



# "Acceptable" Versus "Understandable": The Impact of Adjective Choice in Survey Research on Public Attitudes Towards Sex Work

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## Abstract

Research on public attitudes towards sex work has sought to understand the relationship between question wording, aggregate levels of support, and predictors of attitudes. Recent studies have found that the terminology used to represent the activity can have substantial implications for findings. Given that cross-national research often employs varying descriptors due to translation or cultural nuance, our study addresses a gap in the literature by clarifying how adjective choice shapes measured attitudes. Using a quota-based sample in a pre-registered survey experiment, we assessed whether subtle differences in adjective choice (“acceptable” vs. “understandable”) in survey questions impact public attitudes. Our results indicate that using understandable elicits more positive responses than acceptable. Predictors of attitudes also vary based on the adjective used: religiosity was a stronger predictor for acceptable, while hostile sexism predicted attitudes only for understandable. Even after accounting for these differences, aggregate positive views were substantially higher when understandable was used. These findings suggest that sex work might not be a politically salient or personally crystallized issue for most people and that attitudes toward sex work are relatively fluid, highlighting the importance of precise wording in survey research.

**Keywords** Sex work · Prostitution · Survey research · Word choice · Experimental research

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## Introduction

How does shifting one adjective in a survey question reshape the moral and social meanings people attach to sex work? Language plays a powerful role in shaping how people interpret and evaluate contested social issues. Framing theory shows that terms are never merely descriptive; even subtle differences in wording can activate distinct cognitive and moral schemas, influencing what people perceive as legitimate or deplorable (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993). These framing effects are particularly consequential in domains marked by stigma and moral controversy, such as sex work, where linguistic choices carry strong normative and emotional connotations (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). As Goffman (1963) and later Link and Phelan (2001) observed, stigma is sustained through language that encodes moral boundaries and social distance. Understanding how linguistic framing shapes attitudes is therefore critical both for survey measurement and for interpreting the moral contours of public debate. This study adopts a survey experiment that randomly varied the adjective used in a question about sex work (“acceptable” vs. “understandable”) and then employed correlational models to examine how attitudinal predictors shape responses under each framing.

Several recent studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the attitudinal predictors that shape public views towards sex work, bringing this aspect to the forefront of contemporary research on the topic (Vlase & Grasso, 2023; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024c; Jenaro et al., 2025). While most of this work has focused on predictors of support and opposition, a smaller but growing line of research examines how the wording of survey questions influences responses. Emerging studies have explored associations with the phrase “exchanging of sexual services for payment” (Johansson & Hansen, 2024b), how different types of sex work activities evoke varying levels of acceptance (Johansson & Hansen, 2024a; Gerassi et al., 2024), and how venues and the characteristics of sex workers, such as gender, ethnicity, or migration status, shape public perceptions (Cole, 2024; Hansen et al., 2025; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Lahav-Raz et al., 2024).

A recent study by Hansen and Johansson (2023) utilized a survey experiment to explore how the language used to describe the exchange of sexual services—whether framed as “prostitution” versus “sex work” versus “transactional sex”—impacts how people make sense of and morally evaluate the practice. The findings showed that question wording matters: respondents were more likely to view the exchange as unacceptable when the term prostitution was used, whereas sex work and transactional sex did not carry the same negative connotations. These results underscore the dynamic nature of public attitudes towards sex work and highlight the significant role of language in shaping moral perception. That said, no study has looked at the effects of changing adjectives.

Building on this evidence of the complexity in measuring attitudes toward sex work, we return to the fundamentals of survey design by examining how a subtle change in adjective choice can influence responses. Specifically, we test how attitudes differ when survey items ask whether sex work is “acceptable” versus “understandable.” Although minor in appearance, this distinction may shift the evaluative frame of the question—from one that invites moral judgment (acceptable) to one

that elicits empathy or contextual reasoning (understandable). Such differences may reveal not only how people evaluate sex work but also how they interpret the social and moral boundaries surrounding it.

While studies have examined the morality of sex work (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017) or preferences towards legality (Cole, 2024; Vlase & Grasso, 2023), most research exploring public attitudes towards the activity more generally has tended to use “acceptability” as the central measure (Cosby et al., 1996; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Johansson & Hansen, 2024c). Long-standing large-scale surveys items, such as those in the European Values Survey, the World Values Survey, and the General Social Survey, employ terms like “justifiable”, “acceptable,” or “nothing inherently wrong with prostitution.” While these items aim to capture opinion without priming morality or legality, they may reflect older moral framings that position sex work primarily as a question of deviance or permissibility. As public discourse increasingly situates sex work within broader economic, gendered, and rights-based contexts (Östergren, 2020), such wording may not fully reflect contemporary understandings of this phenomenon. Although “acceptability” remains useful for assessing moral approval, evolving discourses on sex work call for terms like understandable that capture context and recognition rather than judgment.

To address this gap, we test whether alternative adjectives yield systematically different results and how large those differences are, with implications for both measurement validity and cross-national comparability. In line with framing theory and stigma research, we approach these linguistic variations as more than technical choices, recognizing that the language used to describe sex work helps construct its moral and social meaning. By contrasting “acceptable” and “understandable”, this study probes whether linguistic reframing can reveal more nuanced moral and affective orientations toward sex work. Terms like “acceptability” and “justifiability” may reflect outdated moral assumptions, while understandable invites a shift toward recognition and empathy. Using a pre-registered survey experiment with randomized wording manipulation, we assess the extent to which this subtle change alters responses. If wording effects prove substantial, future research utilizing more complex question phrasing will need to incorporate additional robustness checks to ensure the reliability of their findings.

## Question Wording and Attitudes on Sex Work

Surveys are a crucial tool for gauging public opinion. Understanding the public’s views through accurately worded survey questions helps us better interpret citizens’ support for policies. It is particularly important to have accurate instruments for measuring public opinion, as the primary means by which citizens express support for governmental policies in a democracy, namely elections, occur infrequently. Further, it can be difficult to disentangle aggregate levels of support for a candidate or party with support for any one individual policy. In contrast, a well-designed, quota-based survey allows us to get a more direct measure of support for a policy at any time.

Public opinion influences government decisions, creating a feedback loop whereby informed and empathetic understandings of complex issues like sex work can lead to more progressive and supportive policies.<sup>1</sup> That said, there is limited research on the relationship between question wording, aggregate levels of support, and the predictors of public attitudes towards sex work. As mentioned, there is one previous study by Hansen and Johansson (2023) that assessed how three different terms—prostitution, sex work, and transactional sex—used to represent the exchange of sexual services for payment impact views on the acceptability of this activity. The authors found that the level of acceptability is influenced by question wording. Here, we summarize the study.

Hansen and Johansson (2023) found that a higher proportion of respondents indicated “not at all acceptable” when asked about prostitution compared to those who were asked about sex work and transactional sex. Additionally, a greater proportion of respondents indicated a neutral assessment (“neither acceptable nor unacceptable”) when asked about sex work compared to the other terms. Moreover, respondents were more likely to translate other attitudes and associations into an attitude on prostitution than when asked about sex work or transactional sex. There was one instance where attitudes had a statistically significant relationship with predicting acceptability for all three question wording variants: liberal attitudes towards general sexual behavior translated into views that the exchange of sexual services was acceptable when asked about prostitution, sex work, and transactional sex. However, the effect of liberal attitudes was largest when respondents were asked about prostitution and smaller when asked about sex work and transactional sex. This finding highlights the importance of question wording in shaping public attitudes and suggests that nuanced language changes can significantly impact survey results.

When exploring the effect of positive associations with the exchange of sexual services, such as sexual freedom, women’s empowerment, and companionship, these associations increased the level of acceptability of both prostitution and sex work (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). There was no significant relationship between positive associations and views on the acceptability of transactional sex. Conversely, negative associations with the exchange of sexual services, such as poverty, women’s exploitation, and human trafficking, only affected respondents’ assessments of the acceptability of prostitution. These results suggest that the term prostitution is particularly stigmatized. The take-home message from this finding is that language choice in surveys can significantly influence public perception, revealing deep-seated biases and stigmas associated with certain terms.

Survey questions relating to sex work using terms like prostitution and acceptability may fail to capture the nuanced and evolving nature of the debate surrounding this issue. Over time, there has been a significant shift in framing, moving away from portraying this activity as a moral failing of individuals to understanding the broader

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<sup>1</sup>The motivation to explore how adjective choice affects public opinion on sex work stems from our experiences collaborating with sex workers’ rights organizations, as well as our research European Union funded projects and at the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). These partnerships have provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by sex workers and the importance of understanding public perceptions to inform advocacy and policy efforts. We are deeply committed to ethical and impactful research that contributes to the broader discourse on sex work and its societal implications.

structural and personal factors that drive people into it. Earlier notions of sex workers as disreputable deviants and immoral women are nowadays less common in debates on the issue, where people who sell sexual services are often portrayed as vulnerable, exploited, and victims of human trafficking (Kulig & Butler, 2019). Framings emphasizing the need to recognize sex workers' rights and agency have also become more common (Goldenberg et al., 2021; Overs & Hawkins, 2011). Given these shifting frames, it is important to consider the terms used in surveys. Terms like "understandability" may be more apt to capture contemporary understandings of sex work, including the socio-economic factors and systemic inequalities involved.

Hansen and Johansson's (2023) findings underscore the significant impact of question wording on public attitudes, supporting our hypothesis that respondents will, on average, provide lower levels of support when asked whether sex work is acceptable and higher levels when asked whether the activity is understandable. By shifting the focus from acceptability to understandability, we anticipate that respondents will display more empathy towards those involved in the exchange of sexual services for payment and adopt a more nuanced perspective. This hypothesis is grounded in the notion that the term understandable may prompt respondents to consider the broader structural and personal factors that contribute to sex work, thereby increasing the perceived legitimacy and humanization of those involved and potentially reducing the negativity associated with this activity.

**H<sub>1</sub>** *On average, respondents will provide lower levels of evaluations when asked whether sex work is acceptable and higher levels when asked about whether the practice is understandable.*

### **Predictors of Attitudes Towards Sex Work**

The impact of predictors of attitudes towards sex work may differ depending on whether the survey question focuses on the acceptability or the understandability of the activity. In general, attitudinal predictors have been found to vary widely across demographic and ideological lines, as highlighted in the existing body of literature. For instance, studies have found a positive relationship between age and increased acceptability towards the exchange of sexual services for payment (Cosby et al., 1996; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; May 1999). The relationship between education and support for these exchanges is mixed, with research indicating both positive (Johansson & Hansen, 2024b; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; May 1999; Vlase & Grasso, 2023) and negative (Hansen & Johansson, 2022) correlations. One study by Johansson and Hansen's (2024b) finds that individuals with higher education levels are more likely to recognize the positive causes and consequences of sex work, including companionship, sexual freedom, and women's empowerment.

One consistent finding in the literature is that women are more likely than men to hold negative views on the exchange of sexual services for payment (Cosby et al., 1996; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Hansen, 2024b; May, 1999). Johansson and Hansen's (2024b) research further indicates that women tend to recognize the negative causes and consequences of sex work—such as poverty, exploitation, and human trafficking—to a greater extent than men. Additionally, Hansen and Johans-

son (2022) demonstrated that general attitudes toward sexual behavior significantly influence views on the acceptability of exchanging sexual services for payment, but the effect is different for women when compared to men.

Moreover, studies show a range of attitudes correlating with positive views on sex work. For instance, a liberal ideology and liberal attitudes are associated with more positive evaluations of exchanging sexual services for payment (Cosby et al., 1996; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; May, 1999; Peracca et al., 1998; Valor-Segura et al., 2011; Vlase & Grasso, 2023). Valor-Segura et al. (2011) found that a greater commitment to gender equality relates to positive views on sex work. Political orientation also plays a role for predicting positive and negative associations with sex work: Republican partisans are less likely to acknowledge the positive causes and consequences of sex work, while liberals are more likely to associate this activity with both the positive and negative concepts. Notably, viewing the act of selling sex as acceptable correlates with a greater recognition of the positive aspects. Conversely, respondents exhibited a similar level of association with negative aspects regardless of their general attitudes toward these exchanges, indicating a more widespread familiarity with the negative causes and consequences of sex work (Johansson & Hansen, 2024b).

Sexist attitudes also play a central role in shaping views toward sex work. Valor-Segura et al. (2011) found that hostile sexism, defined as antagonism toward women who challenge traditional gender roles, was associated with moral condemnation and punitive views of transactional sex, including stronger support for prohibition and greater victim-blaming. Similarly, Menaker and Franklin (2018) showed that sexist attitudes predicted stronger endorsement of sex work myths, reflecting a tendency to normalize exploitation and stigmatize women in the sex trade. Together, these findings suggest that hostile sexism fosters moral judgment and social distancing that reinforce the stigmatization of sex work. This pattern is particularly relevant for the current study, as the use of acceptable may align with moralizing responses shaped by such biases, whereas understandable may evoke more contextual or empathetic reasoning.

We build on insights from previous research regarding question wording and attitudinal predictors. In doing so, our study seeks to illuminate how shifting from acceptability to understandability in survey questions can offer a more nuanced understanding of public attitudes towards sex work and potentially mitigate stigmatization associated with this complex issue.

**H<sub>2</sub>** *The relationship strength of attitudinal predictors on views toward sex work will vary based on the adjective (acceptable vs. understandable) used in the survey question.*

## Data

This study surveyed 793 individuals in the United States (U.S.) to inquire about their attitudes on sex work. The survey was conducted throughout the second week of April 2024. Respondents provided informed consent and had the option to skip questions or exit the survey at any time. When accounting for item non-response across all

the variables utilized in the empirical analysis and survey incompletions, the sample was reduced to 776 respondents. No systematic patterns emerged when analyzing item non-response or survey incompletions. The sample consisted of adults residing in the U.S., aged 18 or above, recruited through an online Prolific panel. Participants received an average compensation of \$13.76 per hour, nearly twice the federal minimum wage. The median completion time for the survey was 7 min and 51 s, and no respondents' completion times showed large deviations from this median. The study underwent assessment to ensure compliance with institutional review board ethical standards.

The sampling methodology employed in recruiting survey participants was designed to optimize the representativeness of the sample concerning key socio-demographic variables, including age, gender, education, and income. In other words, the goal was for the sample to mirror the broader population of U.S. residents as closely as possible using stratified sampling. Population-level inference should be interpreted as approximate and conditional on the observed sample characteristics rather than as estimates derived from a probability-based national sample. To ensure data integrity, responses to socio-demographic inquiries within the survey were cross-referenced with respondent information previously provided to the survey research recruitment firm. The responses exhibited perfect alignment. Prolific employs a rigorous participant selection process, requiring individuals to submit various forms of identification and undergo verification of supplementary information (such as residential location) prior to their acceptance into their sampling pool. This ensures the integrity and accuracy of the participant pool by confirming eligibility and authenticity before inclusion in the survey.

There is one notable instance where a sample statistic deviates markedly from a population parameter. The percentage of respondents identifying as Democratic partisans, when coding all "leaners" as partisans, was higher than the percentage in the U.S. population. As there may exist partisan gaps in attitudes on sex work, the issue required attention when conducting any correlational analyses. Therefore, survey weights were estimated and incorporated into all correlational analyses to adjust sample characteristics, so they more closely reflect population parameters and thereby increase external validity.<sup>2</sup> The use of weights also helps ensure that the two split samples are comparable in composition. Notably, partisanship did not play a role in predicting attitudes in models with or without survey weights.

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<sup>2</sup>Analyses were conducted using R statistical software 4.3.2. Survey weights were implemented using the "survey" package. The data were adjusted by weighting according to the average percentages of partisan identification categories reported in the 2024 American National Election Study (ANES) and the 2024 Cooperative Election Study (CES). When coding partisan leaners as partisans, 46.5% of the sample was weighted as Democrats, 41.8% as Republicans, and 11.7% as independents. Weights were applied solely to correct partisan imbalance and were normalized to preserve the original sample size. Since weighting addressed only a single marginal distribution and did not reflect a complex sampling design, additional design-based diagnostics were not required. As discussed, weighting decisions did not substantively affect results.

## Experimental Design and Dependent Variables

To assess how the adjective used to ask about views on sex work might impact attitudes, this study implements an experimental survey design pre-registered through the Center for Open Science on the Open Science Framework website: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/AJ46W> on 18 March 2024. Pre-registration publicly records the study's data collection, hypotheses, design, and analysis prior to data collection, enhancing transparency and validity. The experiment conducted here surveyed slightly fewer respondents than was registered due to funding limitations, survey length constraints, and considerations related to fair compensation of participants.

The experimental manipulation in the survey involved the randomization of the adjective used in two questions asking about views on sex work. Participants were randomly assigned to receive one of the questions that asked about "sex work". The phrase "sex work" was utilized due to the stigmatized nature of the word "prostitution" (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). The randomization process produced approximately equal groups, with 387 respondents receiving the question using "acceptable" and 389 respondents receiving the question using "understandable" as the adjective. For each question, the prompt stated, "We would like to ask your views on a debated area of labor." One question asked, "On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing "not at all acceptable" and 10 representing "completely acceptable", indicate how acceptable you think it is for an individual to engage in sex work?". The other question asked, "On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing "not at all understandable" and 10 representing "completely understandable", indicate how understandable you think it is for an individual to engage in sex work?". The 0–10 scale is utilized to be directly comparable with the study conducted by Hansen and Johansson (2023), as well as the World Values Survey. The only difference between the two questions is the adjective used.

Although attitudes toward sex work could be studied through many other manipulations (e.g., terminology, gender of the sex worker, or context of the exchange), this study isolates the adjective to provide the most conservative test of wording effects. This choice was made for several reasons. First, acceptability is widely employed in both large-scale national-level surveys and smaller-scale studies, thus warranting an examination into whether its usage influences aggregate and individual level attitudes. Second, experiences during previous review processes led to dialogue and debate over whether acceptability is a universally understood concept. This discussion led us to consider whether a direct test of adjective choice was needed. Third, we introduced understandable as an alternative adjective to better capture how discourses around sex work have evolved—from moral and deviance-oriented framings toward more contextual, rights-based, and empathetic understandings. Including this adjective allows us to assess whether contemporary shifts in public discourse are mirrored in attitudinal data. Finally, by limiting the manipulation to a single adjective, the design allows a clear interpretation of wording effects without confounding them with other factors. If a minor change in wording produces meaningful differences, it would suggest that attitudes toward sex work are more fluid than previously assumed and that existing findings may have limited robustness and external validity.

After the respondent received one of the sex work questions, the next page provided an attention check. The respondents were asked whether they could identify which of the words were used in the last question. On this page, the option to go back to the preceding page was disabled. Around 94% of respondent correctly identified the adjective used in the survey question they were randomly assigned, which indicates strong attention to the specific word choice in the question. Respondents who failed to correctly identify the adjective used in the question were excluded from the analytical sample to ensure treatment comprehension and accurate interpretation of the treatment wording. Sensitivity analyses estimating models using all randomized respondents, as well as alternative sample composition checks, produced substantively identical results.

## Statistical Method

In the analysis, descriptive statistics are presented with bivariate regression statistical tests to identify any aggregate-level differences in attitudes based on adjective word choice. Subsequently, correlational tests are conducted using multiple regression analysis. Given that all dependent variables are treated as continuous measures for the two statements regarding views on sex work, Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple regression models are estimated.<sup>3</sup> As previously mentioned, correlational tests are performed with post-stratification survey weights to ensure sample representativeness. In addition, in the correlational analysis, all predictions for levels of acceptability and understandability for sex work are calculated for independent variables while holding all other predictor variables at their survey-weighted means. There are three multiple regressions models estimated in the analysis: 1. a model predicting levels of acceptability of sex work, 2. a model predicting levels of understandability of sex work, and 3. a model predicting both acceptability and understandability, with a dummy variable included as a predictor representing adjective choice.

## Independent Variables

While descriptive statistics and bivariate regression statistical tests may convey useful information regarding the impact of framing on aggregate-level support for sex work, the results only convey part of the puzzle. To further explore the impact of adjective choice in survey questions, models were estimated accounting for important individual-level predictors of interest. Several measures are included as predictor variables in the empirical analysis that have been found to have a relationship with attitudes on sex work or are common control measures in American attitudinal studies. First, several socio-demographic variables are included in the multiple regression analysis, including age, gender, income, education, and race. While the literature is largely mixed in terms of findings on the impact of socio-demographic variables and

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<sup>3</sup> Robustness analyses were conducted to assess model specification sensitivity. Models estimated using survey-weighted generalized linear models with heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors, gamma-distributed outcomes with a log link (estimated using a positive shift of the dependent variable), and non-parametric distributional comparisons produced substantively identical conclusions to the primary models reported in the manuscript.

views on sex work, these variables are important to control for just in case question wording impacts responses.

The analysis also included four attitudinal variables. First, the respondent's self-described religiosity was incorporated into the analysis since religious individuals commonly hold strong negative attitudes towards sex work. The expectation is that greater religiosity will be associated with negative attitudes towards sex work (see, Johansson & Hansen, 2025 for discussion on religiosity and sex work attitudes). In particular, the impact of religiosity is expected to be larger when asking about whether sex work is acceptable when compared to understandable. Second, respondents' self-reported political ideology on a left–right unidimensional ideological scale is included. The general expectation is that conservatives will express lower support for the statements when compared to liberals. It is also expected that the impact of the variable will be larger for the question asking about whether sex work is acceptable.

Third, partisan identification is included as a predictor variable. Partisanship has acted as an increasingly important predictor of a range of attitudes over time in the U.S., including issues that could be considered gendered issues (Hansen & Dolan, 2023). In this analysis, respondents that selected that they lean towards a party were coded as partisans identifiers of that party. This choice was made to not overinflate the impact of partisanship by only have strong identifiers coded as partisans. The choice was also made to limit degrees of freedom issues given the number of observations in the dataset. The general expectation is that Republicans will be less supportive of sex work when compared to Democrats. However, there are reasons to believe that partisanship may not matter. Policies towards sex work have not been salient partisan issues in the U.S, meaning they rarely feature prominently in political platforms or public debates between parties. Therefore, we might expect partisanship to have little or no relationship with attitudes towards the topic.

Fourth, a latent variable representing a measure for hostile sexism is accounted for in the empirical analysis. The latent variable was created through the estimation of factor analysis based on levels of agreement with three statements about women and society (see, Appendices A and B). For the hostile sexism variable, it is expected that the variable will have a stronger relationship with predicting views on sex work being understandable when compared to acceptable. Since individuals holding hostile sexist attitudes tend to devalue women's autonomy and want to control female sexuality, use of the word understandable in the survey question might challenge these views by acknowledging women's agency in a way that acceptability does not.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, in the model containing the full sample of respondents a dummy variable is included to represent the treatment. The dummy variable indicates how the use of the adjective understandable impact levels of support for sex work when compared to acceptable. By estimating the model with all responses, it is possible to calculate the precise effect of adjective wording on views of sex work while controlling for all other predictor variables.

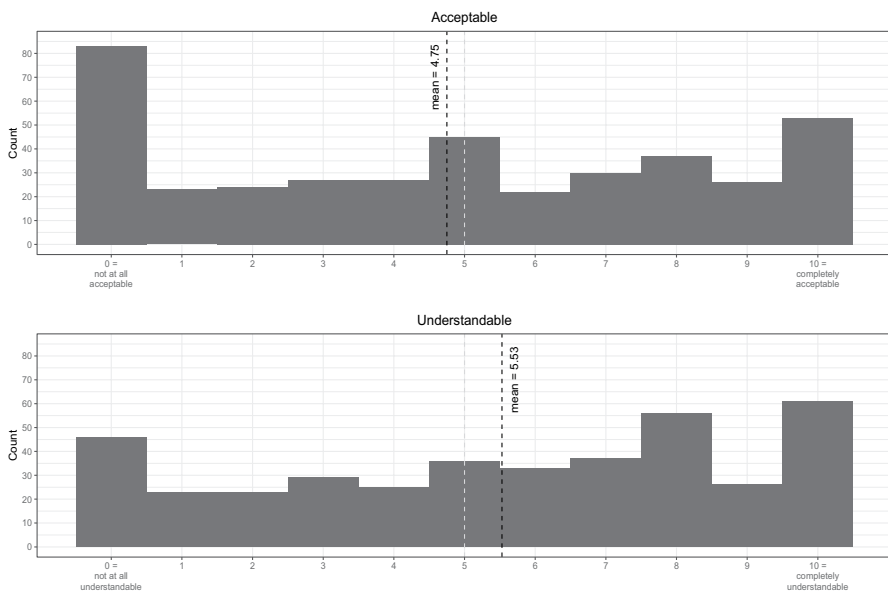
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<sup>4</sup>As a robustness check, a measure was included in previous versions of the empirical analysis to represent benevolent sexism. The benevolent sexism measure had no statistically significant relationships with predicting levels of acceptability or understandability of sex work.

## Results—Descriptive Statistics

Figure 1 displays histograms of response selections for the two questions that ask about views on sex work. In the top panel, response selections are provided for the question that asks about acceptability, and in the bottom panel, the response selections are plotted for the question that asks about understandability. Four takeaways are evident from exploring the figure. First, the mean response level is higher for the question that asks about understandability (5.53) when compared to acceptability (4.75). Although this shift may appear modest in absolute terms, it meaningfully moves the average response from below to above the neutral midpoint, changing the overall interpretation of public opinion from slightly negative to slightly positive. A bivariate regression model was estimated to predict responses by adjective wording use, and the results indicate that responses to the two questions are statistically different. Substantively, if the selection of a 5 indicates the midpoint on the 0 to 10 scale, the mean level of response leans negative when asked whether sex work is acceptable and positive when asked whether it is understandable.

Second, a larger proportion of respondents chose “0=not at all acceptable” (83 respondents, 20.9%) in comparison to those that selected “0=not at all understandable” (46 respondents, 11.6%). The outcome indicates that respondents had a harsher negative reaction to the question when the adjective they were asked about was acceptability. The outcome could be elucidated by the possibility that individuals might hold the belief that an action is unacceptable while also acknowledging that people’s involvement in said action could be justified.



**Fig. 1** Distributions of responses. Bivariate regression models indicate statistically significant difference based on wording at  $p < 0.01$

Third, the reverse trend is true for respondents that selected “10=to a great degree...”. A slightly larger proportion of respondents chose the value of 10 when they were asked about whether the practice was understandable (61 respondents, 15.4%) in comparison to those asked whether it was acceptable (53 respondents, 13.4%). The result indicates a more strongly positive reaction to the question that asks about whether it is understandable a person would engage in sex work. The outcome could be explained by the implication that utilization of the term understandable may prompt contemplation about an individual, whereas the use of acceptable may prompt consideration of the activity itself.

Finally, the fourth takeaway from Fig. 1 is that a larger proportion of respondents selected the range of negative-leaning response choices 0–4 (184 respondents, 46.34% vs. 146 respondents, 36.96%) and the midpoint choice of 5 (45 respondents, 11.34% vs. 36 respondents, 9.11%) when asked about whether sex work is acceptable compared to understandable. Alternatively, a smaller proportion of respondents selected positive-leaning response choices 6–10 (168 respondents, 42.32% vs. 213 respondents, 53.92%) when asked about whether the act is acceptable when compared to understandable. The result indicates that the statistically significant difference in response choices based on the adjective utilized in the survey question is not simply a product of a difference in response selection for the most extreme categories.

Across all categories, except the selection of the values 1 and 9 where there were the same number of respondents for each question, a different number of respondents selected the values along the lines with the highlighted trends. The result indicates a systematic difference in how individuals respond based on adjective choice, with respondents providing more positive responses when asked about understandability. The outcome provides initial support for  $H_1$ .

## Results—Regression Analysis

Model outputs for the three regression models are presented in Table 1. The first two models are estimated separately for each adjective condition (acceptable and understandable), and the third combines both conditions and includes the treatment indicator.<sup>5</sup> The first aspect of the outputs to discuss is the model measures of fit values. The  $R^2$  and adjusted  $R^2$  model fit scores indicate that the three models perform quite well for predicting the attitudes, particularly when considering them within the broader context of behavioral research. The model predicting whether sex work is acceptable ( $R^2=0.33$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.31$ ) shows a higher overall model fit than the model predicting whether sex work is understandable ( $R^2=0.23$ , adjusted  $R^2=0.21$ ). While these models are estimated on different random subsamples and are not directly comparable in the statistical sense, this descriptive difference suggests that the independent variables account for more variance when attitudes are framed

<sup>5</sup> Including interaction terms between the treatment and all predictors would greatly increase the number of coefficients relative to the sample size ( $N=776$ ), leading to overfitting and unstable estimates. Since survey weights already adjust the samples to be more comparable, predictors are estimated separately within each wording condition, and the combined model captures the overall wording effect.

**Table 1** Regression models predicting attitudes towards sex work

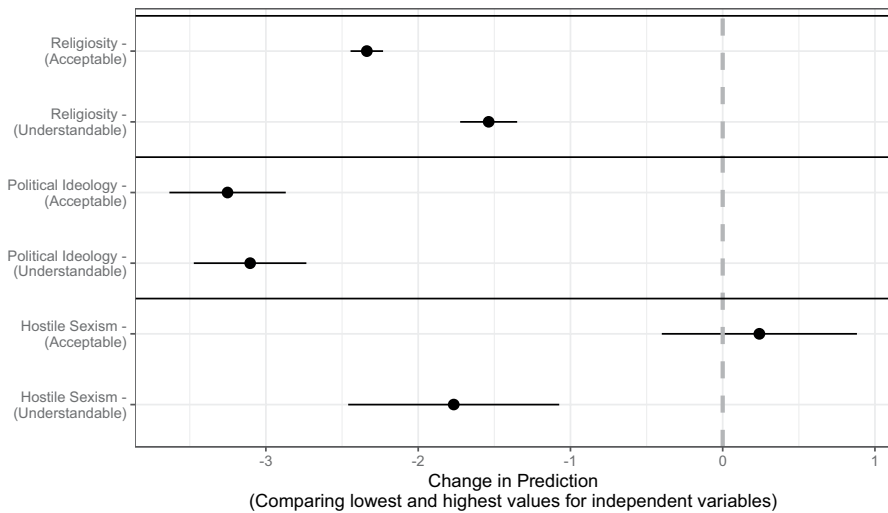
	Acceptable	Understandable	All responses
Constant	8.04** (0.71)	6.64** (0.82)	6.76** (0.58)
Age	-0.04** (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.01)
Woman	-0.08 (0.36)	-0.53 (0.32)	-0.32 (0.24)
Income	-0.05 (0.06)	0.02 (0.05)	-0.02 (0.04)
Education	0.13 (0.13)	0.19 (0.14)	0.15 (0.09)
White	0.61 (0.38)	0.40 (0.38)	0.60* (0.26)
Religiosity	-0.23** (0.06)	-0.15** (0.05)	-0.19** (0.04)
Party ID—Independent	-0.19 (0.44)	-0.63 (0.45)	-0.45 (0.31)
Party ID—Republican	-0.60 (0.67)	-0.07 (0.66)	-0.30 (0.46)
Political ideology	-0.33** (0.10)	-0.31** (0.11)	-0.33** (0.07)
Hostile sexism	0.06 (0.18)	-0.44* (0.20)	-0.15 (0.13)
Treatment—Understandable			1.17** (0.23)
Observations	387	389	776
$R^2$	0.33	0.23	0.28
Adjusted $R^2$	0.31	0.21	0.27

Statistical significance \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ ; standard errors in parentheses; survey weights utilized

in terms of acceptability than when they are framed in terms of understandability. This result indicates that attitude formation about sex work may be more strongly tied to other attitudes when framed in terms of whether sex work is acceptable when compared to understandable.

In terms of the relationship between attitudes towards sex work and predictor variables, the model outputs indicate that there are only two instances where a socio-demographic variable has a statistically significant relationship with the attitudes. First, the results indicate that age is negatively related to predicting whether sex work is acceptable ( $p < 0.01$ ). Second, in the model incorporating responses to both questions, white respondents provided a statistically higher level of assessment ( $p < 0.05$ ). However, when plotting predictions for age and race levels while holding all other variables at their survey-weighted means, the results revealed that neither variable had a substantial impact on views of sex work. In other words, there were no substantive differences in evaluations based on age or race. Therefore, socio-demographic variables do not appear to have substantively meaningful impacts on views toward sex work. In addition, political partisanship also was not correlated with attitudes on sex work.

There were three attitudinal variables that had both statistically significant and substantively important relationships with views on sex work. In Fig. 2, the predicted values derived from the individual models estimated separately for each adjective condition are presented for these variables, allowing for a direct comparison of how predictors operate within each framing of the question. First, respondents' self-reported level of religiosity was negatively associated with both viewing sex work as acceptable and understandable ( $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents who assigned greater levels of importance to religion in their lives were less likely to view sex work as acceptable or understandable when compared to less religious or non-religious individuals.



**Fig. 2** Change in predictions for independent variables based on question wording. 95% confidence bounds; predictions calculated holding other independent variables at survey weighted means

In the top panel of Fig. 2, changes in predicted levels of sex work acceptability and understandability are plotted when comparing non-religious respondents (0 = not at all important) to the most religious respondents (10 = to a great degree important).<sup>6</sup> The results show that the impact of religiosity is markedly stronger on changing attitudes towards viewing sex work as acceptable when compared to understandable. On average, when comparing a respondent that selected “not at all important” to one that selected “to a great degree important” there is a decrease of 2.34 points (95% confidence bounds = -2.44, -2.23) in viewing sex work as acceptable. When comparing similar individuals and the change in predictions of viewing sex work as understandable, there is a smaller decrease of 1.54 points (95% confidence bounds = -1.72, -1.35). The 95% confidence bounds around the point estimates do not touch, which indicates that predicted levels are statistically different. When accounting for the confidence bounds, religiosity corresponds to a minimum change equal to 22.3% of the response scale range when attitudes are framed in terms of acceptability and 13.5% when framed in terms of understandability. In sum, the effect of religiosity on attitude formation towards sex work is stronger regarding its acceptability compared to its understandability. Considering that the term acceptable could evoke contemplation about the action itself rather than the person performing it, it follows that religiosity would play a larger role in assessing said action.

Second, political ideology also has a negative, statistically significant, and substantively important relationship with attitudes towards sex work ( $p < 0.01$ ). Respon-

<sup>6</sup> Predicted values were also compared between the lowest and midpoint levels for all continuous predictors to confirm that the results were not driven by extreme values. The patterns were consistent across variables. For example, in the case of religiosity, predicted support in the acceptability model declined from 5.28 (95% CI [4.68, 5.88]) at the lowest level to 4.11 (95% CI [3.78, 4.44]) at the midpoint, while in the understandability model it declined from 5.87 (95% CI [5.33, 6.40]) to 5.10 (95% CI [4.74, 5.46]). These findings confirm that the relationships shown in Fig. 2 are not driven by comparisons at the scale extremes.

dents who identify more strongly as conservative, compared to those identifying as liberal, are less likely to view sex work as acceptable and understandable. In the middle panel of Fig. 2, the change in predicted values of attitudes towards sex work when comparing a “0=very liberal” respondent to a “10=very conservative” respondent is displayed. The change in predicted values, when comparing a very liberal to a very conservative respondent, is a decrease of 3.25 points (95% confidence bounds = -3.63, -2.87) in predicting whether sex work is acceptable on the ten-point scale. When predicting the understandability of sex work, the change between the extreme values of political ideology results in a decrease of 3.1 points (95% confidence bounds = -3.47, -2.73). Since the 95% confidence bounds overlap when calculating the effect of political ideology on both the acceptability and understandability of sex work, political ideology has a similar substantive impact on both aspects. At a minimum, considering the confidence bounds, the estimated change corresponds to 27.3% of the response scale range in attitudes toward sex work across ideological extremes.

While religiosity had a larger impact on predicting whether sex work is acceptable, and political ideology had the same substantive effect on whether the practice is acceptable and understandable, attitudes of hostile sexism only impact views on whether sex work is understandable ( $p < 0.05$ ). Hostile sexism is not a statistically significant predictor of attitudes on the acceptability of sex work. When comparing an individual that holds non-hostile sexist attitudes to an individual that holds strong attitudes of hostile sexism, there is an average decrease of 1.77 points (95% confidence bounds = -2.46, -1.07) in understandability. The effect size is substantial. At minimum, holding hostile sexist views corresponds to a change equal to 10.7% of the response scale range in attitudes toward the understandability of sex work, and at maximum, the estimated change corresponds to 24.6% of the scale range. Given that hostile sexism entails contemplations about women’s societal roles, it stands to reason that hostile sexism would have a more pronounced influence when the term understandable is employed, as it may prompt stronger associations with the individual, often a woman, engaged in the behavior.

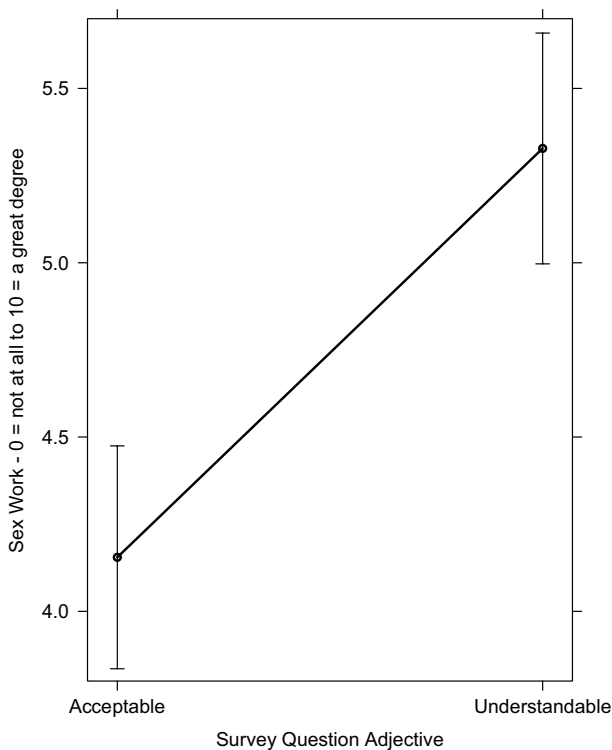
Taken together, the results on the impact of attitudes on support for sex work provide support for  $H_2$ . While political ideology exhibited a consistent relationship with views on sex work regardless of the adjective utilized in the survey question, the impact of the other two attitudinal variables was contingent on adjective choice. The effect of religiosity was notably larger when respondents were asked about the acceptability of sex work. In contrast, hostile sexism emerged as a predictor only when individuals were questioned about the understandability of sex work, where it wielded considerable influence. We should note that these comparisons rely on parallel estimation within randomized and empirically comparable subsamples rather than formal pooled coefficient interaction tests, which allows for substantive contrasts across conditions while prioritizing model stability given the available sample size.

After providing support for  $H_2$ , indicating that predictors of attitudes towards sex work are contingent on adjective choice, it is pertinent to revisit  $H_1$ . Descriptive statistics have shown that evaluations of sex work as understandable were statistically higher than when respondents were asked whether it was acceptable. Since predictor variables exhibit differing relationships based on adjective choice, it is important

to ascertain whether the baseline difference persists when controlling for attitudinal variations. The final column in Table 1 indicates that adjective choice exerts a statistically significant impact on evaluations of sex work even when controlling for differences in relationships with predictors. In Fig. 3, predictions for the two question formats are plotted, while holding all other predictor variables at their survey-weighted means. The predicted response level is 4.15 (95% confidence bounds = 3.84, 4.47) when respondents were asked whether sex work is acceptable, and 5.33 (95% confidence bounds = 5.00, 5.66) when asked whether it is understandable. Accounting for the 95% confidence bounds, the difference in the predicted response value is at least 0.53, controlling for other predictor variables. On the 0–10 scale, a half-point difference equates to a 5% minimum difference in aggregate support for sex work. This result is significant in terms of measuring public opinion and confirms  $H_1$ .

## Conclusion

This study asked how subtle differences in survey wording—specifically the adjectives “acceptable” and “understandable”—reshape public attitudes toward sex work. Using a pre-registered survey experiment, we found that linguistic framing signifi-



**Fig. 3** The impact of question wording on predicted support. 95% confidence bounds; predictions calculated holding other independent variables at survey weighted means

cantly affects both overall evaluations of sex work and the attitudinal predictors associated with those evaluations. The study extends a growing research agenda exploring the complex dynamics of public attitudes towards sex work. In particular, the findings here advance the study by Hansen and Johansson (2023), which found that survey question wording impacts both aggregate-level public opinion on sex work and individual-level associations with sex work. This previous study determined that the most appropriate term to utilize in survey research when asking about the practice is sex work due to the historical stigmatization of the word prostitution and the ambiguity of the term transactional sex. We expand on that work by demonstrating that adjective choice—a subtler level of linguistic variation—can meaningfully influence what is being measured when researchers ask about attitudes toward sex work.

Two concrete findings stand out. First, the results demonstrate that using the word understandable in a question about views on sex work elicits more positive responses compared to a question using the adjective acceptable. The positive relationship between views on sex work and use of the adjective understandable persisted even when controlling for differences in attitudinal predictors based on adjective choice. Second, when estimating regression models to predict responses, the results indicated that not all predictors have consistent relationships with views on sex work across the two question formats. While political ideology consistently predicted views on sex work across the questions, religiosity emerged as a substantially stronger predictor when the question used the adjective acceptable. In contrast, hostile sexism predicted views on sex work only when the question utilized the adjective understandable. These results suggest that respondents may reflect on different aspects of the sex trade—the act versus the people involved, as well as employ different processes in forming their attitudes toward sex work, based on subtle differences in survey question adjective choice.

These differences are consistent with several plausible mechanisms discussed in framing and stigma literature (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Questions emphasizing acceptability appear more likely to invite moral evaluation of the behavior itself, whereas understandability may encourage perspective-taking focused on individuals and contextual circumstances. At the same time, some portion of the observed effect may reflect linguistic familiarity rather than purely conceptual distinctions. For survey researchers, these findings underscore that adjective choice involves substantive trade-offs: wording emphasizing acceptability may better capture normative or moral judgments, whereas understandability may elicit responses grounded in empathy or contextual reasoning. The variability in responses based on question wording emphasizes the need for carefully designed surveys to capture the full range of public opinion.

Which adjective should be used in survey questions asking about views on sex work? The answer depends on the objective of measurement. The use of acceptable appears to focus attention on the moral evaluation of the activity, which helps explain why moral dimensions such as religiosity emerge as stronger predictors under that frame. Thus, the results would seem to imply that use of the adjective acceptable would give scholars a broader understanding of how individuals view sex work overall. In comparison, use of the word understandable appears to prompt

respondents to consider the people involved in sex work, thereby making multifaceted attitudes such as hostile sexism stronger predictors of views for that question. Overall, the consideration of the people involved leads to more positive evaluations of sex work. Since scholars across many disciplines are concerned with the experiences and wellbeing of individuals such as sex workers, this perspective may offer a more person-centered lens through which to assess public attitudes.

At a broader level, this study highlights the need for scholars to reflect on how survey wording can shape what is being measured. While a battery of nuanced questions would be the optimal approach for exploring attitudes towards sex work, many times scholars are confined to using either: (1) national and cross-national datasets, or (2) self-created surveys with modest funding amounts. The first category of surveys is limited in the number of questions asked on any one topic. Thus, scholars utilizing these datasets, while the highest of quality in terms of sampling and representativeness, are restricted to a single question on a topic with wording that was predetermined years or decades prior, using a potentially outdated term. Scholars should reflect on how the wording of questions in these surveys might impact their results. Alternatively, the second category of surveys, while allowing scholars to have ultimate control over the wording of questions, are many times restricted in the number of observations or the amount of questions asked due to funding limitations. This challenge is compounded by the fact that research on attitudes towards sex work is conducted across multiple disciplines with limited engagement between them and no established standards for question wording, increasing the likelihood of inconsistent or non-comparable findings. Scholars should therefore consider how even minor linguistic changes might have substantial implications for their results and try to optimize the insights they can gain by refining the wording of their survey questions.

What are the broader societal implications of the findings? First, the relative sensitivity of responses to wording suggests that sex work is a low-salience issue for most people—one not tied to stable, deeply held convictions. Highly salient issues tend to produce stable attitudes that are resistant to change; by contrast, attitudes toward sex work appear fluid and open to reframing. For instance, it is unlikely that current attitudes in the U.S. towards abortion would be impacted by the adjective choices presented here to the same extent.

The second broad implication is that this study provides an example of how a survey question phrased to intentionally prompt respondents to reflect on individuals rather than actions leads to more positive evaluations. When the adjective understandable was used in the survey question it is more likely that individuals were prompted to think about the participants, rather than the action. The results support observations from sex worker rights movements that humanizing the topic—focusing on people rather than the practice—may be more effective in advocating for their peers and mobilizing support for equitable policies. By getting people and politicians to think about the people and their circumstances, these groups are more likely to successfully obtain preferential outcomes than if they focus solely on arguments justifying the activity itself.

As with all studies, limitations should be noted. Attitude salience was not directly measured in this study, and interpretations linking wording sensitivity

to comparatively fluid or low-salience attitudes should therefore be understood as speculative. The analysis relied on a single pair of adjectives, and differences may partly reflect linguistic familiarity rather than purely conceptual distinctions. Since the study did not directly measure respondents' cognitive or emotional interpretations of the wording manipulation, the proposed mechanisms distinguishing moral evaluation from perspective-taking should be interpreted as theoretically informed inferences rather than directly observed processes. Additionally, while random assignment strengthens causal inference, the correlational modeling of predictors limits causal claims about how individual characteristics interact with framing effects. Finally, since the experiment was conducted in English with a U.S.-based sample, the findings should not be assumed to generalize across linguistic or cultural contexts where translation choices and normative meanings may differ. Future work should replicate these findings with additional linguistic variations, larger samples, and cross-national designs to test the generalizability of results.

Finally, this study offers a foundation for future research on how language shapes moral reasoning and stigma in sexuality studies. Inquiries into attitudes toward sex work offer researchers a wealth of variables ripe for manipulation. Beyond adjective choice, subsequent experiments could explore the effects of verbs (for example, "selling sex" versus "providing sexual services"), pronouns and perspective ("people who sell sex" versus "women who sell sex"), or noun framing ("the sex industry" versus "people engaged in sex work"). Such work would deepen understanding of how words and connotations structure moral interpretation, stigma, and legitimacy—not only in attitudes toward sex work but also in broader debates about sexuality, gender, and social inequality.

## Appendix A: Variable Coding

*Age* – Continuous, respondent's age

*Gender* – Binary, 0 = man; 1 = woman

*Race* – Binary, White = 1; Other races = 0.<sup>7</sup> Several racial and ethnic categories contained relatively small numbers of observations within the analytical samples. Because race functions as a control variable and the models include multiple predictors, categories were collapsed to maintain statistical stability.

*Education* – Continuous, 0 = did not graduate from high school; 1 = high school graduate/GED; 2 = some college, but no degree (yet); 3 = 2-year college degree; 4 = 4-year college degree; 5 = postgraduate degree; 6 = doctorate

*Income* – Continuous, 0 = Less than \$10,000; 1 = \$10,001–\$20,000; 2 = \$20,001–\$30,000; 3 = \$30,001–\$40,000; 4 = \$40,001–\$50,000; 5 = \$50,001–\$60,000;

<sup>7</sup> As a robustness check, additional models were estimated with education, income, political ideology, and religiosity coded as categorical variables. The results were substantively identical to those reported in the main analysis. Education and income remained non-significant, and the relationships for religiosity and ideology were unchanged, confirming that treating these ordered measures as continuous does not affect the conclusions.

6 = \$60,001–\$70,000; 7 = \$70,001–\$80,000; 8 = \$80,001–\$90,000; 9 = \$90,001–\$100,000; 10 = \$10,001–\$150,000; 11 = greater than \$150,001

*Political Ideology* – Continuous 10-point scale, 0 = very liberal to 10 = very conservative

*Partisan Identification* – Nominal, Democrat; Independent; Republican; leaners coded as partisans

*Religiosity* – Continuous 10-point scale, importance of religion from, 0 = not at all important to 10 = to a great degree important

*Hostile SEXISM* – Factor scores of three measures, (1) Women seek to gain power by getting control over men. (2) Women exaggerate problems they have at work. (3) Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash. Continuous, level of agreement from 0 = completely disagree to 5 = neither disagree nor agree to 10 Completely agree.

## Appendix B: Descriptive Statistics

See Tables 2, 3 and 4.

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics—Independent variables

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	39	41.33	83	12.83
Education	0	4	3.49	6	1.35
Income	0	6	6.38	11	3.42
Political ideology	0	4	3.98	10	2.82
Religiosity	0	2	3.76	10	3.78
Variable	Dem	Ind	Rep		
Party ID	52.33%	25.10%	22.57%		
Variable	Men	Women			
Gender	48.46%	51.54%			
Variable	White	Non-white			
Race	68.86%	31.15%			

**Table 3** Hostile sexism

Hostile sexism	Mean (SD)
Women seek to gain power by getting control over men	3.09 (2.69)
Women exaggerate problems they have at work	3.10 (2.66)
Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash	3.18 (2.79)
Cronbach's Alpha	0.86
Factor analysis	Loadings
Variable 1	0.84
Variable 2	0.76
Variable 3	0.87
Proportion variance	0.68

Minimum values of 0 and maximum values of 10. Variables correlated between 0.64 and 0.74

**Table 4** Descriptive statistics by treatment group analytical sample*Acceptable condition*

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	39	41.25	83	12.60
Education	0	4	3.54	6	1.35
Income	0	7	6.63	11	3.41
Political ideology	0	3	3.85	10	2.86
Religiosity	0	2	3.75	10	3.80
Variable	Dem		Ind		Rep
Party ID	55.04%		23.26%		21.71%
Variable	Men			Women	
Gender	49.87%			50.13%	
Variable	White			Non-white	
Race	67.70%			32.30%	

*Understandable condition*

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	39	41.81	78	13.12
Education	0	4	3.43	6	1.35
Income	0	6	6.25	11	3.41
Political ideology	0	4	4.20	10	2.75
Religiosity	0	2	3.81	10	3.75
Variable	Dem		Ind		Rep
Party ID	49.61%		26.22%		24.16%
Variable	Men			Women	
Gender	47.56%			52.44%	
Variable	White			Non-white	
Race	69.67%			30.33%	

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**Data Availability** Anonymized data and replication code are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request via email.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** None.

**Ethical Approval** IRB: #Tenk 4.2, The study was exempted from formal ethical review by the University of Turku (Finland) in accordance with the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK) ethical guidelines for human sciences research. The study involved voluntary adult survey participation with informed consent and did not meet criteria requiring ethics committee review (e.g., no intervention affecting physical integrity, no participation by minors without consent, no exposure to exceptional stimuli, and no elevated risk of psychological or physical harm).

**Consent for Publication** Acquired.

**Informed Consent** Acquired.

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