

Passive leadership and sexual harassment

Roles of observed hostility and workplace gender ratio

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine whether observed hostility mediates the link between passive leadership and sexual harassment. The study also investigates how workplace gender ratio might moderate this mediated relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used online survey data by recruiting full-time working employees in various US organisations and industries.

Findings – Results suggest that when working under a passive leader, both men and women are more likely to experience sexual harassment. Furthermore, the positive association between hostility and sexual harassment is stronger for female employees who work in a male-dominated organisation (low gender ratio). However, the moderating effects of workplace gender ratio were not significant for male employees.

Practical implications – Organisations seeking to reduce or prevent sexual harassment should monitor and screen out managers who display passive leadership behaviour and create a work environment where collegial and civil interactions are encouraged and valued.

Originality/value – This research advances our knowledge regarding the organisational factors of sexual harassment by examining passive leadership, hostile work context, and workplace gender ratio. Theoretically, the study contributes to the sexual harassment literature by incorporating evidence on passive leadership from a broader field of workplace aggression into sexual harassment research. Practically, the study offers important implications for organisations that seek to minimise sexual harassment.

Keywords Quantitative, Sexual harassment, Incivility, Moderated mediation, Hostility, Passive leadership, Gender ratio

Paper type Research paper

Sexual harassment is a form of workplace deviance or discrimination that is based on biological sex (O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 2000). The US Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (Sexual harassment) defines sexual harassment as “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, or other conduct based on sex affecting the dignity of women and men at work which include physical verbal and nonverbal conduct”. Although sexual harassment complaints declined to 28.5 per cent from 1997 to 2011 (EEOC, 2012), sexual harassment is still prevalent in organisations. A Recent study shows that over 50 per cent of women and over 30 per cent of men experience sexual harassment (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012), and the popular press often covers high-profile sexual harassment charges (e.g. cases of Department of US Homeland Security and Yahoo executive; Fuchs, 2012; Linshi, 2014). Given that sexual harassment causes negative consequences for victimized individuals (e.g. decreased job satisfaction, anxiety, depression; Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Munson *et al.*, 2000; Willness *et al.*, 2007) and the organisations (e.g. absenteeism, turnover, lower organisational commitment; Kelloway *et al.*, 2006; Sims *et al.*, 2005), it is important to understand what factors contribute to sexual harassment.

With regard to antecedents of sexual harassment, the seminal work by Fitzgerald *et al.* (1997) has served as the most widely used theoretical model in the literature. This framework, which regards sexual harassment as a work stressor, suggests that



sexual harassment is a function of organisational factors – organisational tolerance (i.e. employees' perceptions of their organisation as tolerant of sexual harassment) and job-gender context (i.e. proportion of women in the immediate setting). In organisations characterised by strong perceptions of organisational tolerance, employees believe that sexual harassment complaints are not taken seriously and perpetrators would face few penalties (Hulin *et al.*, 1996). More recently, O'Leary-Kelly *et al.* (2009), in their comprehensive review article, pointed out the lack of empirical evidence for the specific aspects of perceptions of sexual harassment tolerance (i.e. exactly what conditions compose a tolerant climate?, p. 528). They further argued that sexual harassment research must incorporate accumulated evidence within a broader field of the workplace aggression literature to advance the sexual harassment literature. Bridging sexual harassment research and workplace aggression literature is particularly important because sexual harassment is a sub-type of workplace aggression, and thus incorporating evidence from the broader field of workplace aggression would benefit sexual harassment research (Dionisi *et al.*, 2012; O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 2009). To date, however, sexual harassment has often been regarded as a distinctive form of harassment from other types of aggression. As a result, the sexual harassment literature has progressed separately, impeding more integrative approaches to studying antecedents of sexual harassment (Barling *et al.*, 2001; Dionisi *et al.*, 2012; McDonald, 2012).

Having said that, the present study centres on organisational factors of sexual harassment by incorporating evidence from workplace aggression into sexual harassment research. Prior research has examined the relationships of different types of leadership with various forms of workplace aggression (e.g. abusive supervision on workplace deviance: Mitchell and Ambrose, 2007; structure and consideration leadership and counterproductive workplace behaviour: Holtz and Harold, 2013; Laissez-Faire leadership and bullying: Skogstad *et al.*, 2007). In the sexual harassment literature, by contrast, although a few scholars have acknowledged that the absence of guardians constitutes a condition leading to sexual harassment in the organisation (e.g. De Coster *et al.*, 1999; Quick and McFadyen, 2016), there has been a lack of empirical studies on particular leadership styles associated with sexual harassment (Hunt *et al.*, 2010). To fill the void in the literature, this paper examines passive leadership (i.e. avoiding responsibilities and hesitating to intervene until serious issues arise; DeRue *et al.*, 2011; Kelloway *et al.*, 2005) as an important organisational factor contributing to the proliferation of sexual harassment. Although leaders are expected to set the tone for the organisation and to provide social cues for employees regarding (in) appropriate conduct, passive leaders do not meet such expectations (DeRue *et al.*, 2011; Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Moreover, these apathetic and indifferent leaders are unlikely to punish or correct problematic behaviours (e.g. sexually harassing acts) of their followers, which will not only silence the victim but also let the perpetrator avoid detection. For these reasons, the current study proposes that passive leadership behaviours displayed by managers will positively relate to sexual harassment.

Evidence also suggests that passive leadership is associated with increased levels of interpersonal conflicts, workplace incivility, and bullying (Holtz and Harold, 2013; Hoel and Salin, 2003; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007). Harold and Holtz (2015) have shown that passive leadership is related to employees' frequent experiences of incivility (e.g. yelling, ridiculing, and intimidating) as well as their own engagement in incivility towards others. That is, employees who work under a passive manager are more likely to observe and perceive hostile interactions among coworkers (Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004; Tepper *et al.*, 2015). According to the theory of workplace incivility (Andersson and Pearson, 1999), observing hostility may foster more aggressive types of interpersonal interactions such as sexual harassment because employees often look to how their coworkers are treated for information about behavioural norms at work and display similar behaviours according to

their perceptions (Lamertz, 2002). As such, the general level of hostility observed in the organisation (i.e. hostile work context) will be positively related to the frequency of sexual harassment experienced by employees.

The study also examines workplace gender ratio, an objective feature of an organisation, as a potential moderator in the relationship between hostility and sexual harassment. Workplace gender ratio has been identified as one of the key antecedents to sexual harassment (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997; Willness *et al.*, 2007). Research suggests that when individuals are in a minority position (e.g. women in a male-dominated organisation), they are more likely to encounter hostility, which is often manifested through offensive sexual remarks and behaviours (Gutek and Cohen, 1987; Kanter, 1977). Extending this line of research, the study investigates whether the strength of the relationship between hostility and sexual harassment varies by the levels of workplace gender ratio.

The current study makes important contributions to the sexual harassment literature. First, the study advances our knowledge of antecedents of sexual harassment by examining important situational factors (i.e. passive leadership, hostile work context, and workplace gender ratio) that provide a conducive environment for sexual harassment. Second, the study integrates the leadership, workplace aggression, and sexual harassment literatures. Despite the potentially significant role a leader plays in promoting or inhibiting workplace aggression, virtually no empirical research to date has examined the relationship between passive leadership and sexual harassment. Third, this research sheds light on similarities and dissimilarities between women's and men's experiences of sexual harassment by investigating the mediating role of hostility and the moderating role of workplace gender ratio. The next section provides a brief review of the relevant literature.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a multidimensional construct consisting of three related but conceptually distinct dimensions, which include gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Gender harassment, the most common form of sexual harassment (Lim and Cortina, 2005; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999; US Merit Systems Protection Board (USMSPB), 1995), refers to verbal and non-verbal behaviours generally not aimed at sexual cooperation but rather displaying insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes. Unwanted sexual attention is sexually inappropriate behaviour that is uninvited and unreciprocated by the recipient, such as intrusive phone calls and touching. Finally, sexual coercion is explicit or subtle bribes and threats to make a job-related benefit contingent on sexual cooperation. Despite these conceptual differences among the sub-dimensions, researchers have often treated sexual harassment as a global construct (e.g. Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999; Munson *et al.*, 2000). Following this convention, this study treats sexual harassment as a global construct.

Prior research traditionally focussed only on sexual harassment of women by men, not sexual harassment of men. The research's exclusive focus on women's experiences has resulted in relatively limited understanding of men's experiences of sexual harassment. Understanding male experiences is critical because recent data show that over 30 per cent of men experience sexual harassment (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012) in their workplace and that the percentage of charges filed by males has increased 15.3 per cent from 1997 to 2011 according to the compiled report of EEOC and FEPA. Evidence, albeit scant, also suggests that victimized men experience negative consequences such as lower occupational and health satisfaction, and higher work withdrawal (Dekker and Barling, 1998; Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004). Therefore, it is imperative to understand factors that contribute to the proliferation of sexual harassment of both men and women. Among others, the current study focusses on organisational factors such as passive leadership, hostile work context, and workplace gender ratio.

Passive leadership and observed hostility

Passive leadership is characterised by avoiding decisions, not responding to problems, failing to follow up, hesitating to take action, and being absent when needed (Bass, 1990; Kelloway *et al.*, 2005). Prior research has conceptualised passive leadership as comprising elements from passive management by exception (MBEP) leadership and Laissez-Faire leadership (e.g. Holtz and Harold, 2013; Kelloway *et al.*, 2005), both of which are found to be ineffective (DeRue *et al.*, 2011). MBEP leadership and Laissez-Faire leadership are highly correlated and demonstrate similar relationships with outcome variables (Judge and Piccolo, 2004; Hinkin and Schriesheim, 2008). Thus, MBEP leadership and Laissez-Faire leadership are combined into passive leadership in the study. Moreover, leaders may act in a manner consistent with transformational leadership in some situations (e.g. productivity-related issues) and with passive leadership in others (e.g. harassment-related issues). Therefore, transformational and contingent reward leaderships were controlled for an analysis to examine if passive leadership may have unique effects that go beyond those attributable to a lack of transformational and contingent reward leadership skills.

Although the appointment of a person to a manager position evokes legitimate expectations such as clarifying purposes and means and arbitrating disagreements for employees, passive managers fail to meet those expectations by avoiding decision making and the responsibilities associated with their position (Bass, 1990). As a result, passive leaders may promote conflicting goals among employees and increase work stress through role conflict, role ambiguity, and interpersonal conflicts (Kelloway *et al.*, 2005), which are key factors causing hostile treatment towards others (Bowling and Beehr, 2006; Einarsen *et al.*, 1994). Evidence suggests that experiencing passive leadership by one's immediate superior is positively related to work stress and interpersonal conflicts (Hauge *et al.*, 2007; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007). Because passive leaders are not likely to intervene, despite the primary duty of a manager to handle interpersonal conflicts (Bass, 1990), unresolved escalated conflict among coworkers will lead to increased levels of hostility among organisational members (Liefoghe and Davey, 2001). To summarise, passive leadership will foster hostile interactions among employees. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Passive leadership will be positively associated with observed hostility.

Observed hostility and sexual harassment

Hostility poses a threat to targeted individuals' well-being that is manifested as increased psychological distress (e.g. anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion) and decreased work attitudes (e.g. organisational commitment, job satisfaction) and task performance (Porath and Erez, 2007; Tepper *et al.*, 2015). The detrimental effects of hostility do not limit to targeted victims. Evidence suggests that merely observing uncivil treatment at work also negatively affects the observers' occupational and physical well-being (Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004; Harris *et al.*, 2013). Extending the stream of research on vicarious experiences of hostility, this study proposes that when employees observe hostile interactions among coworkers in the organisation, incidents of sexual harassment are also likely to increase. This is explained by the theory of the incivility spiral (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). According to this theory, mild violations of norms for respect – incivility – can turn into increasingly intense aggressive behaviours through a tit-for-tat exchange (i.e. incivility spiral). The theory further suggests that hostile social exchanges between coworkers may be observed and modelled by a third party, which is likely to initiate an incivility spiral with another person (i.e. secondary spiral). Particularly, when a victim of incivility perceives an identity threat or a loss of face, this will prompt a

more intense response with intent to harm the perpetrator, causing an exchange of increasingly hostile behaviours. For instance, when employees experience incivility such as public ridicule, they may feel that their social identity has been damaged or threatened, and thus may seek revenge (Aquino and Douglas, 2003; Bies and Tripp, 2005). As an attempt to revenge, some people might try to trample the status challenge by sexually harassing the other party because desire to maintain a valued social status is a common underlying motivation for both incivility and sexual harassment (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Berdahl, 2007). Thus, incivility and sexual harassment often co-occur within the same employees' experiences (Barling *et al.*, 2001; Lim and Cortina, 2005).

Sexual harassment often takes place in a larger context of generalised mistreatment embedded in the organisational culture (Lim and Cortina, 2005; O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 2009) because organisations that tolerate one form of interpersonal mistreatment are likely to tolerate others (Barling *et al.*, 2001). Put differently, observations of incivility are indicative of a hostile workplace climate in that they represent the extent to which mistreatment of others in the organisation is normative (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Therefore, the study predicts that in organisations where hostile interactions are prevalent, employees are also more likely to be exposed to sexually harassment. Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

- H2. Observed hostility will be positively associated with the frequency of sexual harassment experienced by employees.

The mediating effect of observed hostility

When leaders pay little or no attention to their employees and fail to clarify behavioural expectations, confusion and ambiguity may exist regarding what is appropriate interpersonal behaviour within the organisation (Robinson and Bennett, 1995). This will create greater potential for employees to perceive that sexually harassing behaviours are acceptable or at least will not be reprimanded (Pryor *et al.*, 1993). In turn, perceptions of their organisation as permissive of sexual harassment will contribute to fostering similar bad behaviours in the organisation (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997; Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004) because a lack of monitoring and oversight by passive managers may be interpreted as a low likelihood of being observed, caught, and punished (Robinson and O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). This motivates potential perpetrators to initiate or continue their harassing behaviours, and thus the frequency of sexual harassment is likely to increase.

Furthermore, the study posits that the aforementioned relationship between passive leadership and sexual harassment will be mediated by hostility observed in the organisation. When working in the harassment-permissive environment, employees are more likely to engage in mild covert forms of hostility (e.g. incivility), rather than violent overt forms of hostility (e.g. assault), due to the subtleness of such an act (Andersson and Pearson, 1999). Thus, passive leadership is positively associated with employees' experiences of incivility and their engagement in incivility (Harold and Holtz, 2015). Employees' frequent involvement in incivility indicates high levels of hostility observed in the organisation and observing others' behaviours provides employees information about what is morally (dis)approved conduct (Lamertz, 2002). Frequent observations of incivility incidents at work will also make employees believe that everybody is treating others in a hostile manner and that it is okay to do so, which may provide opportunities for potential harassers to initiate or persist in sexual misconduct, believing they can get away with their behaviour. That is, the extent to which employees observe hostility within the organisation serves as a barometer of a workplace social norm about (in)appropriate behaviour. Thus, Pryor and Whalen (1997) argue that "sexual harassment can be an expression of hostility towards a recipient perceived as an outgroup member" (p. 130). Based on this evidence,

passive leadership will be associated with high levels of hostility in the organisation, which will serve as an environment that is conducive to the proliferation of sexual harassment (Lim and Cortina, 2005). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. Observed hostility will mediate the relationship between passive leadership and sexual harassment.

The moderating effects of workplace gender ratio

Workplace gender ratio, defined as gender composition in the workplace that individuals interact with on a day-to-day basis, has been shown to influence the prevalence of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997; Willness *et al.*, 2007). Research suggests that when there is a greater number of one gender than the other at work, gender-based expectations and biases that are irrelevant or inappropriate to the work setting may spill over to the workplace (i.e. sex-role spillover theory; Berdahl, 2007; Gutek and Cohen, 1987). Moreover, the token theory (Kanter, 1977) suggests that when individuals become tokens (i.e. people who are in a numerical minority compared to a majority group (e.g. women in a male-dominated work setting)), they are more likely to encounter hostility based on their minority position. Given that gender is one of the most visible social categories in work settings (Eagly and Karau, 2002), women's token status makes their gender become a salient, distinctive factor, thereby being subject to gender stereotypes (e.g. submissive, emotional, weak). Based on these gender stereotypes, men tend to view that token women are inferior as an employee. Thus, token women are more likely to encounter hostility, which is often enacted through offensive sexual remarks and behaviours (Gutek and Cohen, 1987). This indicates that when women are underrepresented in the organisation, they are more likely to be a victim of sexual harassment. Consistently, empirical evidence shows that a masculine job-gender context is associated with increased risk for sexual harassment of women (Gruber, 2003; Wasti *et al.*, 2000). For instance, the reported rate of sexual harassment among police officers was 67 per cent or more, compared to 42 per cent among female US government employees (Brown *et al.*, 1995; USMSPB, 1995). This line of research suggests that the fewer women are in the workplace (low gender ratio), the more they are targeted with sexually harassing behaviours.

However, there is also evidence suggesting that the token theory may not apply equally to individuals who are in high-status social groups (i.e. men). For example, Kabat-Farr and Cortina (2014) found that men's underrepresentation was not related to the risk for men's sexual harassment among university staff employees. In the same work by Kabat-Farr and Cortina (2014), they also found that male court employees who were in the minority reported decreased odds of experiencing sexual harassment. These findings are supported by the arguments that men are often advantaged when they are in the minority because unlike women, men's high-status token evokes positive male stereotypes such as leadership and strength (Stockdale *et al.*, 1999), being less likely to be a victim of mistreatment such as sexual harassment (Williams, 1992). For men, therefore, being a token may have no negative effects or it may result in more positive outcomes such as reduced risk for harassment. This suggests that a high gender ratio (more women than men) in the organisation will not increase men's risk for sexual harassment. Accordingly, the study proposes that workplace gender ratio may have differential effects on men vs women. This will be also true of the conditional indirect effects of passive leadership on the prevalence of sexual harassment via hostility. Specifically, as the preceding arguments suggest, the mediated relationship between passive leadership and sexual harassment via observed hostility will be stronger for women who work in a male-dominated work setting whereas the same relationships will

not be stronger for men who work in a female-dominated work setting. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H4. Workplace gender ratio will moderate the relationship between observed hostility and sexual harassment, such that when the work environment is dominated by her/his opposite gender, the positive association between hostility and sexual harassment will become stronger for women but not for men.
- H5. Workplace gender ratio will moderate the indirect effects of passive leadership on sexual harassment, such that when the work environment is dominated by her/his opposite gender, the mediated relationship between passive leadership and sexual harassment via hostility will become stronger for women but not for men.

Method

Sample and procedure

In total, 403 full-time working employees in various US organisations were invited to complete an online survey. Participants were recruited through StudyResponse (Stanton and Weiss, 2002), an online recruiting system operated by Syracuse University that has a large database of panellists who had registered with them and are willing to complete surveys. This method of data collection has been frequently used in the past organisational behaviour research including workplace aggression (e.g. Hershcovis and Barling, 2010; Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006). One of the benefits of using this type of service includes maintaining complete anonymity of respondents' identities, which can be a concern when contacting employees from one company for a survey on a socially sensitive topic such as sexual harassment and ineffective leadership. Participant confidentiality was further assured emphasising that the study was being conducted by a third party for academic research purposes and that the company would not have access to individual data. Each participant received a \$10 gift certificate from Amazon.com upon completion of the survey.

Complete data were received from 237 participants after surveys with substantial missing responses excluded (59 per cent response rate). Approximately half of the participants in the sample were male (men = 115, women = 112). The average age of the participants were 35.81 years (SD = 8.47) and their supervisory tenure was 5.4 years. Most of the participants were Caucasian (78 per cent) and had a college degree or above (76 per cent). The type of industry represented in the sample was diverse such as manufacturing (19 per cent), construction (11 per cent), service (10 per cent), wholesale (8 per cent), finance, insurance and real estate (8 per cent), retail (7 per cent), and others (e.g. consulting, engineering, education, health care, 37%). Respondents reported that 74 per cent had a formal HR department or HR personnel, and 36 per cent had a union in the company.

Measures

Passive leadership: passive leadership was assessed with the eight items from the MBEP and Laissez-Faire leadership sub-scales of the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass and Avolio, 1997). The items included in the MLQ cannot be reproduced here due to proprietary right.

Observed hostility: consistent with Miner-Rubino and Cortina (2004), observed hostility was measured with items assessing observations of uncivil behaviours displayed by organisational members. Using the seven-item workplace incivility measure (Cortina *et al.*, 2001), respondents assessed how often they had observed others being a target of disrespectful, offensive, and rude remarks or behaviour in their workplace over the last two years. An example includes how often respondents observed or heard about "making demeaning or derogatory remarks about others" in the organisation (0 = never to 4 = many times).

Sexual harassment: this was measured with 16 items of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ-R; Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1999). Respondents were asked to report whether they had been exposed to offensive sex-related behaviours from organisational members on a five-point scale (1 = never to 5 = once a week or more) while working with their supervisor. This was to maintain a temporal alignment between leadership being examined and sexual harassment. The SEQ-R is composed of five items assessing gender harassment (e.g. made offensive jokes about gender), seven items assessing unwanted sexual attention (e.g. touched you in a way that made you uncomfortable), and four items assessing sexual coercion (e.g. made you afraid that you would be treated poorly if you did not cooperate sexually).

Workplace gender ratio: in line with the existing sexual harassment literature (e.g. Fitzgerald *et al.*, 1997; Kabat-Farr and Cortina, 2014; Miner-Rubino and Cortina, 2004), workplace gender ratio was assessed by asking the gender mix of the coworkers that participants worked most closely with on a day-to-day basis. A five-point scale (1 = almost all men to 5 = almost all women) was utilised.

Control variables: age, gender, race, and organisational rank were controlled because young, female, non-white, low-level employees tend to experience sexual harassment more frequently than their male counterparts (USMSPB, 1995). Transformational leadership and transactional contingent reward leadership were controlled to examine the incremental validity of passive leadership. These leaderships were assessed with 20 items and 4 items from the MLQ-5X, respectively (Bass and Avolio, 1997). Negative affectivity was controlled to ensure that any significant effects of passive leadership and hostility could not be attributed to individuals' personal disposition of the extent to which an individual experiences levels of distressing emotions such as anger, hostility, and anxiety across situations (Watson and Clark, 1984).

Data analysis

Hypotheses 1 through 3 (*H1-H3*) were tested using the mediation analysis procedure suggested by MacKinnon *et al.* (2004). This procedure performs a bootstrapping method and provides a significance test of the indirect effects. The bootstrapping method is deemed a more robust approach to assess indirect effects than other approaches such as Baron and Kenny's and Sobel tests (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2004). To test *H4* and *H5*, model 14 in SPSS PROCESS (Hayes, 2013) was used. Specifically, the conditional indirect effects of passive leadership on sexual harassment through hostility at different levels of workplace gender ratio were estimated using bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples to place 95 per cent confidence intervals (CI) around estimates of the indirect effects.

Results

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's α coefficients, and intercorrelations of all study variables appear in Table I.

A series of confirmative factor analyses were conducted utilising AMOS to test the distinctiveness of the study variables. The fit of the six-factor model was acceptable ($\chi^2 = 311.878$, $df = 137$, $NFI = 0.94$, $CFI = 0.95$, $RMSEA = 0.07$) and all loadings were significant. The six-factor model better fit the data than two four-factor models in which passive leadership was combined with transformational leadership ($\Delta\chi^2 = 931.29$, $\Delta df = 12$, $p < 0.01$) or contingent reward leadership ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1,200.66$, $\Delta df = 15$, $p < 0.01$) when observed hostility was also combined with sexual harassment. Furthermore, the six-factor model better fit the data than a two-factor model in which passive, transformational, and contingent reward leaderships were combined, and observed hostility, sexual harassment,

Table I.
Descriptive statistics
and intercorrelations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Age	35.8	8.47											
2 Gender	1.52	0.5	-0.14*										
3 Race	1.22	0.42	-0.12	0.11									
4 Rank	2.64	0.96	0.29**	0.21*	-0.17**								
5 NA	1.89	0.90	-0.12	-0.05	0.05	0.02							
6 TFL	3.39	0.82	0.21**	0.03	-0.07	0.22**	-0.17*	(0.92)					
7 CRL	3.45	0.89	0.22**	0.03	-0.09	0.17**	-0.22**	0.90**	(0.96)				
8 PL	2.54	0.96	-0.12	0.06	0.16**	-0.07	0.48**	-0.13*	0.86	0.18**			
9 OH	2.08	0.99	-0.11	0.01	0.07	0.04	0.66**	-0.29**	-0.35**	0.54**	(0.94)		
10 G-Ratio	2.73	0.93	-0.03	-0.27**	0.01	-0.05	-0.01	-0.07	-0.08	-0.13*	0.03		
11 SH	1.73	0.97	-0.13*	0.07	0.01	0.03	0.61**	-0.08	-0.14*	0.60**	0.69**	-0.17**	(0.98)

Notes: *n* = 237. NA, negative affectivity; TFL, transformational leadership; CRL, contingent reward leadership; PL, passive leadership; OH, observed hostility; G-Ratio, gender ratio; SH, sexual harassment. Gender coded such that 1 = female, 2 = male. Race coded such that 1 = white, 2 = non-white. Rank coded such that 1 = entry level, 5 = executives/CEO; G-Ratio coded such that 1 = almost all men, 2 = more men than women, 3 = half men, half women, 4 = more women than men, 5 = almost all women. Numbers in parentheses on the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas of the measures used in the study. **p* ≤ 0.05, ***p* ≤ 0.01

and negative affectivity were combined into one factor, respectively ($\Delta\chi^2 = 1,480.01$, $\Delta df = 15$, $p < 0.01$). These results lend support for the construct validity of a set of variables examined herein.

Hypotheses tests

As shown in the Table II, passive leadership was positively related to observed hostility ($\beta = 0.28$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for demographic variables, transformational and contingent reward leaderships, and negative affectivity. Moreover, observed hostility was positively related to sexual harassment ($\beta = 0.43$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$). Therefore, *H1* and *H2* were supported. Consistent with the literature (Cheung and Lau, 2008), 5,000 bootstrap samples were specified. The bootstrap analyses demonstrated that the indirect effects were significant ($\beta = 0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$) and the CI did not include 0 (95% CI = 0.06, 0.21), indicating the significant mediating effects of observed hostility. Therefore, *H3* was supported. Although sexual harassment has been studied as a global construct aggregating across its three sub-dimensions, researchers have recently argued that this approach might disregard conceptual differences among the sub-dimensions and that they might have different antecedents and operating mechanisms (Dionisi *et al.*, 2012; Leskinen *et al.*, 2011). Hence, additional analyses were conducted to examine if the same patterns of findings would hold across the three components of sexual harassment. Results showed that observed hostility mediated the relationships between passive leadership and all three sub-types of sexual harassment: gender harassment ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.06, 0.22), unwanted sexual attention ($\beta = 0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.06, 0.21), and sexual coercion ($\beta = 0.11$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.05, 0.20). The same patterns of results also held across female and male groups (female group: $n = 112$, $\beta = 0.09$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.01, 0.23; male group: $n = 125$, $\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = 0.08, 0.29).

H4 proposed the moderating role of workplace gender ratio in the relationship between observed hostility and sexual harassment. The results of regression analysis showed that the interactive effects hostility and gender ratio on sexual harassment were significant for the entire sample (men and women combined) ($\beta = -0.13$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$). In the subsequent sub-group analysis, the significant interactive effects emerged in the female group ($\beta = -0.18$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < 0.001$) but not in the male group ($\beta = -0.02$, $SE = 0.07$, $p = 0.82$). To inspect the pattern of the interaction for the female group, the interaction was plotted (Figure 1). The pattern of the interaction was in the expected direction and the

	Observed hostility			Sexual harassment		
	β	SE	p	β	SE	p
Constant	0.92	0.37	0.01	-0.58	0.34	0.09
Age	0.00	0.01	0.95	-0.00	0.01	0.40
Gender	0.01	0.10	0.91	0.13	0.09	0.13
Race	0.00	0.11	0.99	-0.20	0.10	0.05
Rank	0.08	0.05	0.11	-0.01	0.05	0.77
TFL	-0.01	0.13	0.97	0.16	0.12	0.18
CRL	-0.23	0.12	0.06	-0.01	0.11	0.91
NA	0.53	0.06	0.00	0.22	0.06	0.00
Passive leadership	0.28	0.06	0.00	0.29	0.05	0.00
Observed hostility				0.43	0.06	0.00

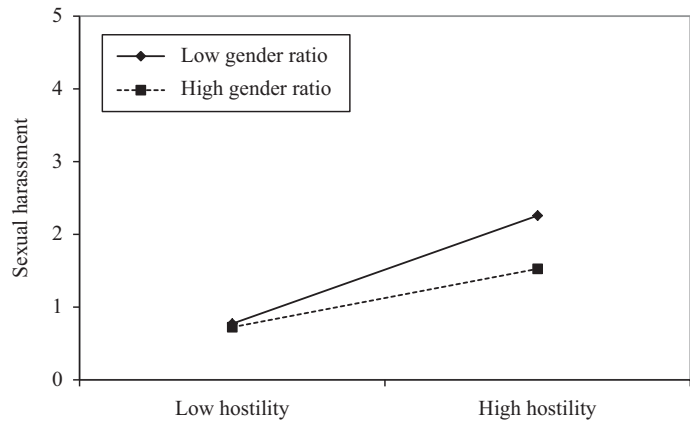
$R^2 = 0.53$
 $F(8, 228) = 32.45$, $p = 0.000$

$R^2 = 0.60$
 $F(9, 227) = 37.34$, $p = 0.000$

Table II.
 Results of hierarchical regression analyses

Notes: TFL, transformational leadership; CRL, contingent reward leadership; NA, negative affectivity

Figure 1.
Moderating effects of
gender ratio on the
relationship between
hostility and sexual
harassment
(female group)



Notes: Low gender ratio = more men than women; high gender ratio = more women than men

simple slope test yielded significant results (simple slope = 0.734, $t = 9.998$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that the interaction plots significantly vary across different levels of workplace gender ratio among female employees. Therefore, *H4* was supported.

H5 predicted whether workplace gender ratio would moderate the mediated relationship between passive leadership, hostility, and sexual harassment. The indirect effects of passive leadership on sexual harassment through hostility were stronger when workplace gender ratio is low ($\beta = 0.16$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% $CI = 0.08, 0.26$) rather than when it is high ($\beta = 0.08$, $SE = 0.04$, 95% $CI = 0.03, 0.17$) for the entire sample (men and women combined). Moderated mediation analyses were also conducted separately only on the female group because the moderating effects of gender ratio were not significant in the male group. Results showed that the conditional indirect effects were significant in the female group ($n = 112$, $\beta = -0.04$, $SE = 0.03$, 95% $CI = -0.12, -0.00$). This suggests that the positive relationship between hostility fostered by passive leadership and sexual harassment is significantly stronger among female employees who work in a male-dominated organisation (low gender ratio, $\beta = 0.15$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% $CI = 0.02, 0.38$) than those who work in a female-dominated organisation (high gender ratio, $\beta = 0.07$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% $CI = 0.00, 0.19$). Because women's results drive the results of the entire sample (of men and women), the results of analysis of the conditional process model for female group are displayed in Table III.

Discussion

"It cannot be stated often enough that sexual harassment is a leadership problem" (Bergman and Henning, 2008, p. 165). Despite the paramount role leaders may play in promoting or inhibiting sexual harassment in the organisation, the relationship of passive leadership with sexual harassment has not been empirically studied in the literature. This void is particularly noticeable because a growing body of research suggests that passive leadership is as equally, if not worse, harmful as a more extreme form of abusive or destructive leadership with regard to employee misconduct (Hinkin and Schriesheim, 2008; Skogstad *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, sexual harassment research has progressed separately from the workplace aggression literature, failing to incorporate the accumulated evidence within the workplace aggression literature. This has resulted in our limited understanding of organisational promoters or inhibitors of sexual harassment. Thus, as other scholars have argued (e.g. McDonald, 2012; O'Leary-Kelly *et al.*, 2009), there

Predictor	Female (<i>n</i> = 112)			Male (<i>n</i> = 125)			Total (<i>n</i> = 237)									
	Observed hostility β	Sexual harassment SE	<i>p</i>	Observed hostility β	Sexual harassment SE	<i>p</i>	Observed hostility β	Sexual harassment SE	<i>p</i>							
Constant	0.93	0.50	0.07	-0.94	0.60	0.12	0.81	0.49	0.10	0.91	0.37	0.01	-0.82	0.45	0.07	
Age	-0.00	0.00	0.61	-0.00	0.01	0.67	0.00	0.01	0.54	0.00	0.01	0.93	-0.00	0.01	0.40	
Gender																
Race	0.06	0.17	0.73	-0.31	0.15	0.04	-0.03	0.15	0.82	0.00	0.11	0.99	-0.19	0.09	0.05	
Rank	0.21	0.07	0.01	-0.08	0.07	0.22	-0.01	0.08	0.85	0.08	0.07	0.24	0.08	0.05	0.12	
TFL	-0.18	0.18	0.33	0.30	0.15	0.06	0.22	0.19	0.26	-0.11	0.17	0.52	-0.00	0.13	0.11	
CRL	-0.15	0.17	0.38	-0.12	0.15	0.41	-0.22	0.12	0.06	0.20	0.16	0.22	-0.22	0.12	0.06	
NA	0.61	0.09	0.00	0.19	0.09	0.04	-0.35	0.17	0.04	0.18	0.08	0.04	0.53	0.06	0.00	
PL	0.25	0.08	0.00	0.30	0.07	0.00	0.30	0.08	0.00	0.22	0.07	0.00	0.28	0.05	0.00	
Hos										0.59	0.19	0.00	0.80	0.13	0.00	
G-R										-0.02	0.17	0.89	0.15	0.09	0.13	
HosXG-R										-0.02	0.07	0.82	-0.13	0.04	0.00	
	$R^2 = 0.63, F(7, 104) = 21.97, p < 0.001$			$R^2 = 0.68, F(10, 101) = 20.77, p < 0.001$			$R^2 = 0.50, F(7, 117) = 16.70, p < 0.001$			$R^2 = 0.63, F(10, 114) = 19.16, p < 0.001$			$R^2 = 0.53, F(8, 228) = 32.04, p < 0.001$			$R^2 = 0.63, F(11, 225) = 34.45, p < 0.001$

Notes: TFL, transformational leadership; CRL, contingent reward leadership; NA, negative affectivity; PL, passive leadership; Hos, hostility; G-R, gender ratio

Table III. Model coefficients for the conditional process model

is a real need for theory and research that enhances our knowledge of specific aspects of organisational factors of sexual harassment.

The study shows that passive leadership can contribute to fostering ambient hostility in the organisation and this, in turn, is related to employees' frequent exposure to sexual harassment. It is notable that the mediating effects of hostility were strong enough to be captured even after controlling for demographic characteristics, negative affectivity, and transformational and contingent reward leaderships. Moreover, the significant mediating role of hostility appeared to be true of the three sub-types of sexual harassment and both women and men. These results suggest that passive leadership may act as a common factor of all the sub-types, mediated by hostility and that when working under a passive leader, both men and women are more likely to experience sexual harassment. This reinforces the notion that sexual harassment occurs within a broader context of mistreatment and disrespect (Lim and Cortina, 2005).

Additionally, the study centres on workplace gender ratio as an organisational factor which may further promote the reinforcing relationship between hostility and sexual harassment. Results demonstrate that for women, a low gender ratio strengthens the relationship between hostility and sexual harassment, and that the indirect effects of passive leadership on sexual harassment through hostility are stronger for women working in a male-dominated organisation. For men, however, the gender ratio does not moderate the relationship between hostility and sexual harassment. As such, the study sheds light on similarities and dissimilarities between women's and men's experiences of sexual harassment. More research is needed to better understand similarities and dissimilarities in the antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment of women and men.

Practical implications

Organisations should carefully monitor managers' behaviours and screen out those who display passive leadership during and after hiring or promotion. Even though the same passive leaders may display transformational and contingent reward leadership, the results of the study suggests that the negative impact of passive leadership on hostility and sexual harassment is extensive. Therefore, leaders should be reminded that displaying apathetic, passive attitudes towards employees, even when coupled with positive leadership behaviours at other times, can still promote hostile interactions among employees, which, in turn, relates to sexual harassment. Furthermore, organisations should educate their managers to acquire and implement leadership behaviours of encouraging civil, respectful interactions among employees. For instance, providing training programs focussing on ethical leadership will be beneficial because this type of leadership is found to decrease bullying and workplace incivility (Stouten *et al.*, 2010). Such appropriate and timely intervention by managers, which is lacking in passive leadership, is critical to prevent a minor interpersonal conflict from escalating into a more intense type of aggression such as sexual harassment. Therefore, it would be helpful to provide training on proactive leadership skills, such as showing concern for what kind of interpersonal treatment employees receive in the organisation, sensing potential sexual harassment incidents, and intervening in a timely manner.

The US law treats sexual harassment as a form of employment discrimination and thus organisations may be held liable for their employees' sexually harassing behaviours "unless they can establish that they took all reasonable steps to prevent the acts or that they promptly corrected the conduct after it became evident" (McDonald, 2012, p. 12). Moreover, rude, uncivil, and hostile interactions not only impair interpersonal coordination and cooperation among employees but also interfere with recruitment and retention of employees in the organisation, hurting the bottom line of the organisation (Porath *et al.*, 2015). To minimise these negative consequences, organisations should create and maintain

a safe and secure work environment where civil interactions are encouraged and valued. To build a collegial working climate, human resources (HR) may need to specify and educate appropriate conduct during the new hires' socialisation process, while highlighting a zero tolerance rule for harassment as part of an employee handbook, anti-harassment policy, or corporate credo. It would be also helpful to provide orientation programs, employee training, and leadership development dedicated to creating organisational culture that prescribes non-tolerance of sexual harassment (Bell *et al.*, 2002). To the end of fostering employees' perceptions of organisational intolerance for sexual harassment, HR may also consider applying anti-harassment policies and procedures to decisions on the allocation of rewards and punishment, such as promotions or demotions, positive or negative performance ratings. Such consistent execution of anti-harassment policies will effectively communicate the organisation's commitment to a harassment-free working environment to employees (Hulin *et al.*, 1996), as this is known to be the best tool to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace (EEOC, 2015). Finally, achieving and maintaining a balanced gender ratio may be beneficial for reducing sexual harassment of women. As a balanced gender ratio serves as an indicator of an organisational climate that promotes equal opportunity for men and women, it is essential for reducing sexual harassment (De Haas and Timmerman, 2010).

Limitations and future research directions

The findings of the study can be generalised across different organisational settings due to the sample utilising a variety of industries and organisations. Because conclusions of the study are less likely to be driven by context-specific norms, policies, or cultural effects that may skew results from a single setting, this study demonstrates strong external validity. However, this study is not without its limitations. First, the data used in the study were derived from a cross-sectional design. It is not possible to make a firm inference about causal relationships between passive leadership, hostility, and sexual harassment. However, the cross-sectional self-report study is one of the major research methods used in OB research (Spector, 1994). Given that this work is one of the first studies examining passive leadership associated with sexual harassment, a cross-sectional study can "provide a relatively easy first step in studying phenomena of interest" (Spector, 2006, p. 390). Furthermore, scholars argue that "well-designed cross-sectional survey may serve as an adequate substitute for longitudinal data collection" (Rindfleisch *et al.*, 2008, p. 264). The research model of the study was based on theoretical and empirical evidence that suggests leadership as an important factor influencing employees' perceptions of their work environment and their experiences in the workplace (e.g. James and James, 1989; Harold and Holtz, 2015). The findings of the study are consistent with such theoretical explanations and thus they provide a strong foundation for causal inference, as Rindfleisch *et al.* (2008) put, "The strong foundation for causal inference is the degree to which results conform to theory" (p. 275). Future research should use longitudinal data to confirm the causal relationships between the variables studied in this work.

Second, the proposed moderating effects of a gender ratio emerged in the female group but not in the male group. While these results are generally consistent with prior work (Kabat-Farr and Cortina, 2014), the existing literature on gender ratio is far from conclusive. For example, Jackson and Newman (2004), using a sample of federal workers, found that as the ratio of female workers increased, the likelihood of a male worker's sexual harassment increased. Nye *et al.* (2014) found that aggregated sexual harassment was not significantly related to gender ratio and thus called for rethinking gender ratio as a predictor of sexual harassment. A closer look at the male sample used in the study reveals that approximately 29 per cent responded that their coworkers were more women than men or almost all women, compared to 52 per cent who responded that their coworkers are more men than women or almost all men. With the small sample size of the male respondents working in a female-dominated organisation, it might have been more difficult to capture the effects of a

gender ratio on male experiences of sexual harassment. Moreover, although this study followed the sexual harassment literature in the operationalization of a gender ratio by using a five-point scale that provides an estimate of gender composition, this may not have adequately accounted for the effects of the gender ratio without information about the exact percentage of gender composition. Future research may benefit from using information about the exact percentage of a gender ratio of the organisation.

Third, all variables were assessed by employees' self-report. Thus, the observed relationships might have been inflated by common-source bias. However, the use of self-reports in studying harassment often requires the same individual to respond to questions whose answers cannot be provided by others (Goldman *et al.*, 2006). To minimise common-source variance, questions regarding sexual harassment were placed at the beginning of the survey, followed by observed hostility and leadership questions (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, a gender ratio is a more concrete measure and thus displays lower levels of common-source bias.

Fourth, as workplace aggression research generally suggests that the source of mistreatment matters (Hershcovis and Barling, 2010), future research needs to consider the sources of sexual harassment (e.g. coworkers, supervisors, customers) to better understand victims' experiences. It would be interesting to examine the sources of sexual harassment, the gender of a victim, and workplace gender ratio to predict sexual harassment and subsequent consequences.

Conclusion

This research advances our understanding of organisational factors of sexual harassment by examining passive leadership, hostile work context, and workplace gender ratio. Results show the significant association between passive leadership and ambient hostility, which relates to sexual harassment. Moreover, the positive association between hostility and sexual harassment becomes stronger for female employees who work in a male-dominated organisation (low gender ratio).

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