The Effect of Women’s Attire and the Level of Attractiveness of the Perpetrator on the Perception of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine the extent to which a woman’s attire, perpetrator’s attractiveness, and study participants’ ambivalent sexism levels affect the perception of sexual harassment. The results of the current study showed that the attractiveness level of perpetrator and ambivalent sexism affected the perception of sexual harassment. Participants perceived the situation as sexual harassment more when the perpetrator was average-looking than when he is physically attractive. Results also found that participants lower in hostile and benevolent sexism were more likely to blame the perpetrator for the situation and were also more likely to perceive the situation as sexual harassment. The effect of attractiveness on the perception of blame was marginally greater for those with low levels of hostile sexism. Exploratory analysis showed that when the woman was dressed provocatively participants were more likely to attribute sexual motivations to her choice of attire. Participants high in hostile sexism and those low in benevolent sexism were more likely to attribute sexual motivations to the woman’s choice of attire.

Introduction

Perpetrator Physical Attractiveness

- Physically attractive individuals are perceived to possess more positive and desirable traits overall, such as social competence, intellectual competence, higher adjustment, and sexual warmth (Lamers, Davis, Davidson, & Hogan, 2016; Lorenzo, Biosca, & Hume, 2010).

- In the review of court cases it was found that the combination of an attractive plaintiff and unattractive defendant provided the best condition for obtaining a favorable ruling (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2016).

- Consistent with Lamers and Fitzgerald (1994), men perceived the sexualized look as indicating a woman’s interest in sex or as an intent to seduce; whereas women rejected the seduction claim and stated that the intent was to look and feel attractive (Moore, 2010).

Ambivalent Sexism

- Individuals who are more tolerant of sexual harassment are more likely to have higher levels of benevolent sexism and hostile sexism (Russell & Trigg, 2004).

- People high in hostile sexism minimized the seriousness of rape in both stranger and dating-type situations. Both those high in hostile and benevolent sexism exceeded the rapist, while those high in benevolent sexism blamed the victim (Yamawaki, 2007).

Research Questions

- Does the perpetrator’s physical attractiveness affect the perception of sexual harassment and blame?

- Does the woman’s attire affect the perception of sexual harassment and blame?

- Does the woman’s level of ambivalent sexism affect the perception of sexual harassment and blame?

- Do any of these variables interact and affect the perception of sexual harassment and blame?

Method

Procedure and Participants

- This is a 2 (attractiveness of perpetrator) X 2 (woman’s attire) between-subjects design. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions in which they read a scenario depicting an ambiguous interaction of sexual harassment. Participants were then asked to rate the behavior of both the male and the female depicted. They were also asked to rate the female’s motivation for her attire. The four conditions were:

  - Average-looking Male, Modestly Dressed Female
  - Average-looking Male, Provocatively Dressed Female
  - Physically Attractive Male, Modestly Dressed Female
  - Physically Attractive Male, Provocatively Dressed Female

- Students who were enrolled in psychology courses at Albright College were used as participants for this study. Students were offered extra credit for their participation.

- N = 105 participants (13 males and 92 females)

- Ages 18-27 (M = 19.7, SD = 2.15)

Measures

Assessment of woman’s motivation for attire. Participants were instructed to rate the woman’s motivations for wearing each type of attire, by indicating how much they agreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree), taken from Moore and Fitzgerald (2004). Statements were broken into two groups:

- Non-Sexual Motivations: To be attractive, To be fashionable, and Personal preference,

- Sexual Motivations: To tempt, To seduce, To convey an interest in sex, To gain affection with her sexuality, and her clothes are arouses by her, Makes men lose control, Gives men the right to touch her,

Assessment of sexual harassment and blame. Participants were instructed to rate the behavior of Julie and Mike, by indicating how much they agreed with the statements on a 5-point Likert scale (1 strongly disagree to 5 strongly agree), taken from Klein et al. (2011). Mike’s actions were beyond the limits of acceptable behavior, Mike’s behavior was totally unacceptable, Julie may have encouraged Mike, Julie is partly to blame for the situation. Albright Selection Inventory (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

Motivation for Woman’s Attire

- Two (2 attractiveness of perpetrator) X 2 (woman’s attire) ANOVAs were conducted, one using sexual motivations as an outcome and the other using the extent of non-sexual motivations outcome.

- Sexual Motivations
  - Attractions, F(1,101)=1.854, p=.176
  - Interactions, F(1,101)=.786, p=.381

- Non-Sexual Motivations
  - Attractions, F(1,101)=.809, p=.926
  - Interactions, F(1,101)=1.43, p=.706

- Two (2 attractiveness levels) X (2 attractiveness) X (2 woman’s attire) ANOVAs were conducted, one using sexual motivations as an outcome and the other using the extent of non-sexual motivations outcome.

- Sexual Motivations
  - Attractions, F(1,97)=3.96, p=.046
  - Attractiveness, F(1,97)=2.881, p=.091
  - Attractiveness X Attractions, F(1,97)=392, p=.049
  - Attractiveness X Attractions, F(1,97)=1.489, p=.225
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=.805, p=.487
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=.040, p=.843
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=9.342, p=.042

- Non-Sexual Motivations
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=1.532, p=.220
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=2.284, p=.043
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=.355, p=.531
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=2.623, p=.109
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=1.768, p=.187
  - Attractive X Hostile Hostile, F(1,97)=1.989, p=.276

Conclusions

- The situation is more likely perceived as sexual harassment when the perpetrator is average-looking than when he is physically attractive.

- Individuals with lower levels of hostile and benevolent sexism were more likely to perceive the situation as sexual harassment and blame the perpetrator.

- People were more likely to associate sexual motivations to a woman when she was provocatively dressed.

- Contrary to the hypotheses, there was no significant interactions. However, there was a marginal interaction for the perception of blame between attractiveness and hostile sexism levels. Participants with low levels of hostile sexism blamed the perpetrator more for the situation when the perpetrator was average looking than when the perpetrator was physically attractive. The opposite was true for those high in hostile sexism, however the difference was less drastic.