

THE IMPACT OF HOSTILE SEXISM ON NEGATIVE AFFECT AND STATE SELF-ESTEEM AMONG WOMEN STUDENTS

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Third-Year Research Workshop



INTRODUCTION

Despite growing representation, women in academia still face informal gender-based barriers that undermine their success (e.g., Greider et al., 2019; Van der Lee & Ellemers, 2015). Hostile sexism—characterized by overtly negative attitudes toward women—has been shown to predict discrimination against women in professional contexts (Bareket & Fiske, 2023), such as favoring men candidates over equally qualified women (e.g., Masser & Abrams, 2004). However, its direct impact on women in academic settings remains underexplored. Emerging evidence suggests that perceived sexism is associated with reduced commitment or sense of belonging (Kuchynka et al., 2018), and that witnessing sexist incidents directed at other women can influence observers’ emotions or judgments (Bradley-Geist et al., 2015). These reactions may include anger or resistance rather than vulnerability (Eniç & Tosun, 2021; de Lemus et al., 2015). The present study is the first to examine the immediate emotional and self-evaluative consequences of a personally directed sexist experience in an academic context. Of particular interest is state self-esteem—a temporary, situation-specific evaluation of one’s self-worth (Heatherton & Polivy, 1991)—which may be especially sensitive to interpersonal threats in evaluative settings.

METHOD

Participants: 145 women students ($M = 23.9$, $SD = 2.53$); 82% were from social sciences and humanities. Most were recruited via the university system ($n = 120$); the rest via social media.

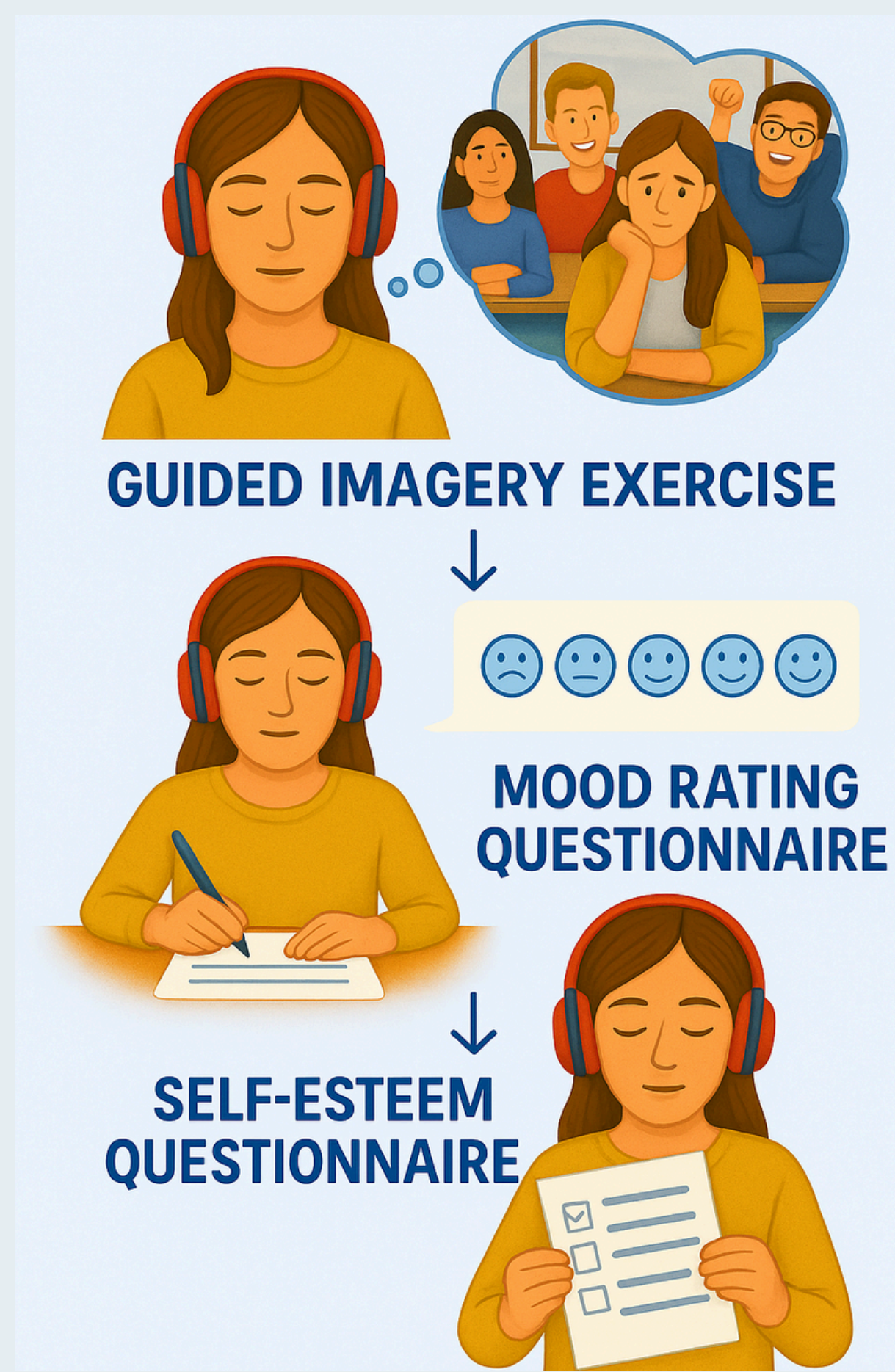
Procedure:

- Experimental group listened to a hostile sexist academic scenario (e.g., “She’s too busy decorating her notes... just like all the girls here”).
- Control group heard a neutral version of the same academic setting.
- After the audio, participants completed the following measures:
 - PANAS-SF to assess momentary negative affect (Watson et al., 1988; 10 items, $\alpha = .78$; e.g., nervous).
 - The State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES; Heatherton & Polivy, 1991; 7 items, $\alpha = .88$; e.g., I feel good about myself).
 - The Hostile Sexism subscale of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996; 6 items, $\alpha = .81$; e.g., Women seek to gain power by getting control over men).

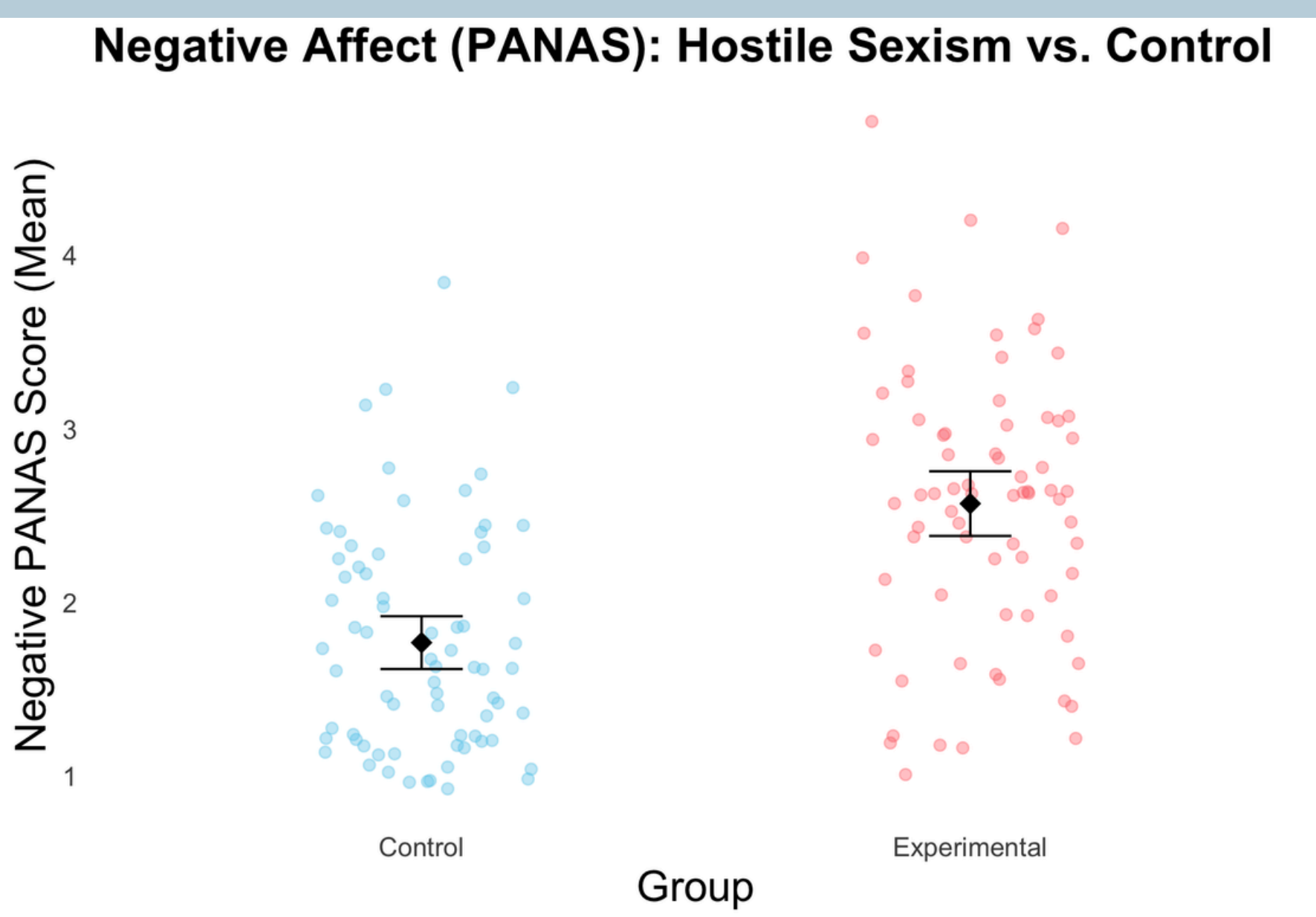
CURRENT STUDY

This study examined whether brief exposure to hostile sexism in an academic setting would increase negative affect and reduce state self-esteem among women students.

A guided imagery task simulated a realistic sexist interaction to evoke an emotional response relevant to academic self-worth.

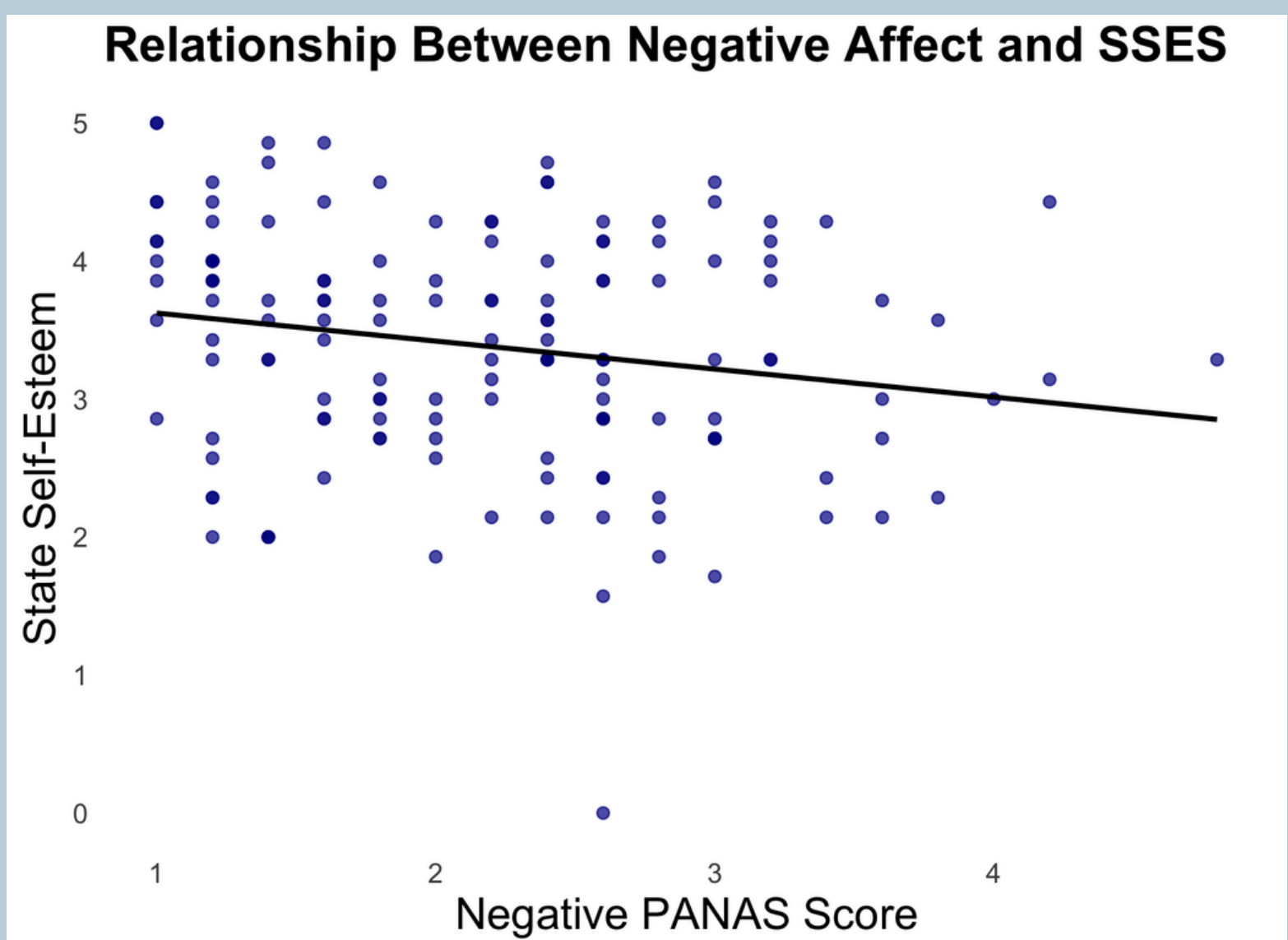


RESULTS

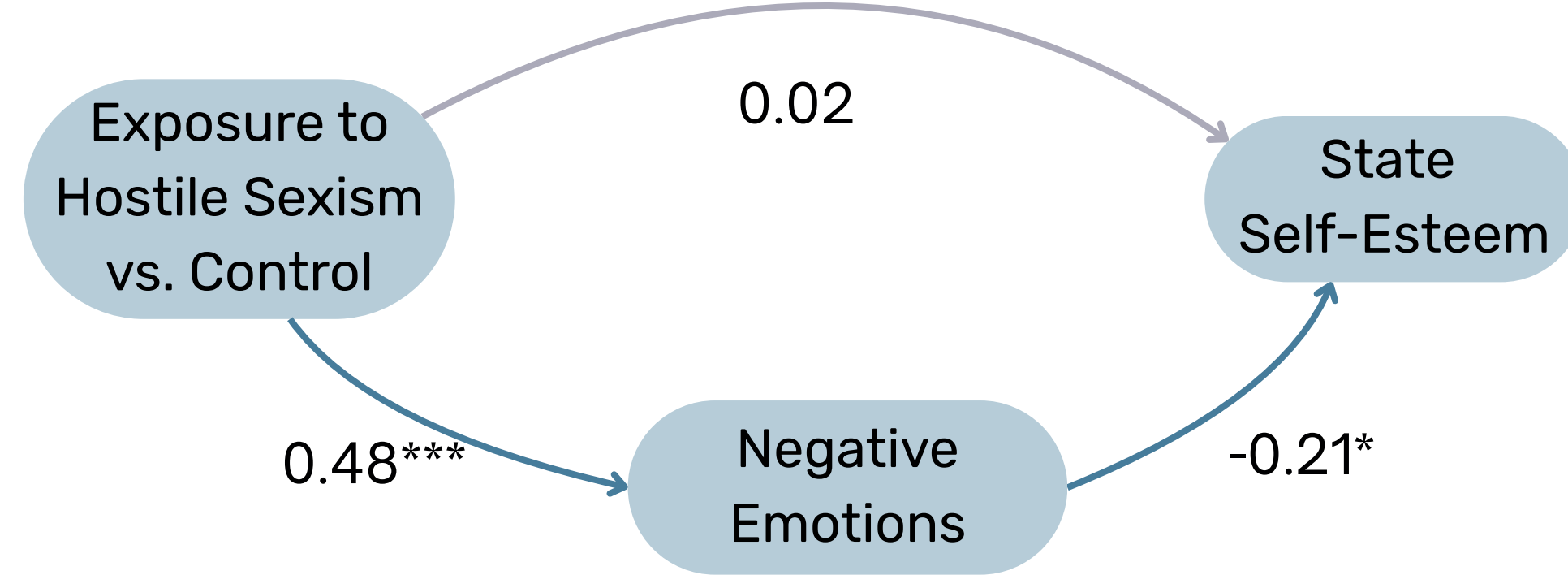


Negative affect was higher in the sexism condition than in control, $t(138) = 6.64$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.10$. No direct effect on state self-esteem was found, $t(142) = -1.00$, $p = .318$.

Negative affect negatively correlated with lower state self-esteem, $r = -.20$, $p = .017$.



Mediation model: Exposure to hostile sexism increased negative affect ($\beta = 0.80$, $p < .001$), which predicted lower state self-esteem ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = .021$). The indirect effect was significant ($\beta = -0.17$, $p = .022$, 95% CI = $[-0.31, -0.05]$), while the direct effect was not ($\beta = 0.03$, $p = .862$, 95% CI = $[-0.27, 0.33]$). Estimates derived via 5,000-draw bootstrap.



DISCUSSION

- Hostile sexism reduced self-esteem indirectly by increasing negative affect. Thus, emotional distress, rather than the sexist event alone, appears to drive the reduction in self-worth.
- A single brief exposure may lack the intensity or duration needed for a direct effect. Future research should test this model in STEM fields, where hostile sexism may exert stronger and more frequent influence.
- An open question remains: Are these responses unique to hostile sexism, or part of a broader reaction to negative social threat?

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