benefit not only themselves but also their organizations and society as well.

**References**


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