



*Short Research Note*

## Reducing the backlash effect: Self-monitoring and women's promotions

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Previous research shows that masculine (agentic) women suffer from a backlash effect in which they are sanctioned for violating the feminine gender role stereotype. We examine the impact of self-monitoring on the promotion rates of MBA men and women over an 8-year period following graduation. Results show that women who were more masculine as well as high on self-monitoring received more promotions, suggesting that self-monitoring is associated with an absence of backlash effects.

In spite of the considerable advancements women have made in the workplace, statistics reveal that they have still failed to achieve the status of men. As an example, only 3% of the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are female, indicating an inequity in the rates in which men and women are promoted in organizations (Catalyst, 2010). One explanation for this inequity derives from the fact that women who have traits that are consistent with the successful manager stereotype of self-confidence, assertiveness, and dominance are sometimes sanctioned for behaving in ways that are incongruent with the feminine gender stereotype of supportiveness, submissiveness, and interpersonal sensitivity (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In the literature, the economic and social sanctions against so-called 'agentic' or 'masculine' women have been characterized as a 'backlash effect' (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). Interestingly, recent studies indicate that the backlash effect against women does not occur in all situations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007). However, when and why masculinity may be beneficial for women remains an empirical question.

A number of researchers have called for studies that identify circumstances or conditions under which backlash effects can be attenuated (Scott & Brown, 2006). One promising solution may be found in individuals' abilities to accurately assess social situations and to project situationally appropriate responses, known as self-monitoring (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). Studies have shown significant associations

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between self-monitoring and work-related outcomes associated with job performance and advancement ability (Day, Schleicher, Unkless, & Hiller, 2002; Kilduff & Day, 1994). Research also indicates that high self-monitors are more likely to emerge as leaders (e.g., Ellis, 1988). There is some evidence that self-monitoring may be more beneficial for women. For instance, in classroom groups and dyadic negotiations, Flynn and Ames (2006) found that high self-monitoring women exerted more influence, were perceived as more valuable, and claimed more resources. Similarly, in a study of assessment centre performance, Anderson and Thacker (1985) found that high self-monitoring women were the most successful and suggested that self-monitoring may be particularly important for women when the role is non-traditional to gender. Taken together, these results suggest that self-monitoring may be an important factor to consider in understanding how the backlash effect could be attenuated. In a comprehensive review of the literature, Rudman and Phelan (2008, p. 74) explicitly raised the possibility that self-monitoring may be a useful way for women to avoid the backlash effect.

While women in general may benefit from self-monitoring, the backlash effect has been shown to operate primarily against women who are either in masculine jobs or roles (e.g., Chatman, Boisnier, Spataro, Anderson, & Berdahl, 2008) or those who enact masculine behaviours (Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004). Women in this circumstance face a double bind. When they display the masculine traits of confidence, tough-mindedness, self-assurance, and aggressiveness expected by the male stereotype of a successful manager, they violate the female gender role and are negatively evaluated (Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1998). Although masculine women are seen as more competent than feminine women, they are also seen as less socially skilled and, consequently, less likeable and less likely to be promoted (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Given that supervisory roles (i.e., the jobs typically sought by MBA graduates) are already masculine in nature (requiring dominance and agency), it is unlikely that male managers will suffer from perceptions of gender incongruity, as demonstrated in recent research (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). In this sense, the consequences of gender incongruence appear to be asymmetric for men and women in organizational settings, with masculine women being particularly disadvantaged by the backlash effect. Integrating the self-monitoring literature with studies on the backlash effect, we propose that self-monitoring will be associated with more promotions among masculine women because they can modulate when and how they display the assertiveness, confidence, and aggressiveness necessary to conform to the masculine managerial stereotype, while simultaneously avoiding the backlash effect. We test this hypothesis in the present study.

## Method

### *Participants*

The data reported in this study were collected at two time periods. The first collection occurred in 1986–1987 (with samples from both years) when respondents were enrolled in the first year of a 2-year full-time MBA programme in the United States. Data collection in the first time period was conducted through a personality and management assessment centre (Craik *et al.*, 2002). There were 132 participants, 43% of whom were women. The second data collection, which was undertaken approximately 7–8 years after graduation, was designed to assess career attainment and to document any major life changes. Surveys were completed by 101 participants (a response rate of 76%), 47% of whom were women. Of those, 80 participants, 48% of whom were women, provided complete data on all variables examined in this study.

## **Predictor variables**

### *Self-monitoring*

Respondents completed the Snyder and Gangestad (1986) 18-item revised self-monitoring scale as part of the assessment centre at Time 1. The reliability of this scale was .70.

### *Masculinity*

To assess masculinity, we adopted a *gender diagnosticity* approach (Lippa & Connelly, 1990) in which estimates of masculinity are based on Bayesian probability estimates of how male-like or female-like a person's pattern of preferences are in comparison to local reference groups of males and females. Historically, masculine values have been characterized by dominance, aggressiveness, and competitiveness while feminine values have been represented by warmth, supportiveness, and caring (Abele, 2004). Two factorially independent organizational culture dimensions that correspond to these constructs are aggressiveness and supportiveness (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Previous research has shown that aggressiveness and supportiveness reflect masculine and feminine differences in organizational culture preferences in a managerial population (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002).

We assessed organizational culture preferences through the organizational culture profile (OCP) (O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991), which participants completed at Time 1. The OCP is Q-sort instrument containing 54 values that can be used to characterize an organization or person's value preferences. Participants were asked, 'How important is it for this characteristic to be part of the organization you work for?' Subsequently, they sorted the values into nine categories ranging from most to least desirable according to the following distribution: 2-4-6-9-12-9-6-4-2. Items representing the values of aggressiveness and supportiveness were then entered into a discriminant analysis as independent variables. The overall discriminant function was significant (Wilk's  $\lambda = .90$ ;  $\chi^2 = 13.8$ ;  $p < .001$ ) and Wilk's lambda was significant by the  $F$  test for both aggressiveness (Wilk's  $\lambda = .94$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 8.38$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and supportiveness (Wilk's  $\lambda = .91$ ;  $F(1, 128) = 12.4$ ,  $p < .01$ ). These variables in the discriminant function explain a third of the variation in the data ( $R_c^2 = .32$ ). Participants were classified as higher on masculinity if they had 'male-like' organizational culture preferences (i.e., high in aggressiveness, low in supportiveness) in comparison to the other participants. The range was from  $-1.91$  (low masculinity) to  $3.63$  (high masculinity). Additional details of this procedure can be found in O'Neill and O'Reilly (2010).

### *Control variables*

We examined the following human capital variables as potential covariates: date of graduation (1987-1988), age, relevant work experience, race, and dummy variables representing the five industries most common in our sample (computer, finance, education, medical, and consulting). Only two variables, date of graduation and education industry, were significantly related to promotions and were thus included in the final model.

## **Dependent measures**

### *Promotions*

In the Time 2 survey, respondents indicated which of their positions, after their initial job, represented a promotion. The total number of promotions, which ranged from 0 to 5, was calculated by summing all reported promotions.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations

	M (SD)	95% CI		1	2	3	4	5
		LL	UL					
1. Year of graduation (dummy)	0.54 (1.1)	.43	.64					
2. Education industry	0.08 (.27)	.03	.14	.04 (132)				
3. Sex	0.57 (.50)	.43	.64	-.02 (132)	-.28** (132)			
4. Self-monitoring	13.3 (3.4)	12.6	13.9	.17 <sup>†</sup> (110)	-.12 (110)	.12 (110)		
5. Masculinity	0.00 (1.0)	-.24	.17	-.01 (132)	-.09** (132)	-.32*** (131)	-.01 (110)	
6. Total promotions	1.91 (1.4)	1.6	2.2	-.11 (95)	-.26** (95)	.03 (95)	.05 (80)	.05 (95)

Note. \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$ ; two-tailed tests; sample sizes are in parentheses; CI, confidence interval; LL, lower limit; UL, upper limit.

## Results

Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and the correlations among variables.

To test the hypothesis that self-monitoring would be most beneficial for masculine women, we first conducted a stepwise ordinary least squares (OLS) regression in which we examined all control variables (Model 1), main effects (Model 2), two-way interactions (Model 3) and three-way interactions (Model 4) using the entire sample of men and women. As shown in Table 2, we found significant two-way interactions between sex

**Table 2.** Ordinary least squares regression of total promotions – women and men combined

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Constant	2.28 (.21)	2.49 (.33)	2.59 (.28)	2.62 (.28)
Year of graduation	-0.55 (.29) <sup>†</sup>	-0.59 (.30)*	-0.71 (.30)*	-0.73 (.30)*
Education industry	-1.33 (.55)**	-1.33 (.58)*	-1.20 (.56)*	-1.15 (.56)*
Sex (0 = female; 1 = male)		-0.34 (.32)	-0.39 (.31)	-0.41 (.32)
Self-monitoring (SM)		0.03 (.04)	0.17 (.07)*	0.20 (.08)*
Masculinity (Mas)		0.14 (.16)	0.14 (.25)	0.18 (.25)
SM × Mas			0.11 (.05)*	0.18 (.09)*
SM × Male			-0.21 (.09)*	-0.24 (.10)*
Male × Mas			0.07 (.32)	0.03 (.32)
SM × Mas × Sex				-0.10 (.11)
R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.13	.22	.23
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.09	.07	.13	.13
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	.11**	.02	.09*	.01
Model F	4.67**	2.20 <sup>†</sup>	2.47*	2.28*

Note. Model estimates include unstandardized betas with standard errors in parentheses. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed tests.

**Table 3.** Ordinary least squares regression of total promotions by sex

	Women only			Men only		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Constant	2.47 (.29)	2.63 (.31)	2.77 (.29)	2.11 (.31)	2.06 (.32)	2.10 (.32)
Year of graduation	-1.22 (.62) <sup>†</sup>	-1.01 (.62)	-0.84 (.58)	-0.39 (.43)	-0.37 (.45)	-0.45 (.45)
Education industry	-0.75 (.41) <sup>†</sup>	-0.92 (.42)*	-1.09 (.40)**	-2.11 (1.39)	-1.99 (1.42)	-2.11 (1.41)
Masculinity (Mas)		0.07 (.25)	0.18 (.23)*		0.17 (.22)	0.18 (.21)
Self-monitoring (SM)		0.13 (.07)	0.23 (.08)**		0.03 (.06)	-0.04 (.06)
Mas × SM			0.20 (.09)*			0.08 (.06)
R <sup>2</sup>	.18	.26	.37	.07	.09	.14
Adj. R <sup>2</sup>	.14	.17	.27	.02	-.01	.01
Δ R <sup>2</sup>	.18*	.08	.11*	.07	.02	.05
Model F	3.99*	2.98*	3.81**	1.37	.87	1.10

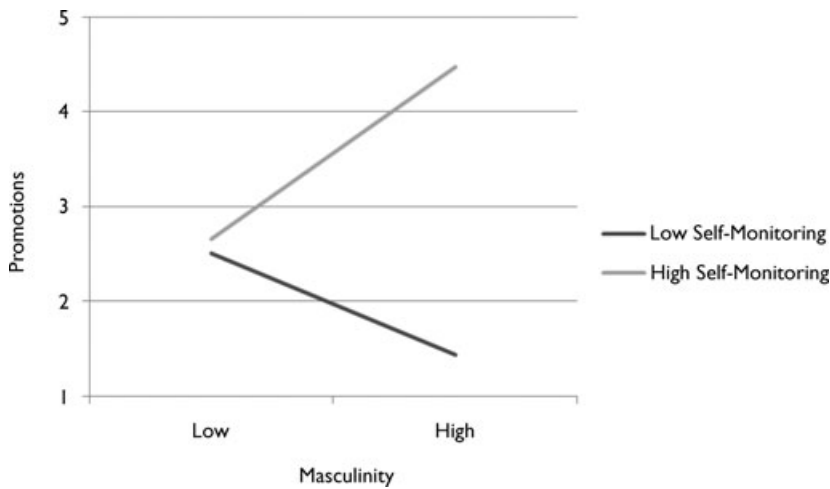
Note. Model estimates include unstandardized betas with standard errors in parentheses. <sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , two-tailed tests.

and self-monitoring and between masculinity and self-monitoring on promotions. Self-monitoring was positively associated with promotions for women [ $t(70) = 2.07, p < .04$ ], but not men [ $t(70) = .58, n.s.$ ], and for people high [ $t(70) = 2.71, p < .01$ ] versus low [ $t(70) = -1.60, n.s.$ ] in masculinity. The three-way interaction of sex, self-monitoring, and masculinity was not significant.

Because our predictions were only concerned with the interaction of masculinity and self-monitoring among women, we next conducted stepwise OLS regressions in which we examined all control variables (Model 1), main effects (Model 2), and two-way interactions (Model 3) for women and men separately. These results are shown in Table 3. Consistent with our hypotheses, we found that the interaction of masculinity and self-monitoring was significant for women only. This interaction is depicted in Figure 1. Masculinity was positively associated with number of promotions among high self-monitoring women [ $t(33) = 2.56, p < .02$ ], but was negatively associated with promotions among low self-monitoring women [ $t(33) = -2.08, p < .05$ ]. The interaction of self-monitoring and masculinity was not significant for men.

## Discussion

Previous research has documented the pejorative effects of counter-stereotypical behaviour on women in organizations. Known as the 'backlash effect', this research has shown that women, but not men, are sanctioned for behaving in the masculine way associated with the stereotype of a successful manager (e.g., Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman *et al.*, 2004; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Several researchers have suggested that self-monitoring may be one way to attenuate these negative effects (e.g., Flynn & Ames, 2006; Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008), but no explicit test of this has been done (Rudman & Phelan, 2008). The results of the study presented here show



**Figure 1.** Two-way interaction of masculinity and self-monitoring on promotions for women. Scores are based on a  $\pm 1$  standard deviation.

that self-monitoring can have beneficial effects for masculine women, leading to more promotions than those obtained by other recent graduates.

Early career success has been shown to be an important determinant of overall success, with even small differences in success rates having large long-term effects. For example, in a simulation study, Martell, Emerich, and Lane (1996) showed that small differences in the promotion rates of women had very large effects on the numbers of women at the highest levels – with a 5% difference in early promotion resulting in a 29% increase in women at the higher levels of an organization. Thus, if gender parity in management is desirable, and if women are expected to be agentic to offset the negative stereotypes regarding their leadership abilities, then women who are high self-monitors have a distinct advantage.

There are several important limitations to our study, which open avenues for future research. First, the sample is comparatively small, restricted to MBA graduates from a single institution, and includes people tracked for only 8 years. Characteristics of this specific sample may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, despite the longitudinal design of the study, our analyses are correlational so we cannot definitively conclude that it is self-monitoring that mitigates backlash. It is possible that other correlated traits, such as agreeableness or regulatory focus (e.g., Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010), could be driving these effects. It is also possible that high self-monitors are more likely to characterize job changes as promotions, which could bias our results. Third, although our results point to the effects of interactive effect of masculinity and self-monitoring on promotions, they do not allow us to describe the process through which these findings occur. One possibility is that self-monitoring allows women to ‘turn on’ and ‘turn off’ the assertiveness, confidence, and aggressiveness necessary to conform to masculine managerial stereotype, while simultaneously avoiding the backlash effect. Self-monitoring could also be linked to likeability, which may be more potent than backlash effects. Clearly, more research is needed to explicate the specific mechanisms that illustrate how self-monitoring might attenuate the negative effects of counter-stereotypical behaviour among agentic women. Finally, our findings also do not provide

any fine-grained analysis of gender specific jobs or organizations, a feature of several earlier studies (e.g., Chatman *et al.*, 2008; Johnson *et al.*, 2008).

Overall, the results of the study reported here suggest a promising resolution to the subtle discrimination that can disadvantage agentic women in organizational career tournaments (O'Neill & O'Reilly, 2010). Our findings provide some external validation to laboratory studies that have shown that self-monitoring may help women enhance their influence and become more effective leaders (Flynn & Ames, 2006; Turnley & Bolino, 2001).

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