

# Appearance comments presented as compliments at work: How are they perceived by targets and observers in and outside of workplace settings?

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## Abstract

Two studies examined perceptions referring to appearance comments presented as compliments. When taking the target's perspective (Study 1,  $n = 678$ ), women perceived appearance comments, especially if sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) as less appropriate than men did. Women also believed that, as the targets of sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) comments, they were likely to be perceived as less warm (whereas men believed that they were likely to be perceived as more competent). When taking an observer perspective (Study 2,  $n = 398$ ), participants perceived comments made at the workplace (vs. a non-work setting) as less appropriate. Women, but not men, also perceived sexualized comments as less appropriate than non-sexualized comments. Finally, both men and women perceived the target of sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) comments as less warm and competent. The results point to a gap between women's and men's perceptions of the appropriateness of appearance comments in general, and sexualized comments in particular, in both workplace and non-work settings. Moreover, women are more aware than men of the “penalty,” in terms of social perceptions, imposed upon the targets of appearance comments. These results, which can inform sensitivity training to prevent sexual harassment, are especially important in workplace settings, where perceptions of warmth and competence affect how individuals are treated and promoted.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment has an enormous negative impact on our society. The “Me Too” movement, which exploded in October 2017 in and outside social media, has increased public awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault and their impact on people's everyday lives (Leopold et al., 2019; Swanson & Szymanski, 2020). The present research focuses on sexualized (as opposed to non-sexualized) appearance comments at workplace settings, which can be viewed as a particular type of sexual harassment. What makes such comments especially interesting to investigate is that they can be disguised as “compliments,” which might make them seem less harmful, or harder to confront, than blatant or overtly hostile comments.

While there may be a consensus about blatant forms of harassment, there is less consensus about more subtle forms (Rotundo et al., 2001). One type of relatively subtle harassment is sexualized comments disguised as appearance compliments. A recent poll on workplace behavior (Ipsos, 2018), conducted in the United States, has revealed that despite the prevalence of appearance compliments—72% of the respondents reported seeing a man complimenting a woman co-worker's appearance, and 65% reported seeing a woman co-worker complimenting a man's appearance—people have mixed opinions about them. Almost half of the participants (49%) perceived a man complimenting a woman's appearance as inappropriate, and a similar ratio (46%) perceived a woman complimenting a man's appearance as inappropriate. The present research aimed to shed light on this topic.

In two studies, we examined whether the type (sexualized vs. non-sexualized) and setting (workplace vs. non-work setting) of appearance comments presented as compliments affect the way, in which women and men perceive the comment and its target. In Study 1, women and men took the target's perspective, and rated the appropriateness of the comment and the extent to which the person making it perceived them as warm and competent (i.e., meta-perceptions). In Study 2, women and men took an observer perspective, and rated the appropriateness of the comment, and the target's competence and warmth. Comparing the target's (Study 1) and the observer's (Study 2) perspectives allowed the congruency between observers' perceptions and targets' meta-perceptions to be examined. We now turn to explain how and why the factors examined in the present research—namely, participants' gender, the type of comment, and its setting—may influence the effects of appearance comments on perceptions of appropriateness and the target's warmth and competence.

### 1.1 | Gender differences in responses to appearance comments

Receiving comments about their appearance is a familiar experience for women (Swim et al., 2001). Women receive many more appearance comments in general, and compliments in particular, than men, who mostly receive comments and compliments related to their skill, competence and abilities (e.g., Rees-Miller, 2011). It is therefore not surprising that much of the research about appearance comments has focused on the effects they have on women (e.g., Calogero et al., 2009; but see for example; Nowell & Ricciardelli, 2008; Schuster et al., 2013, for research on men). This research shows that when appearance comments have a flattering tone (e.g., "I was just looking, and I really like your top") they are often perceived as positive and enjoyable (Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008), especially by women who are highly occupied with their looks (Fea & Brannon, 2006; Kahalon et al., 2018a; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008).

Nevertheless, even subjectively enjoyable appearance comments can result in negative consequences. Experimental studies revealed that women who received appearance compliments reported higher body-surveillance (Kahalon et al., 2018a) and body shame (Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008), and showed decreased cognitive performance (Kahalon et al., 2018a) compared to women who did not receive such compliments. The reason for these negative effects is that, even if flattering, appearance comments can be objectifying; namely, drawing women's attention to their physical appearance. Because women, more than men, are socialized to believe that their value is determined by their appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), objectifying situations have more negative psychological consequences for them than for men (for a review see Kahalon et al., 2018b).

Based on the conceptualization of appearance comments as objectifying (Calogero et al., 2009; Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008), and

the findings that objectifying situations elicit more stress (Green et al., 2014) among women than men, we hypothesized that appearance comments would be perceived as less appropriate by women (evaluating comments made by men to female targets) compared to men (evaluating comments made by women to male targets). We further hypothesized that this gender gap would depend on whether or not the comment is sexualized, a factor that we now turn to discuss.

### 1.2 | The effect of the comment's type

Previous experimental research, in which participants received complimentary comments from a confederate in a lab setting, examined non-sexualized compliments. While such non-sexualized comments (e.g., "your hair looks great today") are not sexually harassing, sexualized comments (e.g., "you look sexy today") or comments that refer to one's body or physical attributes (e.g., "your legs look great in that skirt") might make the target, or others observing the situation, feel uncomfortable, or even humiliated or intimidated. The harassers, however, may argue that they are merely complimenting the target. To illustrate, women who encounter sexual harassment in male-dominated professions often hear comments such as "you should be flattered" or "it was just a compliment" (Taylor et al., 2018). Indeed, sexual harassment can be defined as a spectrum of behaviors, including relatively subtle ones, which are harder to recognize as such (Fitzgerald et al., 1995), sometimes even for the targets themselves (who might feel that they are not "entitled" to be offended; Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2005).

Research on sexual harassment reveals that women are frequently exposed to sexualized interpersonal behaviors both in and outside of the workplace (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Street et al., 2007). Such exposure can lead to negative effects on women's well-being due to increased self-objectification (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) and fear of victimization (Macmillan et al., 2000). At the workplace, sexual harassment has been found to be associated not only with impaired psychological health, but also with impaired physical health and worse job-related outcomes (Chan et al., 2008; McDonald, 2012). Performance decrements following sexual harassment were evident even when women did not label the situation as harassing (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2005). Notably, while the negative consequences of sexual harassment are similar among women and men (Chan et al., 2008), women report a higher frequency of sexual harassment than men (e.g., Street et al., 2007). In the present research, we compared responses to sexualized versus non-sexualized appearance comments. Based on findings that subtle manipulations of objectification, including non-sexualized appearance comments (e.g., Tiggemann & Boundy, 2008) improved women's mood, whereas blatant manipulations of objectification (e.g., being "checked out" by a male experimenter; Gervais et al., 2011, 2016) resulted in negative affective responses and worse work performance (Gervais et al., 2016), we hypothesized that women would perceive sexualized appearance comments as more inappropriate than non-sexualized comments.

As for men, the existing results are mixed: Several studies showed similar patterns to those observed among women, such that subtle manipulations of objectification, including non-sexualized appearance comments (Kahalon et al., 2018a), improved men's mood, whereas more blatant manipulations resulted in negative affective responses (e.g., Hebl et al., 2004). However, in several other studies (e.g., Gervais et al., 2011; Saguy et al., 2010), blatant objectifying manipulations did not influence men's affective responses. We therefore expected a two-way interaction between participants' gender and the type of comment, such that the effect of comment type (with sexualized comments perceived as more inappropriate than non-sexualized comments) would be more pronounced among women than among men.

As another way to interpret this interaction, we expected that the gender gap in appropriateness perceptions of appearance comments would be more pronounced for sexualized as compared to non-sexualized ones. This hypothesis is consistent with previous findings that women perceived expressions of sexual attention directed at them as bothersome or upsetting more than men who were exposed to similar attention (e.g., Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). It is also consistent with the findings of a meta-analysis according to which there is a relatively large difference between women's and men's perceptions of subtle (as compared to blatant) forms of sexual harassment (Rotundo et al., 2001), such as sexualized comments presented as compliments.

### 1.3 | The effect of the comment's setting

To the best of our knowledge, the present research is the first to examine whether the setting, in which an appearance comment is given affects its perceived appropriateness. Research on compliments at the workplace suggests that they are a form of phatic communication, a kind of small talk that can establish and maintain social relationships (Rees-Miller, 2011). Nevertheless, appearance comments can convey unwanted sexual attention and as such might be sexually harassing. An understanding of how appearance comments are perceived by others in the workplace is important for creating social norms that lead to a positive organizational culture.

Previous research revealed that women perceive positive yet stereotype-driven comments, such as calling them "sweet," as more appropriate when made in a dating than a workplace setting (Koudenburg & Gordijn, 2011). This is because stereotypically feminine traits (such as being warm or looking well-groomed) may be positive in a private setting (e.g., on a date) but not at a workplace setting when one's professionalism is at the fore. In other words, the positivity of a given stereotypical trait or behavior is context-specific. We therefore expected that, among women, appearance comments would be perceived as more appropriate in a non-work compared to a workplace setting. In the absence of relevant research, we explored whether a similar effect occurs among men.

### 1.4 | The effects on the target's perceived warmth and competence

In addition to appropriateness perceptions, we also examined how appearance comments affect perceptions of the target in terms of competence and warmth. Research on person and group perception (Fiske et al., 2007) suggests that these are the two fundamental dimensions ("the Big-Two"; A. E. Abele & Wojciszke, 2013, 2014) on which social targets are perceived and judged, such that competence—one's efficiency in task completion—reflects traits like intelligence, innovativeness, and logic, whereas warmth, which is one's orientation toward others and their well-being, reflects traits such as good nature, morality, nurturance, and sociability.

Of direct relevance to the purpose of the present research, we expected an interaction between participants' gender and the type of comments they received such that women, but not men, would believe that they are perceived as less warm and competent in the sexualized compared to the non-sexualized comments condition. This prediction is based on findings that sexualized women targets, but not sexualized men targets, were perceived as less warm, moral, and competent than non-sexualized women targets (Smith et al., 2018). To the extent that women are intuitively aware that sexually objectified women are penalized (and men are intuitively aware of the lack of penalty for sexualized men), it should be reflected in their meta-perceptions of warmth and competence.

Finally, we did not have an a priori prediction regarding the effect of the comment's setting. Notably, however, even if the effects of appearance comments are similar in workplace and non-work settings, they carry different practical implications in each of them. This is because workplace settings typically require competence-related qualities such as assertiveness (Gerber, 2009). For women in particular, perceptions of warmth are also highly important in the workplace, as they are expected to have feminine qualities in addition to a masculine performance of work (Denissen, 2010; Moscatelli et al., 2020). Thus, if the targets of sexualized (compared to non-sexualized) comments are "penalized" in terms of perceived competence and warmth, this should have especially harmful consequences in workplace settings.

### 1.5 | The present research

The present research consisted of two vignette studies. In Study 1, women and men imagined themselves receiving an appearance comment from a person of another gender. They reported their perception of the appropriateness of the comment, as well as their meta-perceptions (their beliefs about how they were perceived, in terms of warmth and competence, by the person who made the comment). We tested four hypotheses: (H1) Appearance comments will be perceived as less appropriate by women compared to men; (H2) the gap between men's and women's appropriateness perceptions will be more pronounced for sexualized versus non-sexualized appearance comments; (H3) among women, appearance comments

TABLE 1 Means and standard deviations of Study 1's variables

	Women				Men				Total M (SD)
	Non-sexualized		Sexualized		Non-sexualized		Sexualized		
	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	
Appropriateness perceptions	4.89 (0.75)	4.99 (0.62)	3.42 (1.11)	3.39 (1.07)	5.13 (0.53)	5.12 (0.49)	4.70 (0.74)	4.69 (0.78)	4.43 (1.10)
Target's Warmth	4.23 (0.74)	4.25 (0.82)	3.80 (0.80)	3.76 (0.77)	3.97 (0.75)	3.94 (0.95)	4.01 (0.88)	3.88 (0.83)	3.98 (0.82)
Target's Competence	4.73 (0.83)	4.83 (0.67)	4.78 (0.60)	4.68 (0.75)	4.62 (0.69)	4.67 (0.67)	4.87 (0.76)	4.81 (0.76)	4.75 (0.72)

would be perceived as more appropriate in a non-work compared to a workplace setting; and (H4) women, but not men, would believe that as the target of a sexualized comment they were perceived as less warm and competent than as the target of a non-sexualized comment.

In Study 2, participants took an observer perspective, by imagining two people in the same situation (in which a person from another gender makes a comment to a person of the participant's gender). They reported their perception of the comment in terms of appropriateness, as well as how they perceived the comment's target in terms of warmth and competence. The hypotheses were the same as in Study 1. Together, these studies aimed to shed light on how women and men perceive and respond to different types of appearance comments both at work and outside of it.

## 2 | STUDY 1

Using a 2 (participant's gender [woman, man]) × 2 (comment type [sexualized, non-sexualized]) × 2 (setting [workplace, non-work]) design, participants in Study 1 imagined receiving an appearance comment from a person of another gender, and rated the comment's appropriateness, as well as their meta-perceptions of warmth and competence.

### 2.1 | Method

#### 2.1.1 | Participants

A power analysis, using the G-Power calculator (Erdfelder et al., 2009), revealed that for a small to medium effect size ( $f = 0.20$ ), in a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power of 80%, for 16 groups (as explained below, each type of comment was operationalized in two different ways), we needed at least 636 participants. Participants were recruited to participate in an online study by research assistants around the city, or through ads placed in social networks. The sample included 678 German participants (426 women),  $M_{age} = 24.63$  ( $SD = 8.25$ ; range = 16–68). Most participants were students ( $n = 414$ ) or had attained an academic degree ( $n = 186$ ).

#### 2.1.2 | Procedure

Participants, who were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions, read a text describing a scenario in which they had to imagine themselves receiving an appearance comment either in a workplace (i.e., office) or a non-work (i.e., park) setting. Women participants imagined that the comment was made by a man; men participants imagined that it was made by a woman. The comment was either non-sexualized or sexualized and was presented as a compliment. To increase generalizability, each type of comment was operationalized in two ways: the non-sexualized compliment

**TABLE 2** Results of ANOVA analyses on appropriateness perceptions and warmth and competence meta-perceptions (Study 1)

	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial $\eta^2$
<b>Appropriateness perceptions</b>						
Intercept	12820.92	1	12820.92	18718.95	0.000	0.97
Gender (G)	84.07	1	84.07	122.75	0.000	0.16
Comment type (T)	149.39	1	149.39	218.11	0.000	0.25
Setting (S)	0.02	1	0.02	0.03	0.858	<0.01
S × T	0.16	1	0.16	0.23	0.629	<0.01
S × G	0.12	1	0.12	0.15	0.695	<0.01
T × G	47.04	1	47.04	68.68	0.000	0.09
S × T × G	0.18	1	0.18	0.27	0.607	<0.01
Error	454.10	663	0.69			
Total	14004.55	671				
<b>Warmth meta-perceptions</b>						
Intercept	9850.08	1	9850.08	14959.56	0.000	0.96
Gender (G)	0.55	1	0.55	0.84	0.361	<0.01
Comment type (T)	8.70	1	8.70	13.21	0.000	0.02
Setting (S)	0.31	1	0.31	0.47	0.492	<0.01
S × T	0.26	1	0.26	0.40	0.528	<0.01
S × G	0.18	1	0.18	0.28	0.599	<0.01
T × G	7.60	1	7.60	11.57	0.001	0.02
S × T × G	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	0.922	<0.01
Error	437.21	664	0.66			
Total	11125.92	672				
<b>Competence meta-perceptions</b>						
Intercept	14043.54	1	14043.54	27494.27	0.000	0.98
Gender (G)	0.03	1	0.03	0.06	0.814	<0.01
Comment type (T)	0.79	1	0.79	1.54	0.215	0.01
Setting (S)	0.01	1	0.01	0.01	0.964	<0.01
S × T	1.11	1	1.11	2.17	0.141	<0.01
S × G	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	0.960	<0.01
T × G	2.25	1	2.25	4.40	0.036	0.01
S × T × G	0.07	1	0.07	0.14	0.713	<0.01
Error	339.16	664	0.51			
Total	15490.83	672				

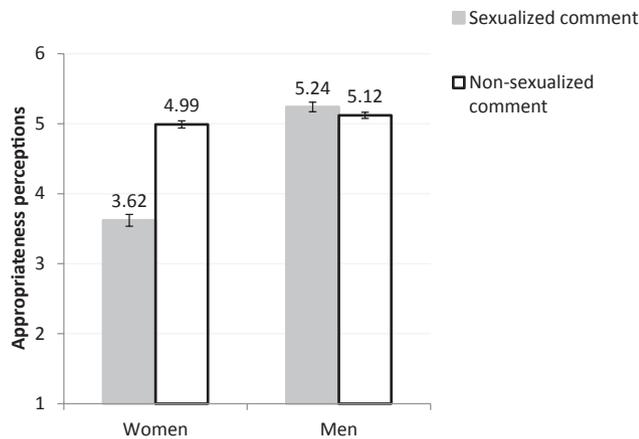
Note: Appropriateness perceptions:  $R^2 = .438$ , Warmth meta-perceptions:  $R^2 = .050$ , Competence meta-perceptions:  $R^2 = .011$ .

referred either to the target's eyes ("you have really beautiful eyes") or shirt ("that shirt looks great on you"), whereas the sexualized comment referred either to the target's figure ("that tight shirt really emphasizes your great figure") or sexiness ("that tight shirt looks really good on you, you probably look even better underneath"). Because the patterns of results were similar across operationalizations, we collapsed the two non-sexualized and the two sexualized comments together to constitute two experimental conditions. The full scenarios and data are available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) [osf.io/6ajev](https://osf.io/6ajev).

Participants then completed the following measures:

**Appropriateness perceptions.** Participants rated their perception of the behavior as positive (appropriate, nice, well-meant, nice flirt, kind) and negative (inappropriate, sleazy, sexist, problematic, discriminative; reverse-scored) on a 6-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*). The ten items formed the appropriateness measure,  $\alpha = 0.91$ .

**Meta-perceptions of warmth and competence.** Adjusted from Abele et al. (2016), participants indicated the extent to which they believed that the person who commented on their looks perceived them as warm (kind, romantic, caring;  $\alpha_{\text{warmth}} = 0.69$ ) and competent



**FIGURE 1** The perceptions of the appropriateness of sexualized and non-sexualized appearance comments among men and women (Study 1). Bars indicate standard errors

(competent, intelligent, wise, clever;  $\alpha_{\text{competence}} = 0.62$ ) on a 6-point scale (1 = not at all to 6 = very much).<sup>1</sup>

## 2.2 | Results

Missing data analysis was conducted for the three dependent variables, revealing that 98.53% of the participants had no missing data and no variable had more than 0.93% missing values. Missing data were handled using list-wise deletion. Next, a 2 (comment type [sexualized, non-sexualized])  $\times$  2 (setting [workplace, non-work])  $\times$  2 (participant gender [man, woman]) factorial ANOVA was conducted for each of the dependent variables. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1 and the ANOVAs<sup>2</sup> in Table 2.

**Appropriateness perceptions.** In line with H1, a main effect for gender revealed that men ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) perceived the behavior as more appropriate than women did ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ). A main effect for comment type revealed that participants perceived the non-sexualized comments ( $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 0.63$ ) as more appropriate than the sexualized ones ( $M = 3.85$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ). In line with H2, a significant ordinal interaction emerged between gender and comment type. As seen in Figure 1, a simple effect analysis for gender showed that both men,

$F(1,663) = 16.61$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.46$ , and women,  $F(1,663) = 361.44$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $d = 1.48$ , perceived the sexualized comment as less appropriate than the non-sexualized comment; yet, the effect was larger for women. A simple effect analysis for comment type showed that the gap between women and men was larger for the sexualized comments,  $F(1,663) = 181.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.36$ , than the non-sexualized comments,  $F(1,663) = 4.03$ ,  $p = .045$ ,  $d = 0.30$ . No support was found for H3, as no effect was found for setting.

**Meta-perceptions of warmth and competence.** H4 was supported for warmth but not for competence. For warmth, a main effect for comment type revealed that participants believed that they were perceived as less warm when the comment was sexualized ( $M = 3.83$ ,  $SD = 0.81$ ) as compared to non-sexualized ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ). An interaction between comment type and gender also emerged. A simple effect analysis revealed that, while there was no difference between sexualized ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 0.85$ ) and non-sexualized ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) comments for men's meta-perceptions of warmth,  $F(1,664) = 0.022$ ,  $p = .883$ ,  $d = 0.02$ , women believed themselves to be perceived as less warm when receiving sexualized ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) compared to non-sexualized ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) comments,  $F(1,664) = 33.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.56$ .

As for competence, an interaction emerged between comment type and gender. A simple effect analysis revealed that, unexpectedly, there was no difference between sexualized ( $M = 4.73$ ,  $SD = 0.67$ ) and non-sexualized ( $M = 4.78$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) comments for women's meta-perceptions of competence,  $F(1,664) = 0.50$ ,  $p = .481$ ,  $d = 0.07$ , whereas men believed they were perceived as more competent following a sexualized ( $M = 4.84$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) rather than a non-sexualized ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) comment,  $F(1,664) = 4.41$ ,  $p = .036$ ,  $d = 0.26$ .

## 2.3 | Discussion

Study 1 revealed that, when placing themselves in the target's shoes, men perceive appearance comments in a more positive light; namely, as more appropriate than women do. This gender gap was particularly pronounced for sexualized comments: Both men and women perceived sexualized comments as less appropriate than non-sexualized comments, yet, men viewed sexualized comments less negatively than women did. A possible explanation for this finding is that, unlike women, men feel pressure to conform to masculine norms (Moss-Racusin, 2010), which encourage them to accept sexualized appearance comments as positive, and feel unentitled to be upset about this type of objectification. Unexpectedly, we did not find evidence that the comments' setting affected participants' appropriateness perceptions.

With regard to meta-perceptions, women more than men believed that receiving sexualized (compared to non-sexualized) comments implied that the person who commented on their appearance perceived them as less warm. This "penalty" effect possibly reflected the perception of women's warmth and nurturance on the one hand, and sexiness on the other, as mutually exclusive (Kahalon et al., 2019). Unexpectedly, women who received sexualized comments did not feel they were penalized in terms of competence. This finding

<sup>1</sup>In line with Eagly et al.'s (2020) recommendation to examine agency and competence separately, we also used a three-item measure of agency (assertive, ambitious, deals well with complex situations) in both Studies 1 and 2. In addition, besides the measures reported in the paper, in Study 1 we measured participant's mood, and in Study 2 we measured perceptions of the target's likability, as well as the likability of the person making the comment. For the sake of brevity, and given the already complex design of our studies, we report the results for these additional variables in the supplemental materials: [osf.io/6ajev](https://osf.io/6ajev).

<sup>2</sup>For all the ANOVAs reported in Study 1 and 2, we first conducted Levene's tests. These tests revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variance had been violated for appropriateness perceptions in both Study 1,  $F(7, 663) = 15.27$ ,  $p < .001$ , and Study 2,  $F(7, 282) = 2.57$ ,  $p = .014$ . Yet, because in both cases the variance ratio of the largest to the smallest sample size did not exceed 4 (variance = 1.23–0.61 in Study 1, and 1.52 to 2.06 in Study 2), we continued with performing the ANOVA analysis under the assumption of variance homogeneity (see the recommendation of Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007, 2013). The assumption of homogeneity of variance was met for the remaining variables in both studies.

TABLE 3 Means and standard deviations of Study 2's variables

	Women				Men				Total M (SD)
	Non-sexualized		Sexualized		Non-sexualized		Sexualized		
	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	Non-workplace	Workplace	
Appropriateness perceptions	4.54 (1.23)	4.00 (1.28)	3.11 (1.85)	2.43 (1.45)	4.60 (1.15)	3.62 (1.30)	3.84 (1.43)	3.35 (1.44)	3.64 (1.59)
Target's Warmth	4.18 (1.14)	4.13 (1.19)	3.75 (1.12)	3.47 (1.16)	4.00 (1.15)	3.89 (1.40)	3.64 (1.03)	3.40 (0.92)	3.81 (1.17)
Target's Competence	4.29 (0.87)	4.23 (0.93)	3.97 (0.94)	3.83 (0.97)	3.94 (0.90)	3.93 (1.04)	3.79 (1.04)	3.79 (0.89)	3.97 (0.96)

possibly reflects women's intuitive awareness of the fact that sexually harassing comments are often directed against competent or "up-pity" women, who pose a threat to male dominance (Berdaahl, 2007).

Whereas comment type had no effect on women's meta-perceptions of competence, men believed that they were perceived as more competent when receiving a sexualized (compared to a non-sexualized) comment. This unexpected finding might reflect men's intuitive awareness of the fact that heterosexual women tend to perceive men's sexiness and smartness (a component of competence) as positively associated (Jonason et al., 2019). Together, these findings suggest that sexualized comments are associated with negative meta-perceptions for women, but with positive meta-perceptions for men.

### 3 | STUDY 2

Study 2 examined the influence of the factors tested in Study 1 on observers' perceptions of the comment's appropriateness and of the target's warmth and competence. Doing so allowed the examination of whether receiving sexualized appearance comments involves a social "penalty" (i.e., being viewed less positively by non-involved third parties). It also allowed the identification of potential gaps between targets and observers; namely, to assess whether participants' meta-perceptions, identified in Study 1, map onto observers' perceptions. Participants of Study 2 read the same scenarios as in Study 1, while taking an observer perspective. They reported their perceptions of the comments' appropriateness and the target's warmth and competence.

#### 3.1 | Method

##### 3.1.1 | Participants

A power analysis, using the G-Power calculator (Erdfelder et al., 2009), revealed that for a small to medium effect size ( $f = 0.20$ ), in a significance level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power of 80%, for eight groups, we needed at least 416 participants. Overall, 496 German participants were recruited either online or from the campus of a large German university and around the city. Of these, 398 (202 women) completed the study;  $Mage = 25.44$  ( $SD = 8.12$ , range = 17–65). Participants were either university students ( $n = 276$ ), or worked in various occupations (e.g., nurse, head of marketing, waitress). Most participants were married or in a relationship ( $n = 186$ ). As for their sexual orientation, most participants identified as heterosexual ( $n = 316$ ), while the rest identified as homosexual/lesbian ( $n = 11$ ), bisexual ( $n = 21$ ) asexual ( $n = 3$ ) other ( $n = 7$ ), or did not respond ( $n = 40$ ).

##### 3.1.2 | Procedure

Participants read a scenario in which they had to imagine themselves witnessing an interaction involving a man commenting on a woman's

appearance (women participants), or a woman commenting on a man's appearance (men participants). The comment was either sexualized ("that tight shirt really emphasizes your great figure") or non-sexualized ("you have really beautiful eyes"), and was made either in a workplace (office) or a non-work (park) setting. Participants then completed the following measures:

*Appropriateness perceptions.* Participants indicated the extent to which they perceived the behavior of the person as appropriate on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all appropriate* to 7 = *very much appropriate*).

*Perception of the target's warmth and competence.* Participants completed the same measure as in Study 1;  $\alpha_{\text{warmth}} = 0.82$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{competence}} = 0.78$ .

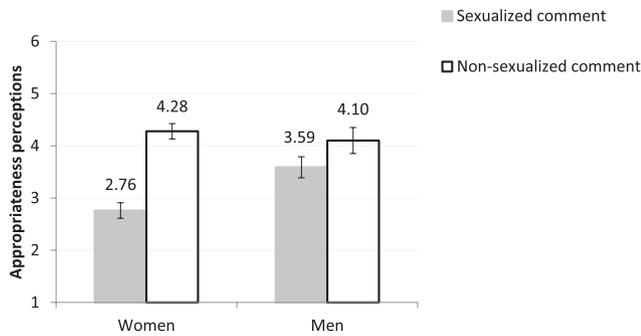
### 3.2 | Results

Missing data analysis revealed that there was no missing data for the measures of perception of the targets' warmth and competence. In terms of the perception of the behavior, 27.14% of the participants had missing data. This attrition might stem from this measure being the last in the study. Missing data were handled using list-wise deletion. Next, a 2 (comment type [sexualized, non-sexualized])  $\times$  2 (setting [workplace, non-work])  $\times$  2 (participant gender [man, woman]) ANOVA was conducted for each of the dependent variables. Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 3 and the ANOVAs in Table 4.

**TABLE 4** Results of ANOVA analysis on appropriateness perceptions and perceptions of the targets' warmth and competence (Study 2)

Sum of Squares		df	Mean Square	F	p	Partial $\eta^2$
<b>Appropriateness perceptions</b>						
Intercept	3587.78	1	3587.78	1745.11	0.000	0.86
Gender (G)	7.28	1	7.28	3.54	0.061	0.01
Comment type (T)	67.23	1	67.23	32.70	0.000	0.10
Setting (S)	30.14	1	30.14	14.66	0.000	0.05
S $\times$ T	0.50	1	0.50	0.24	0.623	<0.01
S $\times$ G	0.27	1	0.27	0.13	0.718	0.00
T $\times$ G	16.13	1	16.13	7.85	0.005	0.03
S $\times$ T $\times$ G	1.66	1	1.66	0.81	0.370	<0.01
Error	579.76	282	2.06			
Total	4580.00	290				
<b>Warmth perceptions</b>						
Intercept	5762.23	1	5762.23	4397.99	0.000	0.92
Gender (G)	2.29	1	2.29	1.75	0.187	<0.01
Comment type (T)	23.38	1	23.38	17.84	0.000	0.04
Setting (S)	2.94	1	2.94	2.25	0.135	0.01
S $\times$ T	0.85	1	0.85	0.65	0.422	<0.01
S $\times$ G	0.37	1	0.37	0.29	0.593	<0.01
T $\times$ G	0.00	1	0.00	0.00	0.961	<0.01
S $\times$ T $\times$ G	0.08	1	0.08	0.06	0.807	<0.01
Error	510.98	390	1.31			
Total	6305.78	398				
<b>Competence perceptions</b>						
Intercept	6264.75	1	6264.75	6971.56	0.000	0.95
Gender (G)	4.72	1	4.72	5.25	0.022	0.01
Comment type (T)	6.24	1	6.24	6.94	0.009	0.02
Setting (S)	0.26	1	0.26	0.29	0.589	<0.01
S $\times$ T	0.03	1	0.03	0.03	0.859	<0.01
S $\times$ G	1.14	1	1.14	1.27	0.261	<0.01
T $\times$ G	0.24	1	0.24	0.27	0.603	<0.01
S $\times$ T $\times$ G	0.05	1	0.05	0.05	0.816	<0.01
Error	350.46	390	0.90			
Total	66390.81	398				

Note: Appropriateness perceptions:  $R^2 = .211$ , Warmth perceptions:  $R^2 = .056$ , Competence perceptions:  $R^2 = .036$ .



**FIGURE 2** The perceptions of the appropriateness of sexualized and non-sexualized appearance comments among men and women (Study 2). Bars indicate standard errors

*Appropriateness perceptions.* A main effect for comment type revealed that a non-sexualized comment ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = 1.29$ ) was perceived as more appropriate than a sexualized comment ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.66$ ). While the effect of gender was only marginally significant (in the direction suggested by H1), a significant interaction emerged between comment type and gender, in line with H2. As illustrated in Figure 2, a simple effect analysis for gender revealed that the comment type did not affect men's appropriateness perceptions,  $F(1,282) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .515$ ,  $d = 0.37$ , whereas women perceived the sexualized comment as less appropriate than the non-sexualized comment,  $F(1,282) = 10.93$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 1.01$ . A simple effect analysis for comment type showed that the gap between women and men was significant for the sexualized comment,  $F(1,282) = 10.93$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = 0.53$ , but not for the non-sexualized comment,  $F(1,282) = 0.43$ ,  $p = .515$ ,  $d = 0.14$ . In addition, in line with H3, a main effect also emerged for setting, such that comments were perceived as more appropriate in a non-work ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) than in a workplace setting ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ).

*Perception of the target as warm and competent.* For warmth, a main effect of comment type revealed that the target of a sexualized comment was perceived as less warm ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) than the target of a non-sexualized comment ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). For competence, a main effect of comment type revealed that the target of a sexualized comment was perceived as less competent ( $M = 3.84$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ) than the target of a non-sexualized comment ( $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ), thus, supporting H4. In addition, a main effect for gender revealed that women ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) were perceived as more competent than men ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ).

### 3.3 | Discussion

Study 2 revealed that, from the observers' perspective, sexualized comments were perceived as less appropriate than non-sexualized comments. Similarly to the pattern observed in Study 1, this effect was qualified by participants' gender, such that women were more likely than men to perceive sexualized comments as inappropriate. This difference, which is consistent with earlier findings that men, more than women, perceived appearance comments as harmless flirts (Shotland

& Craig, 1988), points to a problematic gap in women's and men's view of the meaning of appearance comments in general, and sexually harassing comments in particular. A possible reason for this gap is that men and women encounter substantially different experiences in their daily lives, both within and outside their workplace. Women are subjected to sexual objectification, harassment and assault much more than men (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Street et al., 2007), which may increase their sensitivity to these incidents and their potentially harmful consequences (see Demoulin et al., 2013 for the impact of the divergent realities in which members of different groups live on intergroup tension). In addition, whereas in Study 1 the setting did not affect appropriateness perceptions, in Study 2, in which participants responded as observers (rather than targets), participants perceived comments made in a workplace setting as less appropriate than when the same comments were made in a non-work setting. Possibly, being the target of a flattering comment led to a less critical evaluation of a comment given at the workplace, despite its potentially problematic setting. Such feelings of flattery did not affect the evaluation of the situation when taking an observer perspective.

The results further showed that participants perceived the targets of sexualized (compared to non-sexualized) comments as less warm and competent. These findings suggest that, even though sexualized appearance comments can be well-intentioned (Rees-Miller, 2011), they might result in negative social consequences for their targets. These results further suggest that women's meta-perceptions observed in Study 1 (associating sexualized comments with a social penalty) captured observers' perceptions better than men's meta-perceptions (associating sexualized comments with a social benefit). Although not directly related to the purpose of the present research, it is interesting to note that regardless of the comment's type and setting, men were perceived as less competent than women. This result may reflect recent changes in contemporary gender stereotypes such that women are no longer perceived as less competent than men (Eagly et al., 2020).

## 4 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The current work makes four contributions to the literature. First, our findings reveal that women and men perceive appearance comments differently. In both studies women, compared to men, perceived appearance comments as less appropriate, and this gender gap was especially pronounced for harassing, sexualized comments. Second, women and men also differed in their meta-perceptions: whereas women believed themselves to be perceived as less warm as the targets of sexualized (compared to non-sexualized) comments, men believed they were perceived as more competent as the targets of sexualized comments. Third, going beyond the target's perspective, when asked to observe the same situations happening to others, both men and women perceived the target of the sexualized (compared to non-sexualized) comments as less warm and competent. Fourth, in terms of the context, both women and men observers perceived appearance comments at the workplace as less

appropriate than comments given in a non-work setting. One way to interpret the differences between targets and observers is that the flattery of the comment (when one is the target) masks at least some of its downsides; that is, its potential social penalties and inappropriateness, particularly in a workplace setting.

#### 4.1 | Social and organizational implications

Awareness of the gender differences in perceptions of appearance comments, especially with regard to sexualized comments, is critical for minimizing cross-gender misunderstanding and for reducing cases of harassment in cross-gender interactions. For example, some of the criticism about the #MeToo campaign, which was voiced especially by men, is that it led to the delegitimization of innocent, well-intentioned appearance compliments (Kunst et al., 2019). Our findings suggest that, while men may feel flattered by sexualized comments, women are more likely to view such comments as inappropriate and imposing an unwarranted social penalty on them (see also Siy & Cheryan, 2013 for advantaged group members' failure to acknowledge the negative social implications of seemingly flattering comments made to disadvantaged group members). Being conscious of these differences, which should be considered when thinking what comments to make and how to phrase them, can improve the dynamics between women and men (Dougherty & Goldstein Hode, 2016).

Penalties regarding one's competence (and for women regarding one's warmth; Denissen, 2010) are especially harmful in workplace settings, in which they can affect how employees are treated, evaluated and promoted (Cuddy et al., 2004, 2011; Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Hence, our findings about observers' perceptions of the inappropriateness of appearance comments at the workplace, and the penalties for the targets of sexualized comments, are relevant to discussions on the ethics of appearance comments at the workplace. Because women typically receive more appearance comments (and compliments) than men (Parisi & Wogan, 2006), such discussions are especially relevant to women's workplace status and experience of organizational climate. Gender differences in the frequency of receiving sexualized appearance comments might also explain why women (compared to men) participants in Study 1, more accurately recognized the negative social effects such comments might have, as evident in Study 2. In addition, because women are those who mostly receive harassing sexualized comments, which tax the target's image as competent and warm, such comments might serve as a subtle mechanism that maintains gender inequality—because women cannot control whether such comments are made, yet, they can be negatively affected by them.

As for practical implications in organizations, awareness of the differences between men's and women's perceptions of the appropriateness of appearance comments and their possible negative effects could be acquired through gender sensitivity training at workplaces (e.g., Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003). Gender and sexual harassment sensitivity training is found to be effective in leading

workers to be more sensitive to the issue of sexual harassment, and in helping men to recognize that what they perceive as ambiguous behavior is actually harassing (Antecol & Cobb-Clark, 2003; Blakely et al., 1998). Our findings, which provide direct empirical evidence for the differences in how women and men experience similar behaviors, can be used in such training. Increasing employees' sensitivity to these differences will hopefully improve their well-being.

#### 4.2 | Limitations and future directions

A limitation of the present study is that we used imagined scenarios rather than directly manipulating appearance comments (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2001). Future research should examine people's responses to real-life comments. We assume that the effects found in the present work might be even stronger when people actually experience a real-life comment compared to simply imagining oneself in such a situation. It would be especially interesting to test whether the difference between the target's and observer's perspective increases because, as discussed above, the flattering aspect of comments presented as compliments might affect targets more when receiving real-life comments. A second limitation is that because of the already complex design, we did not use a control, no-comment condition, which should be done in future research. A third limitation is that participants responded to cross-gender interactions in which the target was from their own gender group. Such experimental design resulted in men and women judging different scenarios. Future research in which both men and women judge both scenarios could shed light on whether men and women differ in their perceptions when judging the exact same situation (i.e., men judging scenarios in which the comment's target is a man, and women scenarios in which the target is a woman). Moreover, our experimental design did not allow for the investigation of other interactions, such as woman-to-woman appearance comments and compliments, which are often given as a way to communicate and maintain social connections (Rees-Miller, 2011). Future research should examine other possible scenarios (e.g., when a non-binary individual is making or receiving the appearance comment). Finally, the present study was conducted in Germany, which is relatively less sexist and more egalitarian in comparison to most Western countries (Brandt, 2011; Glick et al., 2000; Kahalon et al., 2019). Future research could examine similar research questions in more gender-traditional societies.

### 5 | CONCLUSION

Our results shed light on the lack of consensus regarding the appropriateness of appearance comments presented as compliments (Ipsos, 2018). This lack of consensus occurs even for comments that clearly fall under the category of sexual harassment (Rotundo et al., 2001). As seen in our research, the perceptions of appearance comments are rather diverse, depending on several factors, including the target's gender and the comment's setting and the degree of

sexualization. Indeed, in recent years there has been a change in the awareness of what is considered as illegitimate gendered behavior at the workplace (Sipe et al., 2016). We hope that our findings will inform and contribute to this change and help in creating a positive organizational culture, in which the perceptions of both men and women are equally respected.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

We hereby declare that we have no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

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