

# Expectancy Violation Exposes the Hidden Victims of Sexual Harassment

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*Using expectancy violation theory as a framework, it was proposed that men and less attractive male and female targets violate the schema people hold regarding workplace sexual harassment, resulting in them being perceived as experiencing less severe harassment, being less believed, and being recommended to pursue less assertive actions. Australian workers (N = 361) aged 18–82 years completed an online questionnaire based on a hypothetical sexual harassment scenario. The findings demonstrated that expectancy violation effects were present, negatively affecting targets who did not meet the schematic norm of a sexual harassment victim, thus highlighting the difficulty and barriers associated with making and assessing organizational sexual harassment claims.*

*Keywords: expectancy violation, sexual harassment, schema, stereotype, gender, attractiveness*

## INTRODUCTION

The typical schema that comes to mind when individuals hear of a case of sexual harassment is that they expect the victim of the harassment to be a woman and, most likely, attractive (Herrera, Herrera, & Expósito, 2016). However, is this schema accurate, and what happens when a sexual harassment situation does not reflect this schema? This study examines the existence of a sexual harassment schema and proposes that the victim's gender and physical attractiveness play critical foundational roles in the schema. Grounded in the concept of expectancy violation (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon & Hale, 1988), it is proposed that victims of sexual harassment who do not fit the schema—for example, men and unattractive individuals—may face negative perceptions. These perceptions include not being believed, their situation being perceived as less severe, and being recommended not to pursue more assertive or punitive actions in response. They become the hidden victims of sexual harassment.

Accordingly, the present study contributes to theoretical development in expectancy violation and sexual harassment literature by proposing that existing theories concerning gendered attractiveness and sexual harassment are more complicated than perhaps traditionally considered. For example, individuals (e.g., attractive women) who conform to sexual harassment stereotypes or schemas may be more believed. Several reasons, such as social changes over the past 15 years (e.g., the rise of the #MeToo movement) may

have also tempered the more traditional dichotomous view of gender. Therefore, this paper suggests that the extant theory focusing on the perception of victims of sexual harassment may need to be re-examined through a more contemporary lens, as discussed below.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

### **Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment has been linked to numerous adverse organizational and personal outcomes (Choi, 2021; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Flores, Settles, McGillen, & Davis, 2021; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Sillito Walker & Bonner, 2021). At the individual level, these include posttraumatic stress disorder; depression; anxiety; and a decrease in job satisfaction, job performance and career opportunities (Clarke, Ford, & Sulsky, 2016; Holland, Rabelo, Gustafson, Seabrook, & Cortina, 2016). Moreover, the ambient effects of sexual harassment in the workplace may affect other employees as a job stressor that may lead to team conflict, negative job attitudes and absenteeism (Flores et al., 2021; Rubino et al., 2018). Further, outcomes valued by organizations, such as organizational commitment, staff turnover, organizational reputation, and financial performance, are negatively affected (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2018; Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Foster & Fullagar, 2018).

Beyond the effect on staff performance and productivity, there is a more prosaic motive behind organizations minimizing the incidence of sexual harassment. Legislation mandates that organizations may be culpable for sexual harassment, and organizations may tend to think more in terms of minimizing the direct financial cost and reputational damage related to litigation and settlements (AHRC, 2020a; Madera, 2018). However, it is well recognized that sexual harassment remains prevalent in workplaces, regardless of legal protections and organizational policies intended to address it (Leskinen, Rabelo, & Cortina, 2015; McDonald, Charlesworth, & Graham, 2016).

Although sexual harassment has many different definitions, in this study, sexual harassment will be limited to *unwanted sexual attention* (AHRC, 2020b). This type of harassment encompasses behaviours that are typically more ambiguous and subjective but are of a sexual nature, which may create a hostile work environment for the individual (Jacobson & Eaton, 2018).

Further, the more ambiguous and subjective nature of these sexualized behaviours fits under the auspices of unwanted sexual attention that may lead to greater variation in interpretation (Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Quick & McFadyen, 2017; Sillito Walker & Bonner, 2021). For example, a substantial body of research suggests that men and women generally perceive sexual coercion harassment similarly (Collazo & Kmec, 2019). In contrast, unwanted sexual attention, which may include less overt behaviours such as sexual comments, inappropriate and unwanted touching, and pressure for dates (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Holland et al., 2016; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Leskinen et al., 2015; Page, Pina, & Giner-Sorolla, 2016), is open to more subjective interpretation, with men having a broader tolerance than women (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018).

### **Expectancy Violation Theory**

Expectancy violation theory suggests that societal norms, rules, roles, and stereotypes provide assessment data about an individual's characteristics, which can be quickly accessed and used to form an opinion and an expectation of the types of behaviour that others perceive should be exhibited by specific types of individuals in particular contexts (Burgoon, 2015). Essentially, 'unmet expectations are expectancy violations' (Burgoon, 2015, p. 3).

Most research indicates that violations of expectancies will generally be viewed negatively. This finding is particularly notable in relation to the violation of gendered norms, such that violations relating to gendered appearance or behaviour tend to result in negative backlash for the violator (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Burgoon, 2015; Flores et al., 2021).

An individual's schema of a sexual harassment victim tends to present the victim as a female victim, and perhaps physically attractive (Goh, Bandt-Law, Cheek, Sinclair, & Kaiser, 2021; Golden, Johnson, & Lopez, 2001; Herrera et al., 2016; Madera, Podratz, King, & Hebl, 2007; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2013).

Expectancy violation theory proposes that when the situation does not match this schema, individuals who violate expectations (e.g., a male victim of sexual harassment) may suffer further negative consequences as a result of that violation. That is, individuals tend to respond negatively when issues, events, or individuals do not present as expected (Bevan, Ang, & Fearn, 2014; Goh et al., 2021).

Most research has tended to focus on the perceived severity of the harassment, incorporating a decision on whether the situation is regarded as harassing by those evaluating sexual harassment complaints (Knapp, DuBois, Hogue, Astakhova, & Faley, 2019; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). However, many studies, including that of Madera et al. (2007), suggest that the consequences of perceptions of harassment are far broader than simply the answer to 'Is the behaviour harassment, and how severe?' Additional factors may include issues of likability (LeMaire, Oswald, & Russell, 2016), how the victim responds or should respond (Herrera et al., 2016) and what, if any, punishment should be applied (Goh et al., 2021; Madera et al., 2007).

For this study, three possible consequences or outcomes were potentially influenced by the respondents' sexual harassment schema. The first was whether the behaviour constituted harassment and, if so, the severity of that harassment. Herrera et al. (2016) found that respondents were more likely to perceive a situation as sexually harassing when presented with an attractive victim as opposed to an unattractive victim. This finding suggests that attractiveness triggers a response that aligns with the schematic representation of a stereotypical victim (Knapp et al., 2019; Madera et al., 2007).

The second was the believability of the parties in the situation. Because sexual harassment may not be witnessed, how a claimed situation or interaction is perceived may depend on the credibility of the parties involved (Latcheva, 2017). For example, Madera et al. (2007) found that the credibility of victims' claims was heavily influenced by their gender and level of physical attractiveness. Those who were schematically aligned (i.e., attractive individuals and women) were more likely to be believed.

A key assumption of this study is that a situation involving individuals who are more consistent with the schema of sexual harassment will be more likely to be:

- considered harassment
- potentially considered more severe harassment
- believed.

Third, we assume that schematic consistency will be reflected in the actions recommended to the victim to pursue. Victims who are consistent with the schema of the harassed should be more likely to be recommended to undertake more assertive actions aimed at ending the harassment than those who are not reflective of the schema (Burgoon, 2015; Burgoon et al., 2016; Hart, 2019; Hershcovis, Cameron, Gervais, & Bozeman, 2018).

## **Characteristics of the Victim**

### *Gender*

Gender is a key factor that may influence perception and expectation in relation to social and workplace interactions (Bem, 1981; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Galdi, Maass, & Cadinu, 2014; Madera et al., 2007; Mellon, 2013). Gender role theory provides a series of expectations about men and women in terms of both their appearance and behaviour, with women generally expected to behave more communally and demonstrate greater sensitivity, obedience, dependence, and submission (Heilman, 2012; Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014; Leskinen et al., 2015). Alternatively, more masculine or agentic behaviours are expected from men, with men learning from a young age that they are expected to enjoy sexual attention and be the sexual aggressors or initiators of sexual advances and relationships (Bitton & Shaul, 2013; Gonzalez-Rivas & Peterson, 2018; Jozkowski, Marcantonio, & Hunt, 2017; Luthar & Luthar, 2007). Those who violate their gender role tend to be perceived negatively and may be penalized for such violations (Leskinen et al., 2015; Mellon, 2013).

In conjunction, there is evidence that the same stereotypical pattern of gendered norms will occur in a sexual harassment scenario. For example, literature indicates that it is typically women who are harassed (Adikaram, 2018; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018). This finding aligns with gendered expectations and is also statistically supported, with a recent Australian survey identifying that 85% of

Australian women, compared with 56% of Australian men, had experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime (AHRC, 2020a).

Therefore, women represent the stereotypical victim of sexual harassment (Bitton & Shaul, 2013; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Goh et al., 2021; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Page & Pina, 2015). To verify the existence of a sexual harassment schema, and to assess the effect of schema violation on those receiving, evaluating, and addressing sexual harassment complaints, this study proposes a range of hypotheses. The first aims to confirm the existence of a gendered sexual harassment schema whereby women are perceived as normative victims of sexual harassment. This is then proposed to affect the level of severity of the harassment, the victim's believability and the actions recommended for them to pursue. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1a:** *Situations of alleged sexual harassment with victims who are women will be more likely to be perceived as more severe harassment than situations featuring victims who are men.*

**H1b:** *Women alleging sexual harassment will be more believed than men.*

**H1c:** *Sexual harassment victims who are women will be:*

- i. *recommended to undertake more assertive behaviours compared with victims who are men*
- ii. *most likely to be recommended to formally report the incident.*

#### *Physical Attractiveness*

Physical appearance is another of the most obvious visible triggers that influence the perception of most social interactions (Agthe, Strobel, Spörrle, Pfundmair, & Maner, 2016; Palmer & Peterson, 2016). A person's physical attractiveness is a strong, influential precursor to a range of positive interaction responses from others, including desirability and liking (Maestripieri, Henry, & Nickels, 2017; Palmer & Peterson, 2016; Wang et al., 2017). The physical attractiveness stereotype purports that 'what is beautiful is good' (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972, p. 285). Those who are more physically attractive possess 'personality goodness' (Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991, p. 109), which comprises positive qualities, including social and intellectual competence and trustworthiness.

In line with this premise, sexual harassment was traditionally regarded as predominantly motivated by sexual attraction or interest (Page & Pina, 2015). Therefore, in the context of sexual harassment, attractiveness may be another factor that strongly influences an individual's opinions and schemas because it is generally assumed that more attractive individuals will be more desired, regardless of the specific context. For example, there is a general belief that an attractive woman will experience a greater or more frequent incidence of sexual harassment than her unattractive counterpart. Therefore, attractive victims who report sexual harassment are more likely to be believed because they possess the requisite characteristics (in this case, being attractive) that represent the 'type' of individuals expected to potentially be harassed (Madera et al., 2007). Attractiveness presumably leads to the activation of the schema. Herrera et al. (2016) found that attractiveness played a significant role in how behaviour was viewed regarding the origin or type of the harassment. If the victim of harassment was attractive, it was deemed an act of sexual harassment more so than if the victim was unattractive. Despite efforts to remain objective, attractiveness is a cue that triggers a schema whereby individuals make evaluations and judgements that cause them to treat and perceive more attractive individuals differently and generally more positively (Agthe et al., 2016; Palmer & Peterson, 2016). In relation to this study, more attractive victims would be assumed to be more believable, their situation would be perceived as more severe, and they would be recommended to undertake more assertive actions should they experience sexual harassment.

The subsequent hypotheses of the study seek to confirm the existence of an attractiveness component within the sexual harassment schema by which victims are expected to be more attractive:

**H2a:** *Situations of alleged sexual harassment towards attractive victims will be more likely to be perceived as more severe harassment than situations involving unattractive victims.*

**H2b:** *Attractive victims alleging sexual harassment will be more likely to be believed than unattractive victims.*

**H2c:** *Attractive victims of sexual harassment will be:*

- i. recommended to undertake more assertive behaviours compared with unattractive victims*
- ii. most likely to be recommended to formally report the incident compared with unattractive women.*

### *Schema Interactions*

There is an inherent implication of an interaction effect between gender and attractiveness in the case of sexual harassment. When the schematic representation of sexual harassment is considered, there is a tendency for individuals to think of an attractive woman being harassed. Many studies support this assumption, with researchers such as Madera et al. (2007) and Herrera et al. (2016) indicating the existence of a sexual harassment schema whereby more attractive women are the most representative of classic or stereotypical victims of sexual harassment. Based on the potential interactions inherent within the schema, the interaction effects of the attractiveness and gender of the victim are proposed in Hypotheses 3a–c.

**H3a:** *Situations of alleged sexual harassment towards attractive women will be more likely to be perceived as more severe harassment than situations with all other victims (i.e., unattractive women, attractive men, and unattractive men).*

**H3b:** *Attractive women alleging sexual harassment will be more believed than all other victims.*

**H3c:** *Attractive women who are victims of sexual harassment will be:*

- i. recommended to undertake more assertive behaviours compared with all other victims*
- ii. most likely to be recommended to formally report a sexual harassment incident than all other victims.*

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected via Qualtrics, which both recruited and delivered an online questionnaire to a paid panel sample of Australian workers. The online questionnaire was developed to measure participants' reactions to a hostile work environment.

A hypothetical workplace scenario was developed to determine whether the incident was perceived as sexual harassment. The scenario was constructed as a fictitious conversation between two friends that included the victim describing a series of sexually harassing behaviours perpetrated towards them by another employee of the opposite gender. The conversation ended with the victim requesting initial, informal advice from their friend about managing the situation. A photograph of the victim of the harassment was also included with the scenario.

Employing hypothetical scenarios has advantages, including increasing internal validity and greater experimental control over variables, while avoiding ethical and other difficulties in obtaining access to organizations (Bauman & Newman, 2013; Poulou, 2001). The hypothetical scenario also provided an appropriate mechanism to identify attitudes, beliefs and values regarding concepts that may be difficult to replicate in the real world owing to the topic being potentially too threatening or sensitive (Al Sadi & Basit, 2017; Bauman & Newman, 2013).

### **Participants**

The sample ( $N = 361$ ) comprised a roughly even distribution of Australian men and women ( $N = 175$  men [48.5%] and 186 women [51.5%]). Respondents were aged from 18 to 82 years, with a mean age of 44 years ( $SD = 13.31$ ). All respondents indicated that they had been employed for at least two years, with 95.6% of the sample still currently working.

## Procedure

Participants were invited to read the scenario and were randomly assigned to one of the four scenario conditions (attractive/unattractive men and attractive/unattractive women) whereby the gender and attractiveness of the victim were manipulated.

Once participants read the scenario, they were asked to consider it, assume the role of the victim's friend, and provide their input and opinion by completing the accompanying questionnaire, which included a series of statements relating to their perceptions of the actors involved in the scenario. Last, participants' demographic details (e.g., age, education, and occupation) were requested.

## Measurements

### *Victim's Characteristics*

The hypothetical victim's gender and attractiveness were manipulated by including a photograph (depicting one of four randomly assigned conditions) with the written scenario. Examples of the photographs used are provided in Appendix 1. Previously, all eight photographs were found to be appropriate representations of their intended conditions (Zacharko, 2019).

### *Harassment Severity*

Respondents were asked to determine whether they perceived that the incident described in the scenario constituted sexual harassment and, if so, the level of severity. Following the approach of Lartigue (2001) and Zacharko (2019), this study employed a single-item seven-point Likert scale (from 1 = *not sexual harassment* to 7 = *serious sexual harassment*) to indicate whether the respondent viewed the situation as sexual harassment, and its severity level.

### *Believability*

Believability of the victim was assessed via a scale for believability in sexual harassment situations (as constructed by Madera et al., 2007). The victim's believability scale consisted of seven items ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ), including questions such as 'How likely is it that (the complainant) is telling the truth?' All items were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, with the first two items anchored with 1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *highly likely*, the next three items anchored by 1 = *completely unreasonable* to 7 = *completely reasonable* and the final two items anchored with 1 = *very little* to 7 = *very much*. The scale demonstrated a high internal consistency score ( $\alpha = 0.920$ ) and consisted of two factors—Self-Opinion (first five items of the scale) and Jury (last two scale items)—as detailed in Appendix 2.

### *Actions the Victim Should Take*

The recommended actions were drawn from the approach used by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1995). This approach has been employed by many researchers, including Magley (2002), Hershcovis et al. (2018), Schneider and Carpenter (2019) and Zacharko (2019). The six actions recommended to the victim were built from the least to the most assertive (Hershcovis et al., 2018; Magley, 2002). The suggested actions were avoiding the perpetrator as much as possible, ignoring their behaviour, going along with the behaviour, joking with the perpetrator about their behaviour, confronting the perpetrator and expressing discomfort with their behaviour, and formally reporting the perpetrator to a supervisor/internal authority for investigation and disciplinary action. Participants were asked to rate on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *highly likely*) how likely they were to recommend each of the six actions.

## Data Analysis

Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) and  $2 \times 2$  multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were conducted to address the study's hypotheses. A full factorial design was selected because the focus of the study was investigating the difference in means, in the main as well as the interaction effects, among the key independent variables (gender and attractiveness) across multiple dependent variables—severity, believability and recommended actions (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

## RESULTS

### Results for Hypotheses 1: Gender

The results of a one-way ANOVA indicated that H1a was supported, with respondents' perceptions of the severity of sexual harassment in the scenario being significantly greater ( $F(1, 359) = 11.26, p < .05, \eta = 0.03$ ) when the victim was a woman ( $\bar{x}_{women} = 5.23$ ) than when the victim was a man ( $\bar{x}_{men} = 4.77$ ). The results of a second one-way ANOVA supported H1b, with women viewed as significantly more likely to be believed ( $\bar{x}_{women} = 5.57$ ) than men ( $\bar{x}_{men} = 5.17, F(1, 359) = 13.31; p < .05, \eta = 0.04$ ).

For H1c(i), the results of a  $2 \times 2$  MANOVA found a significant gender effect ( $F(6, 354) = 8.43; p < 9.001; \eta = 0.04$ ). Three of the five recommended actions were significantly different (see Table 1). As predicted, respondents presented with male victim of harassment were more likely to recommend most of the less assertive behaviours or actions to manage their harasser. *Going along with the perpetrator* ( $\bar{x}_{men} = 2.27$  compared with  $\bar{x}_{women} = 1.63, F(1, 359) = 19.99; p < .001$ ) and *joking with the perpetrator* ( $\bar{x}_{men} = 2.50$  compared with  $\bar{x}_{women} = 2.06, F(1, 369) = 7.31; p < .01$ ) were significantly more likely to be recommended by respondents if they were presented with a male victim of harassment than with a female victim. However, the least assertive behaviour, specifically, *avoiding the perpetrator* ( $\bar{x}_{men} = 3.72$  compared with  $\bar{x}_{women} = 4.48, F(1, 359) = 13.96; p < .001$ ), was more likely to be recommended by respondents if they were presented with a female victim of harassment than with a male victim. There was no significant difference in gender in relation to two of the recommendations: *ignore the perpetrator's behaviour* and *confront the perpetrator*. The results of a one-way ANOVA supported H1c(ii), with women significantly more likely to be recommended by the respondents to formally report the perpetrator ( $\bar{x}_f = 5.26$ ) compared with men ( $\bar{x}_m = 4.40, F(1, 359) = 22.47; p < .001$ ).

**TABLE 1**  
**MANOVA: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS BY VICTIM'S GENDER**

	Value	<i>F</i>	Hypothesis <i>df</i>	Error <i>df</i>	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender of Victim						
Pillai's Trace	.10	7.72	5	355	<.001	.098
Wilks' Lambda	.90	7.72	5	355	<.001	.098
Hotelling's Trace	.11	7.72	5	355	<.001	.098
Roy's Largest Root	.11	7.72	5	355	<.001	.098
Dependent Variable	Mean Square					
Avoid Perp.	51.75	13.96	1	359	<.001	.04
Ignore Perp. Behaviour	8.61	2.49	1	359	.115	.01
Go Along with Perp. Behaviour	36.83	19.99	1	359	<.001	.05
Joke with Perp.	17.75	7.31	1	359	.007	.02
Confront Perp.	2.31	.86	1	359	.355	.00

### Results for Hypotheses 2: Attractiveness

Support for H2a was found, with respondents' perceptions of the severity of sexual harassment in the scenario being significantly greater ( $F(1, 359) = 6.99, p < 0.01$ ) when the victim was physically attractive ( $\bar{x}_a = 5.18; SD = 1.26$ ) than when the victim was unattractive ( $\bar{x}_u = 4.82; SD = 1.33$ ). Support for H2b was

found because attractive victims ( $\bar{x}_a = 5.64$ ) were perceived to be significantly more likely to be believed than unattractive victims ( $\bar{x}_u = 5.05$ ,  $F(1, 359) = 28.04$ ;  $p < .001$ ).

For H2c(i), a statistically significant effect for attractiveness was found ( $F(5, 355) = 4.03$ ;  $p < .001$ ) (see Table 2). However, this effect was not uniform; it varied based on the nature of the recommended action. Notably, attractive victims were more likely than unattractive victims to be recommended to *avoid the perpetrator* (the least assertive action) ( $\bar{x}_a = 4.34$  compared with  $\bar{x}_u = 3.85$ ,  $F(1, 359) = 5.67$ ;  $p = .018$ ). Conversely, more attractive victims were significantly less likely than unattractive victims to be recommended the slightly more assertive behaviour of *go along with the perpetrator* ( $\bar{x}_a = 1.72$  compared with  $\bar{x}_u = 2.19$ ,  $F(1, 359) = 10.60$ ;  $p = .001$ ). There was no significant difference for attractive and unattractive victims for the remaining three recommendations. Accordingly, limited support for H2c(i) was found. For H2c(ii), no significant difference was found with regard to respondents recommending more attractive victims ( $\bar{x}_a = 4.80$ ) to *formally report the perpetrator* compared with unattractive victims ( $\bar{x}_u = 4.84$ ,  $F(1, 359) = .045$ ;  $p = .832$ ). H2c(ii) was therefore not supported.

**TABLE 2**  
**MANOVA: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS BY VICTIM'S ATTRACTIVENESS**

	Value	<i>F</i>	Hypothesis <i>df</i>	Error <i>df</i>	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Attractiveness of Victim						
Wilks' Lambda	.95	4.03	5	355	.001	.054
Hotelling's Trace	.06	4.03	5	355	.001	.054
Roy's Largest Root	.06	4.03	5	355	.001	.054
Dependent Variable	Mean Square					
Avoid Perp.	21.50	5.67	1	359	.018	.016
Ignore Perp. Behaviour	.29	.08	1	359	.773	.000
Go Along with Perp. Behaviour	20.03	10.60	1	359	.001	.029
Joke with Perp.	1.56	.63	1	359	.428	.002
Confront Perp.	.04	.01	1	359	.908	.000

### Results for Hypotheses 3: Gender × Attractiveness Interaction

For H3a, H3b and H3c, no interaction effects were found for severity of harassment ( $F(1, 357) = 2.416$ ,  $p = .12$ ), believability of the victim ( $F(1, 357) = .002$ ;  $p = .97$ ) or overall for the recommended action items (see Table 3). Accordingly, these hypotheses were not supported. Nevertheless, when considering Table 4, a significant interaction effect was found for the most assertive action item: *confront perpetrator* ( $F(1, 357) = 4.751$ ;  $p < .05$ ). However, it was not attractive but *unattractive female victims* ( $\bar{x}_{womenu} = 5.71$ ) who were most likely to be recommended to confront the perpetrator compared with all other victims ( $\bar{x}_{mena} = 5.51$ ,  $\bar{x}_{womenu} = 5.30$ ,  $\bar{x}_{menu} = 5.17$ ). For H3c(ii) there was a significant difference based on the interaction effect between the victim's gender and attractiveness ( $F(1, 357) = 4.994$ ;  $p = .026$ ). *Unattractive women* ( $\bar{x}_{womenu} = 5.53$ ) were more likely to be recommended to *formally report* perpetrators of sexual harassment compared with all other victims ( $\bar{x}_{womenu} = 5.02$ ,  $\bar{x}_{mena} = 4.56$ ,  $\bar{x}_{menu} = 4.26$ ). Accordingly, H3c(ii) was not supported.



**TABLE 3**  
**MANOVA: RECOMMENDED ACTIONS BY TARGET'S GENDER AND ATTRACTIVENESS**

	Value	<i>F</i>	Hypothesis <i>df</i>	Error <i>df</i>	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Gender × Attractiveness of Target						
Wilks' Lambda	.98	1.46	5	353	.202	.02
Hotelling's Trace	.02	1.46	5	353	.202	.02
Roy's Largest Root	.02	1.46	5	353	.202	.02
Dependent Variable	Mean Square					
Avoid Perp.	.51	.139	1	357	.709	.000
Ignore Perp. Behaviour	3.51	1.013	1	357	.315	.003
Go Along with Perp. Behaviour	1.38	.767	1	357	.382	.002
Joke with Perp.	2.03	.833	1	357	.362	.002
Confront Perp.	12.67	4.751	1	357	.030	.013

## DISCUSSION

In general, support was found for the existence of an expectancy violation effect. The harassment of men and unattractive victims (both men and women) was considered less severe and less believed, with these victims being recommended to pursue less assertive actions than women or more attractive victims. Thus, men and unattractive individuals are the hidden victims of sexual harassment and expectancy violation.

### Gender

Sexually harassing situations involving female victims were more likely to be viewed with significantly greater severity than situations involving victims who were men. Specifically, any harassment that men experienced was generally perceived to be less severe (H1a), and they were less likely to be believed (H1b). However, regarding recommended behaviour and actions that victims should undertake, only partial support was found (H1c). For the most part, harassed men were significantly less likely to be encouraged to undertake actions that reflected assertive behaviour (e.g., formally reporting their harasser, (H1c(ii)) as opposed to less assertive behaviours, such as 'going along with' or 'joking with' their perpetrator (H1c(i)).

Conversely, women were significantly *more* likely to be recommended one of the *least* assertive actions—to *avoid* their perpetrator (Hershcovis et al., 2018; Magley, 2002). Accordingly, the H1(a–c) hypotheses provided initial support for expectancy violation influencing how individuals perceived an ambiguous sexual harassment situation, and that violations of a schema tend to result in negative responses and perceptions (Burgoon, 2015).

The implication is that men, when making claims of sexual harassment, may experience a disadvantage based on their gender. Because men violate the gendered expectation of the victim of harassment, they are statistically less likely to be believed, their claims regarded as less severe in nature, and they are generally recommended to pursue less assertive actions to address a sexually harassing situation. Indeed, focusing on the actions recommended to men, a notable group of respondents agreed that they should almost embrace the behaviour by going along with it or joking about it.

The negative perception from expectancy violation may have both objective and schematic origins. For example, women are overwhelmingly perceived as the victims in a sexual harassment situation; therefore, a male victim seems implausible (Adikaram, 2018; AHRC, 2020a; Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Jacobson & Eaton, 2018; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Likewise, statistics from the AHRC sexual harassment surveys indicated that more women than men experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime (AHRC, 2012, 2018, 2020a). This objectivity may inform and reinforce an individual's schema. Women are the victims. As a society, it is expected. It is women, not men, who are harassed.

### **Physical Attractiveness**

Consistent with gender, the perceptions of physically attractive victims of sexual harassment also fit the schematic model of sexual harassment, with corresponding negative consequences for less physically attractive victims. In essence, it is expected that more attractive individuals will be victims of sexual advances (Agthe & Maner, 2017; Buss, 2016; Maestriperieri et al., 2017), including advances that may be unwanted and unwelcome, and that constitute sexual harassment (Adikaram, 2018; Herrera et al., 2016). Part of the explanation may lie with the positive associations generally ascribed to more attractive individuals. Generally, they are expected to be more popular and desirable; therefore, they are subjected to more attention (whether wanted or unwanted) because of their appealing physical appearance (Agthe & Maner, 2017; Buss, 2016; Maestriperieri et al., 2017). Studies indicate that individuals are motivated to bond and form close affiliations with those who are more physically attractive. Thus, the 'what is beautiful is good' phenomenon (Dion et al., 1972, p.285) may contribute to the expectation that more attractive individuals are more likely to be sexually harassed because they are more salient, attract more attention, and have a greater level of what has been referred to as 'aesthetic capital' (Anderson, Grunert, Katz, & Lovascio, 2010; Herrera et al., 2016; Sarpila, Koivula, Kukkonen, Åberg, & Pajunen, 2020).

This is based on the premise that a key motivation to sexually harass is driven by some degree of sexual desire or attraction (Page & Pina, 2015). Rather than ignore or minimise the wealth of literature (e.g., Herrera et al., 2016; Page & Pina, 2015; Shultz, 2018) that identifies sexual harassment as an expression of power, this premise of sexual harassment as an expression of attraction explains the schematic-based perception of an ambiguous sexual harassment scenario featuring more and less physically attractive individuals.

More specifically, the same stereotype underlying 'what is beautiful is good' may also directly explain H2b. Several studies have found that more attractive individuals are viewed as more honest and, most notably for the sake of this study, more believable (Agthe et al., 2016; Madera et al., 2007; Palmer & Peterson, 2016). Thus, in the current study, if a highly attractive individual claims they were harassed, the very nature of their attractiveness makes their claim more believable. Essentially, the beautiful is good stereotype directly contributes to the schema surrounding sexual harassment because it results in a halo effect whereby one positive trait (in this instance, attractiveness) dominates how the individual is perceived by others (Herrera et al., 2016; Palmer & Peterson, 2016). It appears that this stereotype remains consistent within the sexual harassment schema, with attractiveness increasing the likelihood of activating the schema as hypothesised. This finding is consistent with prior studies (Herrera et al., 2016; Madera et al., 2007).

With regard to the perceived severity of the ambiguous behaviour, the more attractive exemplars' sexual harassment experience was again deemed to be more severe than the experience of those regarded as less physically attractive. This result is supported by Herrera et al. (2016), who found that attractiveness played a significant role in whether the behaviour was deemed sexual harassment, with attractive victims' experiences perceived as sexual harassment more so than those of unattractive victims.

However, in contrast to the severity of harassment and believability, where the expectancy violation effect was apparent for less physically attractive victims, the effect was only evident for two of the five dependent variables in H2c. Notably, attractive victims were significantly more likely than unattractive victims to be recommended to avoid the perpetrator. Likewise, more attractive victims were significantly less likely than unattractive victims to be recommended to 'to go along with the perpetrator'.

Thus, women and more attractive victims were more likely to be recommended to avoid the perpetrator. This recommendation places the onus on the victim to extract themselves from the situation rather than on

the perpetrator to not perform the behaviour. This has a potentially concerning implication, reflected in the following view: ‘Well what did you expect? You’re attractive/a woman—you are going to get approached and there is nothing you can do to stop it, so it is up to you to avoid it as the perpetrator just can’t help themselves’. This tacitly places the onus of responsibility and blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator (De Judicibus & McCabe, 2001; Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013).

### Gender and Attractiveness Interactions

H3a–H3c were not supported, with no evidence to indicate a gender  $\times$  attractiveness interaction effect and the assumption that unattractive men would face the greatest penalty because they violate the expected schema. Accordingly, the findings suggested that the schema relating to sexual harassment relates to an individual who is *either* more attractive *or* a woman, but not specifically an *attractive woman*, for the schema to be activated. This implication runs counter to prior research that indicates the existence of a sexual harassment schema whereby more attractive women are the most representative of classic or stereotypical victims of sexual harassment (Goh et al., 2021; Herrera et al., 2016; Madera et al., 2007). Why? It could simply be that the current study differs in some ways from prior studies. First, this study employed a workplace sample rather than a student sample. Many studies investigating sexual harassment perceptions have used scenarios employing student samples (e.g., Golden et al., 2001; Herrera et al., 2016; Madera et al., 2007) with younger median ages (approximately 22 years) than the age group in the current study (approximately 44 years). Several studies have indicated that students and employees perceive sexual harassment differently (Blackstone, Houle, & Uggen, 2014; McLaughlin, Uggen, & Blackstone, 2012; Ohse & Stockdale, 2008). This difference in perception has been suggested to be primarily due to employees’ greater exposure to, and understanding of, what constitutes sexual harassment, as well as related organizational policies and training regarding sexual harassment (Blackstone et al., 2014; Gervais, Wiener, Allen, Farnum, & Kimble, 2016; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). This may have affected the lack of differences found in recommended actions based on the victim’s characteristics. The respondents in this study’s sample may have had a greater understanding of the nuances of sexual harassment as a result of their greater exposure to the workplace, training, and policy awareness.

However, although still not equal, the modern workplace offers more gender equality than the workplace of the 1970s (Flores et al., 2021; Quick & McFadyen, 2017). This may have resulted in reducing the elements of gender role stereotyping, including the component of physical appearance (specifically, attractiveness) as a trigger to increase the perception of femininity (Goh et al., 2021; Leskinen et al., 2015). Despite sexual harassment predominantly being regarded as a ‘woman’s issue’, increased awareness of sexual harassment in the workplace (and the development and implementation of associated organizational policies, procedures, and legal recourse) may have led to a greater understanding that sexual harassment is perpetrated not just against attractive women but also other groups (unattractive women and men) (Holland et al., 2016; McDonald et al., 2016). Further, workplace sexual harassment training and policies have led to a broader social understanding that sexual harassment is not always about sexual attraction, but may also be related to power or a desire to keep subgroup minorities (specifically, women) ‘in their place’ (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). These subgroup minorities, and their control, can take various forms—for example, a form of gendered hostility towards women (Page & Pina, 2015) or retaliation against the masculine gender role threat (Galdi et al., 2014). These more complex power dynamic factors may hence reduce physical attractiveness as a critical factor contributing to an individual being a victim of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Herrera et al., 2016; Holland et al., 2016). Therefore, although attractiveness may not be the factor that necessarily triggers the schema, gender does.

A final point to note in relation to the lack of a gender  $\times$  attractiveness interaction is the findings for H3c(i) and H3c(ii), which appear to be in complete opposition to the assumed stereotype of the attractive woman as victim. To summarize, H3c(i) was not supported, with respondents *not* recommending attractive women take more assertive actions compared with other victims. Interestingly, the findings were in contrast to the direction predicted by the hypothesis, with unattractive women most likely to be recommended to confront the perpetrator compared with all other victims. In fact, attractive women were most likely to be recommended to pursue the *least* assertive behaviour of *avoiding* the perpetrator. Similarly, H3c(ii), which

proposed that attractive women would be most likely to be recommended to report their perpetrator, was not supported. Again, as per H3c(i), *unattractive women* were significantly more likely to be recommended to report their perpetrator.

What can explain this finding? The key is that the H3c set of hypotheses investigated the behaviours that respondents recommended that the victim take. Thus, rather than perceiving the harassment as severe or deciding whether they believed the victim, H3c focused on what respondents advocated the victim should do. One possible explanation for the difference in the predicted findings throughout H3c is the schemas or stereotypes relating to gender and gender roles, and how they trigger perceptions of how individuals should act. However, it is prudent to explore how the nature of physical attractiveness may play a role in enhancing or exacerbating the cues of masculinity and femininity. It was outlined previously that the attractiveness of a given gender is typically associated with cues that emphasize that gender. For example, men with a stronger jaw are considered more attractive because it emphasizes strength and power (Little, 2014). Likewise, women with long and luxuriant hair, smooth skin and fuller lips are considered more attractive because these are signs of youth and health (Campbell, 2004). The more attractive women in the study may have been perceived by respondents as more congruent with their gender by exhibiting feminine traits (slim, longer hair, and softer facial features), thus strengthening the effect of the gendered schema (Goh et al., 2021; Leskinen et al., 2015). That is, the trigger of an attractive female victim may activate respondents' embedded schemas with regard to both sexual harassment and gender roles.

### **Practical Implications**

Many practical implications for managers and human resources (HR) personnel result from the findings of this study. First, the findings highlight the inherent difficulty associated with sexual harassment claims (and for those considering making claims) given that internal and external judgements both appear to be heavily influenced by the sexual harassment schema (Herrera et al., 2016). This study suggests that although a 'one size fits all' approach to managing workplace sexual harassment might appear equitable, it may not be effective. Male victims as well as individuals considered less conventionally physically attractive were found to be at a potential disadvantage in terms of their believability and the perception of the severity of the harassment. They are hidden victims of individuals' expectations of who will be sexually harassed.

Second, many managers and HR personnel may experience difficulty defining and labelling sexual harassment, particularly in ambiguous situations, where it may come down to 'he said, she said'. A logical first step is to increase staff members' understanding of the legal and behavioural definitions of sexual harassment to ensure mutual perceptions of the nature of 'unwanted sexual attention' and acknowledge that one person's 'banter' may be another's discomfort or trauma (Page et al., 2016). Therefore, training for managers and HR personnel to focus on a more encompassing view of sexual harassment is warranted.

Third, another key area of skill development for managers and staff relates to reporting the victim's responses to sexual harassment. Victims may undertake a variety of actions in response to being sexually harassed. These actions range from passive behaviours, such as avoiding or going along with the perpetrator, to more assertive behaviours, such as confronting or reporting the harasser. Victims who respond in more passive ways may face further issues in relation to their believability by other parties. However, it is important for managers and HR professionals to be aware that passive behaviours by a victim are not necessarily an expression of acceptance or denial of the occurrence of sexual harassment or of consent. Unfortunately, this view may result in negative perceptions of those who suffer in silence or delay reporting their experience (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Fischer, 1995; Hart, 2019; Zacharko, Murray, & Vilkinas, 2019).

Fourth, individuals do not like to think they are influenced by surface features such as an individual's appearance or even gender, but the evidence is that they are (Agthe et al., 2016). Therefore, awareness training is needed to make HR professionals, bystanders, and other staff cognizant of the potential effect of appearance and gender on their perceptions of claimants of sexual harassment (Herrera et al., 2016; Zacharko et al., 2019).

Last, articulating the consequences of sexual harassment and the damage it can cause to both the individual and the organization is a critical practical implication of this study (Collazo & Kmec, 2019).

Expressing the negative effects that various victims may experience (or have experienced) will enable coworkers to understand the perspective of a potential victim, regardless of their physical attributes (Diehl, Glaser, & Bohner, 2014). This training may also lead to easier recognition of sexual harassment from a bystander or coworker perspective. Therefore, rather than simply relying on the victim to come forward and report it, others may be encouraged to identify harassing behaviours and intervene, whereby they may support and advocate (to either management or the perpetrator) on behalf of the victim. Such actions, in turn, may lead to greater levels of reporting and support for victims, potentially increasing positive bystander intervention and ultimately reducing sexually harassing incidents (Collazo & Kmec, 2019).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

First, to overcome the limitations associated with using a hypothetical scenario, future research could use virtual reality. This approach would address the disadvantages of written hypothetical scenarios, reduce the challenges of accessing a workplace environment, and minimise the risk to participants and the organization (Hasson et al., 2019; Neyret et al., 2020; Schmid Mast, Kleinlogel, Tur, & Bachmann, 2018; Skarbez, Brooks, Frederick, & Whitton, 2017). Along with a range of potential methodological positives, including greater control, replication and ecological validity (Pan & Hamilton, 2018; Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016; Van Loon, Bailenson, Zaki, Bostick, & Willer, 2018), virtual reality presents an opportunity to create virtual scenarios whereby workplace environments may be simulated to train, study, and enable first-hand experience of another person's perspective (Barbot & Kaufman, 2020; De Gelder, Kätsyri, & De Borst, 2018; Pan & Hamilton, 2018; Slater & Sanchez-Vives, 2016).

Second, another potential limitation is that the study requested respondents to identify the types of actions they would recommend to the victim, but hypothetical scenarios may not reflect how respondents act or behave in real-world situations. The concept of the potential disconnect between actual and stated responses has been identified by Argyris and Schon (1974). Accordingly, because the study did not obtain the actual recommendations that individuals would give in a real-life situation, the potential effect of a mismatch between stated intentions and actual behaviours may be a limitation of the study.

Last, a detailed examination of same-gender, same-sex, and other sexual harassment scenarios was excluded from the scope of this study because of time and cost restraints. Despite a lack of mainstream media attention, research has indicated that 'atypical' sexual harassment interaction is also common within workplaces, with men harassed by men and women harassed by women, but this has received relatively little research attention (McDonald & Charlesworth, 2016; Russell & Oswald, 2016).

### **CONCLUSION**

To summarize, the two dominant findings of the study were as follows:

- Expectancy violation penalties exist for victims of sexual harassment who do not reflect the schematic norm.
- The biases that individuals hold, based on gender and attractiveness, affect their perceptions and subsequent treatment of an individual who violates their expectation of the typical sexual harassment victim.

Sexual harassment is a major topical issue of interest, with the rise of the #MeToo movement and specific individuals championing the cause of calling out inappropriate behaviour and making perpetrators accountable. However, the increased focus from both sides of the gendered divide on what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour highlights that more traditional views (e.g., 'locker room talk' or 'boys will be boys') are still prevalent. The fact that this debate is still raging is testament to the work that still needs to be done to identify sexually harassing behaviours as unacceptable in any context. The hidden element of this debate is that victims do not all have to be pretty women. Anyone can be a potential victim of workplace sexual harassment: men, younger and older people, and people of any ethnicity or political persuasion are all potential victims.

This study provides important insights for a more nuanced understanding of the issues that face the hidden victims of sexual harassment within organizations. They may not reflect society's schema of a sexual

harassment victim; however, by improving the understanding of sexual harassment, and by understanding that exposure and experience offset stereotypical assumptions, organizations may be able to treat all victims of harassment equitably and fairly.

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## APPENDIX 1: EXEMPLAR EXAMPLES



## APPENDIX 2: BELIEVABILITY SCALE

1. How much of the target's story do you believe?
2. To what extent can you sympathize with the target?
3. To what extent would a reasonable person sympathize with the target?
4. How reasonable do you find the target's story?
5. How likely is it that the target is telling the truth?
6. How reasonable would a jury find the target's complaint?
7. How likely is it that a jury would believe the target is telling the truth?