# The Impact of Claimant and Observer Gender on the Perceived Severity of Verbal Sexual Harassment

Viola Braswell

S5081092

Department of Psychology, University of Groningen

PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group number: 17

Supervisor: Dr. Maja Graso

Second Supervisor: Dr. Anne C. Eichholtzer

Collaboration with students: Abbey Berengut, Neele Berg, Clara Bones, Daria Ivan, Anna Klee

June 26, 2025

*A thesis is an aptitude test for students. The approval of the thesis is proof that the student has sufficient research and reporting skills to graduate, but does not guarantee the quality of the research and the results of the research as such, and the thesis is therefore not necessarily suitable to be used as an academic source to refer to. If you would like to know more about the research discussed in this thesis and any publications based on it, to which you could refer, please contact the supervisor mentioned.*

## Abstract

Perceptions of sexual harassment (SH) are influenced by the gender of both the person experiencing the SH and the person observing it. Verbal sexual harassment (VSH), an ambiguous and subtle form of sexual harassment, is particularly vulnerable to gendered perceptions and biases. This study investigated how the gender of the claimant (SH target) and the gender of the observer affect the perceived severity of verbal sexual harassment. We hypothesized that (1) VSH scenarios with a female claimant would be perceived as more severe than those with a male claimant, (2) female observers would perceive the VSH scenario as more severe, and (3) observer gender would moderate the relationship between the gender of the claimant and perceived severity of the VSH. Using a between-subjects vignette design ($N = 144$), participants read a workplace scenario in which either a male or a female employee experienced verbal sexual harassment. Participants then rated the perceived severity of the incident. Our results supported both main effect hypotheses: VSH scenarios with female claimants were rated as more severe, and female observers perceived the VSH scenario as more severe. However, no significant interaction was found between the gender of the claimant and the observer's gender. These results highlight the influence that gender has on the perceived severity of verbal sexual harassment. Our findings have important implications for workplace training, reporting systems, and legal evaluations of verbal sexual harassment, specifically the need to address gender bias in how sexual harassment is received and validated.


*Keywords:* Sexual Harassment Perceptions, Verbal Sexual Harassment, Gender Bias, Moral Typecasting Theory, Gendered Perceptions

# The Impact of Claimant and Observer Gender on the Perceived Severity of Verbal Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment (SH) in any form has serious consequences, affecting targets' well-being, professional success, and mental health (Benya et al., 2018; Fitzgerald, 1993). Despite its impact, many cases of SH, especially in the workplace, go unreported due to fear of disbelief, termination, or retaliation (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008). This silence leaves the targets of sexual harassment without justice and allows perpetrators to avoid consequences (Goh et al., 2022). In response to the lack of accountability for perpetrators, the 2017 #MeToo movement comeback emerged as a way for claimants' voices to be amplified, drawing more attention to the prevalence and harm of sexual harassment (Atwater et al., 2018; Goh et al., 2022). Nevertheless, SH continues to be trivialized through inappropriate jokes, comments about revealing clothing, or suggestions that sexual favors could lead to career advancement. Given the prevalence of SH in our society, it is crucial to understand how people evaluate SH to ensure all victims receive equal support.

Sexual harassment is not objectively evaluated; it is shaped by the identities of both the claimant and the observer (Zhou et al., 2024). In particular, the gender of both the target and observer plays an important role in shaping perceptions of SH. For instance, men and women perceive sexual harassment differently due to different socialization and cultural norms (Rotundo et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2024). As a result, male and female observers also vary in their sensitivity to SH due to their gender identity and personal experiences (Chawla et al., 2021). Understanding how perceptions of SH are shaped is particularly important in ambiguous cases such as verbal sexual harassment (VSH), where the interpretation is subjective and often biased.

Since perceptions of SH can vary based on framing, throughout this paper, we will use the term "claimant" to refer to the target of sexual harassment[1].

This paper examines whether the perceived severity of VSH differs based on the gender of the claimant and the gender of the observer. To explain these gendered perceptions, we draw on moral typecasting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009), which provides a useful framework to understand how people are perceived in moral situations. In the following sections, we will outline how gendered patterns affect the severity of harm perception in cases of VSH.

## Theoretical Foundations

### Understanding Sexual Harassment and its Perceptions

Sexual harassment (SH) is not a simple, easily defined act; instead, it exists on a continuum, ranging from subtle and ambiguous remarks to overt physical coercion (McDonald, 2012; Reinicke, 2022). One reason SH is so hard to define is due to its ambiguous nature. Perceptions of harm are subjective and influenced by an individual's identity, experiences, and biases (Gordon et al., 2005). This means it is up to the individual experiencing a behavior to determine whether they feel harassed.

Subjectivity becomes especially relevant when evaluating subtle behaviors such as compliments, jokes, or suggestive glances (Gordon et al., 2005). What one person experiences as a joke, another may experience as harassment. Subtle behaviors can be interpreted differently depending on the context, the relationship between the individuals involved, and the characteristics of those observing them (Gordon et al., 2005). When a behavior is not physical,

[1]While the term "claimant" refers to someone who has legally filed a claim or complaint, for the sake of consistency and clarity throughout the paper, the term "claimant" will be used to refer to the person who was the target of the sexual harassment. This decision recognizes that not all victims of harassment come forward or consider themselves to be claimants in the legal sense.

classifying it as SH often relies on subjective judgments. Furthermore, recognizing a behavior as SH requires identifying the behavior as inappropriate and interpreting it based on who is involved (Major et al., 2002). For instance, if a male boss routinely hugs all employees as a form of greeting, observers may not perceive the behavior as sexual harassment. However, if he hugs only female employees, observers are more likely to view the behavior as inappropriate (Goh et al., 2022). Even a seemingly harmless gesture like hugging can carry different meanings depending on the context.

Within organizational settings, evaluating and addressing SH can be particularly challenging, especially when determining whether a reported behavior constitutes sexual harassment. To structure these assessments, the American Psychological Association (APA) created a typology still used today that distinguishes between two forms of workplace SH: quid pro quo harassment, where sexual favors are exchanged for rewards, and hostile work environments*,* involving non-verbal and verbal derogatory behaviors communicating hostile gender-based attitudes (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2018). Although the typology is useful, it does not resolve the difficulties associated with identifying and measuring sexual harassment. This paper focuses on a particularly ambiguous form of SH, verbal sexual harassment (VSH), which includes remarks such as sexual jokes, comments on physical appearance, or threats that create an intimidating or hostile environment (Matasayi Aji et al., 2024).

Especially in cases of VSH where boundaries are often less clear, it is important to examine patterns of victimization and perpetration, as they are closely tied to gender. Although anyone can be a victim (Pina & Gannon, 2012), women are disproportionately affected by SH (Kabat-Farr & Cortina, 2014). In most cases of SH, men are the perpetrators and women the

victims, making gender a factor in experiences of and the societal responses to SH (Pina et al., 2009). Moreover, regardless of the claimant's gender, SH is linked to long-term emotional distress and diminished well-being and self-esteem (Matasayi Aji et al., 2024). Furthermore, SH experiences increase the risk for both self-harm and substance use (Bucchianeri et al., 2014). Given the consequences of sexual harassment, understanding how SH is perceived and evaluated is crucial to prevent biased or dismissive responses that further harm victims (Peled-Laskov et al., 2020). The following sections will explore how perception patterns influence SH evaluations.

## The Impact of the Claimants' Gender on the Perceived Severity of Verbal Sexual Harassment

The severity perceptions of sexual harassment do not just depend on the behavior itself; they are also influenced by the gender of the claimant (Zhou et al., 2024). One reason gender influences severity perceptions is that people rarely evaluate claims of harm objectively (Gordon & Cohen, 2005). Especially in ambiguous situations, people rely on cognitive shortcuts, or biases, to quickly assess situations (Gordon & Cohen, 2005; Kahneman, 2012). These biases are often shaped by stereotypes and social expectations. A bias is a systematic deviation from rational decision-making, where judgments are influenced by unrelated factors (Thaler, 2015). These biases influence not only whether an observer will perceive a behavior as SH but also how severe it is, making the gender of the claimant an important variable in perception.

One theory that can help explain how biases and gender influence harm perceptions is moral typecasting theory, which proposes that individuals involved in moral events (which are situations involving any form of harm) are instinctively categorized as either moral agents that cause harm or moral patients that suffer from the harm (Gray & Wegner, 2009). These roles are

usually mutually exclusive, meaning that a categorized person is either perceived as a moral agent or a moral patient. This categorization influences how severe or credible a harmful behavior is perceived to be and is dependent on whether the claimant fits the societal expectations of a moral patient (Gray & Wegner, 2009).

Moral typecasting theory is particularly relevant to understanding how gender expectations shape perceptions of perpetrators and victims. To illustrate this, Reynolds et al. (2020) used moral typecasting theory to explain why people are categorized differently based on their gender. Men are more likely to be perceived in the role of moral agents (Reynolds et al., 2011), reinforced by traditional masculine gender stereotypes, which emphasize dominance, strength, and independence (Bosson et al., 2009; Heilman, 2001). In addition, men are considered agentic and implicitly associated with power, aggression, and control (Rudman et al., 2001; Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). Individuals perceived as agentic are also seen as more responsible for what happens to them (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). As a result, when men report being harmed, they are less likely to receive support or sympathy (Rudolph et al., 2004; Gray & Wegner, 2011). For instance, Cesario (2020) found that male claimants of SH were viewed as suffering less than female claimants. Thus, male claimants of harm often struggle to be taken seriously (Reynolds et al., 2020). We expect that similar dynamics will occur in VSH scenarios where male experiences of SH will be seen as less severe.

In contrast, women are seen more as moral patients and evoke more sympathy (Gray & Wegner, 2011; Reynolds et al., 2020). The perception of women as moral patients is rooted in feminine stereotypes, which depict women as warm, nurturing, gentle, and emotionally vulnerable (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). These traits align with the “women are wonderful”

effect, which suggests that women are liked more due to their association with warmth and communality (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994). These attributes lead to women evoking stronger feelings of pity from others and being seen as more credible claimants (Cuddy et al., 2007). Gender stereotypes explain why women are more often viewed as the victims and receive more validation when experiencing harm. We expect that in the context of VSH, similar dynamics will apply, with VSH scenarios involving female claimants being perceived as more severe.

Furthermore, cultural and environmental factors also contribute to the ways individuals are both targeted by SH and perceived as claimants. Women are more frequently exposed to sexual harassment due to the gendered structure of public spaces and professional environments (Bates, 2014). Furthermore, women are also confronted with more severe forms of sexual harassment, like physical violence (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). Due to women's heightened exposure to SH and their tendency to display greater visible distress, they are perceived as more believable victims (Nitschke et al., 2019).

Given the discussed findings, I hypothesize:

***H1****:* Verbal sexual harassment scenarios with a female claimant will be perceived as more severe than those with a male claimant.

Moreover, how severe VSH is perceived to be is not only shaped by the gender of the claimant; it is also influenced by the gender of the observer evaluating the situation.

**The Impact of the Observers' Gender on the Perceived Severity of Verbal Sexual Harassment**

In order to ensure that all claimants of SH are treated equally, one must consider how the gender of an observer impacts perceptions of SH severity. Research shows that men and women

differ in their evaluations of SH (Goh et al., 2022). Given the ambiguous nature of SH and the lack of a clear threshold for what constitutes a behavior as SH, it is not surprising that men and women interpret the same situation differently. One gender difference in the observer's perception of SH severity may come from the difference in exposure to SH. While there has been a rise in men's reports of sexual harassment, women remain disproportionately affected and targeted by it (Quick & McFadyen, 2017). Within the European Union, 1 in 3 women vs. 1 in 10 men have been sexually harassed at work (European Commission & Eurostat, 2024; Gaude et al., 2022). Due to greater exposure, women may be more sensitive to SH and view it as more severe and harmful (Chawala et al., 2021; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). This sensitivity to SH may also be a reason why women are more likely to classify a behavior as sexual harassment (Blumenthal, 1998; Rotundo et al., 2001). Furthermore, research shows that sexual harassment has a greater negative impact on women's well-being (Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Kessler et al., 2020), reinforcing their perception of such behaviors as harmful (Chawla et al., 2021). All of these findings together suggest that women will be more likely to classify a scenario as SH and see it as more severe.

In contrast, men are not as frequently confronted with SH (Chawla et al., 2021; Rotundo et al., 2001). This lack of frequent confrontation could lead men to dismiss and trivialize scenarios of SH. Men also find SH to be less problematic, threatening, and harmful (Berdhal et al., 1996; Rotundo et al., 2001; Stockdale et al., 2004). One explanation for this is rooted in workplace power dynamics, suggesting that men and women perceive SH differently due to power imbalances in the workplace (Berdahl and Aquino, 2009). In the workplace, men often do not feel threatened by behaviors women find harassing. One possible reason is that behaviors

women find harassing tend to reinforce existing power structures that favor male dominance (Berdahl et al., 1996). Additionally, men often have more power and a greater sense of control and are therefore less likely to perceive harassing behaviors as coercive (Zhou et al., 2024). All in all, these findings suggest that the observer's gender influences how severe sexual harassment is perceived to be. I therefore hypothesize:

***H2****:* Women will perceive scenarios of verbal sexual harassment as more severe than men.

Furthermore, severity perceptions of verbal sexual harassment do not depend on the observer's and claimant's genders alone. Instead, the interplay between the gender of the claimant and the gender of the observer may play a role in shaping how severely verbal sexual harassment is evaluated.

**The Interaction of Claimant and Observer Gender in Evaluating Verbal Sexual Harassment**

Building on the previously discussed research, which established that both the gender of the claimant and the gender of the observer independently influence severity perceptions of sexual harassment, this section explores whether these factors interact. Specifically, it examines how the observer's gender may moderate the effect of the claimants' gender on the perceived severity in cases of verbal sexual harassment. Understanding how these factors may interact is important because perceptions of SH influence severity evaluations, especially in ambiguous cases of VSH where evaluations are often subjective and prone to biases (Crocker & Major, 1989; Pickel & Gentry, 2017).

One possible source of biases in evaluating VSH scenarios may be in-group favoritism, whereby individuals give preferential treatment to members of their own group (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). In the context of evaluating sexual harassment scenarios, observers may show preferential treatment when evaluating scenarios involving a claimant of their own gender (Zhou et al., 2024). Women in particular tend to show stronger in-group favoritism than men, showing more empathy and support for other women (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004).

This tendency toward in-group favoritism can be better understood through the framework of social identity theory, which proposes that people categorize themselves as members of different social groups and tend to favor those who belong to their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). An individual's most salient group has the biggest impact on their social behaviors and judgments. In the context of SH, if a woman observes a scenario in which another woman is sexually harassed, her gender identity becomes salient, increasing empathy and perspective-taking (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). This heightened empathy enhances a woman's likelihood of perceiving the SH as threatening and labeling a behavior as SH (Zhou et al., 2024).

In addition, women's more frequent and severe exposure to sexual harassment further sensitizes them to recognize SH (Blumenthal, 1998; Chawala et al., 2021; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Rotundo et al., 2001). Taken these findings together, we expect female observers will perceive verbal sexual harassment against female claimants more severely.

In contrast, men are less likely to show automatic in-group bias, meaning that they are less likely to automatically empathize with a male claimant (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). Furthermore, men also often struggle to validate SH claims made by other men (Zhou et al., 2024). One reason for this struggle is that male claimants of SH are seen as vulnerable, which

poses a threat to masculinity. This vulnerability challenges the strength and control associated with traditional masculinity norms, making it harder for observers to empathize with the male claimant (Zhou et al., 2024).

Perceptions of SH severity also shift depending on the perpetrator's gender. When a woman is the instigator of SH, it violates traditional gender expectations and typical power dynamics. This violation can create discomfort in male observers, as they may struggle with the inversion of traditional gender roles (Moss-Racusin et al., 2010; Van Kleef et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2024). Taken together, these factors have led me to hypothesize:

***H3****:* Female observers will perceive scenarios of VSH with female targets as more severe, whereas male observers will not perceive scenarios of VSH with male targets as more severe.

Having established the possible mechanisms underlying gender differences in perceptions of SH, the following section will empirically examine our hypotheses.

## Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the gender of a claimant and the gender of an observer influence the perceived severity of verbal sexual harassment. This was tested using a one-off brief online vignette-based experiment in which participants had to rate the severity of an ambiguous VSH workplace scenario. The scenario was designed to reflect realistic, low-level VSH in the workplace.

### Participants and Procedure

Upon receiving ethical approval, participants were recruited via convenience sampling to fill out an online survey. To find participants, we utilized social media platforms and student groups. Specifically, we used a standardized prompt informing participants that the study was

about how people perceive workplace interactions and evaluate allegations of harm. It mentioned the length of the study and that participation was voluntary and anonymous. Inclusion criteria were that participants demonstrated sufficient comprehension of English to complete the survey and were above the age of 16.

Before beginning the study, participants were asked to give informed consent and were informed about their right to withdraw at any time. After providing informed consent, participants started the first part of the experiment, answering demographic questions about their gender. During the second part of the study, participants were asked to read through and evaluate different vignettes. Only one vignette, which addressed verbal sexual harassment, is relevant to the current thesis and will be analyzed here.[2]

The experiment, which I will discuss in greater detail shortly, involved vignettes that described an ambiguous scenario depicting allegations of non-physical, low-level sexual harassment in the workplace. Upon completion of the survey, participants were debriefed on the purpose of the study and were again given the option to confirm or rescind their consent.

A total of 234 participants were recruited for the study. Following data evaluation, certain responses were excluded from the final analysis to ensure data integrity. In total, 88 responses were removed due to incomplete responses or because participants withdrew consent after the debriefing process. Additionally, we removed two participants that identified as non-binary or preferred not to say their gender when testing our second and third hypotheses, as they focused on the binary gender of the observer and therefore required a clear categorization as either male

[2] This study was part of a larger research project conducted by multiple students. All participants answered demographic questions related to their gender, political ideology, immigration status, and sexual orientation. The participants had to evaluate five different vignettes, each describing an ambiguous scenario depicting a claim of non-physical harm. In this paper, only the variables and vignettes related to my research question will be discussed, as the others are beyond the scope of my thesis.

or female. The final sample size was $N = 144$, with 68.05% ($N = 98$) being female and 31.94% ($N = 46$) being male.

**Study Design**

To examine whether the perceived severity of verbal sexual harassment is influenced by the claimant's gender and the observer's gender, our study employed a between-subjects design where the claimant's gender was experimentally manipulated across two sub-conditions. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two versions of a brief, fictional workplace scenario: in one, a female employee experiences verbal sexual harassment from a male colleague; in the other, a male employee experiences verbal sexual harassment from a female colleague. The scenarios were designed to reflect realistic and relatable workplace dynamics of verbal sexual harassment, while the nature of the verbal sexual harassment was kept deliberately ambiguous but clearly verbal. This allowed room for subjective interpretations of the scenario by the observers. To isolate the effect of gender on the observers' perceptions, all other factors were held constant. Therefore, the scenarios were very similar in content and structure apart from the gendered names and pronouns used. This controlled design allowed for a focused investigation of how the gender of both the claimant and the observer may bias responses to sexual harassment.

The exact example of one of the scenarios used is the following:

***Lisa's Experience at a Marketing Agency***

*"Lisa works at a respected marketing agency that values creativity and teamwork. Lately, she has begun to feel uneasy around her colleague, Alex. During meetings and informal conversations, Alex occasionally makes comments that feel overly personal, such as joking that Lisa "has a way of getting people's attention" or suggesting she will go far if she "plays her cards right." Lisa is sure that those comments are not as innocent as they seem.*

*When Lisa tries to keep things focused on work, Alex tends to laugh it off, saying she is "reading too much into things" or that he is "just being nice." Others do not seem to notice anything unusual, but Lisa is*

*increasingly unsure how to respond. The remarks continue, and she finds herself dreading their interactions."*

## Measures

### *Severity Perception of Verbal Sexual Harassment*

To evaluate how severe the participants experienced the VSH to be, we used a 3-item harm perception scale adapted from Reynolds et al. (2020). Participants were asked to rate the severity of the scenario by responding to the following items: "The behavior the individual is describing is (…)": "serious," "concerning," or "harmful." Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with each of the items on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A reliability analysis was conducted with a Cronbach's α of .84, suggesting high internal consistency across the items.

# Results

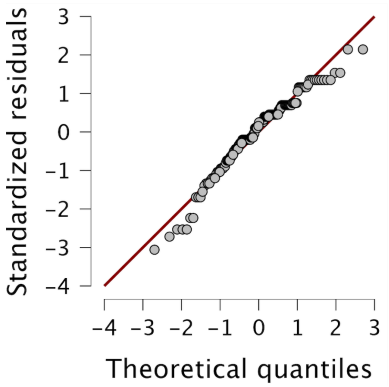
## Assumptions

All statistical analyses were conducted using *SPSS* with a set significance level at $p = .05$. Prior to conducting inferential analyses, key assumptions were evaluated. The examination of Q-Q plots indicated a normal distribution of residuals (see Figure 1). Though there are some deviations at the tails, they are not extreme or concerning. The assumption of independence of observations was met, as data were collected via an anonymous online questionnaire completed individually by participants. The assumption of homogeneity of variance was evaluated using Levene's test of equality of error variance. This result was significant, $F(3, 140) = 4.79$, $p = .003$, indicating that the assumption was violated. As such, the results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) should be interpreted with caution. To address the violated assumption, BCA

bootstrapped estimates (1,000 samples) were used for all hypothesis tests later on in our analysis to increase the robustness of the results.

**Figure 1**

*Q-Q Plot of Residuals*




**Hypothesis Testing**

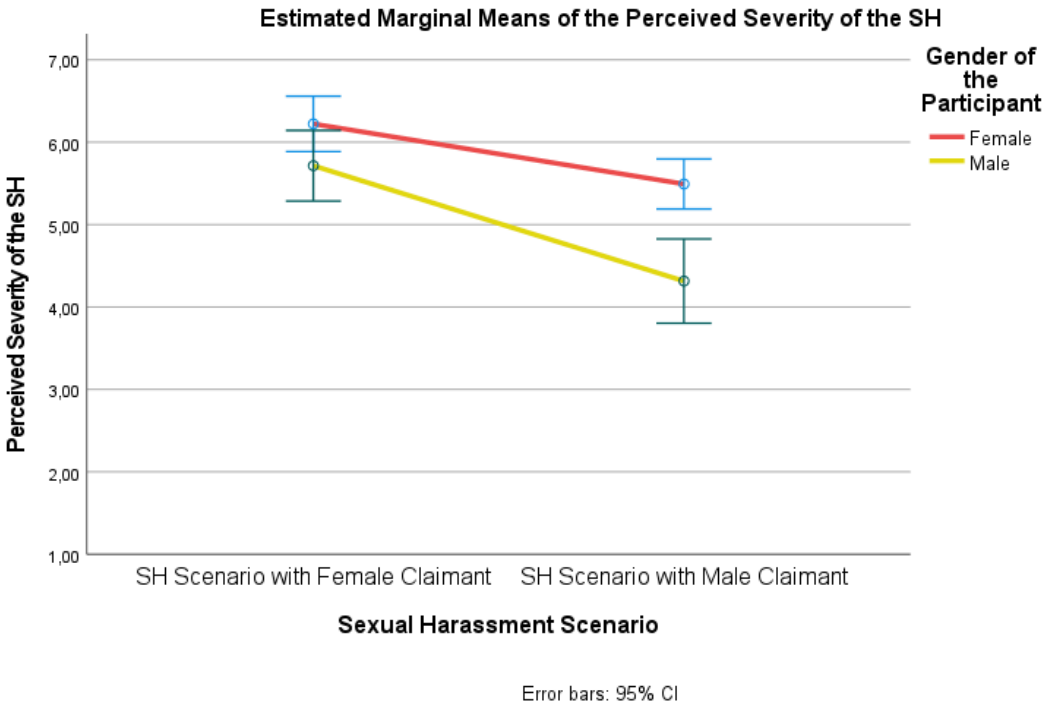
To test our first hypothesis, whether an SH scenario with a female claimant will be perceived as more severe than with a male claimant, a two-way ANOVA was conducted with "gender of the claimant" (coded as 0 = female, 1 = male) as the independent variable and "perceived severity of the claim" as the dependent variable. Consistent with our first hypothesis, we found that female VSH claimants ($M = 6.03$, $SD = 0.95$) were perceived as more severe than male VSH claimants (M = 5.21, $SD = 1.38$), $F(1, 140) = 27.28$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .109$ (see Figure 2).

To test our second hypothesis, whether female observers will perceive sexual harassment as more severe than male observers, we used a two-way ANOVA with "gender of the observer" (coded as 0 = female, 1 = male) as the independent variable and "perceived severity of the claim" as the dependent variable. Consistent with our second hypothesis, we found that women ($M =$

5.82, *SD* = 1.11) perceived sexual harassment as more severe than men (*M* = 5.14, *SD* = 1.43), *F*(1, 140) = 17.09, *p* < .001, ηp² = .163 (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Perceived Severity of the Observer and Claimant Gender Distribution*




For our final hypothesis, we used a two-way ANOVA to examine whether the relationship between the claimants' gender and the perceived severity of the SH was moderated by the observer's gender. The analysis revealed that the interaction effect was not statistically significant, *F*(1, 140) = 2.71, *p* = .102, ηp² = .019 (see Figure 2). The result indicates that the observer's gender did not significantly moderate the relationship between the claimant's gender and perceived severity. That means women did not find SH scenarios with female targets more severe, and men did not find SH scenarios with male targets less severe. Thus, our third hypothesis was not supported.

Due to the homogeneity violation, we performed a bootstrapped 2 x 2 ANOVA using SPSS's General Linear Model procedure in order to assess the robustness of our findings. Bootstrapping parameter estimates showed a significant main effect of observer gender, $F(1, 140) = 17.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .109$, with female observers ($M = 5.82$, $SD = 1.11$, 95% BCa CI [5.58, 6.05]) perceiving the scenarios as more severe than male observers ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.43$, 95% BCa CI [4.70, 5.56]). The results also showed a significant main effect of the claimant's gender, $F(1, 140) = 27.28$, $p = .001$, $\eta p^2 = .163$, with female claimants scenarios ($M = 6.03$, $SD = .95$, 95% BCa CI [5.79, 6.25]) rated as more severe than male claimants scenarios ($M = 5.19$, $SD = 1.39$, 95% BCa CI [4.90, 5.51]). The interaction effect was not significant, $F(1, 140) = 2.71$, $p = .102$, $\eta p^2 = .019$. The means, however, do suggest a pattern in line with our hypothesis, particularly for male observers evaluating male claimants ($M = 4.32$, 95% *BCa CI* [3.71, 4.96]) and female observers evaluating female claimants ($M = 6.22$, 95% *BCa CI* [5.99, 6.44]). Despite these differences, overlapping confidence intervals suggest no robust moderation effect.

## Discussion

The study investigates how perceptions of verbal sexual harassment (VSH) are shaped by the gender of the claimant and the gender of the observer. Specifically, our research examined whether these gender dynamics influence how severely individuals perceive the VSH to be. Based on the existing literature concerning perceptions of SH, three predictions were made. Grounded in Reynolds et al. 's (2020) usage of moral typecasting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009) and gender stereotypes, we hypothesized that a VSH scenario with a female claimant would be perceived as more severe (H1). Furthermore, based on findings on gender differences in exposure and reaction to SH, we predicted that female observers would perceive the VSH as

more severe (H2). Lastly, grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and ingroup favoritism (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004), we predicted that female observers would find VSH scenarios with female claimants more severe, whereas male observers would not perceive scenarios of VSH with male claimants as more severe (H3).

In order to test our hypotheses, we conducted an online vignette-based survey in which participants were randomly assigned to read one of two brief workplace scenarios in which either a male or female was being verbally sexually harassed. The scenario was kept purposefully ambiguous to resemble the often subtle real-world workplace situations of VSH. This ambiguity of VSH is theoretically important, as ambiguous behaviors are more open to subjective interpretations, which are shaped by an individual's prior beliefs and biases (Gordon & Cohen, 2005). Unlike physical SH, VSH often lacks a clear threshold as to what constitutes harassment and therefore leaves more room for biases to influence severity judgments.

Consistent with our expectations, we found two significant main effects: VSH scenarios with female claimants were rated as more severe, and female observers rated VSH scenarios as more severe than male observers. These findings align with existing data showing that ambiguous SH is especially vulnerable to gendered biases (Gordon & Cohen, 2005). However, our results did not provide any significant findings supporting the interaction effect. That is, female observers did not judge VSH scenarios with female claimants as more severe, and male observers did not judge VSH scenarios with male claimants as less severe.

**Theoretical Implications**

Our study has several theoretical implications, contributing to the literature on gendered moral evaluations and social perceptions of SH. First, the finding that SH scenarios with female

claimants were perceived as more severe, aligns with Reynold et al.'s (2020) usage of moral typecasting theory (Gray & Wegner, 2009). They propose that people readily assign women as moral patients (victims), whereas men are more likely to be cast as moral agents (perpetrators). In other words, observers more easily put female claimants in the role of the victim, whereas male claimants do not evoke the same level of perceived suffering. This type of bias is well documented in other research; female claimants of sexual harassment are viewed as more favorable and suffering more than male claimants of sexual harassment (Cesario, 2020). Our findings align with literature that suggests harm towards men is perceived as less severe than harm towards women (Graso & Reynolds, 2024) and that ambiguous VSH may trigger similar gender biases in severity perceptions as more overt SH does (Goh et al., 2022). Moreover, the interpretation of harm severity does not just depend on the behavior itself but on the person claiming the harm.

Second, the finding that female observers perceived the VSH scenario as more severe than male observers aligns with prior research on perceptions of SH; women tend to interpret a broader range of behaviors as SH and see SH as more severe than men do (Rotundo et al., 2001; Zhou et al., 2024). This may stem from women's more frequent and severe exposure to SH (Blumenthal, 1998; Chawla et al., 2021; Rotundo et al., 2001), making women more attuned to detecting cues of SH and recognizing even ambiguous behavior as harmful (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). Men, in contrast, are less frequently targeted by SH and view SH as less problematic and threatening (Rotundo et al., 2001; Stockdale et al., 2004). Men's lack of awareness of SH leads to the threshold of labeling a behavior as SH being higher than for women (Rotundo et al., 2004).

Our results, therefore, suggest that the gender identity of the observer shapes severity perceptions of SH.

Our third theoretical implication comes from the lack of predicted interaction between the observer's gender and the claimant's gender. That is, we found no evidence supporting our hypothesis that female observers would perceive VSH scenarios with female claimants to be more severe and that male observers would perceive VSH scenarios with male claimants to be less severe. This assumption was based on literature using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) predicting ingroup bias: we expected that female observers would show more sympathy to a female claimant due to stronger ingroup favoritism among women (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). However, this pattern was not observed; instead, most observers, regardless of their gender, found the female claimant scenario to be more severe than the male claimant scenario. This finding aligns with previous findings that harm towards women is perceived as more severe than harm towards men (Graso & Reynolds, 2024).

Furthermore, in line with Cleveland & Kerst's (1993) findings, we also found female observers were generally more sensitive to SH, regardless of the claimant's gender. As discussed previously, women's heightened exposure to SH (Blumenthal, 1998; Rotundo et al., 2001; Chawla et al., 2021) contributes to women recognizing SH cues more frequently (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). Contrary to our expectations, male observers did not perceive a male claimant's scenario as less severe. We suggest that these findings align with literature regarding male victimhood, suggesting men generally perceive SH as less severe (Berdhal et al., 1996; Rotundo et al., 2001; Stockdale et al., 2004). Our findings imply that traits related to observers of SH, such as exposure to SH, may play a bigger role in shaping perceptions of sexual harassment than

if they share the same gender as the claimant. These theoretical implications pave the way for practical implications in real-world SH evaluations.

**Practical Implications**

Going beyond theoretical implications, our findings also have practical implications for dealing with SH. It is necessary to address potential gender biases in how SH complaints are treated. Our findings suggest that SH scenarios with male claimants are not considered as severe as for a female claimant. Organizations should therefore try to incorporate these insights into SH prevention and response training to ensure all claimants receive equal protection. Furthermore, the finding that SH scenarios with male claimants are not seen as severe could have serious implications for the legal and policy framework around SH. If judges, jurors, mediators, or policymakers carry the same biases as the participants in our study, male victims of harassment might not receive endorsement or protection in legal situations. Therefore, more comprehensive SH awareness seminars should be incorporated for legal professionals and jurors in order to prevent biases when evaluating a case of SH.

Moreover, the gender difference found in observers' evaluation behavior suggests that reporting systems and investigative procedures should be reviewed to ensure they are not biased. The finding that male observers perceive SH scenarios as less severe than women do suggests that there may be a risk of gender misperceptions. In the workplace, this could lead to differing perceptions if an SH incident occurs. Female employees might label a verbal derogatory behavior as SH, whereas a male employee may be more inclined to see the behavior as harmless. In order to address this difference in perception, workplaces could include bystander intervention

programs that motivate all employees to listen to and validate their colleagues' concerns. All claimants, regardless of their gender, deserve to have their experiences of SH taken seriously.

In practice, organizations should develop better SH policies that explicitly include verbal and ambiguous harassment, reinforcing that SH is not defined by physicality alone. Additionally, gender bias training or education aimed at deconstructing skewed perceptions of victimhood, especially regarding male victims, should be enforced.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

While this study offers insights into how gender influences perceptions of VSH, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, participants were limited and recruited via convenience sampling. Therefore, our sample was lacking generalizability because we most likely recruited young, educated individuals from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, our sample had an over-representation of female participants (68%), which could have skewed perceptions of sexual harassment toward higher sensitivity, possibly inflating the main effects. Moreover, gender-diverse participants and those who preferred not to report their gender were excluded from the analysis of the second and third hypotheses, further decreasing the generalizability. Current research in this field is binary and lacks inclusivity for gender non-conforming individuals. Future studies should aim to recruit more diverse and gender-balanced samples to enhance external validity.

A second limitation is that our study did not include any measurements regarding individual differences that could have influenced the observers' perception of SH. For example, an individual's past experiences with SH either as claimants themselves or as witnesses of SH could shape how they interpret ambiguous scenarios. Such experiences could increase

individuals' sensitivity to SH and possibly influence their evaluations. Future research could include standardized measures assessing an individual's attitude towards or previous experience with SH. By exploring whether individual differences in SH exposure could mediate or moderate the observed effects, researchers could understand how psychological mechanisms based on personal experiences or attitudes influence SH perception.

A third limitation of our study lies in its experimental design. Firstly, the between-subjects design restricted participants to viewing only a single scenario, which limited their ability to make comparisons between different claimants and perpetrators. This choice in design may have reduced sensitivity to biases, as participants could not compare male and female claimants. Secondly, the study focused exclusively on VSH using a single written vignette. While this approach allowed us to control the manipulation of the claimant's gender, the vignette, which portrayed very subtle, non-physical forms of SH, may not have been perceived as serious by participants. As a result, the study may not fully capture the reality of SH experiences, limiting ecological validity and generalizability to real-life SH situations. In the future, studies should incorporate a range of SH severities, such as those that display a clear power imbalance, physical coercion, or even online SH, to test whether ambiguity of a situation moderates gender effects. Additionally, a within-subjects design in which participants assess multiple gendered scenarios with different levels of SH severities may give more robust findings, especially in exploring how perception varies by harassment forms.

Lastly, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated, as indicated by Levene’s Test. Although bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrapping was used to generate more reliable estimates, the results should still be interpreted with caution. Future replications should consider

either larger samples or alternative analytical strategies to stabilize the possible variance across conditions and reduce the risk of biased interpretations.

## Conclusion

At its core, this study shows that judgments of sexual harassment are influenced by who is observing and who is being observed, especially in ambiguous situations like verbal sexual harassment. Women are more likely to be seen as victims in cases of SH and are also more likely to classify a behavior as SH. This research reminds us that recognizing harm is not just about what was said but about who is speaking, who is observing, and the lens through which we view both. Moving forward, addressing SH requires a cultural shift toward empathy and an expanded understanding that everyone's experiences matter.

## References

APA Dictionary of Psychology. (2018). https://dictionary.apa.org/sexual-harassment

Atwater, L. E., Tringale, A. M., Strum, R. E., Taylor, S. N., & Braddy, P. W. (2018). Looking ahead: How what we know about sexual harassment now informs us of the future. *Organizational Dynamics*, *48*(4). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orgdyn.2018.08.008

Bates, L. (2014). *Everyday Sexism*. Simon & Schuster.

Berdahl, J. L., & Aquino, K. (2009). Sexual behavior at work: Fun or folly? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *94*(1), 34-47. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012981

Berdahl, J. L., Magley, V. J., & Waldo, C. R. (1996). The sexual harassment of men: Exploring the concept with theory and data. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *20*(4), 427-547. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1996.tb00320.x

Bosson, J. K., Vandello, J. A., Bumaford, R. M., Weaver, J. R., & Azru Wasti, S. (2009). Precarious manhood and displays of physical aggression. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *35*, 623-634. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208331161

Bucchianeri, M. M., Eisenberg, M. E., Wall, M. M., Piran, N., & Neumark-Sztainer, D. (2014). Multiple types of harassment: associations with emotional well-being and unhealthy behaviors in adolescents. *The Journal of adolescent health:official publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, *54*(6), 724-729. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.10.205

Cesario, B. (2020). Attitudes about victims of workplace sexual harassment based on sex. *Current Research in Behavioral Sciences*, *1*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crbeha.2020.100006

Chawla, N., Gabriel, A. S., O'Leary Kelly, A., & Rosen, C. C. (2021). From #MeToo to #TimesUp: Identifying next steps in sexual harassment research in the organizational sciences. *Journal of Management*, *47*(3), 551-566. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206320980518

Cleveland, J. N., & Kerst, M. E. (1993). Sexual harassment and perceptions of power: An under-articulated relationship. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *42*(1), 49-67. https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1993.1004

Cortina, L. M., & Areguin, M. A. (2021). Putting people down and pushing them out: Sexual harassment in the workplace. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior 8*(1), 285-309. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-012420-055606

Cortina, L. M., & Berdahl, J. L. (2008). Sexual Harassment in Organizations: A Decade of Research in Review. *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Behavior*, *469*, 469-96. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781849200448.n26

Cuddy, A. J., Fiske, S. T., & Glick, P. (2007). The BIAS map: Behaviors from intergroup affect and stereotypes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *92*, 631-648. http://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.4.631

Eagly, A. H., & Mladinic, A. (1994). Are people prejudiced against women? Some answers from research on attitudes, gender stereotypes, and judgments of competence. *European Review of Social Psychology*, *5*, 1-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779543000002

Ellemers, N., & Haslam, S. A. (2012). Social identity theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.),. *Handbook of theories of social psychology (Vol. 2, pp. 379–398). Sage Publications*. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446249222.n45

European Commission & Eurostat. (2024). Ever-working women who have experienced sexual harassment at work, by occurrence of the last episode. *Publication Office of the European Union*. https://doi.org/10.2908/GBV_SHW_OCC

Fairchild, K., & Rudman, L. A. (2008). Every day, stranger harassment and women's objectification. *Social Justice Research*, *21*(3), 338-357. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11211-008-0073-0

Fitzgerald, L. F. (1993). Sexual harassment: Violence against women in the workplace. *American Psychologist*, *48*(10), 1070-1076. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.48.10.1070

Gaude, L. B., Cabrita, J., Eiffe, F. F., Gerstenberger, B., Ivaškaitė-Tamošiūnė, V., Parent-Thirion, A., Peruffo, E., Weber, T., & White, C. (2022, November 29). *Working conditions in the time of COVID-19: Implications for the future | European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions*. Eurofound. Retrieved June 20, 2025, from https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/en/publications/2022/working-conditions-time-covid-19-implications-future

Goh, J. X., Bandt-Law, B., Cheek, N. N., Sinclair, S., Sinclair, C. R., & Kaiser, C. R. (2022). Narrow prototypes and neglected victims: Understanding perceptions of sexual harassment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *122*(5), 873-893. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000260

Gordon, A. K., & Cohen, M. (2005). Innocent Flirting or Sexual Harassment? Perceptions of Ambiguous Workplace Situations. *Representative Research in Social Psychology*, *28*, 47-58.

Graso, M., & Reynolds, T. (2024). A feminine advantage in the domain of harm: a review and path forward. Graso, M & Reynolds, T 2024, 'A Feminine Advantage in the Domain of Harm: A Review and Path Forward',. *Biology Letters*, *20*(11). https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2024.0381.

Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2009). Moral typecasting: Divergent perceptions of moral agents and moral patients. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*(3), 505-520. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013748

Gray, K., & Wegner, D. M. (2011). To escape blame, don't be a hero—Be a victim. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *47*, 516-519. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.12.012

Heilman, M. E. (2001). Description and prescription: How gender stereotypes prevent women's ascent up the organizational ladder. *Journal of Social Issues*, *57*, 657-674. https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00234

Kabat-Farr, D., & Cortina, L. M. (2014). Sex-based harassment in employment: New insights into gender and context. *Law and Human Behavior*, *38*(1), 58-72. https://doi.org/10.1037/lhb0000045

Kahneman, D. (2012). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Kessler, A. M., Kennair, L. O., Grøntvedt, T. V., Bjørkheim, I., Drejer, I., & Bendixen, M. (2020). The effect of prototypical #MeToo features on the perception of social-sexual

behavior as sexual harassment. S*exuality & Culture*, *24*(5), 1271-1291.https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09675-7

Major, B., Quinton, W. J., & McCoy, S. K. (2002). Antecedents and Consequences of Attributions to Discrimination: Theoretical and Empirical Advances. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, *34*, 251-330. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(02)80007-7

Matasayi Aji, L., Nuhu Adamu, N., Azumi Kefas, V., Godwin, A., & Garba Hassan, C. (2024). *Recent Topics Related to Human Sexual Practices: Sexual Practices and Sexual Crimes* (Vol. 17-32). IntechOpen. http://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.1003133

McDonald, P. (2012). Workplace sexual harassment 30 years on: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *14*(1), 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2370.2011.00300.

National Academies of Sciences, Benya, F. F., Widnall, S. E., Johnson, P. A., & Engineering, and Medicine, Policy and Global Affairs, Committee on Women in Science, Engineering, and Medicine, Committee on the Impacts of Sexual Harassment in Academia. (2018). Sexual Harassment of Women: Climate, Culture, and Consequences in Academic Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. *National Academies Press (US)*.

Nitschke, F. T., McKimmie, B. M., & Vanman, E. J. (2019). A meta-analysis of the emotional victim effect for female adult rape complainants: Does complainant distress influence credibility? *Psychological Bulletin*, *145*(10), 953-979. https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000206

Peled-Laskov, R., Ein-Tal, I., & Lutzy, C. (2020). How Does it Feel? Factors Predicting Emotions and Perceptions Towards Sexual Harassment. *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology*, *9*, 37-51. https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2020.09.05

Pina, A., & Gannon, T. A. (2012). An overview of the literature on antecedents, perceptions, and behavioral consequences of sexual harassment. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, *18*(2), 209-232. https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2010.501909

Pina, A., Gannon, T. A., & Saunders, B. (2009). An overview of the literature on sexual harassment: Perpetrator, theory, and treatment issues. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *14*(2), 126-138. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2009.01.002

Quick, J. C., & McFadyen, M. (2017). Sexual harassment: Have we made any progress? *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *22*(3), 286-298. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000054

Reinicke, K. (2022). Men After #MeToo: Being an Ally in the Fight Against Sexual Harassment. *Springer International Publishing.* 28-29

Reynold, T., Howard, C., Sjåstad, H., Zhu, L., Baumeister, R. F., Aquino, K., & Kim, J. ((2020) Man up and take it: Gender bias in moral typecasting. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, (161), 120-141. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.05.00

Rotundo, M., Nguyen, D. H., & Sackett, P. R. (2001). A meta-analytic review of gender differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. *The Journal of applied psychology*, *86*(5), 914-922. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.86.5.914

Rudman, L. A., & Fairchild, K. (2004). Reactions to counterstereotypic behavior: The role of backlash in cultural stereotype maintenance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*(2), 157-176. hhttps://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.157

Rudman, L. A., & Goodwin, S. A. (2004). Gender differences in automatic in-group bias: Why do women like women more than men like men? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *87*, 494-509. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.87.4.494.

Rudman, L. A., Greenwald, A. G., & McGhee, D. E. (2001). Implicit self-concept and evaluative implicit gender stereotypes: Self and ingroup share desirable traits. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *27*, 1164-1178. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167201279009

Rudolph, U., Roesch, S., Greitemeyer, T., & Weiner, B. (2004). A meta-analytic review of help giving and aggression from an attributional perspective: Contributions to a general theory of motivation. *Cognition and Emotion*, *18*, 815-848. https://doi.org/10.1080/02699930341000248

Smith, C. A., & Elisworth, P. C. (1985). Patterns of cognitive appraisal in emotion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *48*, 813-838. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.48.4.813

Stockdale, M. S., Gandolfo Berry, C., Schneider, R. W., & Cao, F. (2004). Perceptions of the sexual harassment of men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *5*(2), 158-167. https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.5.2.158

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.). *The social psychology of intergroup relations*, 33-47.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1986). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.). *The social psychology of intergroup relations (Rev. ed., pp. 33–47). Brooks/Cole.*

Thaler, R. H. (2015). Misbehaving: The making of behavioral economics. *W.W. Norton & Company*.

Van Kleef, G. A., Gelfand, M. J., & Jetten, J. (2019). The dynamic nature of social norms: New perspectives on norm development, impact, violation, and enforcement. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *84*(103814). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2019.05.002

Zhou, Y., Nguyen, H. D., Revier, M. S., Krueger, K. R., & Sackett, P. R. (2024). An updated examination of gender differences in sexual harassment perception: A meta-analysis and a survey study. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, *29*(6), 373-408. https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000391

# Appendix

## Usage of Artificial Intelligence

I acknowledge the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools in the development of this thesis. Specifically, I used OpenAI's ChatGPT (https://chat.openai.com) to generate materials for background research and receive feedback on the grammar and clarity of my writing. It did not generate original content or contribute to the development of arguments, analysis, or interpretations. No content generated by AI technologies has been presented as my own work.