



Sexual harassment and proactive customer service performance: The roles of job engagement and sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between sexual harassment (SH) and proactive customer service performance (PCSP) by focusing on the mediating role of job engagement and the moderating role of sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment. Drawing on the conservation of resources theory, we propose that SH reduces job engagement and PCSP, and that individuals who are highly sensitive to interpersonal mistreatment are more vulnerable to SH. Using time-lagged data collected from 209 female employees of 18 hotels in China, we find that: (1) SH is negatively related to PCSP; (2) SH negatively affects PCSP via job engagement; and (3) sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment strengthens the direct effect of SH on job engagement and its indirect effect on PCSP via job engagement.

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1. Introduction

Workplace sexual harassment (SH) causes significant harm to victims (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009). To the extent that SH is an important social and organizational phenomenon, it is fortunate that a large number of studies have considered the issue. Further, the literature has defined SH from both a legal perspective¹ and a psychological perspective. In this study, because we treat SH as the subjective perceptions of hospitality industry employees, we adopt the psychological definition of SH; namely, "the unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding her resources, or threatening her well-being" (Fitzgerald et al., 1997, p. 15). A growing body of empirical evidence has demonstrated the destructive influence that SH exerts on employees' attitudes, behaviors, and psychological health, resulting in outcomes such as job withdrawal and decrease in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance,

and mental and physical health (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Magley et al., 1999; Willness et al., 2007). However, although much is known about the negative consequences of SH in the general management field, research on this issue in the hospitality industry has not received adequate attention from an empirical viewpoint.

Among the few studies that have examined the devastating impacts of SH in the context of the hospitality industry (Ineson et al., 2013; Kensbock et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2014; Yagil, 2008), scarcely any have focused on the effects of SH on performance. To our knowledge, only one empirical study has investigated the detrimental effects of SH on hospitality industry employees' in-role service performance (Liu et al., 2014), thereby leaving the important issue of the impacts of SH on extra-role service performance unaddressed. Compared with employee in-role service performance, employee extra-role work performance is more likely to be affected by organizational injustice such as workplace mistreatment (Organ, 1988). Further, in the hospitality industry, the prerequisite determinant of service quality is whether the service that customers receive meets the standard that they expect. To the extent that responsiveness and reliability influence customer outcomes, this service gap between customers' expectations and the quality of service they receive may reduce when employees exhibit proactive service performance (Rank et al., 2007). Because SH is characterized by sexual-related behaviors that are unwanted and offensive, it may influence service employees' motivation to exhibit proactive behaviors in the workplace. Thus, we argue that

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¹ The legal definition of SH varies by jurisdictional context. The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) defines it as "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that interferes with one's employment or work performance or creates a hostile or offensive work environment".

SH undermines service employees' proactive customer service performance (PCSP), which refers to self-started, long-term oriented, and persistent service behavior that goes beyond prescribed performance requirements in the workplace (Rank et al., 2007). Hence, our first objective is to explore whether SH plays a role in impeding hospitality industry employees' PCSP, which in the highly uncertain service sector is a particularly proactive form of extra-role service performance.

Drawing on the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the second goal of our research is to build and test a model that explicitly outlines the mediating process underlying the relationship between SH and PCSP. According to COR theory, resources are things that are valued by individuals. Further, when individuals perceive an actual or potential loss of resources, they attempt to conserve resources in order to deal with the threatening conditions (Hobfoll, 1998; Wright and Hobfoll, 2004). In this regard, resources are motivational in nature and may contribute to individuals' job engagement (Karatepe and Olugbade, 2009). Job engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, and work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). To the extent that resources are contended as a prerequisite for job engagement (Halbesleben et al., 2014), it is likely that SH drains victims' resources and depletes their job engagement. Because the experience of SH serves as a stressor that demotivates employees (Willness et al., 2007) and depletes their resources, harassment victims may protect their remaining resources (such as energy) by withdrawing job engagement and decreasing their proactive performance efforts. Research has shown that the relationship between job resources and employees' proactive behavior is transmitted through job engagement (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008). Hence, we propose that SH inhibits hospitality industry employees' PCSP, at least in part, because SH impairs their job engagement.

In addition, we examine the moderating role of SH victims' sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment on the relationships among SH, job engagement, and PCSP. Research has demonstrated that the effects of workplace mistreatment are contingent on individual differences (Hoobler and Brass, 2006), although few studies have examined the role that individual characteristics play regarding the impacts of workplace SH (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009; Willness et al., 2007). Because individual characteristics exert critically important impacts on perceptions about whether certain conduct is SH (Ineson et al., 2013), we propose that one such individual characteristic, sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment, may exacerbate the effects of SH. Defined as a relatively stable personal trait that classifies people by how sensitive they are to the various forms of workplace interpersonal interaction (Bunk and Magley, 2011), sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment may enhance SH targets' sensitivity to unfair treatments. Hence, employees with high sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment are more susceptible to the negative effects of SH and are more likely to withdraw from engagement with their jobs.

In developing and testing this model, our research makes three major contributions to the literature. First, we advance the SH literature by elaborating on the impacts of SH on employees' proactive service performance in the hospitality industry. Our research moves beyond the restricted view that SH affects service employees' in-role service performance and considers that SH undermines hospitality industry employees' willingness to perform proactive service behaviors toward customers. Second, our study advances the literature on SH by investigating the "black box" underlying the impacts of SH. The provision of empirical evidence for the existence of this important pathway of job engagement from SH through to PCSP constitutes another essential contribution of our research. Third, few studies have examined the role that individual characteristics of SH victims play in workplace SH (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009;

Willness et al., 2007). Our study addresses this gap by examining the extent to which victims' sensitivity to interpersonal mistreatment can exacerbate the effects of SH from the victims' perspective. Thus, we extend prior research and identify an important boundary condition in the processes of SH.

Specifically, in our study we focus on SH experienced by females only. Prior research has shown that females are the majority of SH victims (Illies et al., 2003; Kensbock et al., 2015; Lim and Cortina, 2005) whereas males are most likely to be harassers (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009). In addition, females tend to identify their experiences of SH differently from those of males (Berdahl, 2007; Lim and Cortina, 2005). Further, the measurement of SH that is widely accepted in this field was initially designed for women (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). Hence, given the above considerations, we decided to explore females' experiences of SH in our research.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Sexual harassment

SH can be understood in terms of legal and psychological definitions. The legal definition describes SH objectively and has created significant awareness of policies aimed at preventing SH. However, in psychological terms, workplace SH captures perceptual components because it is a subjective assessment made by harassment targets. In this study, because we aim to discuss the subjective perceptions of SH among hospitality industry employees, we adopt the psychological definition of SH proposed by Fitzgerald et al. (1997).

In accordance with the psychological definition, Fitzgerald et al. (1999) identified four dimensions of SH. The first dimension is *gender harassment*, which refers to sexist hostility that includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors that insult and degrade women. Examples of gender harassment include sexist remarks and gender-based differential treatment. The second is *crude and offensive behaviors*, which refer to sexual hostility that includes explicitly sexual verbal and nonverbal behaviors such as offensive sexual jokes or gestures and crude sexual remarks. The third is *unwanted sexual advances*, which refer to victim-targeted sexual incidents such as touching and lewd stares. The fourth is *sexual coercion*, which refers to the extortion of sexual cooperation in return for job-related considerations such as threats of retaliation for refusing to have sex. Among the four dimensions of SH, gender harassment and crude behaviors create a hostile working environment rather than target particular individuals, whereas unwanted sexual advances and sexual coercion are victim-targeted SH behaviors (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009).

According to the literature, the nature of SH differs from other forms of workplace mistreatment in two important ways. First, SH has an inherent sexual component (Willness et al., 2007). Although all workplace mistreatments are conceptualized as unwanted hostile behaviors, the domain of SH is specific to sexual-related behavior at work. Second, a gender difference exists in targets' perceptions of SH such that SH is less threatening to men than it is to women (Berdahl et al., 1996). With respect to women, SH is likely to reinforce their relatively low status by demeaning their gender roles, whereas men are less likely to view SH as a significant threat to them (Berdahl, 2007). In contrast, other forms of workplace mistreatment (e.g., workplace aggression and abusive supervision) are more likely to be perceived as a personal attack based on one's personal characteristics; thus, they affect men and women equally (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010).

Pizam (2008) emphasized that the hospitality industry has a higher prevalence of depression among employees than most other industries, a situation that may in part be due to the higher level of SH in the industry. Workplace SH derives from power differentials

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