

IN PRESS IN *JOURNAL OF APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*

<https://10.1111/jasp.12992>

Perceived sexualization of the work environment's influence on well-being, attitudes and behaviors: The roles of organizational dehumanization and enjoyment of sexualization

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We have no known conflict of interest to disclose. This work was supported by ARC under grant n°16/20-071 of the French Community of Belgium awarded to the first and the last author. All authors contributed to the study conception and design including material preparation, data collection and analysis. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Stephanie Demoulin and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. The research program was approved by the Psychological Ethical Committee of the Université catholique de Louvain (Projet2020-51) and both studies included an informed consent. Data are available upon request.

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Abstract

The present research investigates whether employees' perceptions of being dehumanized by their organization act as an underlying mechanism in the relationship between sexualized work environments (SWE) and their detrimental consequences. The research also examines the moderating role of enjoyment of sexualization in the relationship between SWE and organizational dehumanization. First, a cross-sectional study ($N = 350$) showed that SWE positively relate to organizational dehumanization which, in turn, negatively affects employees' well-being (i.e., increased emotional exhaustion, increased psychological strains), attitudes (i.e., decreased job satisfaction) and behaviors at work (i.e., increased turnover intentions). A second study ($N = 433$) replicated these findings and further revealed the moderating role of employees' enjoyment of sexualization. Specifically, the relationship between SWE and organizational dehumanization proved to be stronger at lower levels of enjoyment of sexualization. Finally, additional exploratory analyses highlighted that the moderating role of enjoyment of sexualization was not conditional upon employees' gender. Theoretical contributions and promising avenues for future research as well as are discussed.

Keywords: sexualized work environments, organizational dehumanization, employees' well-being, employees' attitudes and behaviors at work, enjoyment of sexualization, sexual harassment

Perceived sexualization of the work environment's influence on well-being, attitudes and behaviors: The roles of organizational dehumanization and enjoyment of sexualization

Sexual harmful experiences at work are numerous and have shown to negatively affect individuals' well-being, life quality, and behaviors (Sojo et al., 2016). The vast literature on this topic has so far largely concentrated on employees' individual experiences of sexual harassment (e.g., sexual coercion and unwanted sexual attention). Much less is known regarding the impact of sexual harmful experiences when they occur at the environmental rather than individual level. The few empirical investigations conducted in this domain have focused on sexualized work environments (SWE; Gutek et al., 1990) and have shown that such hostile environments affect various aspects of employees' functioning, like their job satisfaction, their turnover intentions or their emotional exhaustion (Baker, 2016). What is less clear is via which mechanism SWE play their influence.

In the present paper, we propose that SWE are related to employees' dehumanization perceptions, i.e., the perception of not being treated as a full human being by their organization, which in turn negatively affects their well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work. In testing our hypothesis, we controlled for related harmful experiences (i.e., individual sexual harassment and sexism). On top of assessing the indirect effect of SWE on their (negative) outcomes via dehumanization perceptions, we also examine whether these effects should be particularly strong for individuals with low levels of enjoyment of sexualization and whether they depend on employees' gender (see Figure 1 for the theoretical model).

Environmental harmful sexual experiences at work

Harmful sexual experiences at work can occur either at the individual or at the environmental level (Sojo et al., 2016). While the individual level refers to instances in which specific individuals are the targets of harmful behaviors and attitudes during interpersonal encounters (e.g., being the target of unwanted sexual attention), environmental harmful

experiences refer to the generalized attitudes and behaviors that are at play within the organization. When overwhelming, the latter experiences give rise to an environmental form of sexual harassment, also named hostile environment sexual harassment (Cortina & Areguin, 2021).

Environmental harmful sexual experiences can take one of two forms. First, the work by Glomb and colleagues (1997) describes *ambient sexual harassment* as the frequency of sexually harassing behaviors experienced by colleagues in an employee's work group (see also the concept of bystander stress, Schneider, 1996). Second, a somewhat different way of conceptualizing harmful sexual experiences at the environmental level, which is the focus of the present paper, is by considering the extent to which the workplace is perceived as (overly) sexualized. Characteristics that are typical of such *sexualized work environments* (SWE) included the use of public sexual humor, comments and innuendoes, the disclosure of personal sexual information, the presence of discussions around sexual matters, and the display of suggestive materials (Gutek, 1985; Gutek et al., 1990; Philaretou & Young, 2007). While gender differences in perceptions have been reported (Gutek et al., 1990), sexualization of the workplace seems more probable when contact between gender is high rather than low (Bui et al., 2019). In addition, SWE are also more prevalent in flexible work contexts that combine remote working and co-located working presumably because employees' attire and behaviors are less constrained when they are removed from the typical office environment (Bui et al., 2019).

Although sexual behaviors at work are sometimes welcomed and may serve effective functions (Aquino et al., 2014; Sheppard et al., 2020), they negatively affect employees when they pervade the workplace. For instance, Salvaggio et al. (2011) observed that SWE decrease job satisfaction (see also Burke & McKeen, 1992) and increase turnover intentions, in particular among female employees. The effect of SWE on turnover intentions was replicated

by Baker (2016) although, in her study, gender of participants failed to moderate it. Higher exposure to sexual behaviors is also linked to employees' feelings of physical strains and increases their emotional exhaustion (Bui et al., 2019). Finally, SWE increase women's tendencies to self-objectify as a result of their increased internalization of thin ideals (Szymanski & Feltman, 2015; Szymanski & Mikorski, 2017).

The various deleterious effects of SWE on employees' functioning and psychological well-being support the claim of many that frequent sexual workplace experiences of low intensity are very detrimental to employees (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Sojo et al., 2016). Yet, scientific research in the domain of SWE is still scarce. In particular, a claim has been made regarding the need to identify the mediating factors in the association between SWE and their negative outcomes (Baker, 2016). In the present paper, we suggest that organizational dehumanization might play such a role.

SWE and Organizational Dehumanization

Organizational dehumanization (OD) is defined as employees' experience that their organization objectifies them, denies their personal subjectivity and makes them feel as tools or instruments for its own ends (Bell & Khoury, 2011, 2016; Caesens et al., 2017). OD has lately attracted a lot of scientific attention because of its many deleterious consequences (for a recent review, see Brison et al., 2022). Specifically, research has shown that high levels of OD are related to lower levels of employee well-being (e.g., emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, stress, and negative emotions; e.g., Caesens & Stinglhamber, 2019; Demoulin et al., 2021; Sarwar et al., 2021; Stinglhamber et al., 2021). OD has also been shown to negatively influence employees' attitudes toward their organization and their work (e.g., reduced affective commitment and job satisfaction, Caesens et al., 2019). Finally, OD impedes organizational functioning by affecting employees' behavioral intentions as well as their actual behaviors at work (e.g., more turnover intentions, Taskin et al., 2019).

The second reason accounting for the recent interest of scholars in OD relates to its key role in explaining the effects of various antecedents on employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors. Of particular importance for the present work, Stinglhamber and collaborators (2022) observed that, in correctional contexts, OD mediates the relationship of four work environment factors (organizational justice, appropriateness of material resources, quality of the physical environment, and perceived organizational support compared to that of inmates) on job satisfaction. In other words, research shows that negative experiences of hostile work environments are strong predictors of the emergence of OD.

As defined earlier, SWE can also be considered as a form of hostile organizational environment. As a matter of fact, SWE represent an environmental maltreatment that pervades the organization as a whole and for which no specific perpetrator can be pointed at. By letting its members to perpetrate SWE, the organization is held responsible for the acts of its members. This is part of a process that Levinson (1965) called "personification" of the organization (see also Ashforth et al.'s (2020) recent work on the "anthropomorphism" of the organization). Levinson (1965) indeed noted that (un)favorable actions taken by agents or members of the organization are often viewed as indications of the organization's (un)favorable intent, rather than being attributed solely to agents' personal motives. Because, as just detailed, the organization is held responsible for the hostile work environment triggered by SWE, we postulate that they should positively relate to employees' feelings of OD.

It is important to note that, in the present research, we focused on a non-sexualized form of dehumanization feelings (i.e., OD). Yet dehumanization has also been evidenced in the sexual domain via the concept of sexual objectification, i.e., the feeling of being treated as an object for the satisfaction of other people's sexual desires (Nussbaum, 1995). We opted for OD rather than sexual objectification for two reasons. First, sexual objectification implies that

the target person is utilized to satisfy the agent's sexual desires. In the case of SWE, employees are not personally targeted and agents are not identifiable. As such, we deemed it unlikely that employees would develop feelings of sexual objectification. Second, we were particularly interested in work outcomes unrelated to workers' sexuality, such as employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work, which are obviously better predicted by an organizational variable than by a sexual one.

Thus, building on prior research evidence showing the prevalent role of OD as an explanatory mechanism between employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work, on the one hand, and environmental antecedents, on the other (e.g., Caesens et al., 2019; Caesens et al., 2017; Stinglhamber et al., 2022; Taskin et al., 2019), we thus hypothesized that OD would mediate the relationship between employees' perception that they evolve in a sexualized work environment and various negative outcomes. Specifically, we examine OD's mediating role on four variables that have received important attention in the literature on SWE, that is, emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. We opted for assessing the role of the SWE-OD link on these four outcomes because these represent well-known consequences of OD pertaining to its three broad categories of outcomes, i.e., well-being, attitudes, and behaviors (Brison et al., 2022).

Importantly, we investigate the relationships between SWE, OD and the outcomes while controlling for individual sexual harassment in order to ensure that effects are not attributable to personal experiences of sexual harassment (for a similar procedure, see Sheppard et al., 2020). We also control for non-sexual harmful experiences, namely employees' perception of a sexist organizational climate, in order to ensure that the effects are not attributable to overall negative environmental experiences.

Hypothesis 1: When controlling for individual sexual harassment and sexist climate, OD mediates the relationships between SWE and (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) psychological strains, (c) job satisfaction and (c) turnover intentions.

Although Hypothesis 1 postulates a general relationship between SWE and employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work via OD, it is likely that interindividual differences exist as to what extent employees consider SWE to be problematic. In particular, we argue that enjoyment of sexualization (ES) is an individual difference variable that may shape employees' perceptions of SWE. ES occurs when people "find appearance-based sexual attention [...] to be positive and rewarding" (Liss et al., 2011). Empirical evidence exists about the positive effects of ES on psychological functioning. For instance, ES is positively related to self-esteem (Liss et al., 2011; Visser et al., 2014), feelings of empowerment (Erchull & Liss, 2013), and sexual esteem (Barnett et al., 2018). ES was also found to moderate the impact of mild forms of objectification experiences (e.g., being stared at) on self-esteem, with positive effects on self-esteem for those with higher levels of ES.

More in relation with the organizational context, research has shown that reactions to sexual behaviors taking place at work might depend on the extent to which these behaviors are enjoyed by their recipients. Sheppard and collaborators (2020) have for instance shown a stress-relieving effect of flirtation (cross-gender phenomenon), via the accumulation of psychosocial resources that flirtation entails, but only among those that experienced positively such flirtation behaviors. In their studies, Sheppard et al. (2020) operationalized enjoyment at the contextual level (i.e., by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they enjoyed past experiences of sexual behaviors at the workplace) and considered direct forms of sexual behaviors (behaviors that directly aimed the target participant). Nevertheless, based on these preliminary findings, it is reasonable to postulate that the relationship between SWE and employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work via an increased OD would depend on

the extent to which they enjoy sexualization more broadly. That is, those with high levels of ES might face fewer negative outcomes under SWE because they do not consider these environments as so dehumanizing. In contrast, those with low levels of ES might view SWE as particularly dehumanizing and, therefore, experience more intensely their negative effects.

Hypothesis 2: When controlling for individual sexual harassment and sexist climate, the relationship between SWE and (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) psychological strains, (c) job satisfaction and (c) turnover intentions through OD is stronger when ES is low.

Study 1

Method

Participants and Procedure.

Participants were recruited via Prolific Academic. Because some of the studies on SWE specifically focused on the experience of women (e.g. Szymanski & Feltman, 2015) and because other studies suggest that women are more affected than men by SWE (e.g., Salvaggio et al., 2011), we opted in this first study for a focus on women only. To ensure that the sample size was large enough to yield accurate estimates, we followed scholars' recommendations who suggested to have at least five or ten cases per estimated parameter (e.g., Bentler, 1995) and at least 200 cases in total (Kline, 2015). The actual sample size exceeded the minimum threshold indicated by these criteria.

Each participant was paid £1.40 as a compensation for the completion of the survey. To participate in the study, the participants were required to (1) identify as females, (2) be native speakers of English from the United-States or the United Kingdom, (3) have an approval rate in prior tasks completed on the platform of at least 90%, (4) be part-time or full-time employees, and (5) not be students nor self-employed. Overall, 352 participants fully completed the survey. However, two participants were excluded from the analyses due to wrong answers to at least one of the attentional check questions. The final sample was

composed of 350 female participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 38.19$, $SD = 9.64$) who had been working in their organization for an average of 7.41 years ($SD=6.17$), primarily in the health and social care domain (18%). Most of them held a bachelor's degree (44.6%) and worked full-time (75.7%) in organizations from the private sector (52.2%) employing between 50 and 249 employees (18%).

Measures.

Unless otherwise indicated, all items were assessed using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1" (strongly disagree) to "7" (strongly agree).

Sexualized Work Environments. In order to assess participants' perception that they work in a sexualized environment, we developed nine items for the purpose of the current research ($\alpha = .95$). In line with SWE's definition, items refer to instances of public sexual humor, comments and innuendoes, disclosure of personal sexual information, presence of discussions around sexual matters, and the display of suggestive materials. Importantly, items were framed at the organizational level avoiding any references to personal experiences and heterosexual normativity. Indeed, Gutek et al.'s 1990 seminal paper also proposed a measure of SWE. Yet, this measure was overly heteronormative referring to how men and women at work interact on a sexual base (e.g., "How many women dress to appear sexually attractive to men?"). Because work environments can be sexualized in non-heteronormative ways, we thought to develop a measure that would more broadly assess environmental sexualization. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were performed on the initial nine items as well as on the items measuring individual sexual harassment and sexist organizational climate.

Findings revealed that one SWE item cross-loaded on the individual sexual harassment dimension (i.e., "In my organization, suggestive materials [e.g., pictures, stories, or pornography] are displayed, used, or distributed"). Hence, this item was dropped and exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were again performed on these eight remaining

items, individual sexual harassment items, and sexist organizational climate items. Table 1 presents the factor loadings resulting from these analyses and confirm that SWE is indeed different from both a sexist climate and participants' own experience of sexual harassment. As a matter of fact, results of confirmatory factor analyses indicated that the three-factor model fitted the data well ($\chi^2(227) = 410.50$; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .05; CFI = .96; TLI = .95) and was superior to all more constrained models (see Table 2). The final SWE scale is thus composed of eight items ($\alpha = .96$).

Individual Sexual Harassment. Individual sexual harassment was assessed using seven items. We used Shaffer 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?]). Moreover, the items were slightly adapted to emphasize the individual-level nature of the harassing behavior that personally targets the respondent ($\alpha = .89$). Although individual sexual harassment is often measured with the original version of Sexual Experiences Questionnaire developed by Fitzgerald and her collaborators (1995), we chose not to use it as there is no consensus regarding its length and psychometric properties (Gutek et al., 2004). A sample item is "I am stared at, leered at, or ogled in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable".

Sexist Organizational Climate. Eight items were used to measure participants' perceptions of working in a sexist organizational climate. The items were adapted from the perceived burden on women subscale developed by Bergman and Hallberg (2002) (e.g., "In my organization, men fail to pay attention to what women say at meetings"). ($\alpha = .96$).

Organizational Dehumanization. The eleven items developed by Caesens and her collaborators (2017) were used to assess employees' perceptions of being dehumanized by

their organization. A sample item is “My organization considers me as a tool to use for its own ends” ($\alpha = .95$).

Emotional Exhaustion. Participants indicated to what extent they were emotionally exhausted by rating the nine items from the Maslach Burnout Inventory developed by Maslach and Jackson (1981). A sample item is “I feel emotionally drained from my work” ($\alpha = .95$).

Psychological Strains. Four items from Van Katwyk and his collaborators (2000) were used to assess participants’ psychological strains. Participants were asked how often they experienced the emotional state described in each statement during the last 30 days using a 7-point scale ranging from “1” (Never) to “7” (Always). A sample item is “At work, I feel tense” ($\alpha = .90$).

Job Satisfaction. Employees’ job satisfaction was assessed using the four items of Eisenberger et al. (1997). A sample item is “All in all, I’m very satisfied with my current job” ($\alpha = .93$).

Turnover Intentions. Employees’ turnover intentions were assessed with Jaros’ (1997) three items. A sample item is “I often think about quitting this organization” ($\alpha = .96$).

Results

Table 3 displays descriptive statistics and the correlations among the variables included in the analyses.

In order to test Hypothesis 1, path analyses were conducted using *Mplus 8.5*. Specifically, we tested a model in which SWE, and individual sexual harassment and sexist climate (as control variables) were related to outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, job satisfaction, turnover intentions), both directly and indirectly, through OD. Results showed that the direct paths between (1) SWE and all outcomes, (2) individual sexual harassment and job satisfaction and turnover intentions, and (3) sexist

climate and psychological strains and job satisfaction were not significant. For the sake of parsimony, we chose to run an alternative model without these non-significant paths and to report results from this model. The significance of indirect effects was tested using 95% confidence intervals with 10,000 bootstrap resamples.

First, the results of these analyses (Figure 2) revealed that SWE were positively related to OD when sexist climate and individual sexual harassment were taken into account ($\beta = .21$, $p < .001$). Moreover, when sexist climate and individual sexual harassment were controlled for, OD was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .50$, $p < .001$), psychological strains ($\beta = .45$, $p < .001$), negatively related to job satisfaction ($\beta = -.55$, $p < .001$), and positively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = .61$, $p < .001$). Additionally, individual sexual harassment was directly and positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .14$, $p < .01$) and psychological strains ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$). Along similar lines, sexist climate was directly and positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .16$, $p < .01$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .12$, $p < .05$).

Moreover, bootstrap analyses indicated that, when individual sexual harassment and sexist climate were included as covariates, SWE had a significant indirect effect on emotional exhaustion (indirect effect = .10, SE = .03, 95% CI [0.05, 0.15]), psychological strains (indirect effect = .10, SE = .03, 95% CI [0.05, 0.15]), job satisfaction (indirect effect = -.11, SE = .03, 95% CI [-0.15, -0.05]), and turnover intentions (indirect effect = .10, SE = .03, 95% CI [0.04, 0.15]) via OD.

Discussion

Taken together, results of Study 1 fully support Hypothesis 1 according to which OD mediates the relationships between SWE and participants' well-being, attitudes and behaviors (i.e., increased emotional exhaustion as well as psychological strains, decreased job satisfaction, and increased turnover intentions). In other words, the various deleterious effects

of SWE on employees can be explained by the fact that working in SWE is a harmful experience that reduces their humanity and makes them feel used as objects.

Given the adverse impact of SWE, it is important to identify variables that can buffer their effects. As described in the introduction, we argue that ES could play such a role. In Study 2, we thus examine whether the relationship between SWE and employees' well-being, attitudes and behaviors via an increased OD would depend on the extent to which they enjoy sexualization. We hypothesized that those with high (vs. low) levels of ES might face fewer (vs. more) negative outcomes under SWE because they do not (vs. they do) consider these environments as so dehumanizing.

In addition, one important limit of Study 1 is that only women were included in the sample because previous research had suggested that women might react more to SWE than men (e.g., Salvaggio et al., 2011). Yet, it is difficult at this stage to generalize the current findings to male individuals. We thus decided in Study 2 to allow people from both genders participating in the study. Clear hypotheses concerning the potential moderating effect of gender in the relationship between SWE and their outcomes are difficult to make. Indeed, in various studies gender was treated as a control variable in statistical designs rather than as a moderating factor (e.g., Bui et al., 2019). When interactions involving gender were computed, some research (Baker, 2016; Berdhal & Aquino, 2009; Sheppard et al., 2020) found similar negative effects of SWE for males and females, while other studies reported mixed effects. For instance, research by Salvaggio and collaborators (2011) observed that gender modulated the effect of SWE on job satisfaction in one study (Study 2) but not in the other (Study 1), while no effect on turnover intentions was found in either study. Given these mixed results, and although more findings point to the direction of no-moderating effects of gender, we thought, in Study 2, to take an exploratory stance regarding the potential moderating effect of gender.

Study 2

Method

Participants and Procedure. Again, we followed scholars' recommendations who suggested to have at least five or ten cases per estimated parameter (e.g., Bentler, 1995) and at least 200 cases in total (Kline, 2015) to ensure that the actual sample size exceeded the minimum threshold indicated by these criteria and was thus large enough to yield accurate estimates.

As in Study 1, participants were recruited on Prolific Academic and were invited to complete an online questionnaire in exchange for monetary compensation (£1.04). To be eligible to take part in the study, participants had to meet the same criteria as in Study 1 with the exception that their approval rate on Prolific Academic had to be 95% or higher and that they were not required to identify as females. Moreover, individuals who participated in Study 1 were not allowed to take part in this second study. A total of 436 participants fully completed the survey but 3 of them were excluded from the analyses because they failed to answer properly to at least one attentional check question. The final sample was thus composed of 433 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 41.30$, $SD = 10.27$; 54.5% women, 44.8% men, and 0.7% did not report their gender) who, for the most part, held a bachelor's degree (40.6%). On average, participants had been working in their organization for 9.49 years ($SD=7.58$), primarily in teaching and education (14.1%). In addition, most of them held a full-time contract (81.8%) in organizations employing between 50 and 249 employees (21.7%) from the private sector (55.4%).

Measures.

SWE ($\alpha=.94$), individual sexual harassment ($\alpha=.91$), sexist climate ($\alpha=.96$), OD ($\alpha=.95$), emotional exhaustion ($\alpha=.95$), psychological strains ($\alpha=.89$), job satisfaction ($\alpha=.94$), and turnover intentions ($\alpha=.94$) were measured with the same scales as in Study 1. Again,

confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to analyze the distinctiveness of the three harmful sexual experiences (i.e., SWE, individual sexual harassment, sexist climate). Results revealed that the three-factor model fitted the data well ($\chi^2(227) = 493.08$; RMSEA = .05; SRMR = .05; CFI = .95; TLI = .94) and was superior to all more constrained models (see Table 4).

Enjoyment of Sexualization. The eight-item scale developed by Liss and her collaborators (2011) was used to assess the extent to which participants enjoyed being sexualized. Since the original version of the scale only targeted women's ES, the items were slightly adapted to enable both men and women to respond and, as we did for SWE, to avoid a heteronormative stance. A sample item is "It is important to me that other people are attracted to me" ($\alpha = .92$). The full scale is provided in the Appendix.

Results

Table 5 displays descriptive statistics and the correlations among the variables included in the analyses.

To test the hypotheses, we first centered SWE, ES, and gender and created three interaction terms by multiplying these centered variables (i.e., SWExES, SWExGender, and SWExESxGender). Then, path analyses were conducted using *Mplus 8.5*. Specifically, we tested a model in which OD was regressed onto SWE (centered), ES (centered), gender (centered), the three interaction terms, and individual sexual harassment and sexist climate (as control variables). Moreover, the final outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, physical strains, job satisfaction, turnover intentions) were regressed onto SWE (centered), individual sexual harassment and sexist climate (as control variables), and OD. Results showed that the direct paths between (1) SWE and all outcomes, (2) individual sexual harassment and all outcomes, and (3) sexist climate and emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction were not significant. For the sake of parsimony, we chose to run an alternative model without these non-significant

paths and to report results from this model. The significance of indirect effects was tested using 95% confidence intervals with 10,000 bootstrap resamples.

The results of these analyses (Figure 3) highlighted that, when individual sexual harassment and sexist climate were accounted for, SWE were positively related to OD ($\beta = .29, p < .001$), the interactive effect between SWE and ES on OD was significant ($\beta = -.13, p < .01$), while the three-way between SWE, ES and gender on OD was not ($\beta = -.01, p = .917$). In addition, when individual sexual harassment and sexist climate were controlled for, OD was positively related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .56, p < .001$), psychological strains ($\beta = .43, p < .001$), negatively related to job satisfaction ($\beta = -.63, p < .001$), and positively related to turnover intentions ($\beta = .59, p < .001$). Moreover, sexist climate was directly and positively related to psychological strains ($\beta = .13, p < .01$) and turnover intentions ($\beta = .07, p < .05$).

Bootstrap analyses further showed that, when controlling for individual sexual harassment and sexist climate, the indirect effects of SWE on emotional exhaustion (indirect effect = .16, SE = .03, 95% CI [.10; .23]), psychological strains (indirect effect = .13, SE = .03, 95% CI [.07; .18]), job satisfaction (indirect effect = -.18, SE = .04, 95% CI [-.25; -.11]), and turnover intentions (indirect effect = .17, SE = .03, 95% CI [.10; .23]) through OD were significant. Taken together, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1.

Furthermore, because the interactive effect between SWE and ES on OD was significant, indexes of moderated mediation and conditional indirect effects of SWE on outcomes via OD (see Table 6) were tested by means of Model 7 (Hayes, 2013). The results of simple slopes tests (see Table 6) revealed that the relationship between SWE and OD was stronger at lower levels of ES (at -1SD of ES; $B = .50, p < .001$) than at higher levels of ES (at +1SD of ES; $B = .20, p < .01$). This interaction is represented in Figure 4. Additionally, the results displayed in Table 6 shows that the indirect effects of SWE on outcomes via OD were conditional upon ES. More precisely, the effects of SWE on OD and, ultimately, on the

outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions) were stronger at lower levels of ES. Overall, these findings support Hypothesis 2.

Finally, because the three-way interaction between SWE, ES and gender on OD was not significant, no additional analyses were necessary to explore whether the moderating role of ES was conditional upon participants' gender. Put differently, there was no evidence that ES interacted with participants' gender to influence how SWE affect perceptions of OD and hence any of the outcomes (i.e., emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions).

General discussion

Previous research had shown that SWE is negatively related to employees' work well-being and attitudes in terms of emotional exhaustion, psychological strains, job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Yet, information regarding explanatory mechanisms driving these effects were missing. Across two studies, we hypothesized and tested the key mediating role of OD in the relationships between employees' perceptions of their work environment as being sexualized and the above-cited work outcomes. Results fully supported this hypothesis.

These findings first suggest that working in a SWE is considered by employees as a harmful experience that relates negatively to their humanity and makes them feel used as objects. Second, they further indicate that this experience of dehumanization is attributed to the organization as a whole. In the workplace reality, SWE most likely take the form of an environmental maltreatment that creates a diffuse negative work atmosphere or culture within the organization. Since employees are unable to identify idiosyncratic responsibilities in the occurrence of SWE, they turn to the organization as a personified entity (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). The organization is indeed the ideal responsible entity as it endorses legal, moral and financial responsibility for any action originating from one of its members (Levinson, 1965; Ashforth et al., 2020). Finally, these results also show that the perception of

dehumanization from the organization that is associated with the experience of SWE carries over employees' work well-being, attitudes and behaviors. These detrimental effects of OD are explained, according to Lagios et al. (2021), by the fact that feeling treated as mere objects frustrates the basic psychological needs of employees. This leads to ill-being and disengagement from the entity that is causing the maltreatment.

In addition to showing that OD is an important mechanism in SWE-work outcomes relationships, Study 2 went two steps further by examining the moderating role of ES in the relationship between SWE and OD and by assessing whether the obtained effects were restricted to female participants or whether they also extended to their male counterparts. Regarding the first point, results showed that the observed positive link between SWE and OD was stronger at lower levels of ES. That is, participants who reported not enjoying to be sexualized felt particularly dehumanized by their organization when working in a sexualized environment. Or, on the contrary, the above-mentioned feeling of dehumanization are less crucial or preponderant when one enjoys to be sexualized. These results indicate that, when confronted with SWE, reactions can vary greatly from one individual to another, depending on their level of ES. It is nevertheless worth noting that, even for individuals who value being sexualized, the more sexualized the environment, the greater the OD. Our results thus suggest that even for these individuals, SWE is related to a feeling of reduced humanity, with negative effects in terms of well-being, attitudes and behaviors at work. A high level of ES does not therefore cancel out the adverse effects that SWE produce on employees.

Turning to our second point, the above effects were not qualified by gender. In other words, both men and women reacted in similar ways to SWE. The absence of gender effects is consistent with other studies by Baker (2016) and Gutek and colleagues (1990) but is inconsistent with the research reported by Salvaggio and collaborators (2011). Based on these conflicting findings, several predictions could have been made regarding the role of gender in

the development of OD perceptions following SWE. On the one hand, drawing on past research findings indicating that women rate a wider array of social–sexual cues as harassing (Rotundo et al., 2001), we could have anticipated that, as compared to men, SWE are more detrimental to women, even when they enjoy sexualization. Put differently, it could have been that ES attenuates the relationship between SWE and OD perceptions to a lesser extent in female employees.

On the other hand, since our western industrialized society often conveys the idea that men are highly sex-driven (e.g., Baumeister et al., 2001), we could also have predicted that ES would not moderate the relationship between SWE and OD in males because of ceiling effects. Along similar lines, another possible scenario could have been that SWE are not related to male employees' OD perceptions at all because they are thought to appreciate sexuality anyway and, as a corollary, sexualized environments. Consequently, SWE would not be appraised as problematic by men and would not be associated with feeling dehumanized by the organization. Overall, the absence of gender effects suggests that women are not the only ones raising concerns regarding sexualized environments, while men do not automatically remain unaffected by them. These findings thus stress that women and men are more alike than what gender roles and stereotypes prescribe.

Importantly, this research took place in a work context so that dehumanization from the *organization* appeared as the best way to operationalize our explanatory mechanism. However, the results of this research could probably be generalized to other contexts where the sexualization of the environment also exists. For instance, sexualized environments are also a pervasive issue in education, student associations, sport clubs, and youth movements (e.g., Dinger & Parsons, 1999; Karami et al., 2020). As a consequence, future research should replicate our findings in a diverse array of contexts. It might, for example, be interesting to

explore whether a feeling of dehumanization helps understand the experiences of athletes who train in sexualized environments, and who perhaps feel bad and want to disengage from sport.

Despite these considerations, it is important to note that research on sexualization occurring at the organizational level is scarce and many areas of this emerging literature remain underexplored. For instance, one question that might be worth considering is the extent to which SWE should be approached as instances of sexual harassment. Indeed, authors have emphasized the perceptual nature of sexual harassment suggesting that a given behavior might be apprehended and labelled as harassing by one person and as benign by another (Campbell, 1995) depending, for instance, on interindividual differences or contextual variables. In their 2009 review paper, O’Leary-Kelly and collaborators identified no less than 14 variables susceptible to influence the perception regarding the presence of sexual harassment in a workplace.

Accordingly, SWE could relate to perceptions of sexual harassment by affecting how individual experiences of sex-related behaviors are interpreted. For instance, Keyton and Rhodes (1999) found that as sexualization of the environment increases, identification of sexual harassment cues decreases. Other research has similarly shown that, when unwanted sexual behaviors are routinely experienced and perceived as “part of the job”, they are rarely considered or labelled as harassment by employees (e.g., Dellinger & Williams, 2002; Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Salzinger, 2000; but see O’Connor et al., 2004). Future research is thus needed in order to shed light and increase our comprehension of how and when SWE are appraised by employees as sexually harassing.

Limitations and perspectives for future research

As interesting as they are, the present studies are not without limitations. First, we relied on cross-sectional designs that exclude any cause-and-effect relationship. Future studies using longitudinal designs with repeated measures should be conducted in the future to replicate our

findings. Second, our two studies are based on self-reported measures which leads to a potential common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2012). To minimize this bias, we followed several scholars' recommendations and took several precautions (e.g., Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2012). For instance, we assured prospective participants of the anonymity or confidentiality of their responses, and stressed that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. Whenever possible, we also used validated and reliable scales to measure our study variables and took great care to ensure that there is no conceptual overlap in items used to measure different constructs. Overall, it therefore reduced our concerns regarding this potential bias in our data. Having said this, future research would certainly benefit from using more objective measures to assess, for instance, SWE (e.g., by aggregating individual data at the organizational level to capture SWE as an organizational characteristic).

A second limitation of the present set of studies is that they do not consider how participants' sexual orientation might moderate the findings. Indeed, although we paid particular attention at not framing our SWE measure in a heteronormative way, it is likely that, in most organizations, SWE still take the form of heteronormative-SWE. In other words, it is heterosexuality and, more specifically, an ideal of sexuality that is based on hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), that becomes increasingly visible, discussed and available in SWE and such an over-presence should be particularly detrimental for the work well-being and attitudes of non-heterosexual individuals (Watkins et al., 2013).

Finally, the present work focused on SWE as a particular form of sexual organizational climate work experience. Yet, other kinds of sexual organizational climate were identified in the literature. Ambient sexual harassment (Glomb et al., 1997), for instance, is another one. Future research is needed in order to assess whether OD also explains (part of) the effect of such an organizational climate variable on work outcomes. Further, in Sojo and colleagues' model (2016), organizational tolerance for sexual harassment (OTSH) was also presented as a

sexual organizational climate experience. OTSH is defined and measured as employees' beliefs that complains about sexual harassment will not be taken seriously and sanctioned by their organization (Hulin et al., 1996). Although undoubtedly an organizational-level variable (as it assesses employees' beliefs about their organization's actions against sexual harassment), we suggest that OTSH should better be considered as an antecedent of SWE and ambient harassment rather than as an organizational climate harmful experience. Indeed, first, and as defined above, OTSH assesses people's beliefs about their organization more than their experiences *per se* within the organization. Second, it is reasonable to suggest that both ambient sexual harassment and SWE will develop as a consequence of employees' perceptions that sexualization of the environment and sexual harassment are allowed by the organization and will be left unpunished. As a matter of fact, OTSH has been shown to act as an antecedent of individual sexual harassment (e.g., Willness et al., 2007).

Conclusion

As a whole, the present work builds on the existing, but scarce, scientific literature that has examined sexual harmful work experiences that operate at the organizational level. It corroborates previous findings that have highlighted the negative influence of SWE on employees' work well-being and attitudes (e.g., Bui et al., 2019; Szymanski & Feltman, 2015) and responds to a call that was made to pay more attention to mediating mechanisms in these contexts.

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Appendix

Gender-neutral Enjoyment of Sexualization scale

1. It is important to me that other people are attracted to me
2. I feel proud when other people compliment the way I look
3. I want other people to look at me
4. I love to feel sexy
5. I like showing off my body
6. I feel complimented when other people “check me out” as I walk past
7. When I wear revealing clothing, I feel sexually attractive and in control
8. I feel empowered when I look good

Note. Adapted from Liss et al. (2011)

Table 1

Study 1 and Study 2: Exploratory Factor Analysis and Confirmatory Factor Analysis
Loadings of the SWE, Sexist Climate, and Individual Sexual Harassment Items

Items	Study 1						Study 2					
	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3		Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA	EFA	CFA
Sexualized Work Environments												
1. In my organization, sexual jokes are frequently told	.92	.91	-.03	---	.01	---	.90	.84	.01	---	-.10	---
2. In my organization, sexual remarks are made publicly	.83	.89	-.01	---	.09	---	.83	.85	-.03	---	.02	---
3. In my organization, there are unwanted attempts to draw people into discussions of personal matters	.64	.76	.11	---	.10	---	.62	.75	-.05	---	.19	---
4. In my organization, offensive sexual gestures are made	.68	.82	.07	---	.17	---	.65	.77	-.04	---	.17	---
5. In my organization, remarks about appearance, body, or sexual activities are made	.82	.88	.04	---	.07	---	.87	.88	.04	---	.03	---
6. In my organization, sexual connotations or comments occur	.95	.91	-.01	---	-.05	---	.91	.89	.02	---	-.02	---
7. In my organization, sexual humor is often used	1.03	.90	-.07	---	-.14	---	.93	.86	.03	---	-.07	---
8. In my organization, people's physical appearance is often at the core of discussions	.66	.75	.13	---	.04	---	.63	.74	-.18	---	.03	---
Sexist Organizational Climate												
1. In my organization, women's contributions are perceived differently	-.07	---	.89	.90	.07	---	.08	---	-.85	.85	-.07	---
2. In my organization, men fail to pay attention to what women say at meetings	.04	---	.88	.83	-.12	---	.01	---	-.80	.82	.04	---
3. In my organization, working life is characterized by a negative attitude toward women	.06	---	.66	.78	.14	---	.01	---	-.74	.82	.15	---
4. In my organization, women receive more unfair judgements of their work performance than men	.01	---	.90	.91	.01	---	-.00	---	-.92	.91	-.02	---
5. In my organization, women have fewer opportunities than men for professional	.02	---	.84	.86	.03	---	.02	---	-.87	.88	-.01	---
6. In my organization, men receive more organizational support and trust than women	-.03	---	.90	.90	.01	---	-.02	---	-.89	.87	-.01	---
7. In my organization, women have to accomplish more in their work than men in order to be promoted	.03	---	.88	.88	-.03	---	-.07	---	-.91	.87	-.01	---
8. In my organization, it is more difficult for women than men to "be themselves" at work	.01	---	.85	.85	-.01	---	.03	---	-.81	.82	.00	---
Individual Sexual Harassment												
1. In my organization, I am personally given unwanted sexual attention	.10	---	-.03	---	.81	.86	.02	---	-.03	---	.82	.84
2. In my organization, I am stared at, leered at, or ogled in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable	-.01	---	.06	---	.78	.79	.05	---	-.05	---	.80	.86
3. In my organization, I have been the target of attempts to establish a romantic or sexual relationship despite my efforts to discourage this person	-.05	---	.07	---	.70	.70	-.06	---	.01	---	.86	.82
4. In my organization, I am shown suggestive materials (e.g., pictures, stories, or pornography)	.17	---	-.01	---	.55	.65	.21	---	.06	---	.48	.57
5. In my organization, I am asked for dates, dinner, etc., even though I have said "no"	-.05	---	.00	---	.78	.74	-.06	---	-.02	---	.80	.78
6. In my organization, I am touched (e.g., laid a hand on my bare arm, put an arm around my shoulders) in a way that makes me feel uncomfortable	.03	---	.04	---	.68	.72	.05	---	-.07	---	.71	.78
7. In my organization, I am the target of unwanted attempts to stroke or fondle (e.g. stroking my leg or neck, touching my breast, etc.)	.02	---	-.07	---	.75	.72	-.02	---	.02	---	.84	.81

Note. EFA = Exploratory factor analysis, CFA = Confirmatory factor analysis.

Table 2

Model	χ^2	df	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	SCF	$\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$	Δdf
1. Three-factor model	410.503	227	.05	.05	.96	.95	1.51	---	---
2. Two-factor model (SWE-ISH = 1 factor)	808.769	229	.09	.09	.87	.86	1.58	70.92***	2
3. Two-factor model (Sexist climate-ISH = 1 factor)	981.059	229	.10	.14	.83	.81	1.59	92.70***	2
4. Two-factor model (Sexist climate-SWE = 1 factor)	1827.626	229	.14	.16	.64	.60	1.50	3640.21***	2
5. One-factor model (SWE-ISH-Sexist climate = 1 factor)	2093.639	230	.15	.15	.58	.54	1.58	393.73***	3

Study 1: Fit indices of measurement models including Sexualized Work Environments, Individual Sexual Harassment, and Sexist Climate

Note. $N = 350$. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis index; SCF = scaling correction factor; $\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$ = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; ISH = individual sexual harassment; SWE = sexualized work environments.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3*Study 1: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Individual sexual harassment	1.48	.86	(.89)							
2. Sexist climate	2.71	1.57	.49***	(.96)						
3. SWE	2.41	1.50	.61***	.49***	(.95)					
4. OD	3.70	1.58	.28***	.54***	.39***	(.95)				
5. Emotional exhaustion	3.68	1.61	.34***	.47***	.33***	.58***	(.95)			
6. Psychological strains	3.26	1.52	.28***	.39***	.27***	.50***	.72***	(.90)		
7. Job satisfaction	4.76	1.58	-.21***	-.34***	-.21***	-.55***	-.63***	-.53**	(.93)	
8. Turnover intentions	3.68	2.06	.26***	.39***	.25***	.53***	.63***	.51***	-.72***	(.96)

Note. *N* = 350. Reliability alpha values are displayed on the diagonal. SWE = sexualized work environments; OD = organizational

dehumanization.

****p* < .001.

Table 4

Study 2: Fit indices of measurement models including Sexualized Work Environments, Individual Sexual Harassment, and Sexist Climate

Model	χ^2	<i>df</i>	RMSEA	SRMR	CFI	TLI	SCF	$\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$	Δdf
1. Three-factor model	493.076	227	.05	.05	.95	.94	1.60	---	---
2. Two-factor model (SWE-ISH = 1 factor)	1220.378	229	.10	.11	.80	.78	1.69	101.75***	2
3. Two-factor model (Sexism-ISH = 1 factor)	1330.604	229	.11	.14	.77	.75	1.70	112.38***	2
4. Two-factor model (Sexism-SWE = 1 factor)	1863.397	229	.13	.16	.66	.63	1.61	719.44***	2
5. One-factor model (SWE-ISH-Sexism = 1 factor)	2667.056	230	.16	.16	.50	.45	1.59	3799.95***	3

Note. *N* = 433. RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; SRMR = standardized root mean square residual; CFI = comparative fit index; TLI =

Tucker-Lewis index; SCF = scaling correction factor; $\Delta\chi^2_{SB}$ = strictly positive Satorra-Bentler chi-square difference test; ISH = individual sexual harassment;

SWE = sexualized work environments.

****p* < .001.

Table 5*Study 2: Descriptive Statistics and Correlations among Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Gender	—	—	—									
2. Individual sexual harassment	1.36	.75	.08	(.91)								
3. Sexist climate	2.27	1.36	.26***	.47***	(.96)							
4. SWE	2.21	1.30	.04	.53***	.45***	(.94)						
5. ES	3.02	1.29	−.03	.11*	.11*	.19***	(.92)					
6. OD	3.64	1.50	−.03	.29***	.42***	.41***	.10*	(.95)				
7. Emotional exhaustion	3.60	1.57	.11*	.26***	.34***	.32***	.09	.56***	(.95)			
8. Psychological strains	2.91	1.46	.20***	.30***	.38***	.33***	.08	.48***	.74***	(.89)		
9. Job satisfaction	4.85	1.59	.01	−.30***	−.36***	−.34***	.01	−.64***	−.63***	−.53***	(.94)	
10. Turnover intentions	3.19	1.90	.03	.26***	.38***	.30***	.03	.61***	.60***	.52***	−.74***	(.94)

Note. $N = 433$ (excepted for Gender $N = 430$). Reliability alpha values are displayed on the diagonal. SWE = sexualized work environments; ES = Enjoyment of sexualization; OD = organizational dehumanization. Gender was coded “−1” for male and “+1” for female.

* $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 6*Study 2: Two-Way Interaction between SWE and ES on OD and Outcomes*

OD			Emotional exhaustion		Psychological strains		Job satisfaction		Turnover intentions	
Direct effects	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Individual sexual harassment	.01 ns	.10	.12 ns	.10	.17 ns	.10	-.19*	.10	.10 ns	.12
Sexist climate	.30***	.05	.10 ns	.06	.18**	.05	-.08 ns	.05	.18**	.06
SWE	.35***	.06	.05 ns	.06	.06 ns	.06	-.03 ns	.06	-.00 ns	.07
ES	.03 ns	.05	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
SWE x ES	-.11**	.04	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
OD	---	---	.51***	.05	.35***	.05	-.60***	.04	.69***	.06
Index of moderated mediation	---		-.06 [-0.10, -0.02]		-.04 [-0.08, -0.01]		.07 [0.02, 0.12]		-.08 [-0.14, -0.02]	
Conditional effect of SWE on OD	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
ES at -1 SD	.50***	.08	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
ES at +1 SD	.20**	.07	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Conditional indirect effects of SWE on outcomes	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
ES at -1 SD	---	---	.25	.05	.17	.04	-.30	.06	.34	.07
ES at +1 SD	---	---	.10	.04	.07	.03	-.12	.05	.14	.06

Note. $N = 433$. SWE = sexualized work environments; ES = enjoyment of sexualization; OD = organizational dehumanization; ns = not

significant.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

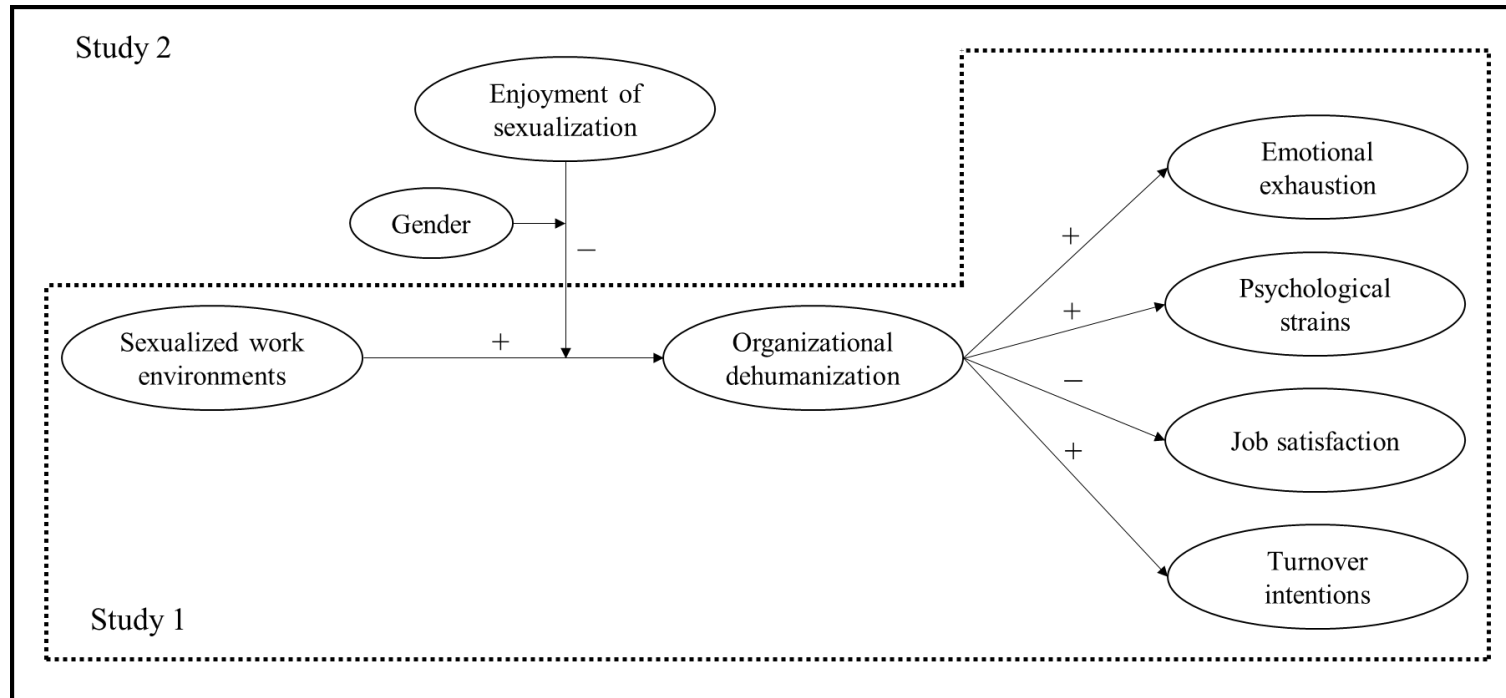
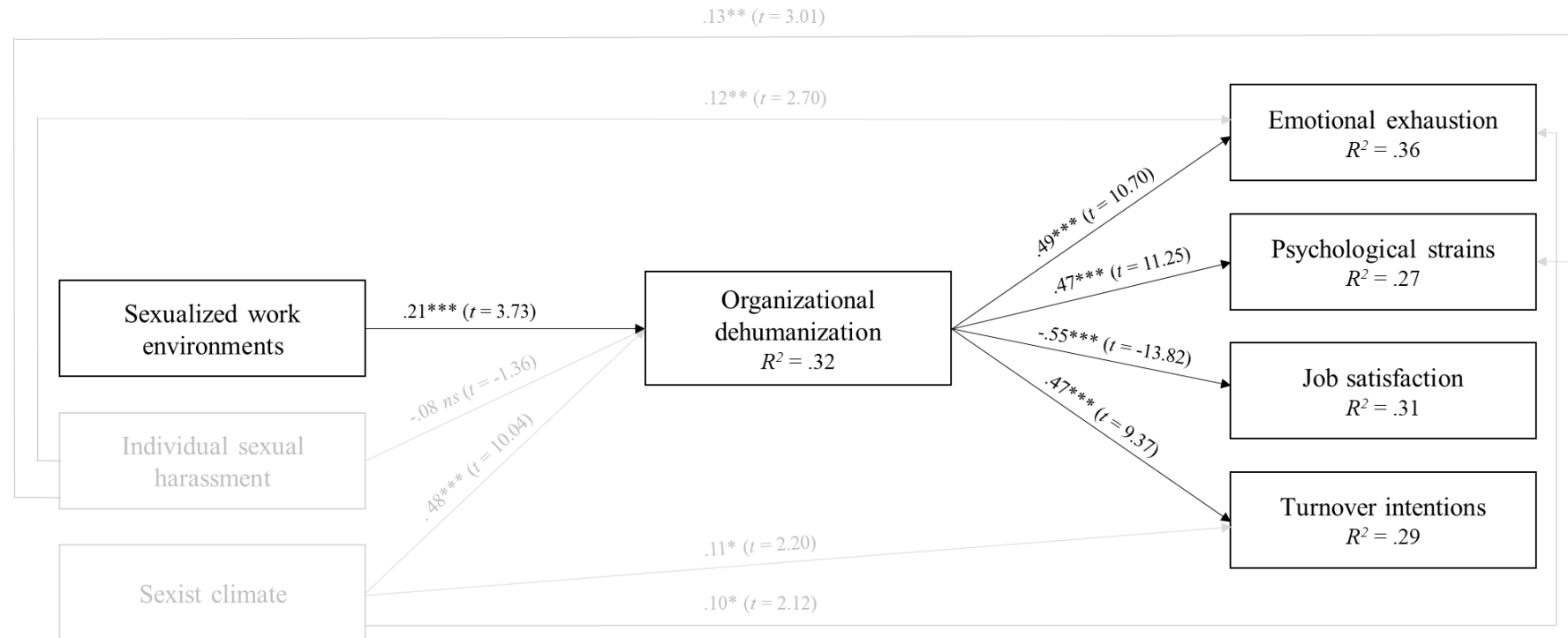
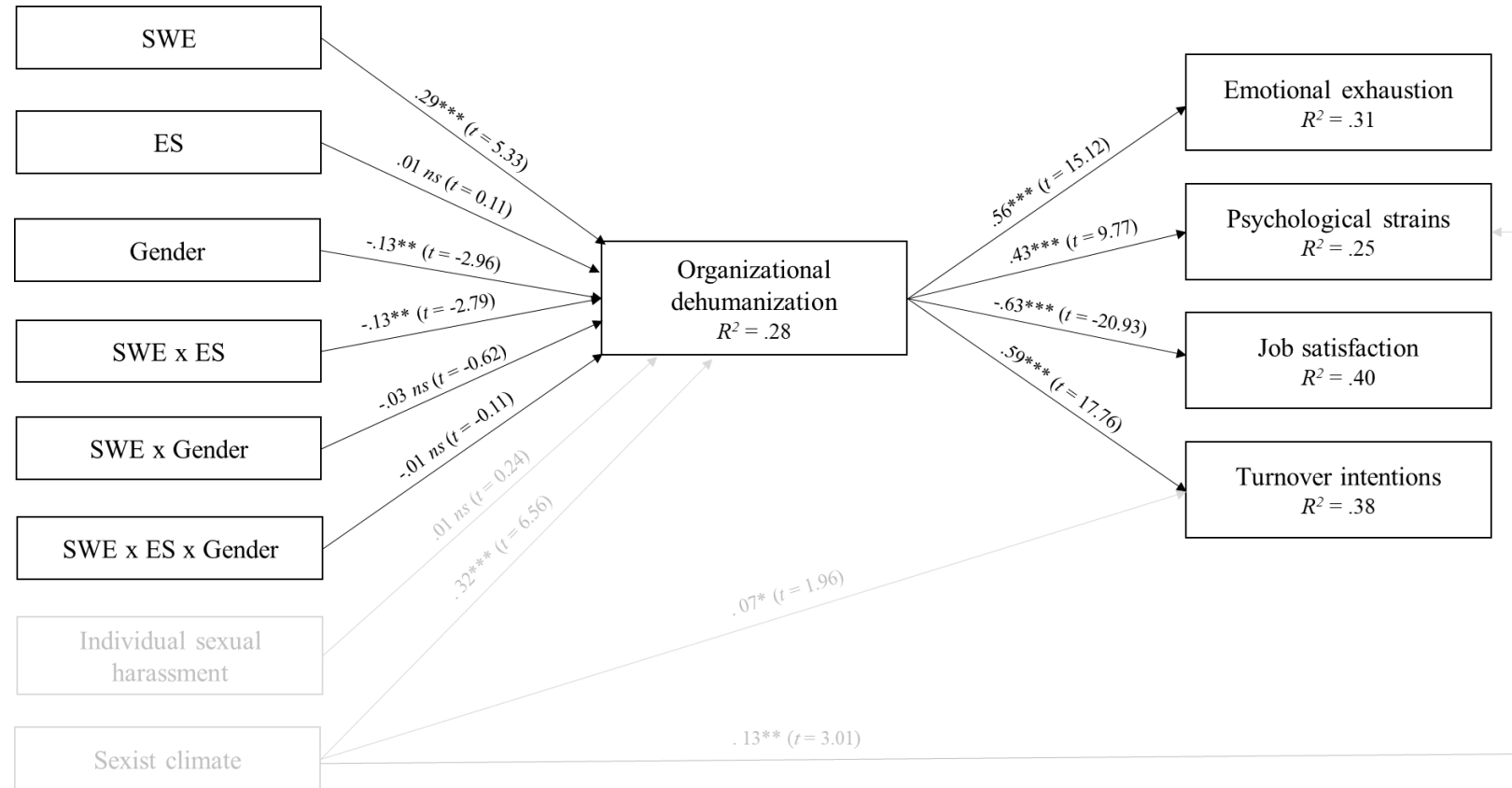
Figure 1*Theoretical Model*

Figure 2*Study 1: Standardized Coefficients*

Note. $N = 350$. $\chi^2(8) = 6.87$; RMSEA = .00; SRMR = .02; CFI = .1; TLI = .1.

ns = not significant. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

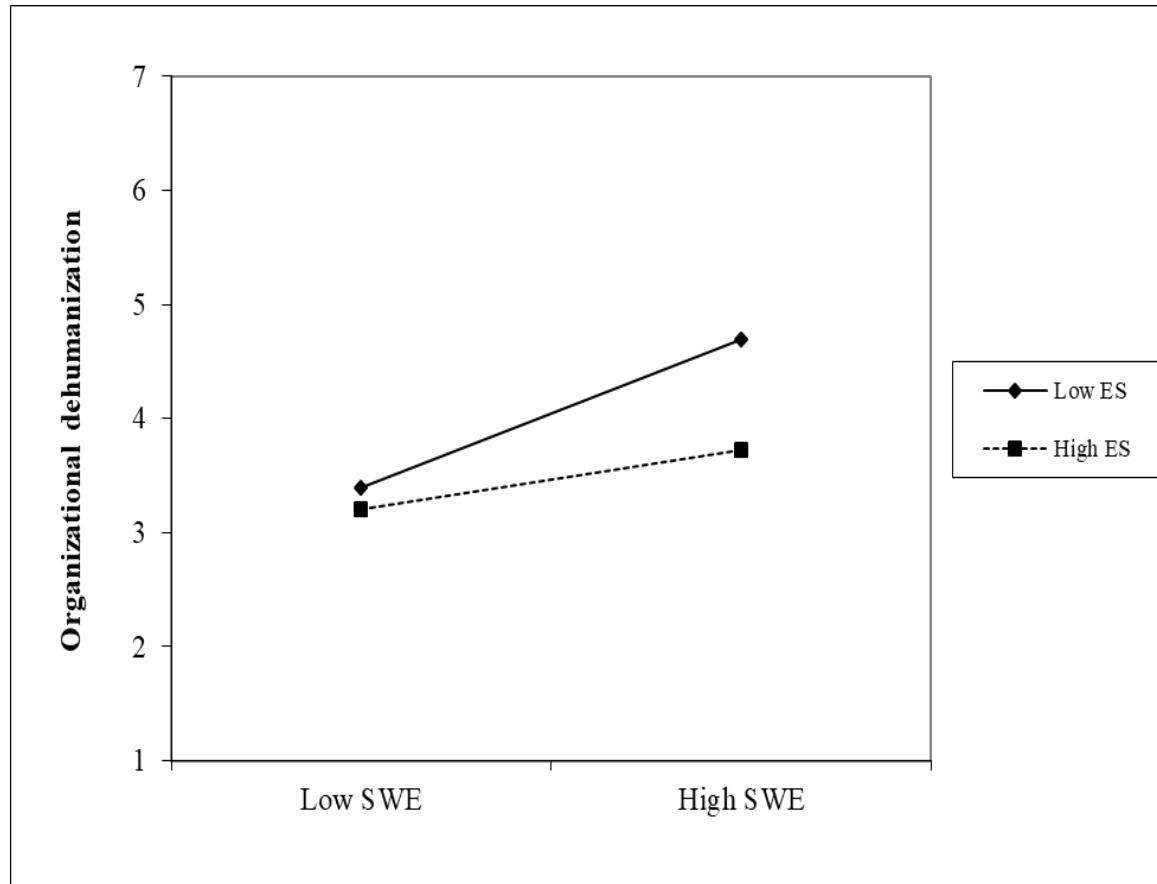
Figure 3*Study 2: Standardized Coefficients*

Note. $N = 430$. $\chi^2(30) = 71.35$; RMSEA = .06; SRMR = .04; CFI = .97; TLI = .95.

ns = not significant. $^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Figure 4

Study 2: Relationship Between SWE and OD as a Function of ES



Note. $N = 433$. Individual sexual harassment and sexist climate were included as covariates. High and low enjoyment of sexualization are, respectively, 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean. SWE = sexualized work environments; ES = enjoyment of sexualization.