

# Leader Reactions to Their Own Gender-Based Image Threat: Why Leaders React Functionally and Dysfunctionally

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## Abstract

Leadership literature has long explored the impacts of leader gender and behaviors on subordinate perceptions; however, it lacks a nuanced understanding of how these factors impact leaders' experiences in the workplace. Furthermore, while previous research has established the existence of strong gender norms, it has not exhaustively explored the impact of these norms on leader image and subsequent behavior. In this thesis, I argue leaders respond to gender-based image threat in one of two ways: functionally or dysfunctionally. To test this proposal, I implemented a correlational study design surveying leaders across multiple time periods to assess changes in behaviors and perceptions. This thesis finds that while gender-role inconsistent behavior does not significantly affect image threat, self-regulation depletion may be a potential mechanism by which leaders who behave gender-inconsistently perceive heightened image threat. Furthermore, the results support the notion that image threat is significantly related to functional and dysfunctional leader behaviors, providing important insights into leaders' experiences.

## Introduction

Extant literature has long demonstrated that leadership is highly gendered such that it favors norms of masculinity. Research by Rudman and colleagues (2008, 2012) established the existence of specific **prescriptions**, expectations of how individuals *should* behave, and **proscriptions**, expectations of how individuals *should not* behave, based on gender. When leaders act out of alignment with the behavioral expectations for their gender, they experience social and economic repercussions known as backlash effects. These include missed promotion opportunities, interpersonal conflict, and decreased wages. The backlash effects of gender-inconsistent behavior pose detrimental outcomes for leaders given their general propensity to highly value their professional image.

**Professional image** is highly important to leaders for three key reasons: assertion of status, reputation, and legacy. A positive professional image grants leaders the authority to enact lasting change within an organization. Building on this, I posit that leaders' attachment to their professional image makes them highly sensitive to image threat. A potential source of image threat is the perception of backlash effects due to gender-inconsistent behavior.

From image management theory, we know that individuals react to image threat in one of two ways: **functionally** (organizational behavior perspective) or **dysfunctionally** (social psychological perspective). To test these perspectives against each other, I posit that leaders enact functional or dysfunctional leadership styles in reaction to gender-based image threat. These leadership styles include **initiating structure, consideration, and participative decision-making** for functional reactions and **abusive supervision and laissez-faire leadership** for dysfunctional reactions.

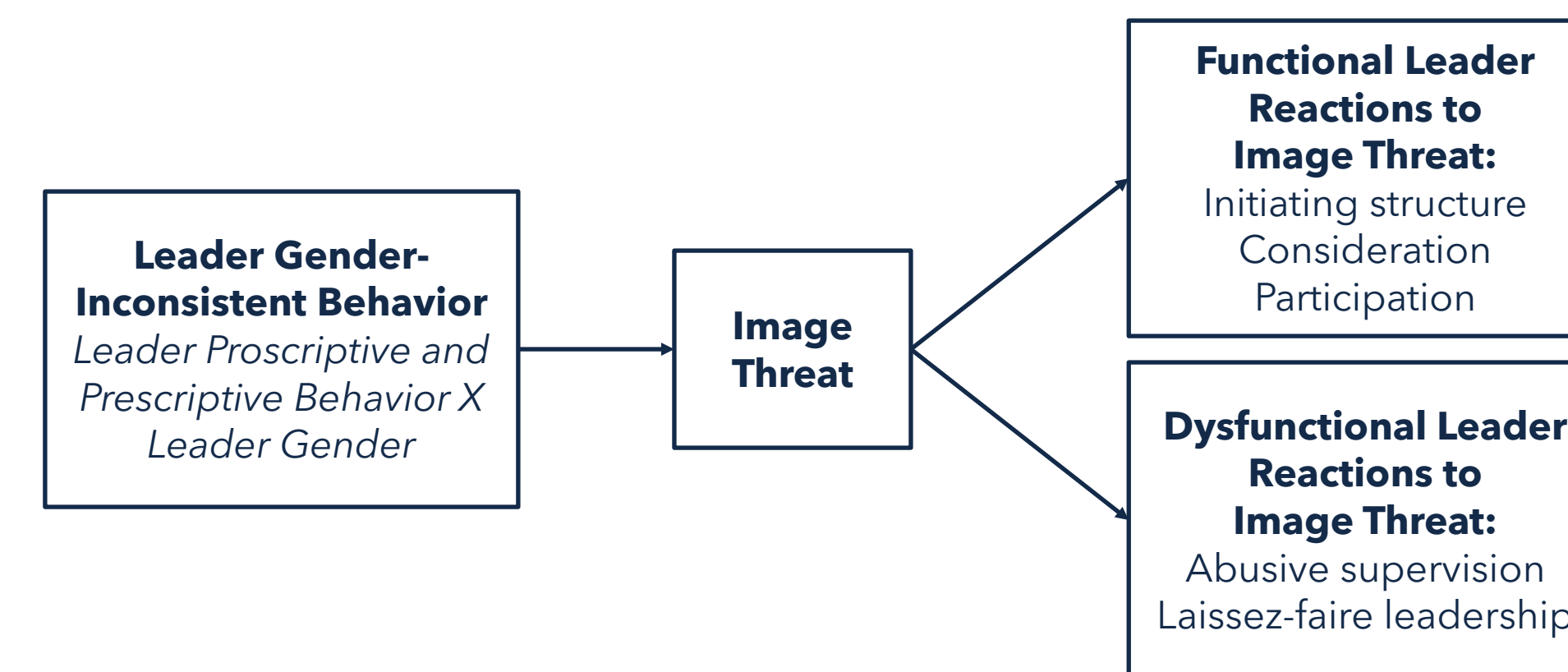
## Hypotheses

**Hypothesis 1.** Leader gender-role inconsistent behavior is *positively* related to image threat

**Hypothesis 2.** Image threat is *positively* related to (a) functional leader behavior and (b) dysfunctional leader behavior

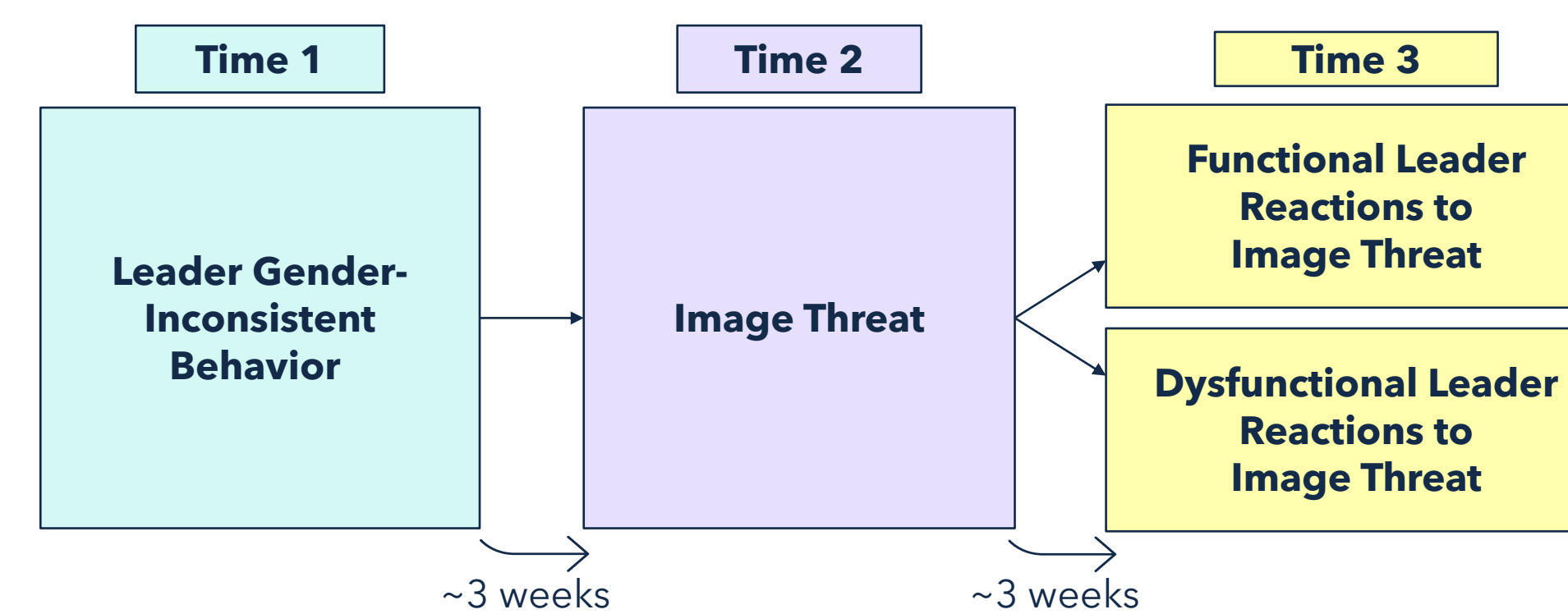
## Model

Below is the model I developed based on my hypotheses. As illustrated by the model, image threat connects Hypothesis 1 (left) and Hypothesis 2 (right).



## Methodology

Using a correlational study design to test my hypotheses, I collected quantitative survey data with participants sourced from Connect, an online research platform. I distributed three surveys in total, each separated by about three weeks to reduce common method variance bias. Participants were 18+ years of age, employed full-time in a supervisory role, and working in an environment with coworkers. Eligible participants were paid up to \$10 using a tiered compensation plan. The final sample size was  $N=317$ . The sample was mostly male (63.4%) and white (72.6%). Participants primarily served in middle management (44.5%) and line management (38.5%) positions. Measures were split across different time periods depending on which piece of the model they corresponded to (see figure below).



## Results

I conducted linear regression analyses to test my hypotheses. None of the interactions between gendered leader behaviors and leader gender were significantly related to image threat. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported. Interestingly, however, masculine leader behavior regardless of leader gender was significantly related to image threat.

**Hypothesis 1: Not Supported**

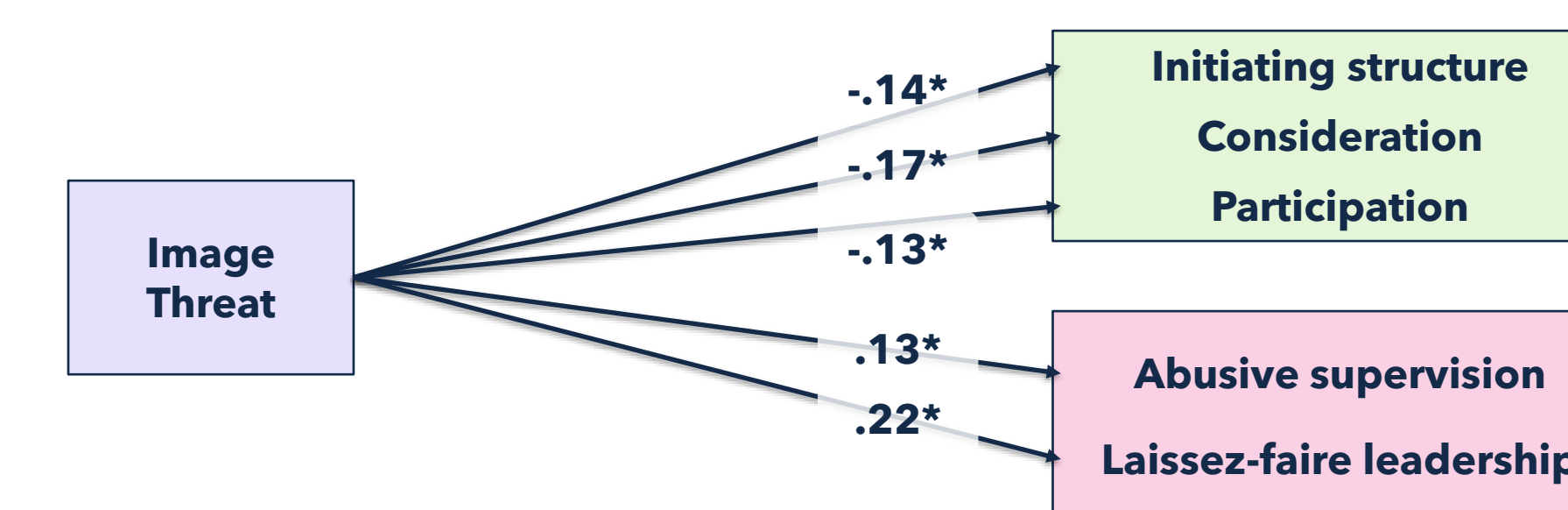
Leader Gender-Inconsistent Behavior  $\rightarrow$  Image Threat

Independent Variable	Beta	p-value
Male prescriptive behavior X Leader gender	.06	ns
Female prescriptive behavior X Leader gender	.10	ns
Male proscriptive behavior X Leader gender	.19	ns
Female proscriptive behavior X Leader gender	.02	ns

For Hypothesis 2, both functional and dysfunctional leader behaviors were significantly related to image threat. Contrary to Hypothesis 2, functional leader behaviors were *negatively* related to image threat.

**Hypothesis 2: Partially Supported**

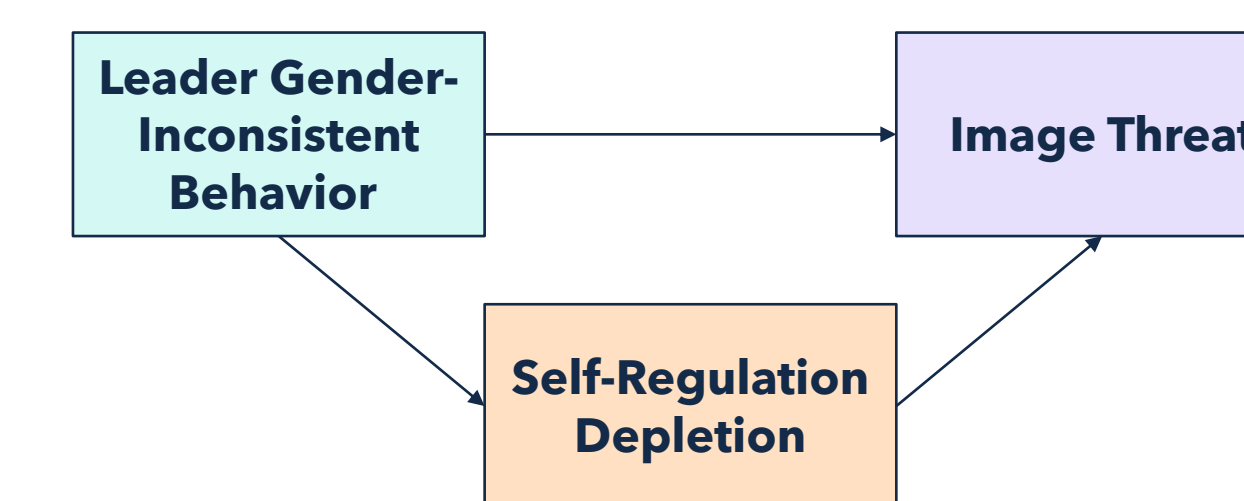
- Functional leader reactions to image threat: *unsupported*
- Dysfunctional leader reactions to image threat: *supported*



## Supplemental Analyses

Interestingly, supplemental analyses uncovered self-regulation depletion as a potential link between leader gender-inconsistent behavior and image threat.

*Self-Regulation Depletion:* the decreased ability to self-regulate behavior to meet goals and social standards due to depleted energy resources



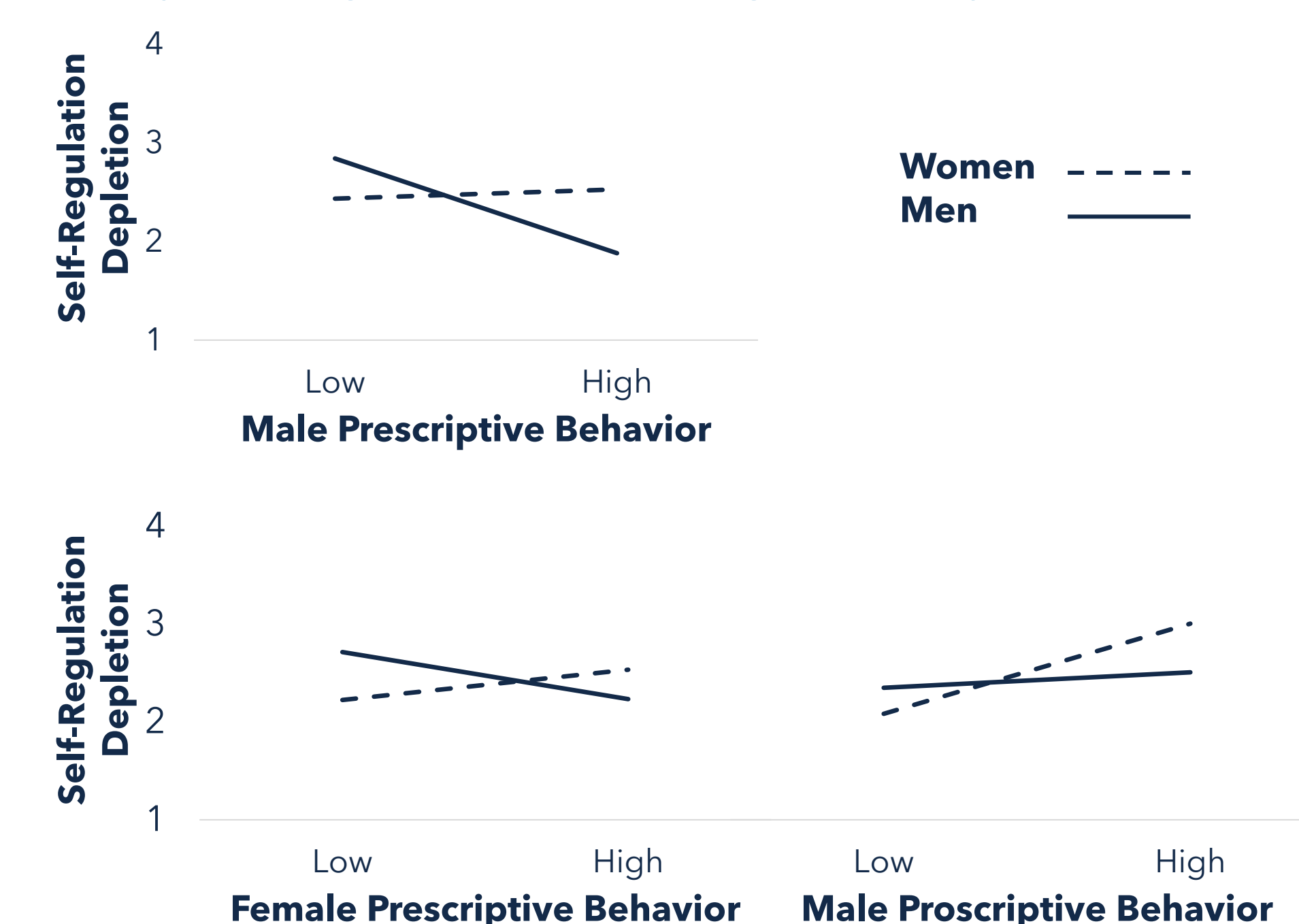
Leader Gender-Inconsistent Behavior  $\rightarrow$  Self-Regulation Depletion

Independent Variable	Beta	p-value
Male prescriptive behavior X Leader gender	1.00	<.01
Female prescriptive behavior X Leader gender	-.72	<.05
Male proscriptive behavior X Leader gender	.61	<.05
Female proscriptive behavior X Leader gender	-.45	<.10

*Self-Regulation Depletion  $\rightarrow$  Image Threat*

$b = .29, p < .001$

Graphing the interactions between gendered leader behaviors and leader gender that were significantly related to self-regulation depletion revealed interesting findings. First, male leaders who reported gender-role consistent behavior also reported lower self-regulation depletion. Additionally, contrary to initial expectations, women leaders who reported behaving gender-role consistently also reported *higher* levels of self-regulation depletion.



## Discussion

While the results of my field study did not support my hypothesized model of downstream consequences of leader gender-role inconsistent behaviors, they still yielded many interesting conclusions. Broadly, my thesis contributes to the expansion of leadership literature, weighing in on emerging scholarly conversations around gender dynamics and leader self-perceptions and behaviors. While Hypothesis 1 was not supported, the direct effects of masculine leader behavior on image threat illustrates that **the modern workplace is still highly gendered**. Furthermore, the findings of Hypothesis 2 contribute to an ongoing debate between organizational behavioral and social psychological scholars in the realm of image management. My findings supported the social psychological perspective; that **image threat promotes exclusively self-defensive and dysfunctional leader reactions**.

Despite unresponsive findings for the relationship between gender-inconsistent behavior and image threat, supplemental analyses demonstrated promising support for the self-regulation depletion perspective. Not only were certain interactions between gender-role behavior and leader gender significantly related to self-regulation depletion, but also self-regulation depletion was significantly related to image threat. This suggests that the image management process is influenced by leaders' self-regulation such that **gender-role inconsistent behavior prompted self-regulation depletion and subsequent image threat**.

My findings illustrate that gender-role behavioral expectations significantly shape leaders' experiences and subsequent actions in the workplace. **The presence and awareness of gendered behavioral expectations is taxing for leaders who behave gender-role inconsistently**. This depletion has negative downstream effects by fostering uncomfortable feelings in leaders (i.e., image threat) that manifest in dysfunctional ways. Thus, organizations should move towards a culture of gender neutrality and equity, especially in management realms. By creating a culture of acceptance, organizations can promote psychological safety and as a result functional leader behavior.

## Future Research Questions

1. What can leaders do to reduce their levels of self-regulation depletion or replenish their energy reserves?
2. How can individuals react to and reframe image threat in a constructive and functional manner?
3. What additional mechanisms drive leader engagement in dysfunctional behaviors over functional behaviors when image threat is online?

## Acknowledgments

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