

The Role of Target Attractiveness and Observer Gender in Harm Perception

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PSB3E-BT15: Bachelor Thesis

Group Number: 17

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June 26, 2025

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Abstract

What determines how we perceive someone's harm? While we like to assume our social judgements to be fair, research indicates that they are often subject to subtle biases, including those tied to physical appearances. One such attractiveness bias suggests that attractive individuals are perceived and treated more favorably, even in contexts involving harm. Studies have shown that attractive victims are evaluated as more credible and receive greater support than unattractive victims, while questioning whether the observer's gender shapes the extent of this bias. Yet, how this attractiveness bias operates in more ambiguous, workplace settings remains unclear. Aiming to bridge this research gap, the present thesis investigates how a female target's physical attractiveness affects perceptions of harm severity and support for punishment, and whether the observer's gender moderates these effects. Using a between-subjects, online vignette-based experiment among predominantly female university students, participants ($N = 144$) evaluated allegations of social exclusion at work reported by a woman, described as either attractive or unattractive in a short, written scenario. Contrary to expectations, no significant effects were found for target's attractiveness, observer's gender, or their interaction. Although a marginal trend suggested attractive targets to be evaluated as experiencing more severe harm, neither target's attractiveness nor observer's gender significantly shaped moral judgements. These results challenge the assumption of appearance-based biases to universally influence social and harm perceptions. Instead, findings hint at a context dependency of this bias, perhaps diminishing its influence in subtle scenarios.

Keywords: attractiveness bias, gender differences, harm perception, moral judgements, workplace exclusion

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When assessing social behavior and scenarios, you will most likely assume your personal appraisals to be correct and fair (Robinson et al., 1995). However, human perception is shaped by several cognitive templates and shortcuts, influencing how we judge social events and individuals within certain situations (Gray & Wegner, 2009). These heuristics and biases often depend on contextual cues and person characteristics (Hester & Gray, 2020). One particularly salient characteristic subject to cognitive biases is physical attractiveness. A body of research found an attractiveness stereotype, suggesting that physically attractive people are perceived to be more desirable on several characteristics, as compared to less physically attractive individuals (Nault et al., 2020; Sprecher, 1989). Importantly, this bias extends beyond personality judgements and can influence rather serious harm perceptions, making physical attractiveness beneficial for actors within a harm scenario (Vrij & Firmin, 2001). Consequently, this could have striking legal and social outcomes for both offenders and targets of harm.

But are all humans equally prone to making attractiveness-based judgements or are certain individuals or groups especially inclined toward this bias? Indeed, research suggests men to be particularly influenced by physical appearance when evaluating women, making them more susceptible to attractiveness biases than women when judging the opposite gender (Bak, 2010). This may be explained by gender differences in how physical attractiveness is perceived, with men placing greater emphasis on a partner's physical appearance than women (Feingold, 1990; Murphy et al., 2014). In turn, female victims of harm are affected more severely (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983). Accordingly, the present analysis focuses exclusively on how female targets' harm allegations are perceived. Notably, while retaining the term *victim* when referring to previous research, the present analysis adopts the term *target* to reflect that the presented harm is alleged and ambiguous.

Taking harm perception, the attractiveness bias, and gender differences together, it becomes clear that not only do both the target's physical attractiveness and the observer's gender seem to independently shape social and moral judgements, the two constructs also seem to be intertwined themselves. Accordingly, this thesis and integrated study seeks to answer questions related to how a female target's physical attractiveness influences an observer's perception of harm, as well as whether the observer's gender moderates this effect. Specifically, I will examine whether attractive women claiming harm are perceived differently compared to less attractive female targets, while investigating whether these perceptions differ for male and female observers. Hereby, the present research aims to bridge gaps in social psychology and gender research by identifying potential underlying biases and relevant factors in harm perception.

Theoretical Foundation

The Attractiveness Bias in Harm Perception

Although people reportedly evaluate physical attractiveness to not be as important as other characteristics in social judgments, practical settings have generally shown it to be of great importance to humans (Nault et al., 2020; Sprecher, 1989). However, not only has attractiveness been shown to be even more salient in forming impressions than perceived (Sprecher, 1989), it has also been identified as susceptible to bias. But what are the underlying foundations of this bias, and even more strikingly, what makes this bias so important to consider for actors and observers within harm scenarios? Referred to as the halo effect or the what is beautiful is good hypothesis, decades of research demonstrate that attractive people are evaluated as more favorable on several traits and across various domains (Bak, 2010; Dion et al., 1972). Characteristics including friendliness (Sprecher, 1989), social competency, powerfulness, intelligence, health (Bak, 2010), professionalism, and even higher chances of a happy marriage (Dion et al., 1972) are all attributed to physical attractiveness.

Interestingly, this effect seems to extend beyond personality and lifestyle attributions, as it was observed that attractive, compared to unattractive, individuals receive more overt helping behaviors when in need (Benson et al., 1976). This suggests that attractive people are not only attributed with positive traits, but they are also being treated more favorably in return.

This bias raises critical concerns about the fairness and objectivity of social judgements, especially in situations where such judgements may induce serious consequences for individuals. Such circumstances include situations involving harm, in which the perception of offenders and targets can shape evaluations of moral behavior. As physical attractiveness is a particularly prominent element of identity, I anticipate that this feature will affect how observers interpret and respond to allegations of harm. Indeed, it is suggested that observers of harm behavior automatically categorize the involved actors into dyadic roles of intentional agent and suffering patient depending on situational cues and salient person characteristics (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Supposedly, the degree of victim prototypicality and, in turn, the harm salience influences the ease with which observers cast the respective roles (Reynolds et al., 2020). Each role consequently evokes divergent emotional responses and moral judgements from observers, affecting their responses toward the situational actors (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Typecasted into the patient role, victims of harm receive differential levels of support and concern due to external factors beyond their control (Hester & Gray, 2020).

In line with this perspective, research supports the idea that physical attractiveness influences moral typecasting, suggesting that it is beneficial for both the agent and patient of harm to be physically attractive (Kulka & Kessler, 1978; Vrij & Firmin, 2001). Generally, attractive offenders are perceived to be less responsible for their crimes and treated especially leniently, implying less severe punishment (Efran, 1974; Mackelprang & Becker, 2017). Similarly, attractive victims are also accorded a higher degree of social acceptance, being

perceived as more credible when reporting harm and less responsible for the incident (Calhoun et al., 1978; Simpson, 2019; Vrij & Firmin, 2001). Meanwhile, unattractive victims are assigned greater responsibility and blame for their own victimization (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983). These findings suggest that harm targets benefit from being considered physically attractive and face disadvantages when deemed unattractive. Thus, the field of social psychology progressively emphasizes that identity elements of harm victims are central to social judgements and treatments and should therefore be increasingly incorporated into theories and research (Hester & Gray, 2020).

Interestingly, the described consequences following the attractiveness bias seem to be most profound for female victims, compared to male victims (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983), wherefore this research deliberately decided to investigate exclusively women claiming harm. In line with the previously discussed findings, I make the following first hypothesis:

H1: Observers will perceive a woman's harm allegations as more severe and will express greater support for the punishment of alleged offenders when the female target is physically attractive rather than unattractive.

Observer Gender Differences in Harm Perception

Considering that social perceptions and evaluations of harm are shaped by some identity characteristics of the actors involved, do certain traits of external observers additionally affect how another's harm is evaluated? Research supports this idea, as for instance the observer's gender seems to play a role in shaping perceptions of harm (Hester & Gray, 2020). Although the attractiveness bias generally appears to affect individuals regardless of their gender (Benson et al., 1976; Dion et al., 1972; Larose et al., 1993), a body of literature suggests a differential harm perception for men and women. The overarching suggestion is that women perceive a victim of harm more favorably (Vrij & Firmin, 2001), while men rather attribute more responsibility, blame and less credibility toward the victim

(Calhoun et al., 1976, 1978). Accordingly, it is suggested that men, compared to women, perceive the negative impact on the victim and the severity of harm to a lesser degree (Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022).

Importantly, the reported literature is based on research focusing on the perception of exclusively female targets, as also adopted in the present research. Therefore, an in-group bias for female observers is proposed to account for the above stated findings (Calhoun et al., 1976). This bias suggests that a woman observing another woman experiencing harm can better adopt the other's perspective and identify with being a victim than men can (Calhoun et al., 1976). Crucially, although men also generally exhibit a similar but more subtle in-group bias when observing men, women's implicit in-group bias is particularly profound (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004). Connecting to previous research and the proposed in-group bias among women, I propose the following second hypothesis:

H2: Female observers will perceive a woman's harm allegations as more severe and express greater support for the punishment of alleged offenders than male observers.

Observer Gender Differences in the Attractiveness Bias

The reviewed literature established relevant foundations regarding the suggested effects of both a target's physical attractiveness, as well as an observer's gender on the perception of a woman's harm allegations. While these findings only separately connect the attractiveness bias and an observer's gender to harm perception, is there also a reason to assume a connection between an observer's gender and the attractiveness bias? Indeed, research suggests that the attractiveness bias is not equally profound for every individual or group (Bak, 2010; Murphy et al., 2014). The reason behind questioning whether the observer's gender might moderate the attractiveness bias in harm perception lies within each gender's value of interpersonal physical attractiveness. Decades of research have consistently shown men to assign greater value and emphasis on the partner's physical attractiveness than

women (Feingold, 1990; Larose et al., 1993; Lippa, 2007; Niketta, 2021; Sprecher, 1989). In turn, findings also endorse the suggestion that the attractiveness bias is more profound for men than for women when perceiving the opposite gender (Bak, 2010).

This observation was also found to hold within moral and harm scenarios, with the tendency to attribute more responsibility and blame toward the unattractive compared to the attractive victim being stronger for male than for female observers (Thornton & Ryckman, 1983). Since existing research consistently suggests this bias to be more pervasive for female than male targets, this paper decidedly investigates the role of the observer's gender in the effect of target attractiveness on harm perception for female targets exclusively. In line with the discussed literature, the present research investigates whether the gender of the observer moderates the effect of a female target's attractiveness on harm perception. In other words, I will examine whether the hypothesized effect, that harm allegations will be perceived as more severe and greater support for the punishment of alleged offenders will be expressed when the target is attractive rather than unattractive, differs between male and female observers. Specifically, I state the following third and last hypothesis:

H3: The attractiveness bias associated with female harm targets will be more profound for male than for female observers.

The methodology regarding this paper's approach to investigate the presented research questions and hypotheses will be thoroughly described in the following.

Methods

Participants

Upon receiving ethical approval, participants were invited using convenience sampling through social media platforms, student group chats, and personal networks. The recruitment occurred through a standardized prompt including the topic of the study, its expected duration of around 10 minutes, as well as ethical assurances. Eligibility to complete

the survey required participants to be over the age of 16 and to demonstrate sufficient comprehension of English. Before starting the study, participants were asked to give their informed consent after being informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidential, anonymous treatment of the results. Following data screening, 88 out of 234 individuals who initially participated but did not provide complete responses or reaffirmed their consent after finishing the study were excluded from the final analysis to ensure data integrity. Additionally, two participants who preferred not to disclose their gender or identified as non-binary were excluded from subsequent analyses. The final sample size consisted of $N = 144$, with 68% ($N = 98$) identifying as female and 32% ($N = 46$) as male.

Procedure and Experimental Manipulation

The conducted research was part of a larger online study exploring social perceptions of ambiguous, non-physical workplace harm allegations using multiple vignettes. As the present analysis was only part of this larger collaborative study, most variables and vignettes are beyond the scope of this paper and will therefore not be further explained. I extracted only those variables associated with the participant's gender and the target's attractiveness, relating to my research question of how a female target's physical attractiveness influences an observer's perception of harm.

Having provided informed consent, participants first answered demographic questions including their gender, as well as other distractor variables. Subsequently, the survey employed a between-subjects experimental design, in which participants were randomly assigned to either one of two sub-conditions for each of the in total five different vignettes included in the study.

For both sub-conditions of the attractiveness-based vignette, all participants read about a woman named Emma, perceiving herself to be ignored and overlooked by coworkers during office meetings. Emma clearly questions whether her physical appearance is the

reason why others underestimate her professional presence. The harm description remained deliberately ambiguous because of ethical regulations and the theoretical framework of focusing on allegations of harm. To isolate the effect of attractiveness, the wording and content of the harm allegation was held constant across the two sub-conditions.

Physical attractiveness was manipulated using the two different vignette conditions including a concise but clear written description of Emma being either conventionally physically attractive or rather unattractive. The respective described physical appearance features were based on literature identifying specific attributes associated with perceptions of female physical attractiveness. A body of research suggests a woman to be perceived as more attractive when having symmetrical facial features (e.g., Baudouin & Tiberghien, 2004), hence Emma's description thereof. Describing her "warm smile" is based upon a saying that "A smile is an inexpensive way to improve your looks". Research supports this notion, observing enhanced perceptions of attractiveness toward smiling people (Bowdring et al., 2021). Emma's "polished style" stems from the suggestion that clothing can communicate status, personality and group affiliation, which women use to promote themselves in a positive way (Johnsen & Geher, 2016). Finally, the description of Emma's "confident posture", as well as "captivating presence" can be connected to findings anticipating that extraversion and nonverbal social skills approaches, describing charisma, are perceived as more favorably (Friedman et al., 1988). Simultaneously, these features were not present in the description of Emma in the unattractiveness condition, but rather the presence of oppositional features. The exact scenarios used, both titled "Emma's experience at her workplace", are the following:

Attractiveness Condition:

“Emma works as a healthcare administrator. Whenever she enters a room, her presence often turns heads and draws the attention of others. She frequently receives compliments on her symmetrical features, warm smile, confident posture, and polished style. However, during important office meetings, she often feels her colleagues do not take her contributions seriously, and that no one is truly listening. Yet, when another coworker later repeats her idea, it suddenly seems to be taken seriously. She often feels excluded from key project decisions. At times, she wonders whether her physical appearance leads others to underestimate her competence and professional credibility.”

Unattractiveness Condition:

“Emma works as a healthcare administrator. She tends to blend into the background, and when she enters a room, people rarely seem to take notice. She rarely receives compliments on her appearance; her features are less conventionally symmetrical, her posture a bit slouched, and her style understated and practical. During important office meetings, she often feels her colleagues do not take her contributions seriously, and that no one is truly listening. Yet, when another coworker later repeats her idea, it suddenly seems to be taken seriously. She often feels excluded from key project decisions. At times, she wonders whether her physical appearance leads others to underestimate her competence and professional credibility.”

After reading the vignette, participants evaluated the scenarios using the measures described below. 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.

Measures

Participants were asked to complete three separate 3-item scales assessing their evaluations of alleged workplace mistreatment as presented in the vignettes. The extent to which participants agreed with each of the items was recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. These scales were inspired by Reynolds et al. (2020) and Dakin et al. (2023), who included general measures of harm perceptions and its severity. However, given the limited scope of the present research, I will only investigate two of these scales, namely the ones measuring the perceived harm severity, as well as the expressed support for the punishment of alleged offenders.

Perceived Harm Severity

Measuring how harmful the experience described by Emma is perceived, participants rated the extent to which “The behavior Emma is describing is (...)”: “serious”, “concerning”, and lastly “harmful”. A reliability analysis was conducted, yielding Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .83$, suggesting quite high and satisfactory internal consistency.

Support for Punishment

Additionally, measuring participants’ support for punishing coworkers who allegedly excluded Emma, they rated the extent to which “Employees who make Emma feel excluded (...)”: “Deserve to be punished”, “Should face consequences”, and “Should receive disciplinary action”. The reliability analysis, yielding Cronbach’s alpha of $\alpha = .84$, demonstrated high and satisfactory internal consistency.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

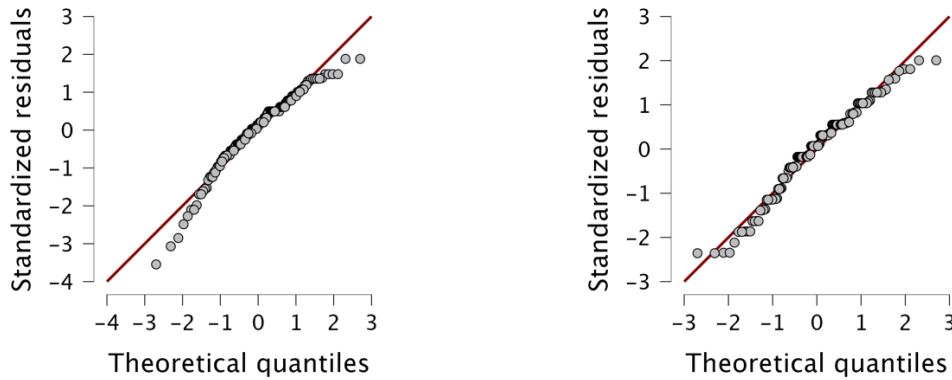
Having applied previously mentioned participant exclusion criteria, a remaining sample size of 144 was used for the statistical analyses. All analyses were conducted using the computer softwares JASP (Version 0.18.3) and IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 28.0).

Assumption checks

Prior to the primary analysis, I conducted the necessary assumption checks to ensure the appropriate use of univariate two-way ANOVA, chosen for its suitability to test my hypotheses. First, the assumption of independent observations was fulfilled, as participants were randomly assigned to either one of the two conditions for each scenario, without using repeated measures. The normality of residuals for each group combination was evaluated using Q-Q-plots for each of the two dependent variables *Perceived Harm Severity* and *Support for Punishment* separately, visualized in Figure 1. As most data points aligned closely with the reference line, except for some unsubstantial variation toward the tails, residuals in both groups appeared to be approximately normally distributed.

Figure 1

Q-Q Plots Depicting the Standardized Residuals of the Dependent Variables 'Perceived Harm Severity' (Left) and 'Support for Punishment' (Right) to test the assumption of normally distributed residuals.



Finally, to test the assumption of homoscedasticity, or in other words the homogeneity of variances across groups, Levene's test was conducted separately for both dependent variables. For *Perceived Harm Severity*, Levene's test was not significant, $F(3,140) = 1.770$, $p = .156$, indicating that there are no significant differences between groups, thus meeting the assumption of homoscedasticity. Similarly, for *Support for Punishment*, the test also yielded a non-significant result, $F(3,140) = 1.247$, $p = .295$, also meeting the assumption of approximately equal variances across groups. To conclude, as all the crucial assumptions for univariate two-way ANOVAs were approximately met, I proceeded with the primary statistical analysis.

Primary Analyses

To test all three hypotheses, I conducted two separate two-way univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs), for each dependent variable: *Perceived Harm Severity* and *Support for Punishment*. Each ANOVA examined the main effects of the target's attractiveness (attractive vs. unattractive), the observer's gender (male vs. female), and their interaction, by comparing the sample mean scores across the respective conditions.

Effects on Perceived Harm Severity

The first hypothesis tested how an attractive target is perceived compared to a rather unattractive target. I anticipated that harm allegations claimed by an attractive woman, compared with an unattractive woman, are perceived as more severe. The analysis revealed that participants in the attractiveness condition ($M = 5.46$, $SD = 1.08$, 95% $CI[5.20, 5.72]$) rated the harm as more severe than in the unattractiveness condition ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.24$, 95% $CI[4.86, 5.42]$). However, the difference between these groups was not statistically significant, $F(1,140) = 2.98$, $p = .087$, with only a small effect size of $\eta^2_p = .021$. Although not reaching statistical significance at the conventional alpha level of .05, this result suggests a marginal trend toward greater perceived harm for attractive female targets. Taken with careful consideration, this aligns with the expected direction.

The second hypothesis tested the effect of the observer's gender, predicting that female observers would perceive the female's harm allegation as more severe than male observers. The analysis showed no statistically significant difference between genders, $F(1,140) = 1.12$, $p = .292$, $\eta^2_p = .008$. Thus, female participants ($M = 5.36$, $SD = 1.16$, 95% $CI[5.13, 5.59]$) did not rate the harm as more severe than male participants ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.19$, 95% $CI[4.75, 5.46]$), failing to support the initial hypothesis.

The third hypothesis stated expectations about the interaction between the target's attractiveness and observer's gender. Specifically, I expected that the effect of the target's attractiveness on perceived harm severity would be moderated by the observer's gender, with stronger anticipated effects for male than for female observers. The analysis revealed no such interaction effect, $F(1,140) = 1.15$, $p = .286$, $\eta^2_p = .008$. Specifically, female participants rating the harm severity of an attractive target ($M = 5.43$, $SD = 1.20$, 95% $CI[5.08, 5.78]$), compared to of an unattractive target ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.14$, 95% $CI[4.97, 5.62]$), did not significantly differ from male participants rating the harm severity of an attractive target ($M =$

5.43, $SD = 0.76$, 95% $CI[5.08, 5.79]$), compared to of an unattractive target ($M = 4.85$, $SD = 1.40$, 95% $CI[4.28, 5.41]$). Given that the observer's gender did not appear to moderate the effect of the target's attractiveness on perceived harm severity, the initial hypothesis could not be supported.

Effects on Support for Punishment

The first hypothesis predicted how a physically attractive target is perceived compared to a rather unattractive target. I expected the attractive target to receive greater support for the punishment of the alleged offenders. The analysis yielded no significant differences between support for punishment expressed for attractive ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.37$, 95% $CI[3.91, 4.57]$) or unattractive female targets ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.42$, 95% $CI[3.68, 4.32]$), $F(1,140) = 1.64$, $p = .202$, $\eta^2_p = .012$, thus not supporting the initial hypothesis.

The second hypothesis tested the effect of the observer's gender, specifically predicting that female participants would express greater support for the punishment of the alleged offenders, compared to male participants. The analysis investigated differences between observing women ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.30$, 95% $CI[3.98, 4.50]$) and observing men ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 1.57$, 95% $CI[3.35, 4.28]$). No significant observer gender differences were found in their level of support for the punishment of an alleged female target, $F(1,140) = 2.38$, $p = .125$, $\eta^2_p = .017$, failing to support the proposed hypothesis.

Lastly, the third hypothesis stated the expectation about the relation between the target's attractiveness and observer's gender. Precisely, I expected that the effect of the target's attractiveness on support for punishment would be moderated by the observer's gender, with stronger anticipated effects for male than for female observers. The analysis showed no significant interaction effect between the attractiveness condition and observer's gender, $F(1,140) = 1.61$, $p = .207$, $\eta^2_p = .011$, as opposed to initially expected. Specifically, the results revealed that female participants expressing their support for punishment of an

attractive target ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.33$, 95% $CI[3.86, 4.63]$), compared to an unattractive target ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.29$, 95% $CI[3.87, 4.61]$), did not significantly differ from male participants expressing their support for the punishment of an attractive target ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 1.54$, 95% $CI[3.46, 4.89]$), compared to of an unattractive target ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.56$, 95% $CI[2.91, 4.17]$). Since the observer's gender did not moderate the effect of the target's attractiveness on support for punishment, these attractiveness-based effects do not seem to be more profound for male than for female observers.

Summary

Overall, the analysis revealed that none of the three initially proposed hypotheses received statistical support. The main effects for the target's attractiveness and the observer's gender, as well as their interaction effect, on both the two dependent variables *perceived harm severity* and *support for punishment* were not shown to be significant. Possible reasons for why these anticipated effects might have failed to emerge will now be discussed.

Discussion

When we evaluate an allegation of workplace harm, does it matter whether the target is physically attractive or unattractive? And do such evaluations of a woman claiming harm depend on whether the observing person is male or female? These were the guiding questions of the present study, which aimed to bridge a gap in research by investigating whether it matters who is claiming harm, as well as who is observing, using an online experimental design. Particularly, two aspects of harm perception were evaluated within the scope of the present paper, namely the perceived harm severity and the support for the punishment of the alleged responsible offenders.

Specifically, I anticipated that being physically attractive would be advantageous for a female target, as an attractiveness bias suggests that observers rate the harm claimed by an attractive woman as more severe and express more support for the punishment of the alleged

offenders. However, the present results did not support these expectations. This suggests that the perceived harm severity, as well as the expressed support for punishment, does not depend on a target's physical attractiveness when reporting identical harm allegations. Interestingly, although not found to be statistically significant and to be considered with caution, findings suggest the trend that observers tend to perceive the harm allegations claimed by attractive targets as more severe. Still, the present findings suggest that attractive female targets are not significantly evaluated or treated more favorably than unattractive targets overall.

Moreover, I expected female observers to rate another female's harm allegations as more severe and express greater support for the punishment against the accused offenders compared to male observers. This hypothesis was based on previous research indicating that women exhibit a stronger in-group bias and greater empathy toward other women than men do. However, findings did not support these expectations, suggesting that there are no significant gender differences in how observers perceive a female target's harm.

Lastly, I anticipated that male observers would show greater differences in harm perception ratings between the attractive and the unattractive target. This was based on research suggesting that men value physical attractiveness more than women and are in turn more strongly influenced by it. However, this expected interaction effect did not emerge, suggesting that men and women do not significantly differ in how they perceive the harm claimed by an attractive compared to an unattractive female target.

Theoretical Implications

The above presented expectations stem from an extensive previously conducted literature review presented within the introduction, combining several established psychological theories and empirical findings. These foundations provided the rationale for hypothesizing the examined effects. However, the observed results highlight a discrepancy

between theory and findings, as none of the theoretical predictions were found to be significant. These null results raise essential questions about the applicability of the proposed theories to the specific framework and methodology employed in the present study.

The main effect for physical attractiveness was rooted in theories supporting the attractiveness bias, which proposes that attractive individuals are not only attributed with positive traits, but they also receive preferential treatment (e.g., Bak, 2010; Benson et al., 1976). Referred to as the halo effect or the what is beautiful is good hypothesis, this bias was extended to contexts involving harm, implying that attractive targets should be perceived as more credible (Simpson, 2019), and offered greater support for the punishment of alleged offenders (Calhoun et al.; 1978). Yet, the present analysis found null results, suggesting that attractive targets are not perceived or treated differently than unattractive targets.

One key difference from prior studies is the emotional salience of the harm context presented in the current study. Previous literature reported the attractiveness bias using rather intense, emotionally and harmfully charged scenarios, often describing sexual offences and rape victims to measure the effect of target's attractiveness within harm contexts (Calhoun et al., 1978; Mackelprang & Becker, 2017). While these highly evocative harm scenarios strongly heightened the emotional salience, the present study instead described subtle, non-physical workplace harm allegations due to strict ethical boundaries and a focus on alleged rather than proven harm. This raises the question of whether the activation or effect of this bias was diluted by the ambiguity or mildness of the harm scenario.

Another methodological divergence between current and previous research frameworks lies within the manipulation of the target's physical attractiveness. While prior researchers manipulated the target's physical attractiveness using photographs or other visual cues (e.g., Efran, 1974), the current study relied on a text-based description of the target's physical appearance. Possibly, observers perceived a greater difference between the attractive

and the unattractive target, in turn evoking a stronger bias, using visual rather than written cues.

Additionally, I relied on the theory of moral typecasting, proposing that observers assign roles within harm situations based on salient cues of identity (Gray & Wegner, 2009). Related to the degree of victim prototypicality and the subsequent harm salience, such identity cues influence how easily observers cast the respective roles (Reynolds et al., 2020). It is possible that attractiveness is not commonly seen as a prototypical victim trait, particularly within ambiguous harm scenarios, which would consequently reduce the likelihood for an attractive person to be categorized as a target. These remarks could help to explain why the attractive target was not evaluated significantly differently than the unattractive target.

Similarly, the main effect for the observer's gender was not found to be significant, implying no gender differences in how observers perceive a female target's harm. However, prior research suggests that there indeed are gender differences, finding female observers to be more empathetic and rate another woman's harm as more severely than men (Calhoun et al., 1976). A very profound in-group bias for women, strengthening the ability to adopt another woman's perspective and to identify with being a victim themselves, was proposed to account for this effect (Rudman & Goodwin, 2004).

However, most literature demonstrating such in-group bias within harm scenarios focused on the harm of sexual assault (e.g., Moore & Miller-Perrin, 2022). As there are several statistics reporting a much higher prevalence of female than male victims within sexual assault cases (e.g., Australian Bureau of Statistics; 2021-22), gender differences in empathy and blame toward the target might be particularly pronounced. This represents another key methodological divergence between prior and present research, since the present study solely reported an ambiguous harm allegation of subtle social exclusion at the

workplace. While intense and gendered harm experiences are likely to elicit a stronger victim identification, the present scenario may not have evoked such a vivid reaction, making it less resonant for women to identify with the target.

Another methodological difference lies within the presentation style of the harm scenario. Some prior studies (e.g., Calhoun et al., 1976) showed video interviews displaying the target to participants, increasing the proximity and empathy toward targets and their experience. In contrast, the written vignettes presented in the present study may not have elicited a similar level of emotional connection to the target. Furthermore, the present harm scenario may not have been sufficiently framed as a gendered experience, as there was no emphasis on the target being treated poorly because of being a woman, but rather because of their physical appearance. This might have weakened the salience of the in-group bias and identification for female participants, resulting in an insignificant main effect for the observer's gender.

Finally, the present study found no significant interaction effect, implying that the perception of attractive versus unattractive female targets does not depend on the observer's gender. This contradicts established research suggesting that men value physical attractiveness more than women when judging the opposite gender, in turn showing a stronger attractiveness bias (Bak, 2010; Feingold, 1990).

Strikingly, most of the presented literature that demonstrated a stronger attractiveness bias for male participants did so using romantic contexts including partner choices, in which physical appearance plays an enhanced role in evaluation. In contrast, the social exclusion scenario and workplace context presented in the present research might have weakened the salience of the attractiveness bias, for both men and women. Thus, it is most likely that this bias is context-specific and may not emerge as strongly in workplace-based or neutral

contexts as in contexts with romantic salience. This highlights a possible theoretical boundary condition of the attractiveness bias.

To conclude the theoretical implications of the present study, it can be suggested that established theories, such as the halo effect or the moral typecasting theory, and in-group dynamics do not always generalize across different contexts. In retrospect, the specific framework used for the present study may have benefitted from additional or different theoretical foundations. However, given the complexity of social interactions, isolating which theories are most relevant or apply at all to a specific setting remains challenging. The same applies to the current study, as previously reviewed research findings could not be replicated by using ambiguous harm allegations by female targets within a professional context and a text-only manipulation of physical attractiveness. This does not necessarily imply that the theories themselves do not apply or that there generally are no significant effects but rather points out to possible boundary conditions of the utilized theoretical frameworks and methodologies.

General Limitations and Future Directions

As touched upon, this study has several limitations, tempering our results and interpretations thereof, while simultaneously inviting for future research directions. First, a sample imbalance can be noted, as the participant pool likely consisted of mostly young and well-educated people, eager to respond without any visible bias, and potentially having a profound social awareness. This raises the possibility of bias attenuation, in which such sample characteristics reduce observable biases, wherefore future research should aim to recruit a demographically more diverse sample. An imbalance of specific groups can also cause results to be imprecise, such as the possibility of the overrepresentation of female participants having caused masked gender effects of male participants. To avoid and address this, a diverse sample should also include gender-balanced participant samples.

Second, the online and self-report format of the survey may not adequately measure and reflect true behavior, as social desirability, self-perception and a lack of situational pressure might affect how participants behave and report their evaluations. This includes the text-based vignette scenarios, which may lack in their ability to evoke feelings of proximity and empathy toward the target. Instead, one could employ a rather interactive design more closely resembling real-life situations, such as role plays in which participants reenact and observe mild harm scenarios. This might increase proximity towards the situation and target, motivate participant's engagement with the research, and more adequately measure true behavior simultaneously.

Third, the current text-based manipulation of the target's physical appearance may have diminished the salience of attractiveness itself, as well as the difference between the two attractiveness conditions. Future research should address this and instead include visual cues of appearance such as images, video stimuli or even real-world observations. Additionally, presenting such visual information could further enhance an observer's proximity toward the victim and increase their emotional involvement.

Fourth, the harm described in the scenarios focused on mild social exclusion within the workplace, which might not elicit emotions and evaluations that are strong enough to activate the respective biases. Thus, the hypotheses tested in the present study should also be examined in more emotionally charged harm contexts, given that the participants' exposure to harm is still within ethical constraints.

Finally, another perspective to consider is that the current study was very limited in which factors to include for the analysis. Consequently, there are many other possible predictors and ideas to consider for further research investigating a similar, but slightly different framework. For given reasons I focused on solely female and not male targets, although it would be interesting to evaluate such intersectional designs to study more

nuanced patterns of this bias. Other variables despite the observer's gender might as well be insightful to observe within such a design, for instance political ideology. Just as women may exhibit an in-group bias toward another woman due to shared experiences of being victimized, individuals with liberal political orientations might similarly show greater perspective-taking ability and sensitivity to social injustice than conservatives. Such additional factors to consider not only apply to the target, but also to the offender of harm. Although the current analysis focused on how a target claiming harm is perceived, it would be as interesting to see how an offender of harm is evaluated based on their identity. Lastly, future directions could also be guided toward the direction of evaluating whether it matters who is observing, and what factors could predict this. Within my context of describing a woman claiming harm for instance, related observer variables such as sexism levels or implicit bias measures would be interesting to analyze. To conclude, there seem to be endless variations of possible predictors and levels that future research could address through equally many different means.

Conclusion

Despite our best intentions, the stories we perceive and experience and especially how we perceive them, are most often shaped by several factors beyond our control, such as the physical appearances of others. Yet, the present findings suggest that human interactions and the judging mind is complex, and that bias may not be as universal or predictable as theory would have us believe. While the present results did not support the initial expectations, this conclusion carries an encouraging implication. If people do not judge others more or less positively based upon physical appearance alone, it may signal greater fairness in social perception and interpersonal interactions.

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