Perception of sexual harassment: The influence of sex and physical attractiveness

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Abstract

The present study explored the extent to which the sex and attractiveness of the harasser, as well as the sex of the participant, influence perceptions of sexual harassment. Previous research has shown that women are generally more attuned to recognising sexual harassment and are more likely than men to classify certain behaviours as inappropriate. A total of 146 participants completed a structured questionnaire, a vignette-based scenario, and the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R). The findings revealed that the sex of the harasser significantly impacted participants' perceptions of sexual harassment. In contrast, neither the attractiveness of the harasser nor the sex of the participant demonstrated statistically significant effects. The study concludes with a discussion of its methodological limitations and implications for future research in the field.

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Introduction

Perception of Sexual Harassment: The Influence of Sex and Physical Attractiveness.

Definition of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is a prevalent social misconduct that occurs in various settings. It can be defined as any unwanted and unsolicited sexual attention directed to a target (Studd & Gattiker, 1991). Such attention is often expressed through verbal means, sexual or inappropriate comments; visually, such as sharing of unconsented explicit content; or physically, including unwelcome or inappropriate physical touch (Burn, 2018). Defining sexual harassment is complex due to its subjective nature and varying manifestations. Moreover, behaviours perceived as harmless flirtation or banter by some can constitute sexual harassment for others, highlighting the subjective and context-dependent nature of the issue (Pina et al., 2009; Fairchild, 2010). The lack of consensus on what constitutes sexual harassment, including the inclusion of nonverbal behaviours (unwanted touching, staring, leering, or obscene gestures), the necessity of demonstrating negative impact on the victim, and the blurred distinction between sexual harassment and sexism, makes it difficult to define clear boundaries for this complex phenomenon (Pina et al., 2009).

From a social science perspective, sexual harassment is defined as any unwelcome workplace behaviour with a sexual connotation that creates a hostile environment or negatively impacts an employee's psychological or professional well-being (Burn, 2018). Although sexual harassment is commonly associated with inappropriate behaviour at the workplace, it is essential to acknowledge that it can manifest in a variety of settings. Such conduct has the potential to significantly undermine an individual's psychological well-being, academic or occupational performance, social functioning, and overall sense of personal safety. Defining sexual harassment may be challenging, not only in terms of its overall concept but also in identifying specific behaviours that constitute harassment. The subjective nature of sexual harassment implies that what one person perceives as harassment may not be viewed as such by another, resulting in diverse interpretations of specific behaviours (Fairchild, 2010).

Several studies have reported mixed findings; for example, behaviour such as sexist comments, unwanted attention, crude language, and inappropriate jokes is often not universally perceived as harassment (Adams et al., 1983; Padgitt & Padgitt, 1986; Popovich et al., 1986). However, Terpstra and Baker (1987) reported that while 95% of their participants did not consider sexual propositions as harassment, 20% viewed crude language and jokes as harassment. Moreover, cultural background can significantly influence the perception of sexual harassment, where the perception of acceptable behaviour may differ. To support this idea, several studies investigated how

varying degrees of power gap within social status and authority could influence perceptions of sexual harassment. Pryor et al. (1997) found that students from North America, Australia, and Germany perceived scenarios involving unwanted sexual advances from a supervisor in a work environment as power abuse and gender discrimination. In contrast, students from Brazil perceived the same scenarios as unharmful sexual behaviour but not sexual harassment.

Consequences of Sexual Harassment

Victims of sexual harassment often experience significant psychological distress, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Brown et al., 2011). Research has shown that these individuals may suffer from decreased job satisfaction, impaired work performance, increased absenteeism, and intentions to leave their jobs (Willness et al., 2007; Boyd, 2011; Cianconi et al., 2020; Mensah et al., 2024) Another study conducted a longitudinal study on 1734 students at the beginning of grade 9 to the end of grade 11, results revealed that sexual harassment among grade 9th males and females were common but more so for females than males (Chiodo et al., 2009). Female students reported experiencing lewd jokes, comments, and unwanted touch more frequently than male students. Both genders reported negative consequences, including increased risk of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse. However, female students were more likely to experience eating disorders and feelings of insecurity at school. Furthermore, empirical evidence supports the notion that sexual harassment in tertiary education have led victims spiralling into depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, physical pain and discomfort, unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted disease, increased substance abuse, limited career opportunities, and diminished work motivation (Schneider et al., 1997; Richman et al., 1999; Harned et al., 2002; Chan et al., 2008; Martin-Storey & August, 2015; Selkie et al., 2015; Henning et al., 2017). Similarly, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that victims of sexual harassment may experience long-term negative consequences, including emotional distress, substance abuse, and violent behaviour (Chiodo et al., 2009).

A significant body of research has demonstrated that victims of sexual harassment may experience both short-term and long-term effects. These negative effects can manifest in several ways, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Dansky and Kilpatrick (1997) reported that victims developed severe symptoms qualified as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which may persist many years after the incident. In short-term, victims may experience impaired psychological well-being and work performance (Schneider et al., 1997. Furthermore, sexual harassment can have significant economic implications, forcing victims to change jobs and potentially leading to financial hardship (McLaughlin et al., 2017).

Factors of Sexual Harassment

A growing body of empirical research has identified numerous individual and contextual factors that contribute to the prevalence of sexual harassment, including age, marital status, social status, access to resources, physical attractiveness, and gender (Petrauskaitė & Čunichina, 2019; Pina et al., 2009; Madera et al., 2007; Jackson & Newman, 2004; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Ray and Parkhill (2021) further highlight how experiences such as childhood trauma, association with delinquent peers, and psychopathic personality traits may increase the likelihood of perpetration (Malamuth et al., 1991, 1995). Klümper and Schwarz (2019) note that some perpetrators may assert dominance over targets perceived as threats, regardless of gender. In response to these findings, various theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain the motivations and behaviours underlying sexual harassment. Evolutionary perspectives, for example, suggest intersexual differences in perception due to divergent sexual strategies and goals (Klümper & Schwarz, 2019). While these theories offer useful conceptual insights, many have been criticized for lacking robust empirical support. The following section will provide a brief overview of these theoretical frameworks.

Research suggests that harassment can be driven by other factors such as the desire to exert power and dominance over others and can be manifested in many forms in different social settings and regardless of sexes (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Willness et al., 2007; Maass et al., 2013; Cortina & Areguin, 2021; Steele et al., 2021). Berdahl (2007) offers a gender-neutral perspective on sexual harassment, viewing it as a tool for maintaining social status within hierarchical structures rather than as an expression of sexual interest. While this interpretation may seem counterintuitive given the predominantly gendered nature of harassment in which males are often the perpetrators and females the victims, such disparity likely reflects broader sociocultural patterns. According to Social Role Theory (Eagly, 1987), men and women are socialised into distinct roles, with men often encouraged to develop agentic traits such as dominance, confidence, and entitlement (Eagly & Wood, 2016). This may foster a stronger sense of personal power regardless of their actual hierarchical position. In line with this, Berdahl (2007) argues that sexual harassment can function as a form of social control, punishing women who defy traditional gender norms or fail to embody the feminine ideal. Thus, rather than refuting Berdahl's proposal, the gendered patterns of harassment may extend it, highlighting how socially constructed roles shape both the enactment and perception of power.

While Berdahl's framework provides valuable insight into how power and social hierarchies influence harassment, it may not fully account for instances that occur outside such structured

settings. This suggests that motivations for harassment may be more complex and multifaceted. A review by Ray & Parkhill (2021) found that factors like trauma from childhood, association with delinquent peers, psychopathic personality traits might contribute to perpetration of harassment (Malamuth et al., 1991, 1995). Furthermore, Klümper & Schwarz (2019) notes that some perpetrator may assert dominance unto targets who are perceived as a threat, regardless of the target's gender. From an evolutionary standpoint, these behaviours may also be influenced by intersexual differences in perception and motivation, shaped by distinct sexual strategies and goals (Klümper & Schwarz, 2019).

Tangri et al. (1982) proposed the natural/biological theory. According to this theory, male often have an innate stronger sexual desire than female, hence, males are biologically motivated to pursuit a female of their interest. The key concept of this theory is the acknowledgement of the innate human instincts as the driver of sexually aggressive behaviour (Kapila, 2017). Gutek and Morasch (1982) proposed the sex role spillover theory. This theory posits that gender roles exist in every organisation but more prominent when there is an imbalanced sex ratio in an organisation, for instance, females entering traditionally male-dominated fields or males entering female dominated fields. This can result in the dominant gender, in terms of number, developing inappropriate expectations of the minority gender, which may manifest in sexually harassing behaviours. It is important to acknowledge that the sex role spillover theory can also have negative consequences for men. A classic example of sex-role spillover involves the expectation that women should perform domestic tasks in the workplace, such as making coffee for others, while men are expected to cover the cost of social outings with female colleagues (Gutek & Cohen, 1987).

Organisational theory suggests that the hierarchical structure of many organisations can create power imbalances that facilitate sexual harassment. Individuals in positions of authority, such as supervisors, may abuse their power to coerce subordinates into unwanted sexual interactions or advances (Tangri et al., 1982). Similarly, the social-contact explanation theorises that women in male dominated work environments are more likely to experience inappropriate sociosexual behaviours (Gutek et al., 1990; Jackson & Newman, 2004). Equally significant, the sociodemographic explanation theory suggests that an individual's gender is a key predictor of harassment risk. Numerous studies have consistently shown that women are much more likely than men to be victims of sexual harassment (Welsh, 1999; Bowes-Sperry & Tata, 1999).

In addition to gender, marital status also influences vulnerability. Single, divorced, separated, and widowed women are at a higher risk, potentially due to perceptions that married women are less sexually available or are protected by their spouses (Gutek, 1985). Interestingly, Gutek (1985)

found that being married may reduce the risk of sexual harassment for both men and women. Age is another factor, with younger women being more likely to experience harassment. Past studies have revealed that victims are generally between the ages of 16 and 35 (Lafontaine & Tredeau, 1986; Fain & Anderton, 1987).

Research suggests that physical attractiveness significantly influences social perceptions, including how individuals are judged in the context of sexual harassment. Dion and colleagues (1972) introduced the concept of the "beauty-is-good" stereotype, showing that physically attractive individuals are often assumed to possess inherently positive traits, such as trustworthiness and honesty. This bias, known as attractiveness bias, has been supported in more recent work by Klebl et al. (2021), who found that participants not only associated attractive faces with positive characteristics but were also more likely to assign them moral traits, including honesty and integrity. Seitar and Dunn (2000) extended this line of research by exploring how attractiveness impacts perceptions of victimhood. Their findings revealed that attractive individuals were more likely to be perceived as victims of sexual harassment than their less attractive counterparts. This suggests that attractiveness can shape judgments of both character and vulnerability, reinforcing how superficial qualities may unconsciously influence responses to complex interpersonal situations. Drawing from empirical evidence, physical attractiveness emerges as a significant factor in shaping perceptions, sometimes leading to distortions. Moreover, physical attractiveness provides distinct social advantages to those who are physically attractive.

Sexual Harassment in Specific Occupations and Industries

In Malaysia, sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, regardless of being verbal, non-verbal, visual, gestural or physical, directed at a person which is offensive or humiliating or is a threat to the receiver's well-being in Section 2 of the Employment Act 1955 and the Code of Practice on the Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in 1999 (Fadzlan & Radzi, 2025). While often associated with workplace environments, it can occur in any setting, including within political institutions. In which multiple incidents involved male Malaysian politicians making sexually inappropriate remarks towards female colleagues during parliamentary sessions (Malay Mail, 2017). Numerous other cases of sexual harassment often involve power imbalances, with perpetrators holding positions of authority over their victims (Ar, 2019). Unfortunately, a significant number of reported cases remain unresolved or dismissed. Nonetheless, a concerning statement by a politician further exacerbated the situation, suggesting that the rapist can marry the victim as a solution to such social problems (BBC News, 2017).

Certain occupations, particularly those in the service industry, such as food service and hospitality, are more susceptible to sexual harassment due to factors such as frequent customer interactions, lack of oversight, and vulnerable working conditions (Shaw et al., 2018).Similarly, those who are required to work in isolated environments, such as caretakers and janitors, may be at increased risk due to the lack of witnesses and potential for abuse of power (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016). Villegas (2019) examined the interplay between workplace sexual harassment, immigration status, and precarious work status, identifying several factors that exacerbate the risk for migrant females. Precarious work status females are more vulnerable to sexual harassment due to their limited knowledge of labour laws and standards in their host country, lack of legal protection, fear of retaliation from perpetrators, and fear of deportation if they report the incident to authorities (Menjívar & Abrego, 2012; Parra, 2015). These vulnerabilities are not confined to any single sector but are prevalent across various industries. Additionally, workplaces with significant power imbalances, such as those where women hold lower-level positions, are more likely to experience sexual harassment. In such environments, female employees, especially those in junior positions, may be more vulnerable to harassment from male superiors or colleagues (Feldblum & Lipnic, 2016).

Sexual Harassment in Retrospection

Early research primarily focused on workplace sexual harassment, with particular attention to the concept of sex-role spillover (Gutek & Morasch, 1982). It soon sparked a surge of interest among researchers, leading to a growing body of research aimed at understanding the behaviour, its incidence and effects, measurement, and organisational context (Fitzgerald et al., 1988; Gelfand et al., 1995; Hulin et al., 1996; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). In 1980, a pioneering effort to categorise sexual harassment emerged from Till's (1980) research on college women's experiences. He identified five distinct categories, gender harassment, seductive behaviour, sexual bribery, threats of noncompliance, and sexual assault. Till viewed these as a spectrum of severity, encompassing all potential forms of sexual harassment. Later, Fitzgerald and colleagues developed the Sexual Experiences Questionnaires (SEQ) based on Till's categories of sexual harassment (Gelfand et al., 1995). The SEQ is a three-factor self-reported questionnaire developed to access the prevalence of sexual harassment at academia and workplace. These classifications are gender harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual coercion (Fitzgerald & Shullman, 1985). Gender and sexual harassment are two different things although some may use it interchangeably, one should be aware of its definition. Sexual harassment is an umbrella term for behaviours of a sexual nature which causes discomfort or harm to another (Madsen & Nielsen, 2023). On the other hand, gender harassment is not of sexual nature rather it is insults or derogatory attitudes directed to another based on the gender. Gender

harassment is not exclusive to only one gender; both male and female can be potential victims of gender harassment (Madsen & Nielsen, 2023).

Biological Sex Differences and Human Mating Behaviour

Robert Trivers first coined the term Parental Investment Theory in 1972, proposing that mating behavioural strategies are shaped by the relative amount of parental investment each sex contributes to offspring (Geher, 2013). In species with high parental investment, such as Homo sapiens, reproduction incurs substantial biological and energetic costs, particularly for females. A key factor is the extended human gestation period, lasting approximately 38–40 weeks. Human infants are born in an altricial state, meaning they are highly dependent on caregivers due to their slow developmental pace. This prolonged dependency requires sustained investment to ensure survival and development. As a result, the cost of reproduction is significantly higher for females than males. In most sexually reproducing species, the sex that invests more in offspring is typically more selective when choosing a mate. In humans, this has led to the evolution of sex-specific mating strategies, with females often engaging in more meticulous mate selection due to the greater risks and long-term commitments associated with reproduction (Geher, 2013).

From an evolutionary standpoint, males and females exhibit different reproductive strategies. However, despite the differences both sexes share similarities in terms of strategies. This difference, particularly in terms of parental investment, influences mate selection goals. Men, on average prioritise on quantity of offspring, might employ different strategies compared to women who generally invest more in parental care. This exploration of the evolutionary basis of sexual selection can shed light on how these differences might potentially contribute to social misconduct such as sexual harassment. Males are the lesser investing sex, competes intrasexually, and are more aggressive in their mating strategies. On average, males and females differ in reproductive investment and physiology. Males tend to have a higher potential reproductive rate due to biological factors, such as lower physical and time commitments to reproduction compared to females. These differences may contribute to a greater male interest in casual sex and sexual variety (Clark & Hatfield, 1989; Schmitt, 2003; Buss & Schmitt, 2011; Buss, 2015;). Males tend to mate with fertile females to increase their chances of reproductive success. As a result, they are often attracted to young and physically attractive females, with youth indicating fertility and physical attractiveness signalling genetic fitness. Conversely, older females are perceived as less attractive, owing to the fact that female fertility typically declines with age. Both sexes experience a decline in attractiveness with age, but this decline tends to be more pronounced in females due to its connection to fertility. Yet, merely engaging with multiple young and attractive partners may not suffice to optimise their offspring count, as the survival of offspring relies on maternal investment, hence, a receptive and

dedicated female must be selected. However, this is not to imply that males do not invest at all as a parent, but rather their investment is typically lesser in comparison to females (Symons, 1979).

Exploring evolutionary perspectives may offer additional insights into underlying motivations and functions of this behaviour. For instance, the display of aggressive or coercive mating behaviour has been observed in non-human primates, insects, fish, birds, and mammals (Garner et al., 2009; Wells et al., 2014; Killen et al., 2015; Smit et al., 2022). In the animal kingdom, the term 'sexual coercion' more accurately reflects these behaviours and can be directed at both males and females (Clutton-Brock & Parker, 1995; Georgiev et al., 2013; Baniel et al., 2017). These coercive behaviours include aggression to achieve submission during mating, competition for mates, territories, intimidation, and resources (Clutton-Brock & Parker, 1995; Georgiev et al., 2013; Baniel et al., 2017). It has been observed that coercive behaviours among the animal society extends beyond mating. Gómez et al. (2023) found that coercive behaviours may serve as a means of maintaining social relationships, resolving conflicts, and demonstrating dominance. However, it is crucial to recognise that while certain animal behaviours may resemble human sexual harassment it cannot be directly compared to human sexual harassment. Further research is essential to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this area.

In contrast to males, females bear a heavier reproductive cost, leading them to prioritise in mate quality over quantity (Thornhill & Gangestad, 2008). Unlike males, for whom mating with multiple partners can potentially result in more than one offspring, females typically conceive a single offspring regardless of the number of partners they mate with. As a result, females focus on selecting a high-quality mate capable of providing for them and their future offspring in long-term relationships (Buss, 2015). Due to the significant investment of time and resources required for offspring care, females often exhibit a preference for mates who possess traits indicative of strong financial resources, high social status, intellectual intelligence, physical attractiveness, and high genetic fitness (Greengross & Miller, 2011; Jonason & Koenig, 2012; Schmitt, 2014). In addition, Sadalla et al. (1987) discovered that dominance was considered an attractive trait in males but not in females. Specifically, it was found that dominance enhanced the sexual attractiveness of males without necessarily affecting their overall likeability. The significance of dominance as a desirable trait is attributed to its role in establishing hierarchies within primate and nonprimate groups. As dominance correlates with higher social status (Hogan, 1979), females may find males who exhibit dominance more attractive.

Buss and Schmitt (1993) proposed that men and women have evolved unique adaptive strategies to address various reproductive challenges, including sexual accessibility, fertility

assessment, responsibility seeking and avoidance, immediate and enduring resources, paternity certainty, mate value assessment, and parental investment (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Long-term mating strategy is defined as a relationship that often entails pair bonding, prolonged courtship, substantial investment, commitment to a single partner, and the dedicated investment of resources towards each other and any offspring from the relationship (Buss, 2015). In contrast to long-term mating, short-term mating strategies, as the name suggests, involve casual and brief relationships. These relationships are typically characterised by uncommitted sexual intercourse, minimal courtship efforts, and limited emotional attachment (Jonason and Balzarini, 2016), potential involvement with multiple partners simultaneously, and a lack of commitment (Koehn & Jonason, 2018). According to the Sexual Strategies Theory, men's greater preference for short-term mating reflects an adaptive trade-off, wherein the potential reproductive benefits of pursuing multiple partners typically outweigh the associated cost; in contrast, women generally face higher biological and parental investment costs, making short-term mating strategies less advantageous on average (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). While Sexual Strategies Theory (SST) acknowledges sex differences in reproductive strategies, it should be kept in mind that these differences are not exclusive. Both sexes share similar reproductive goals. For instance, both sexes are equally selective in selecting long-term mates and in providing biparental care to their offspring. While the level of investment may differ on average, with females typically contributing more through pregnancy, lactation and direct care, males also provide a significant amount of contributions. These can include providing resources, protection, and participating in other forms of parental care.

The Role of Sociosexual Orientation in Experiences and Perceptions of Sexual Harassment

This section focuses on a key study that investigates the role of sociosexual orientation in shaping individuals' experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment. Kennair and Bendixen (2012) investigated the role of individual differences in shaping perceptions of sexual harassment. The authors hypothesised a positive association between sociosexual orientation and self-reported experiences of sexual harassment among female participants. The study aimed to address a gap in prior research by additionally examining measures of sexual harassment and coercion experienced by participants. The hypothesis further suggests unrestricted social behaviour is defined as openness to casual sex, leading to unwanted advances from others with similar unrestricted behaviour. Consequently, individuals who exhibit more restricted sociosexuality might be less likely to experience such harassment. The inclusion of both male and female perpetrators and victims is a noteworthy contribution, as the authors highlight the scarcity of research on female perpetrators in this area. Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI) and Rape Myth Scale alongside other research instruments were employed to measure sexual attitudes and behaviours of participants. Data were

collected through a self-reported online survey distributed to students between the ages of 16 and 26 years old; a total of 1,199 participants were recruited. Kennair and Bendixen's (2012) research identified a correlation between components of the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI) (especially from the behaviour component), pornography exposure, and experiences of sexual harassment. They found that individuals scoring higher on behavioural and attitudinal components of SOI, which indicate a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation, reported significantly greater exposure to harassment and coercive sexual behaviours. These findings support the hypothesis that sociosexual orientation reflects an underlying motivational framework that influences both engagement in and sensitivity to certain sexually motivated behaviours. Another significant finding was that individuals with high SOI scores (unrestricted sociosexuality) were equally likely to experience and perpetrate harassment. This study's findings challenged traditional gender roles in sexual harassment. While females reported experiencing harassment more frequently, the data demonstrates that both males and females can be perpetrators and victims. A notable discrepancy emerged between the higher rates of opposite-sex harassment reported by females and the lack of a significant link between sociosexual orientation and coercive behaviour in males. Kennair and Bendixen's findings highlight that harassment cannot be fully understood through sociosexual orientation alone. While women's higher reports opposite-sex harassment may reflect adaptive vigilance and cultural sensitivity to harassment cue, men's coercive behaviours appear less tied to sociosexuality and more influenced by contextual, cultural, or personality-based factors. This unexpected finding may be attributed to the limitations of SOI in capturing the full spectrum of factors influencing male coercive behaviour, or a potential focus on female experiences within the study design.

Interpreting Sexual Harassment: The Role of Outcome Expectancies, Attractiveness, and Social Context

Leigh et al. (2021) explored how men and women differ in their judgments of sexual harassment in social interactions based on the role of outcome expectancies, which are the anticipated positive or negative consequences someone believes they might experience from a particular behaviour. In this study, positive outcome expectancy (POE) refers to the tendency to believe that engaging in sexual harassment will result in positive consequences. A strong positive outcome expectancy (POE) can increase the likelihood of someone engaging in sexual harassment. In contrast, negative outcome expectancy (NOE) refers to the belief that sexual harassment will lead to negative repercussions. This can serve as a deterrent, rendering individuals less likely to engage in such behaviour. Leigh et al. (2021) developed a vignette-based tool to measure participant's perceptions of sexual harassment, which is known as the Online and Digital Sexual Harassment

Attitude Measure (OD-SHAM). The OD-SHAM consist of 21 vignettes depicting male-on-female sexual harassment scenarios. One hundred and ninety-six participants rated the scenarios using a scale that assessed their perceived likelihood of positive or negative outcomes resulting from the depicted behaviours. The results indicated that women and men may differ in their perceptions of sexual harassment, with women tending to be more likely to identify certain behaviours as harassment compared to men. The study also found that the perceptions of sexual harassment of both sexes are influenced by their outcome expectancies. However, the influence of these expectations was stronger but not exclusive for men. For instance, for men their negative outcome expectancies are moderated by the positive ones. Additionally, among female participants, the persistence of the perpetrator's behaviour such as, repeatedly sending unsolicited messages, making continued advances despite clear rejection, or continuously engaging in suggestive or inappropriate comments after being asked to stop has emerged as a significant indicator of sexual harassment. This suggests that for women, repeated violations of boundaries are more likely to be perceived as harassment than isolated incidents, highlighting the importance of context and recurrence in shaping their judgments. This restricts the generalisability of the findings to other forms of sexual harassment, such as female-on-male scenarios. The authors point out that evolutionarily women may pursue short-term relationships for various reasons beyond sexual access, such as acquiring resources or protection (Leigh et al., 2021). To explore this further, future research could incorporate scenarios reflecting these motivations in the context of female-on-male sexual harassment.

Studies suggest that characteristics of the perpetrator, such as physical attractiveness, social status, or gender, can influence how observers perceive sexual harassment (e.g., Angelone et al., 2008). Angelone et al. (2008) employed a simulated dating scenario experiment in a laboratory setting. They manipulated perpetrator attributes (physical attractiveness, social status, perceived dating potential) to investigate their influence, along with participants' sexual harassment attitudes, on tolerance for sexual harassment. To assess participants' tolerance of sexual harassment, the Sexual Harassment Attitude Scale (SHAS) was utilised (Mazer & Percival, 1989). The Sexual Harassment Attitudes Scale (SHAS) consists of 19 items on a 5-point Likert scale used to assess attitudes towards sexual harassment. Results revealed a significant effect of perpetrator's attractiveness on participants' tolerance for sexual harassment behaviours. Similarly, participants exhibited greater tolerance towards comments delivered by high-status perpetrators compared to participants who were exposed to low-status perpetrators. A correlation was found between high scores on the Sexual Harassment Attitudes Scale (SHAS) and both tolerance of sexually suggestive comments and willingness to date the actor. The study found that increased dating potential led to greater tolerance for harassing behaviours. A potential bias identified in this study is that people's

judgments about sexual harassment can be influenced by factors like physical attractiveness, social status, and perceived dating potential. On the other hand, the research by Aguilar & Baek (2020) highlights how power imbalances within institutions, such as professor-student dynamics, can be a significant factor in underreporting harassment. This emphasises that underreporting is often not due to the victim's fault, but due to fear of repercussions. Additionally, underreporting an incident is often associated with the fear of career disruptions, possibility of retaliation from perpetrator, or a perceived inefficacy of reporting (Hart, 2019). The use of a laboratory analogue, such as a simulated scenario experiment, offers advantages over questionnaires. This method allows researchers to directly observe human behaviour during the experiment, providing deeper insights into how factors like attractiveness influence judgments about sexual harassment.

Studies have consistently found that physical attractiveness is often associated with positive qualities, such as, friendliness, superiority, warm personality, right minded, and socially skilled (Feingold, 1991). Pryor and Day (1988) explored the influences between status and physical appearance on perception of sexual harassment. Vignettes were used to examine the status of the harasser (professor versus student) and the physical appearance of the victim. Results revealed that participants perceived the scenario as less harassing when the victim was described as someone who cared about their appearance, whereas scenarios were perceived as more harmful when the victim was described as being less concerned with their appearance (Pryor & Day, 1988). Physical appearance was found to influence decision making and jurisdiction decision. Efran (1974) explored how physical attractiveness would determine decision making with a hypothetical jury experiment. The study found that attractive faces were perceived as less guilty as compared to unattractive defendants. Similarly, Castellow et al. (1990) examined the influence of physical attractiveness and sexual harassment charges in a hypothetical jury experiment. Findings revealed a consistent bias, with participants favouring either an attractive plaintiff or an attractive defendant. This aligns with the general tendency to favour physically attractive individuals. This phenomenon can be explained by a theory known as the 'Halo Effect', coined by Edward Thorndike (1920). The 'Halo Effect' is a cognitive bias in which people make assumptions or generalisations about others based on first impressions, often focusing on a single positive trait (Winters et al., 2020). Thorndike (1920) found that commanding officers often evaluated their soldiers in a way that showed a strong correlation between high ratings in one trait, such as physical appearance, and high ratings in other unrelated traits, like leadership and intelligence. This bias was further demonstrated by Nisbett and Wilson (1997), who discovered that students were more likely to attribute positive traits, such as good mannerisms or an appealing voice, to lecturers they perceived as 'warm.'

Another study by Goh et al. (2022) further supported the notion that perceptions of sexual harassment may be influenced by physical attractiveness. According to prototype theory, people develop mental shortcuts called prototypes to process information around them. These prototypes are culturally influenced and shared among groups. For example, a prototypical female might possess traditionally feminine features and qualities. Individuals who deviate from this stereotype, or who embody more masculine features and qualities, are considered "non-prototypical". When an individual behaves in a way that violates these cultural norms, they might be perceived more negatively (Goh et al., 2022). Across three studies, researchers investigated how perceptions of sexual harassment are shaped. In Study 1, participants formed mental representations of victims. Study 2 examined how judgments of harassment scenarios vary based on the victim's perceived typicality (prototypical or non-prototypical female). Finally, Study 3 explored the legal implications of sexual harassment, focusing on victim credibility, perceived harm, and perpetrator punishment. The researchers predicted that participants would be more likely to identify prototypical females as victims, even in ambiguous scenarios. Conversely, non-prototypical females were expected to be perceived as less credible victims, even in situations that could constitute sexual harassment. Supporting the study's hypothesis, participants were more likely to perceive prototypical females as victims of sexual harassment compared to nonprototypical females. Hence, the authors proposed that gender prototypes create biasness in making judgement and can influence perceptions of sexual harassment (Goh et al., 2022). While the study may support the hypothesis, the authors acknowledge that these prototypes are likely shaped by pre-existing biases. Participants might have associated sexual harassment primarily with sexual intent, leading them to stereotype young, attractive, and feminine females as victims. This association might partially reflect ideas about potential mate selection, but it is crucial to acknowledge that harassment can happen to anyone.

Golden et al. (2001) examined the effects of attractiveness on the perception of sexual harassment. The study involved participants evaluating an ambiguous scenario between a manager and secretary. Along with combinations of attractive and unattractive images of the manager and the secretary. The study found evidence of judgment bias in perceptions of sexual harassment. Specifically, participants were less likely to perceive actions by an attractive male as harassment, especially when the victim is perceived as unattractive. Conversely, actions by an unattractive male were more likely to be seen as harassment when the victim is perceived as attractive. This aligns with the 'what is beautiful is good' stereotype (Dion et al., 1972; Eagly et al., 1991; Feingold, 1992; Golden et al., 2001), suggesting that physical attractiveness can influence how people perceive social interactions. However, as noted by the authors, the study solely examined scenarios with male perpetrators and female victims. Including both genders in perpetrator and victim roles could have

provided a more comprehensive analysis of how gender dynamics influence perceptions of sexual harassment.

In line with previous research, Klümper and Schwarz (2019) examined how sociosexual orientation, attractiveness, physical appearance, and social status shape individuals' perceptions of the severity of sexual advances—defined as the extent to which such behaviour is perceived as disturbing and discomforting, based on contextual and individual factors. Participants rated the level of disturbance and discomfort elicited by a series of scenarios, and the average of these ratings was used to construct an index of perceived harmfulness, reflecting the overall severity attributed to each advance. Study 1 investigated three factors, participants' sex, sociosexual orientation (SOI-R), and the actor's attractiveness. Participants were exposed to three scenarios involving varying degrees of sexually ambiguous verbal and behavioural acts. Afterward, they rated the perceived harmfulness of the acts. The findings supported the hypothesis, indicating that male participants and those with higher SOI-R scores (unrestricted sociosexuality) perceived the scenarios involving an attractive actor as less severe (Klümper & Schwarz, 2019). Building on Study 1, the researchers in Study 2 further investigated the perceived severity of sexual advances. They examined the influence of participant's sex, the actor's physical appearance (very good looking vs. very bad looking), and the actor's status (secretary vs. executive board). Likewise, results of Study 2 supported the hypothesis in which unrestricted male participants more than female participants perceived the scenarios with a physically attractive actor as less severe (Klümper & Schwarz, 2019). Conversely, the actor's status (secretary vs. executive board) did not significantly influence perceived severity. It is important to acknowledge a limitation present in both studies: the vagueness associated with the actor descriptions. In Study 1, participants relied solely on subjective interpretations of 'attractive' and 'unattractive' labels. Similarly to Study 1, Study 2 also relied on subjective labels for the actor's physical appearance. Participants were only provided with the categories of 'very good looking' and 'very bad looking.' lacking any specific physical descriptions. This lack of specific details could lead participants to misinterpret the situation and potentially influence their perceptions.

Collectively, these studies highlight potential gender differences in how sexual harassment is perceived, with findings consistently showing that women are more likely than men to identify and report behaviours as harassing. However, it is important to note that these studies were conducted primarily in Western contexts, such as the United States and parts of Europe, where cultural norms around gender, sexuality, and social behaviour may differ significantly from other regions (Pryor et al., 1997; Zimbroff, 2007). This raises important questions about generalisability, specifically, whether similar patterns of perception would be found in Southeast Asian contexts, where social taboos and gender roles are often shaped by distinct cultural and religious influences. Given this gap, the present

study contributes by examining perceptions of sexual harassment within a Malaysian sample, offering insights into how cross-cultural factors and individuals' dispositions interreact to shape such perceptions.

Previous Research in Malaysia

The following table summarises previous research on sexual harassment conducted in Malaysia, highlighting key findings, research objectives, and methodologies. These studies offer valuable insights into the prevalence and perceptions of sexual harassment, as well as the approaches used to investigate this issue in the Malaysian context. Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the existing literature in this field.

There is a growing need for further research on perceptions of sexual harassment in Asian countries. In Malaysia, the number of reported sexual harassment cases has been steadily increasing in recent years. According to the Criminal Investigation Department's (CID) Sexual, Women, and Child Investigations Division (D11), a total of 2,905 cases were reported in 2021, rising to 2,920 in 2022, and further increasing to 3,373 in 2023. While the majority of victims are female (2,823 in 2021, 2,825 in 2022, and 3,238 in 2023), nonetheless the number of male victims has also risen steadily (82 in 2021, 95 in 2022, and 135 in 2023). Furthermore, the number of sexual harassment cases brought to court has increased, with 480 cases charged in 2021, 467 in 2022, and 547 in 2023. The CID's D11 division classifies various offenses as sexual harassment, including rape, molestation, outrage of modesty, gross indecency, spread of lewd content, and stalking (Zack, 2024).

Table 1

Overview of sexual harassment research in Malaysia

Author(s) and Year	Objective	Sample	Methodology	Key Findings
Ng and Othman (2002)	Examined perceptions of sexual harassment in Malaysia workplaces.	1,483 participants, (814 female & 669 male), Malaysian.	Short survey questionnaire followed by interview.	Female participants more likely to experience sexual harassment than male participants.
Endut et al. (2011)	Explored the prevalence, awareness, and experiences of sexual harassment among university students.	369 participants, mixed gender, Malaysian.	Questionnaire based.	Female students are primary victims of sexual harassment.

Ali et al. (2015)	Investigated the relationship between awareness of sexual harassment and employment in the hospitality industry in Terengganu, Malaysia.	260 participants, mixed gender, Malaysian.	Questionnaire based.	Offensive behaviour and sexual coercion, significantly impacts employment in hospitality industry.
Suhaila and Rampal (2012)	Examined the prevalence and factors of sexual harassment among female nurses in government hospitals in Melaka, Malaysia.	455 females, Malaysian.	Questionnaire based.	A high prevalence of sexual harassment was observed in hospitals, with factors like physical appearance and personality traits significantly influencing the risk of being targeted.
Hutagalung and Ishak (2012)	Examined the predictions on sexual harassment experience towards job satisfaction and work stress among female employees at three universities in Klang Valley, Malaysia.	1,423 participants, female, Malaysia.	Questionnaire based.	Sexual harassment is a significant predictor of reduced job satisfaction and work stress among female employees.
Tan et al. (2020)	Explored the significance of organizational climate in ensuring psychosocial safety for the prevention of workplace sexual harassment.	20 participants, mixed gender, Malaysian.	Semi-structured interviews.	Both genders are at risk of workplace sexual harassment. Organisations play a role in preventing harassment and providing support to victims.
Syahirah et al. (2020)	Analysed the risk factors associated with sexual harassment and abuse in Malaysian sports.	35 participants, mixed gender, Malaysian.	Focus group interview.	Identified 15 risk factors contributing to sexual harassment and abuse in sports.

Hypotheses

The aim of this study is to explore how perceptions of sexual harassment vary in relation to several key variables, including the participant's sex, the sex of the harasser, and the level of attractiveness of the harasser. Understanding these factors is crucial, as they may influence how sexual harassment is perceived in different social and cultural contexts. Previous research suggested that individuals' perceptions of harassment may be shaped by sex differences, and the attractiveness of the harasser has been shown to influence judgements of harassment, with attractive individuals often being perceived more positively or their behaviour judged less negatively. Drawing from this, the following hypotheses were formulated to further investigate how these variables interact and contribute to the perception of sexual harassment within the Malaysian context.

1) There will be a difference in the perception of sexual harassment between male and female participants.

2) The sex of the harasser will influence participants' perceptions of sexual harassment.

3) The attractiveness of the harasser will influence participants' perceptions of sexual harassment.

Materials and Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling from the University of Nottingham Malaysia by means of posters and student recruitment emails circulated within the university community. The recruitment criteria targeted individuals aged between 18 and 40 years. An a priori power analysis conducted using G*Power (power = .95, α = .05) indicated that a sample size of 251 participants would be required to achieve adequate power for a three-way between-subjects ANOVA, assuming a medium effect size. A total of 146 individuals participated in the study. The sample consisted of 53 men and 93 women, with ages ranging from 18 to 38 years (M = 23.6, SD = 4.9).

Procedure

This study was reviewed and approved by the Science and Engineering Research Ethics Committee (SEREC) at the University of Nottingham Malaysia (Ethics Approval ID: [NK020424]). The committee ensures that research is designed and conducted in accordance with ethical standards to protect participants' rights and well-being. The true nature of the study which is to investigate the perceptions of sexual harassment between males and females was not disclosed to participants,

instead the experiment was advertised to study the perceptions of social interaction and behaviour between males and females under the temporary title 'How We Mingle'. The survey was administered online. Psychology students accessed the survey via the SONA system link, while non-Psychology students were provided with a Qualtrics link. The link led to an information sheet that provided participants with details about the experiment. Participants were informed that the study involved exposure to sexually tinged content (vignettes) and direct questions about personal sexual and romantic experiences. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, and participants were allowed to withdraw at any point of the study without the need to provide a reason. The experiment only proceeded with the participant's consent. Upon agreeing to participate, basic demographic information such as age and sex (male or female) was collected. Participants were not financially compensated. However, students from the School of Psychology were awarded 0.5 SONA credits.

Measures

This study employed two measures to investigate participant's perception of sexual harassment.
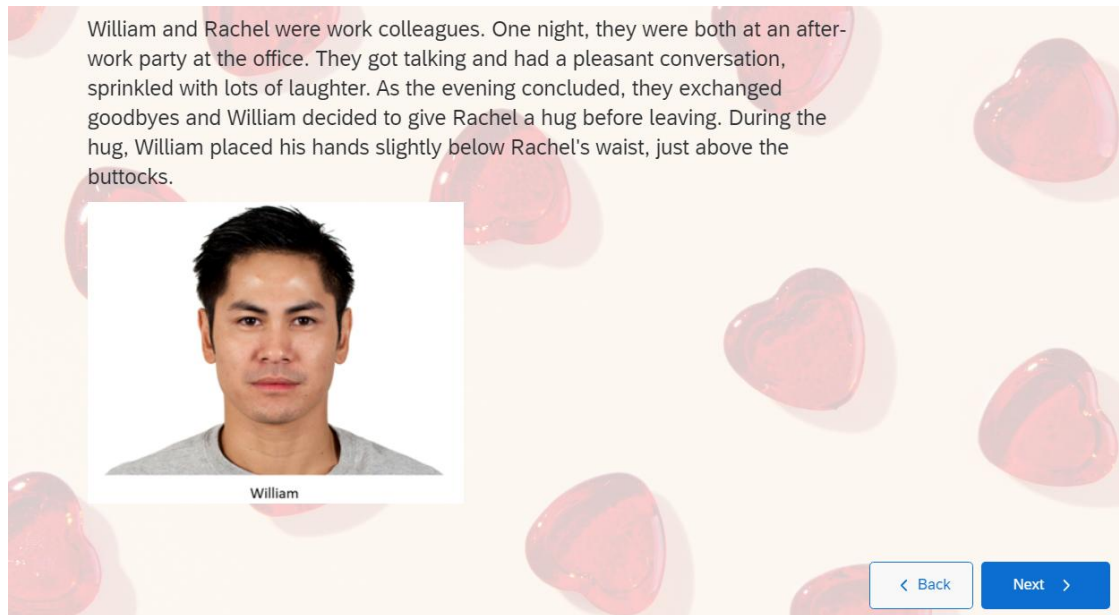
Vignettes. The vignettes were custom developed to align with the study's objectives, specifically to assess participants' perceptions of sexual harassment in social interactions. Each vignette presented a hypothetical scenario portraying an interaction between a man (William) and a woman (Rachel) at an after-work party. For example:

"William and Rachel were work colleagues. One night, they were both at an after-work party at the office. They got talking and had a pleasant conversation, sprinkled with lots of laughter. As the evening concluded, they exchanged goodbyes and William decided to give Rachel a hug before leaving. During the hug, William placed his hands slightly below Rachel's waist, just above the buttocks (Figure 1)."

Although these vignettes were not drawn from previously validated instruments, their development was informed by existing literature on digital sexual harassment and social perceptions of inappropriate behaviour (e.g., Leigh et al., 2021; Klümper & Schwarz, 2019). While they have not undergone formal validation or pilot testing, care was taken to ensure the scenarios were conceptually relevant, clearly written, and contextually appropriate for the research aims.

Figure 1

Participants' view of the actual stimulus in Qualtrics.

William and Rachel were work colleagues. One night, they were both at an after-work party at the office. They got talking and had a pleasant conversation, sprinkled with lots of laughter. As the evening concluded, they exchanged goodbyes and William decided to give Rachel a hug before leaving. During the hug, William placed his hands slightly below Rachel's waist, just above the buttocks.

William

‹ Back   Next ›

Note. Screenshot of the stimulus as presented to participants in Qualtrics

Two versions of the vignette were developed one with a male pursuer and the other with a female pursuer. The scenario remained identical except for the sex of the person initiating the touch. For example, in the male pursuer version "William placed his hands slightly below Rachel's waist…" while in the female pursuer version "Rachel placed her hands slightly below William's waist…". An image of the person initiating the touch accompanied each vignette. The vignettes were presented in a randomised order using Qualtrics software.

Follow-Up Questionnaires. Following the scenario, participants was presented with 11 questionnaires, developed to assess how participants perceived the initiator's behaviour in the vignette (e.g., question 1: How acceptable was William's/Rachel's behaviour in this situation? and question 2: How comfortable do you feel about William's/Rachel's behaviour in this situation?). Participants answered multiple-choice questions 1-7 and 9-10. The response options for these questions ranged from 'Very unacceptable 'to 'Very acceptable,' with an intermediate option like 'Neutral'. Question eight and question 11 were structured differently from the rest of the survey questions. Question eight assessed participants' judgments of the potential emotions experienced by the target in the scenario. Participants rated ten emotions, such as 'Insulted-Flattered' and 'Displeased-Pleased,' on a scale ranging from 1-to-5. Here, 1 indicated a strong negative feeling, 5 indicated a strong positive feeling, and 3 represented 'Neutral.' Finally, question 11 assessed

participants' judgements of the initiator's perceived level of interest in the target in the scenario using the following categories: Romantically, Sexually, As a Friend, As a Short-Term Relationship Partner, and As a Long-Term Relationship Partner. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Very uninterested) to 5 (Very interested). The primary dependent variable was participants' perception of sexually harassing behaviour. Lower scores indicated lower tolerance for the depicted behaviours and a more negative view of the scenario, while higher scores reflected greater tolerance and a more positive view of the behaviour. The questionnaires administered in the study were not derived from established or previously validated scales. Instead, it was specifically developed to align with the objectives and context of the experimental design. Item construction was guided by relevant literature and designed to capture key aspects of student perception and response to the intervention. Although no formal validation procedures (e.g., pilot testing, factor analysis) were conducted, the items were crafted to be clear, relevant, and focused on the intended constructs. This limitation is acknowledged, and future research is encouraged to validate and refine the instrument to enhance reliability and generalizability.

Attractiveness of Pursuer

Facial images were selected from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015) based on attractiveness ratings and ethnicity. To control for potential confounding variables, only Asian male and female images were utilised. Two male and two female faces were selected and categorised as 'high attractiveness' and 'low attractiveness' based on the given attractiveness score (see Appendix A). While the platform provided attractiveness ratings and ethnicity of the images, detailed information such as the sample population who rated the images and specificity of ethnicity beyond 'Asian' were unavailable. The ratings for high and low attractiveness stimuli were as follows, for high attractiveness, male (CFD-AM-216-114-N, attractiveness score: 4.12, age: 28) and female (CFD-AF-205-155-N, attractiveness score: 4.3, age: 26); for low attractiveness, male (CFD-AM-202-079-N, attractiveness score: 2.7, age: 26) and female (CFD-AF-210-050-N, attractiveness score: 2.6, age: 23).

The Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R)

The second set of questionnaires included the Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), which was used to assess participants' sociosexual orientation. This well-validated measure explores individual differences in attitudes towards, and behaviours related to casual sex (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008; Romero et al., 2022). The scale comprises three components – sociosexual behaviour (items 1 to 3), attitudes (items 4 to 6), and desires (items 7 to 9). The behaviour items of the SOI-R focused on participants past experiences, an example of a behaviour question is, "How many sexual partners have you had in the past 12 months?" While the

attitude items gauged their perspectives on casual sex, such as "Sex without love is okay," and the desire items assessed sexual fantasies and arousal, for example, "How often do you experience sexual arousal when you are in contact with someone you are not in a committed romantic relationship?" Participants indicated their responses on a 9-point Likert scale. Individuals scoring high on the SOI-R tend to have unrestricted sociosexuality, indicating an openness and willingness to engage in uncommitted short-term sexual relationships. Conversely, those scoring low on the SOI-R typically exhibit restricted sociosexuality, preferring committed long-term relationships before engaging in any sexual relationship (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed via Qualtrics.

Results

Data analyses were computed using SPSS version 28 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY). The initial sample consisted of 209 participants. After removing participants with incomplete response, the final sample size was 146 participants (53 males, 93 females). Consistent with the recommendations of Penke and Asendorpf (2008), SOI-R question 6 was reverse-coded before analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of the mean scores and standard deviations for perceptions of sexual harassment (PERCEPT) and SOI-R, for both male and female participants.

First, to explore the bivariate relationships among the variables, a Pearson's correlation coefficients was conducted. This analysis examined the associations between perception of sexual harassment (PERCEPT), sociosexual orientation (SOIR), sex of the participant (Sex), sex of the harasser (SexHar), and attractiveness of the harasser (AttHar) (See Appendix B). Results showed a significant negative correlation between sex of participant (Sex) and sociosexual orientation (SOIR), r (136) = -.242, p = .004, indicating that male participants reported more unrestricted sociosexual orientation compared to females. The sex of the harasser (SexHar) was significantly associated with perceptions of harassment (PERCEPT), r (144) = -.291, p < .001, such that harassment was perceived more negatively when the harasser was male. Additionally, there was a moderate negative correlation between PERCEPT and SOIR, r (136) = - .276, p = .001, suggesting that individuals who reported higher perceptions of harassment tended to have a more restricted sociosexual orientation. A scatter plot illustrating the relationship between PERCEPT and SOI-R is provided in Figure 2. In contrast, attractiveness of the harasser was not significantly correlated with any variable.

Following the correlation analysis, a three-way ANOVA was conducted to examine the effects of participant sex, harasser sex, and harasser attractiveness on perceptions of sexual harassment, with perception scores entered as the dependent variable. Levene's test of equality of variances was not significant, p = 0.54, indicating homogeneity of variances. The analysis revealed a significant main

effect of sex of harasser, F (1,138) = 11.39, p < .001, η^2 = .076, with a medium effect size (Figure 3). However, no other main effects or interaction effects were significant (Table 3). This finding revealed that both male and female participants perceived sexual harassment from the behaviour as more severe when perpetrated by a male, irrespective of the harasser's physical attractiveness.

To further examine the predictive value of the variables, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted with perception of sexual harassment (PERCEPT) as the dependent variable. The predictors included sociosexual orientation (SOI-R), sex of the harasser (SexHar), sex of the participant (Sex), and attractiveness of the harasser (AttHar). The overall regression model was significant, F (4,133) = 6.69, p < .001, R^2 = .17. Sociosexual orientation significantly predicted perceptions of sexual harassment (β = - .26, p = .002), indicating that individuals with a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation perceived less harassment. In addition, the sex of the harasser significantly predicted perception scores, (β = - .30, p < .001), such that male harassers were perceived as more harassing than female harassers. Given its consistency with the results of the three-way ANOVA, this finding is illustrated in Figure 3. However, participants' sex (β = - .08, p = .335) and attractiveness of the harasser (β = .09, p = .244) were not statistically significant.

Table 2

Descriptive overview of perception of sexual harassment and SOI-R scores

|	N	Mean	SD
Male	72		
PERCEPT	53	3.38	0.57
SOI-R	51	2.90	1.09
Female	125		
PERCEPT	93	3.36	0.59
SOI-R	87	2.49	0.55

Table 3

Three-way Interaction Effects from 2 × 2 × 2 Between-Subjects ANOVA on Perception Scores

	F	p	η^2
Sex of participant	0.20	.652	.001
Attractiveness of harasser	0.90	.346	.006
Sex of participants × Attractiveness of harasser	0.004	.953	.000
Sex of participants × Sex of harasser	0.218	.642	.002
Attractiveness of harasser × Sex of harasser	0.285	.594	.002
Sex of participants × Attractiveness of harasser × Sex of harasser	0.217	.642	.002

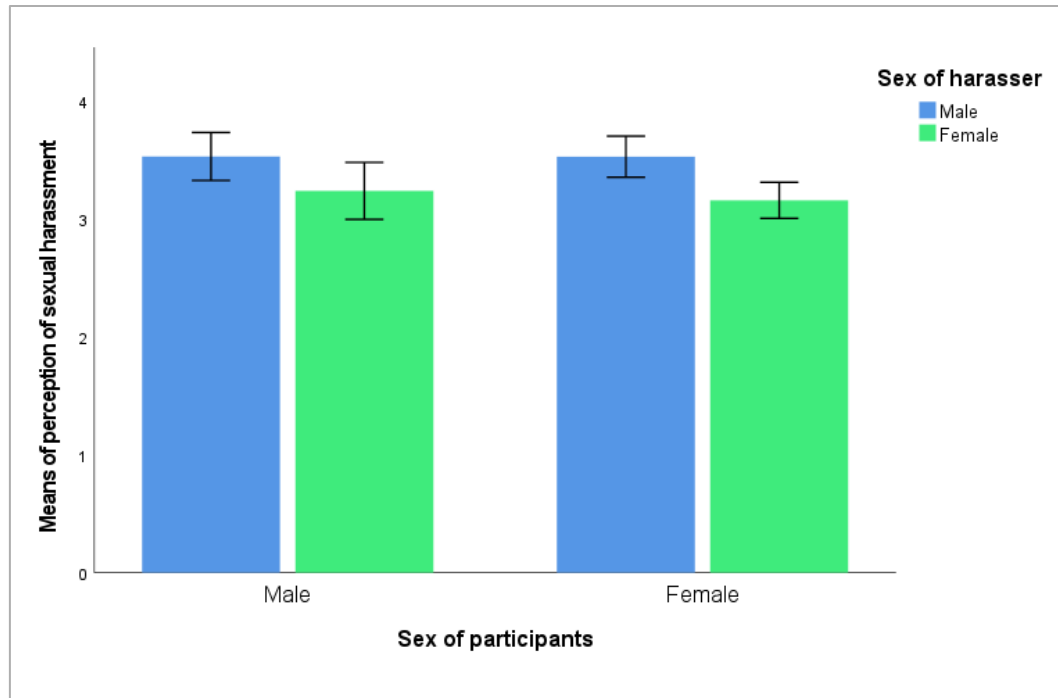Note. None of the interaction effects were statistically significant.

Figure 2

Scatterplot of Perceived Sexual Harassment and Sociosexual Orientation (SOI-R)
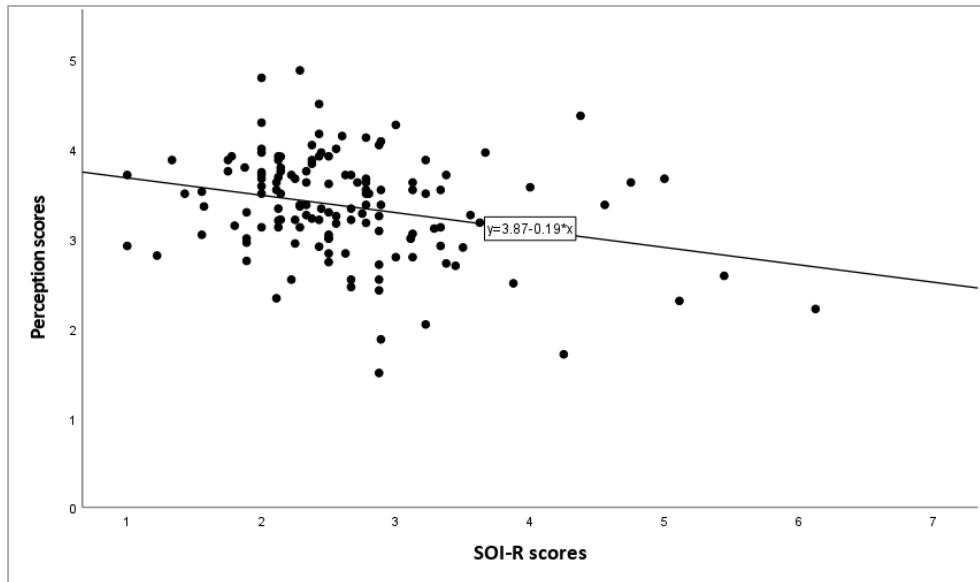
Note. A moderate negative correlation between perceived sexual harassment scores and SOI-R scores.

Figure 3

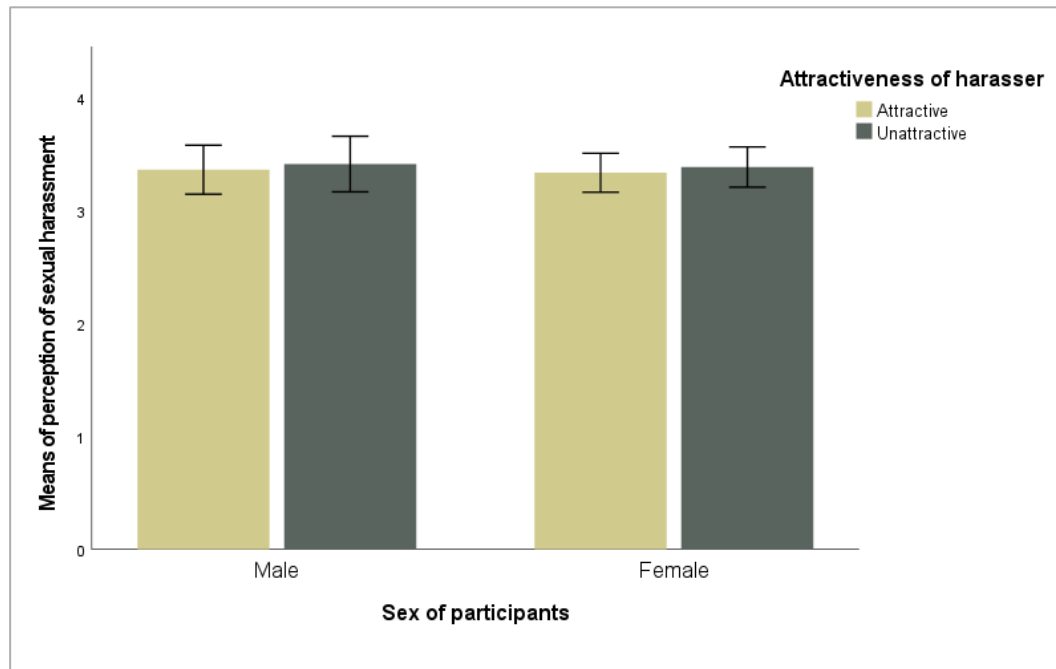Mean scores of perceived sexual harassment

Note. This clustered bar graph illustrates the mean scores of perceived sexual harassments by the sex of participants and sex of harasser. A significant main effect was observed for the sex of the harasser, with male harassers generally perceived as more harassing than female harassers. Error bars represent standard error of the mean with 95 % confidence interval.

While the attractiveness of the harasser did not significantly predict perceptions of sexual harassment, Figure 4 provides a visual summary of the pattern of responses. This figure is presented to aid interpretation and highlight any observable trends, despite the results did not reach statistical significance.

Figure 4

Mean perception scores of perceived sexual harassment by attractiveness level of harasser

Note. Mean perception scores of sexual harassment as a function of participants' sex and sex of the harasser. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Although no significant interaction was found between the variables, this graph illustrates the overall trend in perception ratings across groups.

Discussion

This study examined the influence of the harasser's sex and physical attractiveness, as well as the participants' sex, on perceptions of sexual harassment. Specifically, it investigated how the sex and attractiveness of the harasser affected male and female participants' perceptions of the behaviour depicted in the vignettes. Overall, the findings revealed that the harasser's sex was the only factor significantly influencing perceptions of sexual harassment. In contrast, the attractiveness of the harasser and the sex of the participants had no significant effect on these perceptions.

Physical attractiveness

Contrary to most prior research that consistently identified physical attractiveness as a significant factor shaping perceptions of sexual harassment, the findings of this research revealed no significant effect of the harasser's physical attractiveness on participants' judgements. This contrasts with earlier research (e.g., Golden et al, 2001; Klümper and Schwarz (2019), which suggested that physical attractiveness can affect an individual's perception and judgement. The study found a significant bias, in which participants viewed the behaviour of an attractive harasser as less negative compared to that of a less attractive harasser (Cartar et al., 1996; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Golden et al., 2001). One possible explanation for this discrepancy could lie in the selection of the harasser's images in the vignette, which were not selected based on a universally recognised standards of attractiveness, such as the golden ratio.

Instead, the images were selected based on the ratings provided by the Chicago Face Database. Detailed information about the specific criteria used to rate attractiveness or the demographics of the individuals who made these ratings were not mentioned in the database. The facial images of the harasser were not selected based on the Golden Ratio stems from the reason that beauty standards vary culturally and may not be universally applicable (Singer & Papadopoulos, 2024). Given the complex and multifaceted nature of defining ones' beauty which is influenced by cultural, social, and evolutionary factors, a more nuanced approach is required to assess facial attractiveness (Singer & Papadopoulos, 2024). To enhance the cultural relevance of future research, it is recommended that facial images of Malaysian individuals be utilised to better represent the specific cultural and aesthetic norms of the target population.

Additionally, this study did not explicitly assess the perceived attractiveness of the harasser. Future research could improve the experimental design by conducting a preliminary pilot test in which students are recruited to evaluate and rate the attractiveness of the harasser images. This would provide a more rigorous and standardised selection process. The results may imply that physical attractiveness of the harasser may not be as influential as previously suggested by other

authors, at least within the context of this study. It is possible that participants may have prioritised the severity of the depicted behaviour over the physical attractiveness of the harasser, thereby diminishing its influence on their perceptions. The unobserved effect of physical attractiveness on perceptions of sexual harassment may suggest that attractiveness alone may not be a strong factor in affecting perceptions when behaviours like physical touch is involved as depicted in the vignette.

Sex of harasser

The sex of the harasser emerged as a significant factor influencing participants' perceptions of the behaviour depicted in the vignette. Align with previous study, data of the present study revealed that behaviour initiated by a male was perceived as more negatively as compared to a female initiator (Cummings & Armenta, 2002). Similarly, Bitton and Shaul (2013) revealed that both men and women were less tolerant of scenarios involving harassing behaviour initiated by a male perpetrator towards a female victim. Notably, in Bitton and Shaul's (2013) research, the behaviour was explicitly presented as sexually harassing, for instance, a male at a party sexually harassing a female by squeezing her buttocks. In such cases, it is understandable that participants would clearly identify the behaviour as sexual harassment. In contrast, this study was deliberately designed to avoid signalling to participants that the behaviour depicted was intended to harass or had overtly sexual connotations. The aim was to observe participants' perceptions of the behaviour without biasing their responses. Despite this subtle nature of the behaviour, participants had perceived male-on-female interactions as inappropriate, suggesting that cultural norms and societal expectations may play a significant role in shaping perceptions of sexual harassment.

The negative association with a male initiator may have been further amplified by the #MeToo movement in 2017, which have brought widespread attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment, particularly in cases involving male perpetrators. By highlighting the experiences of women who have been subjected to sexual harassment and abuse, the #MeToo movement may have led to increased scrutiny of behaviours exhibited by men that may constitute harassment. Consequently, this could contribute to a broader societal view that male initiators are more likely to engage in inappropriate or harassing behaviours, thereby perpetuating a 'bad reputation' for men in contexts of harassment scenarios.

While cultural norms and social movements such as #MeToo likely shape how harassment is perceived, evolutionary perspectives may also offer deeper insights. From an Error Management Theory (EMT) (Haselton & Buss, 2000) standpoint, individuals may have evolved cognitive biases that prioritise avoiding high-cost errors. In the context of sexual harassment, male harassers may be perceived as more threatening due to historically higher risks of coercion or physical dominance,

which would have had serious reproductive and survival consequences, particularly for women. Consequently, women may have evolved heightened sensitivity to potential sexual threats as an adaptive bias to detect and avoid danger. As such, stronger reactions to male-initiated behaviours could reflect adaptive mechanisms aimed at reducing the likelihood of costly misjudgements. While EMT would suggest that men are more tolerant of ambiguous sexual cues in mating contexts due to the adaptive benefits of the false positives, this does not necessarily translate to tolerance toward inappropriate behaviour by other males. In the current study, both male and female participants viewed male harassers more negatively. This could reflect broader social learning mechanisms and reputation management concerns, particularly on post #MeToo contexts. Additionally, from an evolutionary standpoint, men may perceive norm-violating behaviours by other males as threatening to group cohesion or social stability, prompting stronger disapproval. Thus, cultural norms and evolved tendencies may jointly shape judgements of harassment.

Moreover evolutionarily, the size and strength disparity between males and females may contribute to a heightened perception of threat or harm when the behaviour is initiated by a male. Males' physicality can render such actions more intimidating or potentially dangerous. For instance, harassing behaviours could escalate to sexual coercion, which poses more severe reproductive consequences for females, such as extended gestation periods and parental investment (Trivers, 1972; Buss, 2017). Such risks may have driven the evolution of heightened sensitivity in females to behaviours that signal potential threats and unwanted sexual attention (Bursik & Gefter, 2011), enabling them to better avoid situations that could compromise their reproductive success (Buss, 2017). These findings may also be shaped by historical trends in reported sexual harassment cases. Data consistently indicate that the majority of reported incidents involved male perpetrators and female victims (Beecher & Wright, 2023). This pattern may have reinforced negative perceptions of male initiators among both male and female participants in the vignette, contributing to the observed results.

Sex of participants

This study examined the effect of participants' sex on their perceptions of sexual harassment. As demonstrated in earlier studies, females tend to be more sensitive to instances of sexual harassment compared to males, who are more likely to perceive sexually harassing behaviour as less harmful (Gutek & O'Connor, 1995; Frazier et al., 1995; Cartar et al., 1996; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Bitton & Shaul, 2013; Yee et al., 2015; Klümper and Schwarz's, 2019; Rothgerber et al., 2020). However, the present study contradicts previous findings that suggested females are more likely to perceive sexual harassment from the scenario than male. Both male and female participants in this

study demonstrated similar levels of sensitivity to sexual harassment based on the vignette. This finding suggests that both male and female participants equally perceived the behaviour described in the vignette as less appropriate may be attributed to cultural norms in Malaysia.

While a physical embrace is not inherently negative, Malaysia's predominantly Muslim population has contributed to cultural values that discourage physical contact, particularly between unmarried individuals of opposite sexes as it is against the practice of Islamic faith (Yee et al., 2015). However, Yee et al. (2015) acknowledged that these norms may not be universally applicable across all ethnic groups in Malaysia. While Islamic values have undoubtedly shaped social norms regarding physical contact within the Malay Muslim community, the authors suggest that these norms may differ among other ethnic groups, such as Chinese and Indian communities. Further research is needed to fully explore the nuanced interplay of religious and cultural factors in shaping social norms regarding physical touch within the diverse Malaysian context. Additionally, the vignette specified that the individuals involved were colleagues, which may have influenced perceptions of appropriateness. Moreover, the emphasis on respect and appropriate behaviour within Malaysian culture may have shaped participants' perceptions of the scenarios (Ramli, 2013). Although, the actors in the vignette were not depicted as Muslims, cultural aversion to physical contact could reflect ingrained societal norms. In Malaysian culture, gestures such as physical embraces are generally not common among certain communities and cannot be generalised (Shamshudeen & Morris, 2013).

While context and culture were not directly investigated in this study, it is noteworthy that the study's context highlights how cultural disparities could influence individual perceptions. For instance, in Klümper and Schwarz's (2019) Study 1, contextual factors were investigated through three scenarios examining the effects of sex, socio-sexual orientation, and the physical attractiveness of the actor. A notable distinction between their study and the present study lies in the severity of the behaviours depicted. Klümper and Schwarz (2019) presented scenarios involving more overtly inappropriate actions, such as "fondling the back" or "grabbing the buttocks," while the current study depicted a subtler behaviour in which the initiator placed their hands slightly below the waist just above the buttocks of the other actor. Despite the relatively mild nature of the behaviour in the current study, a significant effect was observed when the initiator was a male. The finding may be attributed to cultural factors unique to Malaysia, a predominantly conservative society where professional decorum and interpersonal boundaries are often strictly upheld. In this context, the depiction of the actors as colleagues likely heightened participants' sensitivity to even minor deviations from expected norms. These cultural values may contribute to perceptions of male-initiated behaviours as particularly inappropriate, even when the actions themselves are not

explicitly severe. This observation underscores the influence of multiple factors in shaping perception.

Sociosexual orientation (SOI-R)

The Sociosexual Orientation Inventory-Revised (SOI-R) was included as a variable in this study to explore whether participants' openness to uncommitted sexual relationships might relate to their perceptions of sexual harassment. Prior research has suggested that individuals' sexual attitudes and behaviours can shape how they interpret social and sexual advances (e.g., Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Therefore, including the SOI-R allowed for a broader understanding of how personal attitudes toward sexuality may correlate with harassment judgements.

However, SOI-R was not included in the final three-way ANOVA model for two primary reasons. First, the ANOVA was designed to assess the effects of experimentally manipulated categorical variables such as the sex of the participants, sex of the harasser, and the attractiveness of the harasser on perceptions of sexual harassment. In contrast, SOI-R is a continuous trait measure, making it more appropriately analysed using multiple regression. Second, including SOI-R as a covariate or moderator within the ANOVA framework would have shifted the analytical focus from the experimental manipulations to an unmanipulated psychological trait.

Despite its exclusion from the factorial ANOVA, SOI-R yielded valuable insights through separate analyses. A significant negative correlation and regression result revealed that individuals with a more unrestricted sociosexual orientation were less likely to perceive certain behaviours as harassing. These findings help validate the use of perception of sexual harassment as a meaningful dependent variable and offer a more nuanced perspective on how individual differences, like sociosexual orientation, may shape how people judge and interpret potentially harassing behaviours.

Limitations and implications

Factors contributing to these results may include the methods employed in the study. For instance, the questionnaire designed for this experiment may not have effectively probed the participants' thoughts and perceptions in sufficient depth. Self-report instruments can lack nuance and fail to capture the complexity of participants' emotional or cognitive responses (Podsakoff et al., 2003). For example, such measures are susceptible to various response biases, including social desirability, where participants may respond in ways they believe are more socially acceptable rather than providing entirely honest or accurate answers (Krumpal, 2013). This can be particularly problematic when addressing sensitive topics such as sociosexuality or perceptions of sexual harassment, where individuals may feel discomfort, embarrassment, or concern about judgement,

even in anonymous surveys. An important observation was that most, if not all, participants appeared hesitant to complete the SOI-R questionnaire, which was administered following the vignette and the perception questionnaire. This reluctance may stem from discomfort in sharing personal sociosexual information or feeling of shyness, as such topics are often considered sensitive or taboo in

Malaysian society, despite assurances of anonymity (Wong et all., 2016; Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). Moreover, the SOI-R includes several direct and potentially intrusive questions about one's sociosexual life, such as the number of partners one has had and instances of sexual intercourse within the past 12 months. This stigma surrounding the topic and the nature of the questions may have influenced participants' willingness to engage fully, potentially impacting the accuracy of the data collected.

Vignettes are widely employed in social research, including studies on sexual harassment, due to their versatility and practicality (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Allen & Meadows, 2017; Leigh et al., 2021; Dodaj et al., 2023). This approach allows researchers to manipulate specific variables, such as the sex and attractiveness of the actors, to analyse their impact on participants' perceptions. Using this method offers a robust way to investigate sensitive topics while reducing the potential for distress or discomfort, thereby aligning with ethical research practices. Additionally, vignettes are easily accessible and can be distributed online, removing the need for in-person participation, which is particularly important when researching sensitive topics such as sexual harassment.

One of the limitations in using vignettes is that the scenarios are hypothetical and may lack realism, potentially limiting participants' ability to fully engage with the context (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). To address this, future studies could consider presenting the scenarios in a more immersive format, such as videos featuring actors reenacting the actions. For instance, the scenarios could be depicted as CCTV footage or as recordings captured by bystanders. This approach may enhance the realism of the scenarios, helping participants better visualise and assess the behaviours portrayed, thereby eliciting more authentic and accurate responses.

The current study exclusively utilised heterosexual scenarios in the vignettes and restricted participants to selecting their sex as either 'Male' or 'Female'. This binary classification may have excluded individuals who do not identify with these categories, presenting a potential limitation of the research. Future studies could address this by broadening the scope to include vignettes depicting male-to-male and female-to-female sexual harassment scenarios. Additionally, providing more inclusive options for participants to indicate their gender would ensure that the study is representative of diverse perception and experiences. This is particularly important in regions like

Malaysia, where research on same-sex harassment scenarios remains limited. Expanding the scope in this way could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of sexual harassment dynamics across different gender identities and orientations. Moreover, research has shown that same-sex sexual harassment is as common as female-to-male harassment (Waldo et al., 1998), further underscoring the importance of including such scenarios in future investigations.

An additional factor that may have influenced the findings is social desirability bias, a phenomenon particularly prevalent when addressing sensitive topics such as sexual harassment (Kelly et al., 2013). Given the sensitive nature of the questionnaire, participants may have provided responses they deemed socially acceptable to avoid any potential judgement, despite assurances of anonymity. This bias was likely evident in participants' reluctance to answer questions regarding their sociosexual orientation, even though the questionnaires were administered online. The personal and sensitive nature of these questions likely contributed to this hesitancy, potentially reflecting underlying stigma or discomfort associated with discussing such topics.

Building on the results, future research could investigate and compare perceptions of sexual harassment across ethnic groups, particularly among the Malay, Chinese, and Indian populations. Exploring how different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds shape these perceptions would provide deeper insights. Yee et al. (2015) found that perceptions of sexual harassment varied significantly among ethnic groups, with Malay participants, followed by Chinese and Indian female participants, being more likely to classify certain behaviours as sexual harassment. These findings underscore the importance of considering cultural and ethnic diversity in future studies. Furthermore, manipulating the attractiveness of the victim may allow for the observation of how attractiveness of the victim may influence perceptions.

Considering the implications outlined above, these findings have several practical implications. For instance, the influence of sociosexual orientation and the sex of the harasser on perceptions of sexual harassment suggests that individuals do not interpret such behaviours uniformly. This highlights the importance of tailoring workplace harassment training programs to address perceptual differences rather than relying solely on standardised definitions. Human resource departments and policymakers could use this insight to design more inclusive training that would accommodate for psychological and sexbased variability in judgements. Moreover, these findings could inform university-level educational interventions aimed at fostering awareness of how individual beliefs may bias interpretations of social or sexual cues. Such awareness could help promote a more empathetic and informed understanding of harassment, which in turn may improve reporting behaviours and the overall culture of respect and safety on campus.

Additionally, the implementation of pre-employment screening tools may assist organisations in identifying candidates whose behavioural tendencies and values align with a safe and respectful workplace culture (Matthews, 2017). These tools could also play a role in reducing potential workplace misconduct, including sexual harassment, thereby contributing to a healthier and more inclusive environment.

Conclusion

This study investigated the influences of perception on sexual harassment, focusing on the variables of the participant's sex, the sex of the initiator, and the level of attractiveness of the actors. The findings indicated that the initiator's attractiveness did not significantly influence perceptions of sexual harassment, contrary to previous research.

Similarly, the sex of the participants did not play a significant role in shaping perceptions. However, the sex of the initiator emerged as a crucial factor, with both male and female participants perceiving sexually harassing behaviour from a male initiator as more severe than similar behaviour from a female initiator. These results underscore the complexity of individual perceptions, which are shaped by a multitude of factors, including cultural, social, and religious influences. While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. For instance, the methodology and tools used in this study may have constrained the findings, as well as the restriction of participants to identifying as either male or female and the potential influence of social desirability bias. Future research could build on these findings by exploring perceptions across Malaysia's multi-racial context, manipulating the ethnicity of the initiator, and recruiting participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Utilising tools that enhance realism, such as staged CCTV footage, video stimuli, or virtual reality (VR) simulations, could significantly improve the authenticity of the scenarios (Rawski et al., 2022). These methods may provide participants with a more immersive and lifelike experience, potentially leading to more accurate and reliable responses. Additionally, future studies should consider inclusive representations of gender in both scenarios and participant demographics. As a preliminary investigation into perceptions of sexual harassment, this study highlights the need for further research to deepen our understanding of the complex factors influencing how individuals perceive and evaluate sexually harassing behaviour.

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Appendix A

Appendix B

Correlations among study variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sex of participants (Sex)	-				
2. Attractiveness of harasser (AttHar)	.05	-			
3. Sex of Harasser (SexHar)	-.05	.10	-		
4. Perceptions of harassment (PERCEPT)	-.02	.04	-.29**	-	
5. Sociosexual Orientation (SOIR)	-.24**	-.08	.10	-.28**	-