Organizational Intolerance to Sexual Harassment in Sexualized Work Environments: Its Effect on Workers' Emotions and Intentions to Display Active Responses

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that work environments that are sexualized harm employees' wellbeing, attitudes, and behaviors. The paper examines employees' affective reactions and behavioral intentions in such environments depending on the strictness of anti-harassment policies. Across two studies, we hypothesize that strict policies will lead to less hostile emotions and fewer intentions to actively react (considerate voice, whistleblowing, aggressive voice, and intention to quit) compared to loose policies. The second study also investigates whether these effects stem from the perception that sexualized work environments are not viewed as instances of sexual harassment. We discuss the implications for how managers should design anti-harassment policies in organizations.

Keywords: Sexualized Work Environments; Sexual Harassment; Organizational Intolerance to Harassment, Hostile emotions

Organizational Intolerance to Sexual Harassment in Sexualized Work Environments: Its Effect on Workers' Emotions and intentions to Display Active Responses

In contemporary society, particularly within organizations, there is an increasing emphasis on addressing issues of sexual harassment, prompting the implementation of preventative and punitive measures. Indeed, sexual harassment in the workplace is recognized as a significant problem, impacting both the well-being of employees and the overall organizational productivity. Anti-harassment measures vary across organizations, and individuals may perceive their organization as more or less tolerant towards harassment issues. Recent studies on employees' perceived organizational intolerance to sexual harassment (i.e., OISH; Cortina et al., 2002; Hulin et al., 1996) reveal that organizations with stringent harassment policies experience lower rates of harassment. Furthermore, strict policies promote active employee responses to harassment, such as reporting and voicing concerns.

Yet, studies examining the influence on OISH all have in common that they focus on individual or direct forms of sexual harassment, instances in which the victim is personally targeted by the sexually harassing behavior. Yet, sexual harassment is not limited to interpersonal interactions as it often takes an environmental form (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Although considered as less severe (Gruber, 1992), environmental forms of sexual harassment are more frequent and pervasive and can similarly impact employees' well-being, performance, and attitudes at the workplace (Sojo et al., 2016; Demoulin et al., 2023). In the present paper, we focus on one specific form of environmental harassment, that of sexualized work environments (SWE, Gutek et al., 1990). We test the role of organizational intolerance for sexual harassment on workers' intentions to actively respond to SWE. Active responses

refer to workers' responses that aim at directly dealing with the situation either by attempting to changing it (i.e., voice) or by shipping out from it (i.e., exit) (Hagedoorn et al., 1999).

Assessing how OISH affects people's reactions to SWE is important because, as will be detailed in this article, there are reasons to suspect that the positive relationship found between OISH and active reactions (e.g., Offerman & Malamut, 2002) might in fact completely reverse. In two studies, we indeed test the hypothesis that when OISH is high, SWE would be perceived less as a form of sexual harassment, triggering lower levels of hostile emotions and a lower intention of active responses from the part of employees than when OISH is low.

Organizational Intolerance for Sexual Harassment

OISH reflects the beliefs employees have that their organization takes sexual harassment seriously, has developed strict policies, practices and procedures to prevent harassment and investigate all complaints independently of who files it or who the perpetrator is (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Hulin et al., 1996). OISH has often been investigated as an antecedent of sexual harassment and research indeed supports the hypothesis that sexual harassment is more likely to develop among employees working in more permissive organizations (e.g., Bergman et al., 2002).

On top of affecting the very occurrence of harassment, OISH also influences employees' reactions to harassment instances. For instance, in a study assessing the predictors of harassment report among a large sample of Canadian women, Gruber and Smith (1995) found that the number of (more than the type of) procedures and policies that are in place in a given organization positively correlated with women's active responses to sexual harassment (directly responding or reporting the harasser) while decreasing their tendency to rely on more passive coping strategies (e.g., ignoring their harasser). The later findings led Bergman and collaborators (2002) to suggest that one of the best ways to encourage active reactions

towards sexual harassment among employees is by modifying the organizational climate and thus by reinforcing OISH. As these authors phrase it "If an organization's climate strongly opposes sexual harassment, then reports of sexually harassing behaviors may increase and may occur earlier in the harassment experience" (p. 238). As sensible as the later conclusion is when considering individual instances of sexual harassment, we reasoned that the effect of OISH employees' active reactions to SWE could be quite different.

Sexualized work environments

Sexual harassment can take multiple forms. To take but one example, Gruber's (1992) typology differentiates eleven harassment types in three overarching categories (i.e., verbal requests, verbal comments, and nonverbal displays). Within each category, harassment types are presented from most to least severe. Unsurprisingly, the most severe forms of harassment include interpersonal interactions involving, for instance, sexual bribery, personal remarks, sexual assault, and sexual touching. In contrast, the least severe types of harassment are often nonpersonal such as when sexually-based comments are made about women in general or when pornographic material is displayed. The latter behaviors, when common among employees, give rise to organizational climates that are sexually-charged, i.e., sexualized work environments (SWE, Gutek et al., 1990). While not targeting any individual in particular, SWE have nevertheless several negative impacts. First, and most importantly, SWE tend to increase both (self-reported) gender and sexualized harassment (Dekker & Barling, 1998). Second, SWE negatively affect employees' functioning and psychological well-being. For instance, environments that are sexually-charged have been shown to trigger lower job satisfaction (Salvaggio et al., 2011), increased turnover intentions (Baker, 2016), feelings of physical strains and emotional exhaustion (Bui et al., 2019), as well as increased tendencies among women to self-objectify (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2017). The relationships between SWE and employees' well-being and attitudes

have been in part explained by an increase in employees' perception that their organization dehumanizes them and the effect of SWE on organizational dehumanization is stronger when employees report lower levels of enjoyment of sexualization (Demoulin et al., 2023). Given the various negative impacts that SWE have on workers, assessing the factors that prompt workers to actively respond to these hostile environments is crucial.

Although active responses to SWE could somewhat parallel responses that are given to other forms of sexual harassment, it is also possible that they differ from it. First, because indirect, nonpersonal forms of sexual harassment are perceived as less severe, reactions to SWE should be less intense. Second, due to the indirect, nonpersonal nature of the harassment at play in SWE, specific intragroup phenomena could arise among workers that could modify the type of response they display. For instance, even if all workers might simultaneously suffer from SWE, they could all refrain from actively reacting to it or showing their discomfort due to a phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, i.e., all of them believing that others feel comfortable with SWE because none of them appears to display signs of discomfort (Miller & McFarland, 1987). Third, unlike individual forms of harassment, perpetrator confrontation might appear an irrelevant or unfeasible strategy as responsibility for the occurrence and development of SWE is shared among employees.

Finally, and despite what scientific evidence tends to show regarding their negative impact (e.g., Bui et al., 2019), variations exist in the perception of how problematic employees believe environmental forms of harassment to be (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; see also Sheppard et al., 2020). The later point is crucial because if a given situation is not perceived and qualified as harassment, it will not trigger the hostile emotions that prompt victims' active reactions to the situation (Matheson & Anisman, 2009). As we will detail in the following sections, OISH is likely to intervene in workers' perception of SWE and modify the interpretation workers make of their problematic character.

Reactions to SWE in organizations

As just detailed, while the problematic nature of individual sexual harassment is largely consensual, the extent to which SWE are perceived as harassment instances is less evident. Indeed, SWE are considered as less severe and trigger lesser consensual reactions than individual instances of sexual harassment (Rotundo et al., 2001) and, although they are deemed by many as inappropriate, hostile environments at the workplace (Schultz, 2003), variations exist as to what extent individuals personally endorse this belief (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009) or enjoy sexualization (Erchull & Liss, 2013; Liss et al., 2011).

Because of the higher variability of SWE in terms of perceived severity and consensualness, reactions to SWE should similarly vary. In particular, we propose that reactions to SWE will depend on the type of policies (loose vs. strict) that people perceive that an organization puts in place to counter sexual harassment. On the one hand, the occurrence of SWE in an organization with strict anti-harassment policies (high-OISH) might instill doubts in workers' mind about whether (or not) SWE should be considered as harassing, hostile work environments. Indeed, workers who perceive the organization as having developed strict procedures and policies against sexual harassment (high-OISH) and yet, at the same time, who consider that the work environment is highly sexualized (SWE) might develop a sense of cognitive dissonance produced by these two seemingly contradictory beliefs. As the literature suggests, a state of cognitive dissonance motivates people to act upon the dissonance in order to solve it and regain an appropriate level of psychological well-being (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). One particular way through which cognitive dissonance can be solved is by modifying one's perception that SWE are problematic and fall under the sexual harassment category. If the latter strategy is undertaken, SWE would then trigger lesser levels of hostile emotions. and, consequently, a lesser intention of active

reactions. Indeed, hostile emotions have been shown to work as catalysts for action (Frijda et al., 1989; Matheson & Anisman, 2009).

At the same time, when SWE occur in organizations with loose anti-harassment policies (low-OISH), workers might develop increased negative emotions towards these hostile environments, considering them more directly as an important form of sexual harassment that is not taken into consideration by the organization. Such hostile emotional reactions to SWE in low-OISH settings would then in turn precipitate employees' intention to act against them.

In line with the above reasoning, we hypothesized that:

Hypothesis: An organization's perceived intolerance to sexual harassment will impact people's reaction to SWE such that high-OISH will trigger lower hostile affective reactions and, hence, lower intent to respond actively to SWE than low-OISH.

Overview of the studies

We tested our hypothesis across two experimental studies. In Study 1, we had participants imagining facing a SWE under two conditions, low- versus high-OISH. We thought to examine four different types of active reactions to SWE. First, in line with the so-called EVLN model of employees' reactions to dissatisfaction (Farrell, 1983) which distinguishes four possible categories of behavioral responses, we assessed participants' intentions to voicing of their problem and to quitting their organization (also called exit), that is, we measured the two active strategies of the EVLN model[1]. The voicing strategy was assessed in several ways. Indeed, as noted by Hagedoorn and collaborators (1999), internal forms of voicing one's problem within one's organization can either take a constructive path

[1]The EVLN model (Farrell, 1983) offers insights into how employees react to dissatisfaction in the workplace. EVLN stands for Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect, representing four distinct responses. "Exit" refers to employees leaving the organization in response to their dissatisfaction, seeking employment elsewhere. "Voice" involves employees expressing their concerns, grievances, or suggestions to their employers, aiming to address the issues causing their dissatisfaction. "Loyalty" reflects the choice to remain with the organization despite dissatisfaction, often in the hope that conditions will improve. "Neglect" entails reduced commitment and performance on the part of the dissatisfied employees.

or a more destructive one. When constructive voicing is used, i.e., considerate voice, employees attempt at solving the problem while considering both their own and the organization's concerns. In contrast, destructive voicing, i.e., aggressive voice, occurs among employees that voice their dissatisfaction with no consideration for the concerns of the organization. In addition, because voicing can also sometimes be external rather than internal to the organization (Van Dyne et al. 1995), we added a measure of whistleblowing.

We tested our hypothesis while controlling for gender and individual experiences of sexual harassment. Indeed, available research has shown that gender sometimes can affect employees' reactions to SWE (Salvaggio et al., 2011, but see Baker, 2016). In addition, we felt it important to control for participants' individual experiences of sexual harassment to ensure that their response to our questionnaire would not be affected by their personal past in terms of sexual harassment.

Study 2 aimed at replicating the findings of Study 1 while addressing one shortcoming of it: the lack of a control condition. In addition, in Study 2, we also explored the possibility that the effect of OISH level on hostile emotions is driven by participants' perceptions that SWE should be (or not) considered as a form of sexual harassment. In line with what we described in our theoretical introduction, we postulate that when OISH is high, SWE would be less perceived as a form of sexual harassment than when it is low.

Both studies were fully pre-registered. Preregistrations and data are available here: https://osf.io/5gyth/?view_only=1fc5bfb1561441eca9b881ad15402fcd.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure

As specified in our preregistration, we restricted our sample to participants who would explicitly report that their workplace is not tinged with sexual aspects. Using G-power, we

computed our sample size for a design with two conditions, a power of .80, and alpha of .05, and a medium size effect. This led us to an estimation of 128 participants. Expecting some drops (failing attentional check questions), we pre-registered an initial sample size of 140 participants. Participants were recruited on the Prolific platform and prescreened for employment (full-time and part-time employees), nationality (USA and UK), language (English), and approval rate on the plateforme (90-100%). After a first data collection of 140 participants, an insufficient number of 90 participants was considered as usable according to the criteria set in our pre-registration (i.e., not working in a SWE and not falling for attentional check). We thus decided to collect an additional 110 participants. This additional data collection took place before the computation of any analyses relating to our hypothesis. Out of this final sample, 146 observations were usable (7 questionnaires were omitted because they were incomplete, 10 because respondents failed an attentional check question, 1 because the respondent admitted they did not answer honestly, 44 because participants reported working in a SWE, and 47 because participants failed the manipulation check[2]). Of these 146 participants, 62.3% were women and 37.7% men. Their mean age was 39.69 years (*SD*=10.94). Most participants held a bachelor's degree (39.7%).

Participants were first randomly presented with one out of two experimental conditions. In the tolerance for sexual harassment condition (i.e. low-OISH, *N*= 73), participants read that the company for which they supposedly work for 10 years had a policy towards sexual harassment that "*investigates harassment complaints when true coercion was used to force people into sexual behaviors in exchange for rewards or promotions, and*

[2] Although admittedly the number of participants who failed the manipulation check was high, we reasoned that this might have been the case because, in the manipulation check participants had to decide whether their supposed organization had a strict or a loose policy toward sexual harassment. Because the scenarios did not specifically refer to "strict" or "loose" environments but to the way complains about sexual harassment were processed and because perceptions of what constitutes a "strict" and a "loose" organizational environment is subject to interpretation, the way we designed our manipulation check might have inflated the number of participants who incorrectly responded. Nevertheless, as a robustness check, we conducted the analyses a second time with these participants included. Results (available upon request) did not show any substantial difference.

punishes harassment behaviors when victims can prove they have been truly discriminated against." That is, in the low-OISH condition, the organizational policy against sexual harassment was loose and complaints were only investigated when strong suspicions exist. In contrast, in the high-OISH condition (N = 73), participants read that their company "*has a policy of total intolerance towards sexual harassment. That is to say, your organization investigates harassment complaints no matter who does the harassment, what type of harassment it is, and who makes the complaint*." That is, in this organization, the organizational policy against sexual harassment was strict and all complaints taken seriously.

Having stressed the overall organizational context, participants were then provided more information regarding their specific work context. In particular, it was specified to all participants that "*the work atmosphere at your company is tinged with sexually-related aspects. That is, employees often tell sexual jokes, discuss on personal matters and on people's physical appearance, body or sexual activities. That is, the general work environment is quite sexualized*".

In both experimental conditions, participants were asked to take some time to project themselves in the imaginary situation before answering the variables of interest.

Measures

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree). Each measure was presented on a separate screen and items were randomly presented within each scale.

Hostile emotions. Hostile emotions were measured using the full hostile subscale of the PANAS-X (Watson & Clark, 1994). Participants were asked to report whether they would feel "hostile", "irritable", "angry", "scornful", "disgusted", and "loathing".

Aggressive voice. The 7 items of Hagedoorn et al. (1999) were used to assess the extent to which participants intended to aggressively voice the problem. A sample item is "I would describe the problem as negatively as possible to my supervisor".

Considerate voice. We used the 11 items of considerate voice developed by Hagedoorn et al. (1999). A sample item is "I would try to think of different solutions to the problem".

Whistleblowing. Participants indicated to what extent they would blow the whistle to external authorities about SWE by rating the three items of external whistleblowing of Nayir and Herzig (2012). A sample item is "I would report the wrongdoing to the appropriate authorities outside of the workplace".

Intention to quit. Participants' turnover intentions were assessed with Jaros' (1997) 3-item scale. A sample item is "I would often think about quitting this organization".

Individual Sexual Harassment. Individual sexual harassment was assessed using seven items. We used Shaffer's and her collaborators (2000) unwanted sexual attention subscale with the exception of one item that was dropped as it captures sexism rather than sexual harassment (i.e., I am frequently made sexist remarks [e.g., suggesting that women are too emotional to be scientists or to assume leadership roles, or men are too disorganized to do secretarial work?]) (see Demoulin et al., 2023 for the same argument). A sample item is "I am stared at, leered at, or ogled in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable".

Manipulation Check. At the end of the study, participants were asked to choose between three possibilities regarding the anti-harassment policies implemented in the fictitious organization (i.e., strict vs. loose vs. inexistent policy).

Results

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics, correlations among the variables included in the analyses as well as all Cronbach alphas. While gender was correlated with all of our

dependent variables but considerate voice, individual sexual harassment showed weak relationships.

As a first step, we examined mean differences across conditions on all our dependent variables (Hostile emotions, Considerate voice, Whistleblowing, Aggressive voice, and Intention to quit) with a series of between-subject ANOVAs. Controlling for Gender and HIS, results show a small effect of Condition on Considerate voice ($\eta_p^2 = .01$) and Whislteblowing ($\eta_p^2 = .05$) and a medium effect on all other variables ($.06 < \eta_p^2 < .10$) . As can be seen in Table 1, participants in the low-OISH condition reacted with more hostile emotions to SWE and intended to show more active responses to them than those in the high-OISH one.

We then computed regression analyses on our dependent variables to test our model of mediation. All analyses are reported in Table 2. As can be seen in the table, results were fully in line with our mediation hypothesis. That is, the effect of OISH on all our dependent variables was reduced when participants' Hostile emotions were entered in the model. This mediation indicates that, controlling for gender and individual levels of sexual harassment, responses to SWE varied as a function of OISH such that hostile emotions were less likely when the organization was presented as intolerant to harassment than when it was presented as tolerant. In turn, the less hostile emotions felt led employees to report lesser intentions to engage in active behaviors.

Discussion

Results of our first study confirms our hypothesis that when SWE occur in an organization that is highly intolerant to sexual harassment, workers experience lower levels of hostile emotions and, hence, intent to respond less proactively than when they occur in organizations with loose anti-harassment policies. This result underlines that, contrary to what happens for individual forms of sexual harassment (Gruber & Smith, 1995), strict OISH might

lead to less active reactions in the face of SWE. Importantly, this finding holds while controlling for gender and for participants' individual level of sexual harassment experience.

Study 2

Despite its various merits, one important shortcoming of Study 1 is the lack of a control condition in the manipulation of OISH. Study 2 was specifically designed to address this limitation. We preregistered the hypothesis that it is the high-OISH that would trigger a reduction of hostile emotions and intention to react actively compared to a baseline because the co-occurrence of a sexualized environment within organization with strict anti-harassment policies would lead workers to reevaluate the situation as less problematic and to qualify it less as an instance of sexual harassment.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Using G-power, we computed our sample size for a design with three conditions and one covariate, a power of .80, and alpha of .05, and a medium size effect. This led us to an estimation of 156 participants. Expecting some drops (failing the attentional check question and people reporting to work in a SWE), we pre-registered an initial sample size of 210 participants (70 in each condition). As in the preceding study, participants were recruited on Prolific and prescreened for nationality, employment status, and language. They were also asked to report whether their real workplace environment was sexualized. As in the first experiment, we retained only those whose work environment is not tinged with sexuality-related aspects. After a first data collection of 210 participants, an insufficient number of 141 participants was considered as usable (i.e., not working in a SWE and not falling for attentional check). We thus decided to collect and additional 100 participants. This additional data collection took place before the computation of any analyses relating to our hypothesis. Out of this final sample (N=316; 99 (48.5%) males, 103 (50.5%) females, 2 (1%) missing),

204 (*N*s= 66, 75, & 63, for the low-OISH, control, high-OISH conditions respectively) observations were usable (6 questionnaires were incomplete, 8 were omitted due to failing attentional check questions, 66 were omitted due to participants reporting effectively working in a SWE, and 32 observations were deleted because they failed the manipulation check question[3]).

Participants were asked to imagine working in a SWE and presented with one out of three experimental conditions (random assignment). The high- and low-OISH conditions were exactly the same as the ones in Study 1. In the control condition, no information was provided to participants regarding the sexual harassment policies at play in the fictive organization.

Measures

All measures were exactly the same as the ones used in Study 1. Again, as in the previous study, we added a manipulation check. At the end of the study, participants were asked to choose between three possibilities regarding the anti-harassment policies implemented in the fictitious organization (i.e., strict vs. loose vs. I don't know or do not remember). In addition, we also measured participants' perceptions that SWE should be considered as a form of sexual harassment.

Perception of harassment. Two items were developed for the purpose of the present study ("I consider that sexualized work environments are a form of sexual harassment" & "To me sexualized work environments should simply not be tolerated").

Results

Table 3 displays the descriptive statistics, correlations among the variables included in the analyses as well as all Cronbach alphas. As can be seen, gender positively correlated with hostile emotions, whistleblowing, and intention to quit. Our measure of individual sexual harassment (i.e., unwanted sexual attention) only moderately correlated with aggressive voice.

[3] As in Study 1, the high number of failed manipulation check might be due to the overall subjectivity of what constitute a "strict" or a "loose" policy. Again, analyses including these participants (available upon request) did not show any substantial difference in results.

As a first step, we examined mean differences across conditions on all our dependent variables (Hostile emotions, Considerate voice, Whistleblowing, Aggressive voice, and Intention to quit) with a series of between-subject ANOVAs. Controlling for Gender and HIS, results show a medium effect size of Condition on all variables except for Hostile emotions with a small effect size of .05 and Considerate voice with an effect size lower than .01. As can be seen in the descriptives reported in Table 3 and contrary to our initial hypothesis, overall means in high-OISH condition were very similar to those of baseline except on Intention to quit for which the mean of baseline was higher. In addition, the low-OISH condition appeared to always differ from both baseline and high-OISH except on Considerate voice reflecting the absence of effect on this measure.

As the mean difference analyses disconfirm our hypothesis that it is especially the high-OISH condition that differs from the other two, we opted for not computing the preregistered mediation model but a model that aims at replicating the findings of the a priori hypothesis tested in Study 1. That is, we created two contrast codes. C1 (1=high-OISH, 0=control, -1=low-OISH) is designed to assess the difference between the low- and the high-OISH conditions. C2 (-1=high-OISH, 2=control, -1=low-OISH) was orthogonal to C1 and entered as a covariate in our analyses. We first computed regression analyses on our dependent variables before using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Model 4; 5,000 bootstrap resamples; Hayes, 2013) to test our model of mediation. All analyses are reported in Table 4. Replicating what was obtained in Study 1, and as can be seen in the table, results were fully in line with our hypothesis showing that, except for Considerate voice, the effect of OISH on all other dependent variables was reduced when participants' Hostile emotions were entered in the model. That is, controlling for gender and individual levels of sexual harassment, responses to SWE varied as a function of OISH such that hostile emotions were less likely when the organization was presented as intolerant to harassment than when it was presented

as tolerant. Furthermore, the lesser hostile emotions felt led workers to intend responding less actively to SWE at higher levels of OISH than at lower ones.

Finally, we also assessed whether participants' perception of SWE as a form of sexual harassment would vary as a function of condition. Indeed, consistent with the cognitive dissonance explanation developed in the introduction, we reasoned that the different levels of hostile emotions experienced by participants in the low- and high-OISH conditions could be triggered by variations in their perception that SWE are problematic and should be considered as a form of sexual harassment. Indeed, as reflected in Table 3, participants perceived SWE more as a form of sexual harassment in the low-OISH condition than in the high-OISH one with baseline falling in between (partial Eta^2= .04). Thus, in contrast to those who imagine working in an organization with loose policies against sexual harassment, workers who anticipate an organization with strict policies apprehend the sexualization of their work environment as less of a form of sexual harassment.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 replicate the findings of Study 1. While those facing an organization with strict policies towards sexual harassment see their hostile emotions and their active reactions towards SWE decrease, those who face an organization with loose policies experience higher levels of hostile emotions and higher intention to act against SWE. As was the case in Study 1, the size of the effect of our manipulation on Considerate voice was much less important than for other variables.

In addition, results suggest that SWE are perceived as less of a problem when they occur in a work environment in which strict procedure and policies exist to prevent and punish sexual harassment.

General Discussion

While research examining victims' reactions to individual instances of sexual harassment abounds, much less is known on victim's reactions to more environmental forms of it and, in particular, on their reactions to SWE. The two studies reported in the present paper were designed to address this important question by examining the extent to which the type of organizational policies (loose vs. strict) that aims at condemning sexual harassment at the workplace influences employees' emotional reactions to SWE as well as their intention to actively react to it. Using an experimental methodology, we consistently showed across studies that when working in organizations that firmly rather than loosely condemn sexual harassment, employees experience reduced levels of hostile emotions and, as a consequence, report lesser intention to use active strategies against SWE.

Results of the present research which examines workers' reactions to SWE contrast to what is obtained in studies that have assessed the role of OISH on workers' responses to individual forms of sexual harassment. Indeed, previous studies had pointed to the beneficial effects of the implementation of strict procedures and policies against sexual harassment in organizations as they increase active responses to harassment such as reporting (Gruber & Smtih, 1995). This opposite pattern of results found between reactions to environmental and individual forms of harassment underlines the fact that responses to sexual harassment vary depending on the form it takes and that one should refrain from generalizing findings from one type of harassment to the other. As a result, the current findings should alert managers about the potential paradoxical effects of the implementation of anti-sexual harassment policies. Indeed, although such policies might effectively reduce individual harassment or enable voicing earlier in its experience, they can also reduce employees' propensity to act against environmental harassment. The latter possibility is problematic given the numerous studies that have underlined the deleterious effects of environmental sexual harassment (e.g., Glomb et al., 1997), in general, and of SWE, in particular (Demoulin et al., 2023).

It is important to note that Study 2 failed to confirm our hypothesis that it is specifically those that work in an organization with high-OISH that differ from baseline. Indeed, low- rather than high-OISH are the ones that differ the most from baseline. Yet, in this study, baseline was operationalized as a condition in which no information whatsoever was provided to participants as to what extent their fictious organization was loosely or strictly intolerant to sexual harassment. As such, we do not know what participants in the baseline condition had in mind while answering to our questionnaire. Future research should thus examine more closely whether the difference between workers' reactions to loose and strict anti-harassment policies are due specifically to a reduction in high-OISH participants' hostile emotions, as we hypothesized, or to an increase among low-OISH participants as our data seems to suggest.

Limitations and Future Research

As interesting as they are, our studies are not without some limitations. First, in our experimental studies, we chose to focus on participants that have reported to not encounter SWE at their workplace but because of the self-ascription procedure, we have no guarantee that this is in fact the case. Indeed, variations exist as to what extent a given environment should be labelled as sexualized or not (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2020). Thus, it is therefore possible that the two SWE categories encompass participants that in fact face similar levels of SWE at their workplace. In addition, past research has evidenced the gap that exist between those that face sexual harassment in their real life and those who just merely imagine being confronted to it (Perry et al., 1997). Concretely, those who merely imagine themselves facing a situation of sexual harassment often tend to overestimate the extent to which they would react to the problematic situation. In their publication, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2001) showed for example that while a majority of imaginers thought they would confront a sexist interviewer, no one actually challenged the harassing interviewer

among those who experienced the situation. In addition, while imaginers thought they would experience strong feelings of anger and almost no fear, experiencers in fact reported feeling much more fear than anger (see also Morton et al., 2023). It would thus be crucial, in future studies to assess whether what people imagine they would do and their behavioral intentions actually translate into real, concrete behaviors while encountering SWE in their real workplace environment. Nevertheless, even if future research was to show that behavioral intentions of imaginers do not always translate into actual behaviors among experiencers, the present study would still significantly contribute to the literature by showing that an organization's level of OISH influences workers' perceptions of how much workers consider SWE as a form of sexual harassment and their emotional reactions to it.

A second limitation is that the underlying mechanism explaining the relationship between our independent variable and hostile emotions, i.e., participants' differential perception of SWE as a form of sexual harassment, was only tested exploratively. In the introduction, we indeed theorized that the experience of hostile emotions is dependent on the extent to which the situation is deemed problematic and high- and low-OISH participants would consider the problematic character of SWE differently, a difference of perception that was corroborated in our results. This finding is consistent with research that has evidenced the importance of severity perceptions in the determination of reactions to sexual harassment (e.g., Baker et al., 1990). Future research would nevertheless be needed in order to replicate this preliminary finding. In sum, more research is needed to better understand the explanatory mechanisms that drive the effects of any given combination of SWE and OISH on employees' emotions and subsequent actions.

Third, we chose to focus our studies on active behavioral intentions. Theoretical models on coping propose that, on top of active strategies, individuals also have at their disposal coping strategies that are more passive such as neglect (e.g., reporting sick, come in

late to work, etc.) and patience (e.g., wait for better times, trust the organization will take care of the problem, etc.) (Hagedoorn et al., 1999). At this stage it is unclear how a combination of SWE with high- and low-OISH would affect passive strategies and behavioral intentions.

Fourth, the present findings should not at this stage be generalized to work environments in which sexualization is a known and expected part of the job (e.g., hooters). Indeed, in such environments, differential perceptions in the harassing character of SWE are less likely to occur because deemed as less relevant. Indeed, it is most probable that what people in the sex industry consider as SWE and, as a matter of fact, sexual harassment importantly differs from what employees working in more traditional work settings envision. As a matter of fact, even among employees in traditional settings, characteristics of SWE could vary (e.g., flirting, joking, displaying sexualized materials, etc.). Future research would therefore be needed in order to specify whether different kinds of SWE would be reacted to differently by employees.

Fifth, the self-reported methodology used here makes our research sensitive to the common method bias. To limit its influence, we followed suggestions made by Podsakoff and colleagues (2012): ensuring participants anonymity; allowing them to stop the study at any time; stating that there were no wrong or right answer and that their sole opinion mattered; and counterbalancing items of each scale. Nevertheless, future studies might be needed to overcome this limitation using alternative measures.

Finally, the present research is silent on the potential variables that could modulate the obtained effects. For instance, research has shown that variation exists as to what extent individuals appreciate or enjoy sexualization (Erschull & Liss, 2013; Liss et al., 2011) and such individual factor affects the impact of SWE on employees' psychological wellbeing and attitudes (Demoulin et al., 2023). Taking individuals' level of enjoyment of sexualization in future studies should therefore be considered as it might buffer the impact of SWE on hostile

emotions and, hence their consequences, even when the organization is highly tolerant to sexual harassment.

Implications

If our findings point to the importance for policy makers to be cautious in the type of anti-harassment policies they implement, they should not be interpreted as an argument is disfavor of the implementation of strict anti-harassment policies. For leaders, this highlights the importance of not merely implementing anti-harassment policies but also ensuring these policies are coupled with a deeply ingrained organizational culture that raises awareness about the issues of workplace sexualization and its impacts. Achieving this objective can be done in several ways.

Firstly, anti-harassment policies should be designed to target both individual and environmental forms of harassment, such as SWE. All too often, anti-harassment policies only refer to the most problematic forms of harassment, such as sexual bribery, personal remarks, sexual assault and sexual touching, and fail to specify that non-personal forms of hostile behaviour are also considered to be forms of harassment that organizations condemn. Explicitly including environmental forms of harassment in policies should reduce perceptual variations in employees' assessment of their degree of inappropriateness. In other words, by defining clearly what sexual harassment is and listing all the forms it can take, the problematic and harassing character of SWE should no longer be questioned by employees as is the case in the present studies.

Secondly, it is also laudable to improve training and education on appropriate workplace behaviour and the consequences of sexualizing the workplace. In other words, workers need to be better informed about the pitfalls of the sexualisation of the workplace in terms of well-being and attitudes at work (Bui et al., 2019; Demoulin et al., 2023; Salvaggio et al., 2011) and encouraged to co-create a working climate free of negative individual or

interpersonal consequences. In particular, workers should be urged to react actively to environmental harassment rather than passively accepting it, since one of the specific features of this type of harassment is that, unlike personal forms, many employees are aware of it and can take steps to stop it or prevent it from developing (Bowes-Sperry & O'Leary-Kelly, 2005; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2000).

Aside from these informational and educational concerns, managers must also be vigilant and proactive in detecting and addressing inappropriate behaviors, even when policies appear deterrent, to prevent complacency or minimization of incidents. Indeed promptness in reaction to harassment is considered as an important component of best practices in dealing with workplace harassment (Becton et al., 2017)

Conclusion

Across two studies, we have seen that reactions to SWE depend on the extent to which employees' organization is perceived as intolerant to sexual harassment. Our results underline the importance of cautiously designing organizational policies against sexual harassment so that they encompass all possible forms of sexual harassment, including environmental ones thereby preventing the occurrence of paradoxical, deleterious effects on employees. More generally, and as detailed in the introduction, processes at play in environmental forms of harassment might fundamentally differ from individual harassment due to the collective aspect of the former. Future research should thus be conducted that specifically address the differential impact of individual and environmental forms of sexual harassment.

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Table 1

Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Variables

	Low OISH	High OISH	Partial Eta-Square							
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. Gender	1.67 (.47)	1.58 (.50)	-	(--)						
2. ISH	1.37 (.61)	1.55 (.87)	-	.04	(.91)					
3. Hostile emotions	5.30 (1.37)	4.23 (1.67)	.10	.30	-.05	(.96)				
4. Considerate voice	4.86 (1.37)	4.41 (1.38)	.02	.07	-.08	.53	(.95)			
5. Whistleblowing	4.16 (1.69)	3.40 (1.68)	.05	.22	.05	.65	.55	(.92)		
6. Aggressive voice	4.24 (1.24)	3.51 (1.11)	.08	.18	-.01	.66	.70	.67	(.85)	
7. Intention to quit	5.75 (1.44)	4.90 (1.75)	.06	.27	-.05	.70	.34	.55	.59	(.97)

Note. *N*=146. Reliability alpha values are on the diagonal. Gender was coded 1 for *male* and 2 for *female*. SWE was coded -0.5 for "no" and 0.5 for "yes". ISH = Individual Sexual Harassment; OISH = Organizational Intolerance to Sexual Harassment. Partial Eta-Square are computed on the main dependent variables while controlling for Gender and ISH.

Table 2

Study 1: Mediation Effects of Organization Intolerance toward Sexual Harassment on Outcomes via Hostile Emotions.

	Hostile emotions			Considerate voice			Whistleblowing			Aggressive voice			Intention to quit		
Direct effects	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Gender	1.01	.26	.30	.20	.24	.07	.79	.29	.22	.44	.21	.18	.90	.27	.27
Gender	1.02	.26	.31	.20	.24	.07	.79	.29	.22	.45	.21	.18	.91	.27	.27
ISH	-.14	.17	-.07	-.15	.15	-.08	.10	.19	.04	-.02	.13	-.01	-.13	.18	-.06
Gender	.91	.25	.27	.16	.24	.06	.71	.28	.20	.37	.20	.15	.83	.27	.24
ISH	-.06	.16	-.03	-.11	.15	-.06	.16	.18	.07	.04	.13	.02	-.06	.17	-.03
Condition	-.49	.12	-.30	-.21	.12	-.15	-.36	.14	-.21	-.35	.10	-.29	-.38	.13	-.23
Gender	--	--		-.28	.21	-.10	.08	.24	.02	-.08	.17	-.03	.21	.21	.06
ISH	--	--		-.09	.13	-.05	.20	.15	.09	.07	.10	.04	-.02	.13	-.01
Condition	--	--		.03	.10	.02	-.03	.12	-.02	-.11	.08	-.09	-.05	.11	-.03
Hostile emotions	--	--		.48	.07	.56	.69	.07	.64	.49	.05	.64	.68	.07	.67
Indirect effect				-.23 [-.39; -.11]			-.34 [-.51; -.16]			-.24 [-.37; -.11]			-.33 [-.51; -.16]		

Note. $N = 146$. Condition (1= high-OISH; -1=low-OISH). ISH = Individual Sexual Harassment.

Table 3

Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Variables.

	Low OISH	Control	High OISH								
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Gender	1.52 (.50)	1.53(.50)	1.47 (.50)	(--)							
2. ISH	1.50 (.69)	1.50 (.80)	1.62 (.83)	.03	(.88)						
3. Hostile emotions	5.13 (1.31)	4.41 (1.49)	4.45 (1.43)	.22	-.00	(.96)					
4. Considerate voice	4.72 (1.12)	4.54 (1.53)	4.77 (1.19)	.10	.03	.46	(.95)				
5. Whistleblowing	4.32 (1.52)	3.45 (1.61)	3.19 (1.54)	.20	.11	.58	.47	(.93)			
6. Aggressive voice	4.31 (.92)	3.70 (1.25)	3.75 (1.12)	.14	.16	.63	.60	.68	(.86)		
7. Intention to quit	5.88 (1.21)	5.16 (1.59)	4.66 (1.70)	.26	.05	.71	.33	.64	.57	(.97)	
8. Perception of harassment	2.33 (.63)	2.21 (.54)	2.03 (.60)	.10	.05	.44	.30	.34	.38	.48	(.73)

Note. *N*=204 (except for gender, *N* = 202. Reliability alpha values are on the diagonal. Gender was coded 1 for *male* and 2 for *female*. SWE was coded -0.5 for “no” and 0.5 for “yes”. ISH = Individual Sexual Harassment; OISH = Organizational Intolerance to Sexual Harassment.

Table 4

Study 2: Mediation Effects of Organization Intolerance toward Sexual Harassment on Outcomes via Hostile Emotions

	Hostile emotions			Considerate voice			Whistleblowing			Aggressive voice			Intention to quit		
Direct effects	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Gender	.52	.18	.19	.13	.17	.06	.55	.21	.18	.23	.15	.11	.75	.20	.25
Gender	.52	.19	.19	.14	.17	.06	.57	.21	.19	.25	.15	.12	.76	.20	.26
ISH	.01	.13	.01	.06	.12	.04	.25	.14	.12	.25	.10	.17	.13	.14	.07
Gender	.51	.18	.19	.14	.17	.06	.55	.20	.18	.24	.14	.11	.73	.19	.25
ISH	.02	.13	.01	.05	.12	.03	.28	.14	.13	.26	.10	.18	.17	.13	.08
C1	-.33	.12	-.18	.02	.12	.01	-.57	.13	-.28	-.29	.10	-.20	-.61	.13	-.31
C2	-.13	.07	-.13	-.07	.06	-.08	-.10	.07	-.09	-.10	.05	-.13	-.03	.07	_ ;03
Gender	--	--	--	.00	.17	-.03	.25	.24	.08	.02	.13	-.00	.34	.16	.12
ISH	--	--	--	.04	.11	.03	.27	.15	.13	.25	.08	;17	.16	.10	.07
C1	--	--	--	.17	.10	.10	-.37	.12	-.18	-.12	.08	-.09	-.36	.10	-.19
C2				-.02	.06	-.01	-.02	.06	-.02	-.04	.04	-.05	.06	.05	.05
Hostile emotions	--	--	--	.42	.06	.48	.60	.07	.53	.47	.04	.60	.72	.05	.65
Indirect effect				-.14 [-.25; -.04]			-.19 [-.34; -.05]			-.15 [-.28; -.04]			-.23 [-.42; -.06]		

Note. *N* = 204. C1 (1=high-OISH, 0=control, -1=low-OISH). C2 (-1=high-OISH, 2=control, -1=low-OISH). ISH = Individual Sexual Harassment.