

Does the Likely Perpetrator's Marital Status Matter In Engaging In The Act Of Sexual Harassment?

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Abstract

This study explored men's likelihood to sexually harass a female colleague in a given context. Participants were 900 male non-academic employees working in 3 major Research Universities in Malaysia. As sexual harassment is a phenomenon that has always been looked from a woman's perspective, this study had looked from the men's perspective of understanding the likelihood in engaging in a array of actions that are considered an act of sexual harassment. The major finding of the study shows that men, regardless of marital status view many acts of sexual harassment as acceptable and the findings depict that there is no distinct differences between men of both the married and single group in their likelihood to sexually harass their female colleagues as contrary to past research on sexual harassment that have suggested that single men have a higher tendency to sexually harass due to his marital status.

Keywords: Gender issues at workplace

1.0 Introduction

Imagine you have been working in an organisation for a good few years and share many acquaintance and good times with your colleagues. The relationship amongst all your colleagues has always been cordial. Suddenly one day, whilst working on a task with your colleague, he makes an unwelcome sexual comment. The question now is; what brought him to do it? Though, the phenomenon of sexual harassment has been discussed at large in many research conducted in the western world for the past two decades, however, society at large, only started to realize the seriousness of this problem when awareness is created on this subject matter (Gutek, 1985; Langevin, 1992). This paper seeks to examine men's likelihood to sexually harass; and most importantly does the marital status of the likely perpetrator matter in engaging in the act of sexual harassment.

2.0 Sexual Harassment: An Overview

As the focus of this study would be examining men's likelihood to sexually, the authors feel it is imperative that different forms of sexual harassment should be reviewed for the interest of this study. Around the world, many researchers in this field agree that there are many forms of sexual harassments. For example, the forms of sexual harassment convicted in the American court of justice are related to lewd humour, display of porn calendar, the use of lewd language, calling names like honey, babe, bitch etc; talking about victim's sexual activities, unacceptable sexual message sent via e-mail or voicemail (Samuels, 2003; Rotunda et.al, 2001; Pierce, 1999; Svoboda & Crockett, 1996). According to Fitzgerald (1993) and Till (1980), in analyzing sexual harassment definition, it is a form of harassment that is based on gender, which includes inappropriate behaviour, bribery and forceful sexual behaviour.

What one person defines as sexual harassment, another person may not, and thus it is not surprising that a vast amount of research conducted in this area has concentrated on determining what exactly affects a person's perception of sexual harassment (Lee, 2000; Foulis & McCabe, 1997). In general, sexual harassment is a sexual behaviour that is not invited. To determine whether an incident is sexual harassment or not, it is influenced by the perception of the individual on the matter. This is because sexual harassment is very much the interpretation of the incident (Lonsway et.al, 2008; Marin & Rosanna, 1999; Popovich et al., 1992). Gutek and Dunwoody (1987) also disclosed that sexually explicit behaviour and behaviour which involves threats or warnings is more likely to be judged thus. So, touching is more highly rated as sexual harassment than comments, looks or gestures which until today are viewed as an acceptable behaviour.

The incident is also considered more serious when the harasser is a supervisor rather than a co-worker or a subordinate. The situation is more likely to be perceived as sexual harassment when a man is the harasser, and a woman is the victim. Besides that, perceptions differ between men and women of what constitutes sexual harassment. Women rate a wider variety of sexual behaviours at work as sexual harassment while men tend to rate only the more extreme behaviours. Based on past research in sexual harassment, Malaysian society has generally felt that this phenomenon is closely related to the beliefs and views of human traditions (Sabitha, 2002; Tengku & Maimunah, 2000; Asiah Mion, 1990; Badriyah, 1988). These two factors are believed to have formed the expectations of men and women in our society and their perceptions on sexual harassment. There are also many people who are still under the impression that anything that is related solely to sex only can be defined as sexual harassment (Mazlinda, 1999/2000). This is due to the ambiguity of this issue. Many still did not understand the meaning of sexual harassment or the impact on the victim (Gayathri, 2000).

Powell (1993) agrees that men consistently notice less sexual harassment than women do. In addition, men are more likely than women to view the victim as contributing to their own harassment, the typical response being the sexy way she dresses; or by not being able to handle 'normal' and 'harmless' sexual attention. In fact, sexual harassment has been misconceived by both men and women as simply the harmless expression of an individual's basically sexual nature to others. It is also argued that men have been brought up to accept sexual harassment as their birthright, while women have been conditioned to accept such abuse as inevitable (Uggen & Blackstone, 2004, Sullivan, 2001; Earle & Madek, 1993).

The common denominator of models looking into this problem is that sexual harassment is a manifestation of the power imbalances between men and women. Not only do men want to rule, but they also take measures to legitimize their rule (Farley, 1978; Gardner, 1985; MacKinnon, 1979). Many researchers believe that sexual harassment as a phenomenon exists because the evolution of time and modernization did not bring much change to people's expectations towards both sexes, as in how a boy has to behave, likewise as how a girl has to behave. Vaux (1993) discussed sexism as one of the several grounds on which to evaluate sexual harassment as a problem and noted that an observer's or victim's perception of harassment may well be influenced by gender consciousness. According to Watts and friends (2005), girls and boys with subordinate masculinities are still subject to sex-based harassment. This is because these girls are accepted as easy prey and the boys on the other side, are harassed because their behaviours are frowned upon as they believe to not behave in the norm that a man should behave.

3.0 Research Methodology

The authors had used survey design to comprehend the nature of this phenomenon from the perspective of men, since there had been very few studies in this area. For the purpose of this study, public universities in Malaysia that have the Research University (RU) title were selected. A total of 900 respondents were interviewed for this study. Majority of the respondents are between the age of 21 and 30 (51.5 percent). This is followed by 26.6 percent of the respondents are between the age of 31 and 40 and not many respondents are below the age of 20. The youngest respondent is of 18 years old and the oldest respondent is of 59 years old. In terms of place of upbringing, a total of 47.2 percent of respondents hail from rural area as compared to 52.8 percent from urban area. In the context of educational background, 32.4 percent have completed their SPM, 14 percent are diploma holders, 21 percent are bachelor holders and 2.6 percent have postgraduates' degrees/PhD. As for occupation, majority of the respondents (45.1 percent) respondents fall in the category of Administrative Assistant followed by Technicians which form 28.4 percent of the respondents.

The third highest majority of the respondents work as clerks which form 12 percent of the respondents. In terms of working experience, a total of 77.3 percent respondents have less than 10 years experience as compared to 22.7 percent of respondents who have worked over 10 years. There were only 1.1 percent of respondents who have worked over 31 years. The minimum year of experience is one year as compared to the maximum year of experience of 36 years. As for salary scale, 23.9 percent of respondents fall in the category of RM2001 – RM4000 salary as compared to 69.8 percent respondents who earn less than RM2, 000. A total of 4.9 percent respondents earn more than RM4000. The minimum salary of a respondent in this study is RM750.00 and the maximum salary is RM5000.00. As the key area that is looked in this study is the relationship of men's marital status and his likelihood to sexually harass, out of the 900 respondents interviewed, a total of 48.9 percent respondents are married, 0.7 percent is divorced, 2.3 percent are widowers and the balance of 48.1 percent is single. However, for the purpose of this study, the respondents who fall in the category of divorcee and widower will not be accounted as the number is relatively small and will be treated as a negligible data due to the small sample size. The researcher has used Pryor likelihood to sexually harass (LSH) scale and revised it to suit the local context. According to Pryor (1995), LSH is assessed through a self-report measure that asks respondents to indicate how likely they behave sexually in specific scenarios.

Pryor and his colleagues have shown that the LSH has high internal consistency i.e coefficient alpha's of 0.95, 0.93 and 0.91 for samples of male undergraduates ranging in size from 117 to 185. In addition, the LSH scale had shown that the LSH scale had been shown to predict sexually harassing behaviour by men, high in LSH in situations that are permissive of such behaviours (Pryor et. al, 1995). A total of 17 items ranging from the categories of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological and physical were asked in this study where the choice of answers ranged from:

1	2	3	4
Will definitely not do it			Will definitely do it

4.0 Findings and Discussions

There are in total 17 items or factors that explain the variation in the variable of men's likelihood to sexually harass in this study. These items were analysed for its average score and it was found that the factor that strongly supports the inclination of men to sexually harass is first, request the other party to go out for a drink/meal (3.09), followed by complimenting the person's appearance (2.89) and thirdly, use of intimate language e.g dear, 'sayang' (2.69) followed by pat on the back (2.65). Only 4 items out of 17 items have scoring below the mean of 2 for individual item. For the other items please refer to Table 2. As for the factors that scored the lowest is to requesting for sexual favours which shows a score of 1.73. (Please refer to Table 1: Average mean score of LSH variable).

Table 1: Average Mean score of Men's Likelihood to Sexually Harass Variable

Items	Mean	Std. Dev.
Request the other party to go out for a drink /meal.	3.09	1.016
Complimenting the person's appearance.	2.89	1.111
Use of intimate language e.g. dear, saying.	2.69	1.222
Pat on the back.	2.65	1.233
Standing real close to a person.	2.62	1.123
Nudge.	2.58	1.184
Showing Porn Pictures.	2.49	1.197
Telling Dirty Jokes.	2.47	1.154
Pinch.	2.44	1.090
Leering.	2.44	1.116
Describing someone sexually e.g. Nice butt you have.	2.16	0.976
Kiss On the Cheek.	2.09	0.921
Surfing Porn Site.	2.06	0.985
Hug.	1.95	0.827
Grope.	1.91	0.908
Give souvenir with intimate element e.g. underwear, night dress.	1.88	0.889
Requesting for sexual favours.	1.73	1.007

The Malaysian Code of Practice defines sexual harassment as, "Any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature having the effect of verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological or physical harassment." and based on this definition the researcher had selected the 17 items in the instrument of men's likelihood to sexually harass whereby; the classification of the items are as Table 2 below :

Therefore, as per the definition of the Code of Practice, all the items listed in this variable can be classified as an act of sexual harassment. Table 1 shows the results of the analysis of the average mean score in the order of scoring of the highest to the lowest mean. The results reveal that in the context of this study, majority of the respondents score high in the category of verbal sexual harassment, whereby the first three items with a highest mean score i.e. requesting the other party to go out for a drink/meal (3.09), complimenting the person's appearance (2.89) and use of intimate language (2.69) fall in this category. However, if all four classifications are analysed across categories depicted in table 2; the table shows that in the visual classification, item showing porn picture scored a mean of 2.49. As for psychological classification, item of standing real close to a person scored a mean score of 2.62; and lastly under the physical classification, item pat on the back scored a mean of 2.65 and nudge scored a mean of 2.58. This proves that though the tendency of men's likelihood to sexually harass is more inclined towards verbal harassment; however other items in the classification of visual, psychological and physical as mentioned above also show a mean score which is close to the third item (use of intimate language) listed in the verbal harassment classification.

Table 2: Classification of Sexual Harassment in Men’s Likelihood to Sexually Harass Variable

Verbal	Non-verbal	Visual	Psychological	Physical
Telling dirty jokes (2.47)	Leering (2.44)	Showing porn pictures (2.49)	Standing real close to a person (2.62)	Pat on the back (2.65)
Requesting for sexual favours (1.73)		Surfing porn site (2.06)	Give souvenir with intimate element e.g underwear, night dress (1.88)	Kiss on the cheek (2.09)
Use of intimate language (2.69)				Hug (1.95)
Describing someone sexually e.g nice butt you have (2.16)				Pinch (2.44)
Request the other party to go out for a drink/meal (3.09)				Nudge (2.58)
Complimenting the person’s appearance (2.89)				Grope (1.91)

Out of the six items of the 17 items in this instrument; only one item in the category of verbal sexual harassment in this instrument has a scoring below the mean of 2 which is requesting for sexual favours. This could be due to the fact that requesting or even talking about sex with the opposite sex in the open is still regarded as very sensitive in the Malaysian cultural context and not a norm in the day to day interaction of men and women.

The authors had also looked at the cumulative score of ‘doing it discreetly’ and ‘doing it openly’ in order to examine the variation of men’s likelihood to sexually harass in this study. The results reveals that though majority of the respondents did not score high on “definitely do it openly”, but at least 10% of the respondents scored that they will do it (cumulative percentage of doing it discreetly and openly) for all the 17 items in this variable. A total of more than 50% respondents scored that they will do it (cumulative of doing it discreetly and openly) for 8 items in the study; and these items are : pat on the back, nudge, standing real close to a person, leering, telling dirty jokes, use of intimate language e.g dear, ‘sayang’, request the other party to go out for a drink/meal, complimenting the person’s appearance. Only for one item; requesting for sexual favours, 58 percent of the respondents said they will definitely not do it as compared to the rest of the items; whereby for most other items, the percentage of respondents who rated they will definitely not do it ranged from 13.3% to 38.4%.

The findings of this study supports the gender ideology theory that states men wait for the right ‘opportunities’ to take advantage of their victims (Lee, 2000; O’Neill, 1996). As discussed in the gender ideology theory also, being a sexual predator and sexualizing all women is regarded as normal and desirable for men. Therefore, when a man is alleged to be sexual predator, he is actually being defined as a man who has engaged in a ‘manly’ conduct (Smart, 1987). The finding is also supported by the social cultural theory that suggests men engage in sexually harassing behavior because they disregard the negative consequences on women and view their behavior as natural and justified (Vaux, 1993).

The finding of this study is also supported by other similar research findings; for example by Gutek and Dunwoody (1987) that disclosed that sexually explicit behaviour like touching is more highly rated as sexual harassment than comments, looks or gestures which until today are viewed as normal and acceptable occurrences. In the context of the scenario in this study, men is aware that his actions are wrong but however, he knows he will not be reported thus he has the leeway to do as he please. Gutek & Dunwoody (1987) re-affirmed that these men would regard inviting someone out or complimenting the person as something harmless that he could do even when people are watching and are around. As discussed by Studd and Gattiker (1991), men emit sexual harassment behaviours in the workplace in order to improve the probability of gaining sexual access to more females (Studd & Gattiker, 1991). Till today, acts such as wolf-whistling are premised upon ‘the taken for granted entitled of men to women bodies’ (Larkin, 1991), and consist of asserting the male right to comment on them (Bartky, 1990).

The findings of this study in relation to this objective is also supported by findings by Pryor, La Vite and Stoller (1993) that state men believe that if their motives are not known, then they will have a higher propensity of indulging in quid pro quo kind of sexual harassment. Rohani (2005) also found in her study that opportunities are the key to the occurrences of sexual harassment.

Average Score of Men's Likelihood to Sexually Harass According to Marital Status

In order to examine the variation in men's likelihood to sexually harass, the authors have also conducted a cross tabulation of average score according to the respondents' marital status. As the size of respondents in the category of divorcee and widower are relatively small, 21 and 9 respondents respectively as compared to the sample size of 900 respondents; the researcher had only used the respondents who are single and married for the purpose of this analysis and has regarded the category of divorcee and widower as negligible due to the small sample size. Table 3 shows the cross tabulation between two levels of each item measuring the likelihood of men to sexually harass against their marital status. The items are grouped according to the classification of sexual harassment which include verbal, non-verbal, visual, psychological, and physical. Respondents were given a fixed scenario and asked to rate the likelihood to sexually harass a female colleague.

Table 3: Cross Tabulation of Average Score of LSH Variable According to Marital Status

Variables N = 873	Marital Status		
		Single n (%)	Married n (%)
Verbal			
Telling Dirty Jokes.	Lower	172 (39.8)	216 (49.0)
	Higher	260 (60.2)	225 (51.0)
Requesting for sexual favours.	Lower	342 (79.2)	345 (78.2)
	Higher	90 (20.8)	96 (21.8)
Use of intimate language e.g. dear, saying.	Lower	169 (39.1)	198 (44.9)
	Higher	263 (60.9)	243 (55.1)
Describing someone sexually e.g. Nice butt you have.	Lower	308 (71.3)	313 (71.0)
	Higher	124 (28.7)	128 (29.0)
Request the other party to go out for a drink /meal.	Lower	81 (18.8)	105 (23.8)
	Higher	351 (81.3)	336 (76.2)
Complimenting the person's appearance.	Lower	126 (29.2)	138 (31.3)
	Higher	306 (70.8)	303 (68.7)
Non-verbal			
Leering.	Lower	216 (50.0)	240 (54.4)
	Higher	216 (50.0)	201 (45.6)
Visual			
Showing Porn Pictures.	Lower	204 (47.2)	196 (44.4)
	Higher	228 (52.8)	245 (55.6)
Surfing Porn Site.	Lower	309 (71.5)	298 (67.6)
	Higher	123 (28.5)	143 (32.4)
Psychological			
Standing real close to a person.	Lower	175 (40.5)	171 (38.8)
	Higher	257 (59.5)	270 (61.2)
Give souvenir with intimate element e.g. underwear, night dress.	Lower	388 (89.8)	349 (79.1)
	Higher	44 (10.2)	92 (20.9)
Physical			
Pat on the back.	Lower	186 (43.1)	185 (42.0)
	Higher	246 (56.9)	256 (58.0)
Kiss On the Cheek.	Lower	332 (76.9)	326 (73.9)
	Higher	100 (23.1)	115 (26.1)
Hug.	Lower	374 (86.6)	368 (83.4)
	Higher	58 (13.4)	73 (16.6)
Pinch.	Lower	212 (49.1)	244 (55.3)
	Higher	220 (50.9)	197 (44.7)
Nudge.	Lower	168 (38.9)	188 (42.6)
	Higher	264 (61.1)	253 (57.4)
Grope.	Lower	348 (80.6)	347 (78.7)
	Higher	84 (19.4)	94 (21.3)

Sexual harassment in the form of verbal acts consist of six items namely telling of dirty jokes, requesting for sexual favours, using intimate language, describing someone sexually, requesting for a date, and complimenting the person's appearance. For the item "Telling dirty jokes", majority of single (60.0%) men are in the higher level category, followed by married men with 51.0%. Higher percentage of both single (57.2%) and married (58.7%) men had lower score for the item "requesting for sexual favours" indicating that they are less likely to request for sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, two out of five men regardless of their marital status still may have requested for sexual favours. For item labeled "Use of intimate language", mostly in the lower level category are married (44.9%) men, followed by single (39.1%). About 61% of single men are in the higher category. The item "request the other party to go out for a drink /meal" showed that more single men (81.3%) are more likely to do so as compared to married men (76.2%) even though the disparity is not big. It is also worth noting that both single (71.3%) and married (71.0%) men were also less likely to describe someone sexually. Last but not least, majority of both single and married men would complement the person's appearance with 70.8% of single and 68.7% of married men had higher score for this item.

In the context of non-verbal form of sexual harassment, only one item was placed under this category which is leering. Half (50.0%) of single men had lower score for the item "leering" while slightly more married men had lower score for this item with 54.4%. This means about one in two men regardless of their marital status would look at their female colleague with a sidelong glance, indicative especially of sexual desire.

Two items were grouped under the visual form of sexual harassment namely showing of pornography materials and surfing of porn sites. Both single and married men had slightly more than half scored higher for the item "showing of pornography materials" with 52.8% and 55.6%. As for the item "surfing porn sites", majority had lower score for both single and married men with 71.5% and 67.6%. In other words, men are less likely to surf porn sites with the presence of a female colleague regardless of their marital status.

Use of psychological form of sexual harassment such as standing real close to a person or give souvenirs with intimate elements to their female colleagues were also noted in this study. More single (59.5%) and married (61.2%) men had higher scores for the item "standing real close to a person". On the contrary, both single (89.8%) and married (79.1%) men scored lower for the item "give souvenir with intimate element e.g. underwear, night dress" indicating that they are less likely to do so as compared to the previous item. This may be indicative of the fact that men in this study were more likely to sexually harass their female colleague using indirect approach such as by standing real close to a person rather than using direct approach as depicted by giving souvenir with intimate element to the other party.

In terms of the physical form of sexual harassment, six items were examined in this study which include pat on the back, kiss on the cheek, hug, pinch, nudge and grope. Both single and married men had 50% likelihood to "pat a female colleague on the back" given slightly more than half scored higher for this item with 56.9% and 58.0% respectively. For item labeled "Kiss on the cheek", both single and married men scored most on the lower level category with 76.9% and 73.9% respectively indicating that they were less likely to engage in such action given the proximity of the contact. The likelihood for both single (86.6%) and married (83.4%) men to hug their female colleague was also relatively low since majority scored lower for this item. Slightly more than half (50.6%) of single men scored high for the item "pinch" while 55.3% of married men scored low for this item. Majority of both single and married men would "nudge" a female colleague given 61.1% of single men and 57.4% of married men had a higher scoring for this item. Nevertheless, it is worth noted that single men would be more likely to do as compared to married men given the higher percentage of single men with higher score. Further inspection on the item "grope" found that majority of both single (80.6%) and married (78.7%) men had a low possibility of conducting the action.

Taking into consideration that there is no distinct trends at both the higher and lower categories of all the categories of marital status, this finding shows that that sexual harassment exists regardless of their marital status. To be specific, men's likelihood to sexually harass does not belong to a specific marital status group i.e. married or single. This is an important finding as many studies in the past (MacMillan et. al, 2000; Marin & Rosanna, 1999; MacKinnon, 1979) have suggested through their perceptual study that single men have a higher propensity in indulging in sexual harassment as compared to other marital status group due to their status of 'no commitment'. The findings of this study also opposes the suggestion of the biology theory that young single men are the likely perpetrators because of their high sexual desire (Schneider, 1991; Savery & Halstead, 1991); as the findings of this study shows the likelihood of sexual harassment exists regardless of one's marital status. Besides that, men engage in various form of sexual harassment without any specific preferences. This can be seen with the fact that there is no specific pattern or preference of the types of sexual harassment engaged by the men in this study. Instead, sexual harassment of various forms occurs and this could be more likely a resultant of individual's likelihood of doing it.

5.0 Conclusions

There should be a paradigm shift in viewing the phenomenon of sexual harassment. Instead of looking at it from the victims' perspective and merely stereotyping the actions, we should look towards identifying means of intervention and prevention programs. The authors believe that this study will provide valuable information for future researchers to identify the male respondents' views on sexual harassment and what brings men to sexually harass, as well as understanding what are the other factors that contribute to the problem of sexual harassment in the context of a male perpetrator. The study results can also be used by government agencies particularly those dealing with gender-specific works and situations, to organize programs in the effort to generate awareness of sexual harassment to both sexes.

This study also reveals that men regardless of their background will have the propensity to sexually harass given the conducive environment in both the social contexts and organizational context. Therefore, from this study it can be concluded that to overcome the phenomenon of sexual harassment, there is a dire need to understand the effects of sexual harassment whereby society at all levels need to be educated on this subject through understanding the dynamics of gender equality. It can be further justified that to combat this problem, all parties; individual, family institutions, law enforcers, organizations' management and government agencies must play a proactive and pivotal role in ensuring that both current generations, and future generations will not be regarded either as the perpetrator nor the victim of sexual harassment.

The study proposes that there is a dire need to have gender awareness training and programmes to curb this phenomenon to further grow. According to Bukhart (1992), we are at a cultural transition which causes lots of confusion on how a man or woman should behave towards one another. Therefore, by having gender awareness training, it will help staff to understand the manner on how male-female should behave and also communication ethics at workplace. Gender awareness training will also help male participants to realize on the misconception they have on sexual harassment. This is supported by Pyke (1996) who states that awareness on sexual harassment is crucial to help understand the limitations of behavior in a professional workplace relationship. Bargh and Raymond (1995) have also disclosed that past research on sexual offenders has underscored the importance of power and dominance as a motivator of their behaviour towards women. One striking feature of both sexual harassment and the misuse of power is the lack of awareness offenders often show regarding the appropriateness of their actions. This lack of awareness is similar to automatic or non-conscious effects demonstrated in social perceptions and judgment research, such as unintentional influence of one's stereotypes in forming impressions of others. In conclusion, a change in the likely perpetrator's prejudicial attitudes and beliefs would be one of the most desirable outcomes that could result from doing gender awareness training and programmes.

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