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How Organizational Responses to Sexual Harassment Claims Shape Public Perception

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ABSTRACT

Sexual harassment remains pervasive in the workplace. Complementing past research examining the intra-organizational effects of sexual harassment, this paper investigates its extra-organizational consequences by considering reputational damage organizations can suffer from sexual harassment claims. Four experiments ($N_{Total} = 1,534$) show that even a single sexual harassment claim can damage public perception of gender equality of an organization, which reduces organizational attractiveness. However, an organizational response characterized by proactive consideration of the claimant (compared to no mention of sexual harassment, mention of sexual harassment with no response, or a minimizing response to a sexual harassment claim) fully restores, and sometimes even increases, public perceptions of the organization's commitment to due process and gender equality. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

How organizational responses to sexual harassment claims shape public perception

Sexual harassment refers to “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of sexual nature,” and is among the most prevalent forms of discrimination (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 2022). Data from a nationally representative sample suggest that 43% of men and 81% of women have experienced sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetime (Kearl, 2018). While sexual harassment is not a new phenomenon, the recent level of public attention is unprecedented, which has contributed to the dethroning and criminal conviction of a long list of high-profile men (Almukhtar et al., 2017; Corey, 2017; Ponsot, 2017; Twohey & Kantor, 2020). Importantly, oftentimes organizations linked to the accused face public pressure to take action following sexual harassment allegations, as these allegations can lead to reduced firm reputation and value and become costly to organizations (Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; Segal, 2021; Smith, 2018). In the current work, we examine


different types of organizational responses to sexual harassment claims and the ways in which they affect public perception.

Past research on the harm caused by sexual harassment in organizations has primarily illuminated victim outcomes, such as reduced psychological and physical well-being (Barth et al., 2016; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Rospenda et al., 2023), lower job satisfaction (Blumell et al., 2023; Willness et al., 2007), and lower performance (Woodzicka & LaFrance, 2005; Yie & Ping, 2021). Some research has also identified indirect effects among those witnessing harassment. Namely, *observing* sexual harassment can reduce direct bystanders' job satisfaction (Salvaggio et al., 2011), and performance-based self-esteem (Bradley-Geist et al., 2015), particularly if they are women. Similarly, perceiving gender-based incivility or hostile behavior is linked to lower work satisfaction and commitment (Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007).

Past studies have in common that they primarily consider the intra-organizational dynamics of sexual harassment, and less on extra-organizational consequences (for an exception see Dionisi & Barling, 2015).

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The latter is particularly relevant given the societal developments following the #MeToo movement showing that sexual harassment claims can bring about strong reactions in extra-organizational actors (e.g., consumers and stakeholders; Borelli-Kjaer et al., 2021; Bouzzine & Lueg, 2022). Further, scholars suggest that outside observers' (e.g., general public) responses can be even stronger than inside observers' reactions, because the insiders have had time to acclimatize to the environment in which harassment has taken place (O'Connor et al., 2004). Building on signaling theory (Carpentier et al., 2019; Turban & Greening, 1997), we posit that the general public's perceptions of company gender dynamics as well as evaluations of organizational attractiveness negatively shift in response to sexual harassment claims.

While our first argument is that sexual harassment claims can damage organizational reputation, we also suggest that such damage is evitable and that organizations can play an active role in managing public perception. When a sexual harassment claim occurs, companies enter the post-claim period. This period involves an initial phase of handling claims, followed by a remedial or corrective phase. Two contrasting needs from multiple parties (e.g., stakeholders, media, customers) complicate effective management of expectations in the early post-claim period. On the one hand, these parties expect the organization to quickly engage in corrective acts (Seeger et al., 2003), such as punishing the alleged perpetrator or employing policy changes. On the other hand, while action has to be taken, the organization lacks the necessary information to determine which, if any, corrective action is most appropriate (Coombs, 2006). This complexity highlights the importance of having effective processes in place, which can be immediately implemented while gathering more information to decide on actions later. Since prior research has primarily focused on the remedial or corrective phase (e.g., punishing harassers; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; McDonald et al., 2015; O'Leary-Kelly et al., 2009), we lack insights on (i) what constitutes an effective response immediately after a harassment claim becomes known (Willness et al., 2007), as well as (ii) downstream consequences of these acute responses on outsiders' responses.

Drawing on image repair frameworks (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2006), we examine how information about (mal)adaptive procedures following a sexual harassment claim shapes public perception and evaluation of organizations. In doing so, we address the scholarly call for moving away from the dominant descriptive paradigm to empirically examining a

diverse set of prescriptive image management approaches companies confronted with sexual harassment claims can employ (Avery et al., 2010; Coombs, 2009; Tao & Kim, 2017). Below, we theorize the impact of sexual harassment claims on organizational reputation and introduce a framework for managing organizational responses immediately following sexual harassment claims. We focus on organizational responses that can benefit both the organization and those who file claims of sexual harassment.

Public perception following sexual harassment claims

Organizational reputation is defined as "how an organization is perceived by its publics" (Coombs, 2006; p. 246). Importantly, the public's beliefs about an organization do not only depend on their direct experiences but also on indirect sources of information and inferences they make based on these (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Thus, even in the absence of direct experiences with the organization, learning about a sexual harassment claim can make the public make assumptions about a company, specifically with respect to the extent to which men and women receive equal treatment and opportunities. Indeed, prior work has identified three considerations for the construal of unfair treatment and outcomes (Cropanzano et al., 2001; Folger et al., 1998; Folger & Cropanzano, 2001), and a sexual harassment claim meets all these considerations. First, sexual harassment involves a negative situation in which a "victim" is in an unfavorable state. Second, there is an individual (e.g., manager) or entity (e.g., organization) that is deemed accountable for the harassment situation. Third, harassment violates moral norms. Intriguingly, the public can form beliefs about the organization even in absence of frequent encounters (Wilton et al., 2018). Recent empirical work has revealed that perceivers can use a single piece of gender-related information to make assumptions around systemic gender inequality. For example, when an equally competent woman candidate loses an election to a man candidate in a (fictitious) country, perceivers assume the country as a whole has lower levels of gender equality than when she wins (Does et al., 2019).

Perceptions of (in)equality are important drivers of subsequent behaviors and attitudes (Gimpelson & Treisman, 2018), such as organizational attractiveness. Signaling theory suggests that prospective employees use their interpretation of organizational information

to assess working conditions (Turban & Greening, 1997). Moreover, potential new employees' reputational concerns can drive how attractive they find an employer. For example, organizational ethicality (e.g., corporate social responsibility) can enhance potential employees' attraction (Kim & Park, 2011; Waples & Brachle, 2020). Such attraction is a key component of employer branding (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Given that gender inequality communicates unfavorable working conditions and reputational concerns, observers may report reduced organizational attractiveness. This prediction is also consistent with the social identity perspective. That is, as individuals derive an important part of their self-worth from the social groups in which they have membership, they are motivated to belong to groups (e.g., organizations) with positive regard (Leach et al., 2007).

Taken together, the literature suggests that when the public learns that a sexual harassment claim has been made in a company, they may use that information to infer the company suffers from lower levels of gender equality. This, in turn, can make the company appear as a less attractive employer. This leads us to hypothesize that the presence (versus absence) of a sexual harassment claim will reduce public perception of gender-equality in a given organization, which in turn will reduce organizational attractiveness.

Responses to sexual harassment claims as a function of social dominance motives

Berdahl (2007) proposed that sexual harassment is inherently rooted in power differences and hierarchy. That is, sexual harassment is not primarily driven by the pursuit of sexual gratification, but by the motivation to retain power hierarchy between groups. Therefore, we expect that those who favor hierarchy between groups are less affected by sexual harassment claims in terms of their perceptions of gender equality, than those who favor intergroup equality. This paper examines the interplay between sexual harassment claims and Social Dominance Orientation (SDO; i.e., the extent to which individuals endorse group-based hierarchy versus group-based equality; Ho et al., 2015) in shaping perceptions of gender equality. Prior research has shown that SDO shapes individuals' perceptions, preferences, and behaviors pertaining to intergroup hierarchy (e.g., Does & Mentovich, 2016; Kteily et al., 2017; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Individuals high on SDO are less prone to perceive inequality than those who endorse equality between

groups (Kteily et al., 2017). Therefore, we expect that high SDO individuals will be less likely to perceive a sexual harassment claim as a signal of gender inequality than low SDO individuals.

Managing public perception: from threat to opportunity

Organizational response strategies to sexual harassment involve multiple stages (for a review, see McDonald et al., 2015). The primary stage focuses on prevention and refers to organizational actions to create an environment, which helps avoiding sexual harassment from occurring (e.g., training employees). The secondary stage includes immediate responses to sexual harassment claims, such as initial handling of the claims, and later remedial actions, often following an investigation, such as punishing the perpetrator. Finally, some scholars identify a tertiary stage, which involves organizations' handling of the longer-term effects of sexual harassment, such as the lasting impact of harassment on the well-being of the victim. While most companies prioritize prevention, the secondary stage remains relevant, not only for its importance for intra-organizational consequences of wrongdoing but also for extra-organizational implications.

The literature on the management of public relations in the aftermath of misconduct, such as sexual harassment, has been dominated by typologies of possible actions. For example, both image restoration theory (Benoit, 1997, 2020) and situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2006; Hällgren et al., 2018) describe numerous possible responses that management can employ following different types of crises (Benoit, 1997; Coombs, 2007), ranging from attacking the victim to issuing an official apology. Broadly these responses can be divided into two categories. *Accommodative* responses involve an active consideration of the stakeholders' needs, and *defensive* responses relate to organizations' actions to distance themselves from the misconduct (see Hersel et al., 2019). Whereas accommodative responses involve a public relations approach, which is characterized by ethical and care-oriented actions revolving around impartiality and consideration of (indirectly) involved parties' emotional needs, defensive responses are more consistent with the legal-oriented withdrawal responses, such as denial (Tao & Kim, 2017).

Building on these insights, we propose that a similar accommodative to defensive distinction can be made for the immediate organizational responses to

sexual harassment. On the defensive end, organizations can respond to sexual harassment claims in a minimizing way, with an avoidance focus, suspicion, inaction and encouragement for retraction of the claim (Barnes, 2023; Bergman et al., 2002). The accommodative counterpart of a minimizing response is, then, characterized by an approach focus, open communication, fair treatment of and care for the involved parties (e.g., Pearson, 2010). Here, we coin the first approach *organizational minimization* and the latter one *organizational responsiveness*.

Prior research has revealed that organizations typically employ defensive, legal approaches in response to sexual harassment claims (Barnes, 2023; Tao & Kim, 2017). Consistent with these research findings, media reports on highly publicized sexual harassment lawsuits reveal that organizations indeed often employ a minimizing approach when confronted with claims (e.g., Edwards, 2016). While a minimizing response to sexual harassment seems widespread, it appears to be counterproductive. Sexual harassment is a type of transgression where the public attaches responsibility to the organization (Coombs, 2007). A minimizing organizational approach, in comparison with a responsive one, can backfire because the company appears as not taking the responsibility they should (Coombs, 2015). Moreover, by immediately showing a response of care and justice, an organization with a responsive approach can communicate the underlying virtue of “commitment to due process,” which can help them regain positive reputation (Connelly et al., 2011; Kharouf et al., 2020). The company signals that they take on the role of a fair and impartial party, which can help counteract the reputational damage following sexual harassment claims.

In sum, while many companies engage in minimizing initial responses when confronted with sexual harassment claims, employing a responsive approach with a focus on justice and care can help them regain reputation. Importantly, because the allegations allow companies to explicate their commitment to due process, which they cannot when no allegation is in place, it can offer them a unique opportunity to even boost their reputation. This leads us to hypothesize that a responsive (vs. minimizing) approach to sexual harassment will increase (decrease) public’s perceptions of an organization’s commitment to due process, which in turn will be positively associated with perceived gender equality and organizational attractiveness. Moreover, we hypothesize that the responsive (vs. minimizing) approach and the associated commitment to due process it demonstrates will create positive

spillover effects by enhancing public trust and anticipated organizational capability to be resilient in handling crises in other domains.

Overview of present research

Four studies tested these predictions. Studies 1 and 2 aimed to demonstrate the negative impact (public backlash) of sexual harassment claims on organizational attractiveness through perceived gender inequality. In Study 1, we tested the impact of a sexual harassment claim on perceived gender equality and organizational attractiveness, the mediating role of perceived gender equality, and the moderating role of SDO. Study 2 manipulated the proposed mediator—perceived gender equality—to examine whether perceived gender equality vs. inequality causally boosted organizational attractiveness (Rucker et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2005). In Studies 3-4, we examined how organizations can best manage these claims and the concomitant public perception. Study 3 tested the effects of organizations’ responsive vs. minimizing reactions to a sexual harassment claim on public perception of organizational attractiveness, and the underlying mechanisms of perceived organizational commitment to due process and gender equality. Moreover, it tested how SDO moderated the relationship between experimental condition and the key outcomes. Finally, Study 4 replicated and extended findings from Study 3 by including two additional measures of public trust and anticipated organizational resilience in the face of a future crisis. It tested the ancillary effects of organizational responsiveness vs. minimization on public trust and perceived organizational resilience in non-gendered domains, mediated by perceived organizational commitment to due process. Sample sizes were determined per study before data collection and analyses. The [Online Supplement](#) includes power analyses and all materials. All studies were approved by UCLA North General Institutional Review Board (IRB #15-001927). All participants read an informed consent document and indicated consent before proceeding with the studies.

Study 1: Initial test of the effects of a single sexual harassment claim on public perception

In Study 1, we test the impact of a sexual harassment claim on perceived gender equality and subsequent organizational attractiveness. Specifically, we predict that participants who learn about a sexual harassment claim in the organization will view the organization as

having less gender equality and less attractive to work for. Moreover, we predict the negative impact of sexual harassment claims on organizational attractiveness to be mediated by perceived gender equality, and moderated by SDO.

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 497 participants (230 women, 266 men, one non-binary person) on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (Mturk).¹ After excluding 50 participants who failed a manipulation check or an attentional check (10%)², the final sample included 447 participants (205 women, 241 men, one non-binary person, $M_{\text{age}} = 37.17$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.32$). Three hundred fifty-eight participants self-identified as White/European American, 38 as Black/African American, 13 as Latinx or Hispanic American, 25 as Asian American, 113 as multiracial or other. The study consisted of two conditions: information about a sexual harassment claim vs. no information about a sexual harassment claim.

Procedure and measures

All participants received an online brochure about a fictitious company ("Blockstrout") containing background information. Participants were randomly assigned to either the sexual harassment condition, where they were presented with a press release about a sexual harassment lawsuit being filed against the company, or the control condition, containing no additional information (see the [Online Supplement](#) for the materials). After the manipulation, participants reported their perceptions of gender equality (e.g., "I think women and men are treated the same way at Blockstrout."); 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree; 4 items; $\alpha = .96$; adapted from Kaiser et al., 2013), organizational attractiveness (e.g., "I would exert a great deal of effort to work for Blockstrout."); 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree; 3 items; $\alpha = .93$; adapted from Turban, 2001). Finally, they reported their social dominance orientation (e.g., "An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom"; $\alpha = .88$; Ho et al., 2015).

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations can be found in [Table 1](#). Prior to the main analyses, we examined participant gender as a potential factor in the model. We observed very small moderating effect of participant gender on experimental condition—and

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations Study 1 and Study 2.

Study/Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
Study 1				
1. Experimental condition ^a	—	—		
2. Perceived gender equality	4.01	1.77	-.70	
3. Organizational attractiveness	3.54	1.70	-.59	.78
Study 2				
1. Experimental condition ^b	—	—		
2. Organizational attractiveness	4.03	2.05	-.75	

Note. ^aExperimental condition is coded as 1 = sexual harassment and 0 = control. ^bExperimental condition is coded as 1 = gender equality and 0 = gender inequality.

thus do not report these analyses below. The results of these and other additional analyses are reported in the [Online Supplement](#).

Perceived gender equality

As predicted, participants in the sexual harassment condition perceived less gender equality ($M = 2.76$, $SD = 1.38$), than participants in the control condition, ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.14$), $d = 1.94$.

Organizational attractiveness

As predicted, participants in the sexual harassment condition found the organization less attractive ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 1.49$), than participants in the control condition, ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.25$), $d = 1.47$.

Indirect effects

Next, we tested the indirect effect of condition on organizational attractiveness via perceived gender equality (Hayes, 2013). The path coefficients are presented in [Figure 1](#). As predicted, there was a large indirect effect of condition via perceived gender equality on organizational attractiveness, *indirect effect* = 1.70, $SE = .12$. Thus, learning of a sexual harassment claim was associated with reduced perceptions of gender equality, which in turn was associated with people being more likely to avoid working for the organization. In Study 2, we manipulated perceived gender equality, seeking additional evidence for a causal model.

Moderation by SDO

We also tested whether the effect of condition on participants' perceptions of gender inequality and organizational attractiveness was moderated by SDO. There was a large experimental condition by SDO interaction effect on perceived inequality, $b = .33$, $SE = .11$. A simple slopes analysis showed that as expected, the negative relationship between sexual harassment and perceived gender equality was more pronounced among those with lower (-1 SD) SDO-scores

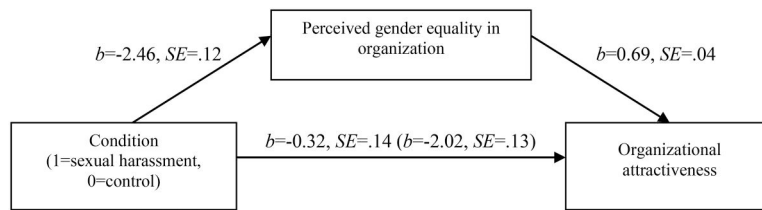


Figure 1. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between sexual harassment and organizational attractiveness through perceived gender equality in Study 1. *Note:* The effect of condition on attractiveness without the inclusion of the mediator is in parentheses.

($b = -2.85$, $SE = .16$) than those with higher (+1 SD) SDO-scores ($b = -2.15$, $SE = .17$).

There was also a large experimental condition by SDO interaction effect on organizational attractiveness, $b = .32$, $SE = .11$. A simple slopes analysis showed that the negative relationship between condition and perceived gender equality was more pronounced among those with lower (-1 SD) SDO-scores ($b = -2.41$, $SE = .17$) than those with higher (+1 SD) SDO-scores ($b = -1.74$, $SE = .18$).

Study 2: Manipulating gender equality

Study 2 builds on Study 1 to further establish and test causality. Specifically, Study 2 manipulates the proposed mediator identified in Study 1, perceived gender equality, to provide additional evidence of causality (Rucker et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2005). We predict that organizations lacking gender equality will be perceived as less attractive employers than organizations with gender equality.

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 154 participants (58 women, 94 men, two other) on Mturk. After excluding 10 participants who failed the attention check (6%)³, the final sample included 144 participants (56 women, 87 men, one non-binary person, $M_{age} = 34.82$, $SD_{age} = 10.67$). One-hundred and eight participants who self-identified as White/European American, 19 as Black/African American, four as Latinx or Hispanic American, 11 as Asian American, and two as other.

The study consisted of two conditions: gender equality vs. a lack of gender equality.

Procedure and measures

Identical to Study 1, participants received generic information about a fictitious company consisting of information about the company's services and read that the company went through an audit regarding gender dynamics (see the [Online Supplement](#) for the

materials). They were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Participants in the gender equality condition read that the conclusion of the audit was that the company was characterized by gender equality and free of gender bias, while participants in gender inequality condition learned the conclusion of the audit was that the company was characterized by gender inequality and not free of gender bias. The direction of gender bias (i.e., disadvantaging men or women) was not specified. Participants then completed the manipulation check, three-item organizational attractiveness scale from Study 1 ($\alpha = .95$; Turban, 2001) and the attention check.

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations are reported in [Table 1](#). The manipulation was successful; participants in the gender equality condition perceived more gender equality ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 0.96$) than participants in the gender inequality condition ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.69$), $d = 3.28$. As predicted, participants in the gender inequality condition ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 1.56$) reported less organizational attractiveness than participants in the gender equality condition ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 1.15$), $d = 2.23$. This finding corroborates the findings from Study 1, suggesting that perceptions of organizational gender inequality affect organizational attractiveness. In Study 3, we examined how an organization's response to a sexual harassment claim might influence public perception of said organization.

Study 3: Organizational responses to sexual harassment

Studies 1 and 2 established the finding that learning about a sexual harassment claim leads perceivers to view an organization as less attractive because they perceive the organization to have less gender equality. Study 3 builds on these findings by examining how organizational responses to a sexual harassment claim impact public's perception. We predict that a proactive accommodating approach, as compared to a

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and inter-correlations Study 3 and Study 4.

Study/Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
Study 3							
1. SH ^a No response information	—	—					
2. SH Organizational minimization	—	—	—				
3. SH Organizational responsiveness	—	—	—	—			
4. Perceived gender equality	3.65	1.68	-.15	-.52	.30		
5. Organizational attractiveness	3.50	1.60	-.03	.48	.18	.66	
6. Perceived commitment to due process	4.32	2.06	.01	-.75	.47	.76	.65
Study 4							
1. SH ^a No response information	—	—					
2. SH Organizational minimization	—	—	—				
3. SH Organizational responsiveness	—	—	—	—			
4. Perceived commitment to due process	4.39	2.02	.01	-.66	.42		
5. Generalized public trust	4.00	1.54	-.05	-.56	.31	.85	
6. Anticipated organizational resilience to future financial crisis	4.62	1.51	-.01	-.51	.26	.77	.79

Note. ^aSexual harassment. SH No response, SH Organizational Minimization and SH Organizational Responsiveness represent focal dummy-coded experimental conditions. The condition with no mention of sexual harassment is the reference group.

minimizing one, mitigates the negative perceptions of the organization following a sexual harassment claim by increasing perceived organizational commitment to due process, and subsequently enhancing perceived gender equality. Moreover, we explore the moderating role of SDO in the relationship between condition and the key outcomes. Social dominance orientation reflects a preference for existing intergroup hierarchies (Ho et al., 2015). Therefore, we predict that those lower on SDO should exhibit more backlash against organizational minimization and sexual harassment claims than those higher on SDO.

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 517 participants (253 women, 264 men, $M_{age} = 35.70$, $SD_{age} = 11.43$) on Mturk. After excluding 34 participants who failed the manipulation check or the attention check (7%)⁴, the final sample included 483 participants (233 women, 250 men, $M_{age} = 35.72$, $SD_{age} = 11.44$). Three hundred and seventy-one self-identified as White/European American, 43 as Black/African American, 23 as Latinx or Hispanic American, 27 as Asian American, and 19 as multiracial or other.

The study had a four-level, single factor between-subjects design: (a) no information about a sexual harassment claim [control condition], (b) information about a sexual harassment claim but no information about the organization's response [no response information condition], (c) information about a sexual harassment claim and information regarding a minimizing organizational response [organizational minimization condition], (d) information about a sexual harassment claim and information regarding a proactively considerate organizational response [organizational responsiveness condition].

Procedure and measures

All participants, except those in the control condition, read about a sexual harassment claim. In the organizational minimization condition, participants read that following a report to HR of sexual harassment, the HR department did not launch an investigation, reminded the victim of the alleged perpetrator's high status, and advised her to reconsider her claim. In the organizational responsiveness condition, participants read that the HR department launched an investigation following the complaint, provided process information and offered psychological support to the alleged victim.

Participants completed similar measures as in Study 1: perceived gender equality ($\alpha = .95$; Kaiser et al., 2013), and organizational attractiveness ($\alpha = .91$; Turban, 2001). In addition, participants reported perceived organizational commitment to due process in handling sexual harassment claims (e.g., Based on what you read about Company X, how seriously do you think this organization takes complaints regarding sexual harassment?; 1 = not seriously at all, 7 = very seriously; 3 items; $\alpha = .98$). As a manipulation check, participants answered whether or not they read about a sexual harassment lawsuit filed against the company.

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between the variables can be found in Table 2.

Main effects of organizational response

We performed ANOVAs to test the main effect of experimental condition on the dependent measures. Consistent with the expectation, experimental condition predicted perceived commitment to due process, $\eta_p^2 = .64$, perceived gender equality, $\eta_p^2 = .40$ and organizational attractiveness, $\eta_p^2 = .28$. Next, for each dependent measure, we performed simple contrast

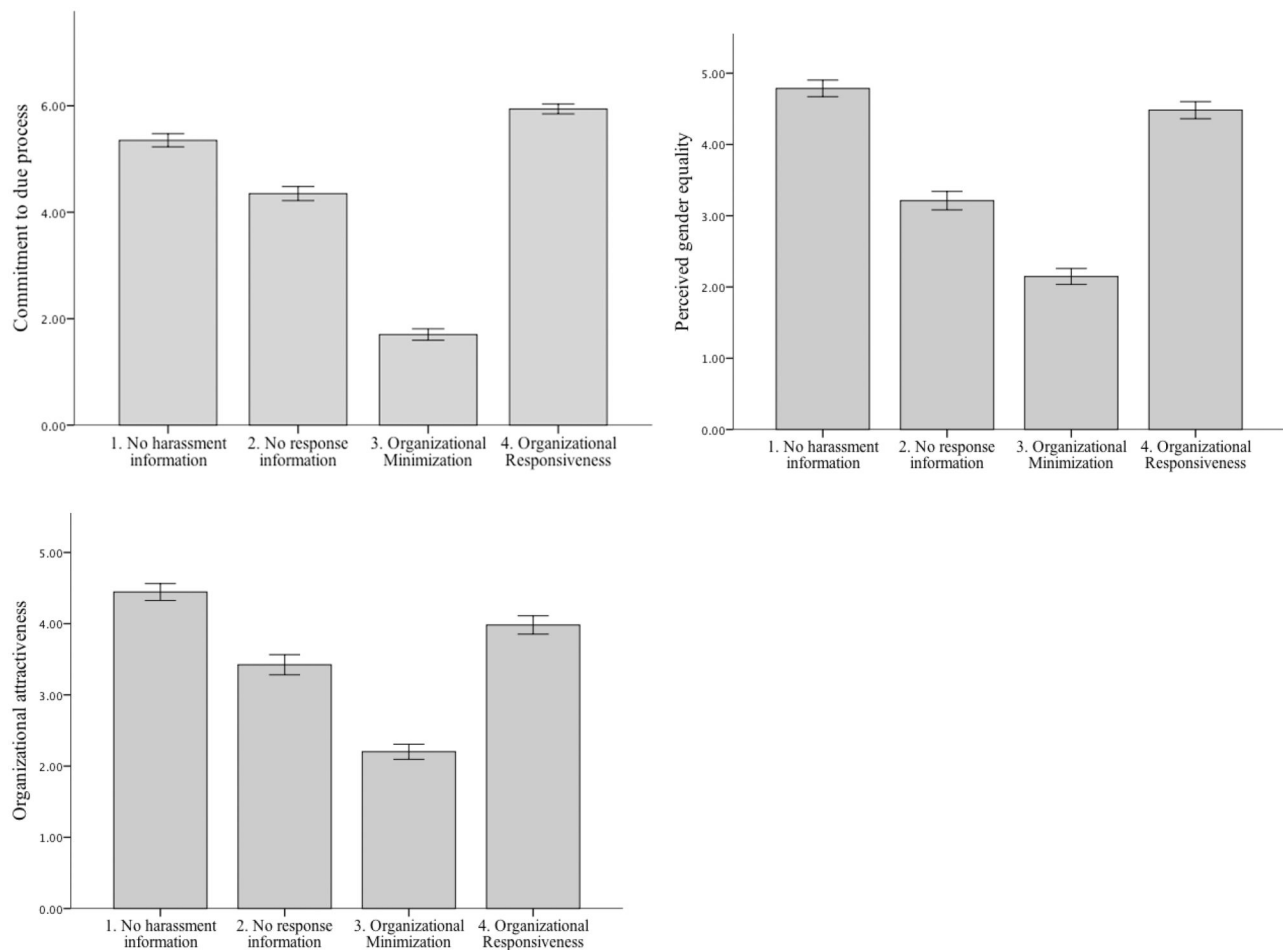


Figure 2. Means and standard errors per condition in Study 3.

analyses. Means and standard errors per condition are presented in [Figure 2](#).

The three main findings confirmed our predictions. First, compared to a minimizing organization or absent information about an organizational response to a claim of sexual harassment, a responsive organization helped circumvent public backlash following a claim of sexual harassment. Second, minimization yielded the least favorable public perception across conditions, even compared to not receiving any information about an organization's response to the sexual harassment claim. Finally, we also observed a boost effect beyond restoration to baseline. Namely, we observed greater perceptions of organizational commitment to due process among those in the responsiveness condition compared to all other conditions, even compared to control, where participants did not receive any information about a sexual harassment claim.

Indirect effects

Contrasting the condition with no mention of sexual harassment to the remaining three conditions, we examined the indirect effect of sexual harassment

claim on organizational attractiveness, through perceived organizational commitment to due process in handling such claims and gender inequality. The path coefficients are presented in [Figure 3](#).

An analysis of the serial indirect effects revealed negative indirect effects of sexual harassment claim with no response information, $b = -0.23$, $SE = .06$, and of organizational minimization, $b = -0.84$, $SE = .16$, but a positive indirect effect of organizational responsiveness, $b = 0.14$, $SE = .04$, on organizational attractiveness.

Thus, in comparison with an organization where no sexual harassment claim has been made, an organization that provided no response information or acted in a minimizing way reduced perceptions of commitment to due process in handling such claims and gender equality, which in turn, damaged organizational attractiveness. A responsive organization, however, was perceived as more committed to due process in handling sexual harassment claims than a 'neutral' organization, which increased perceived gender equality and boosted organizational attractiveness.

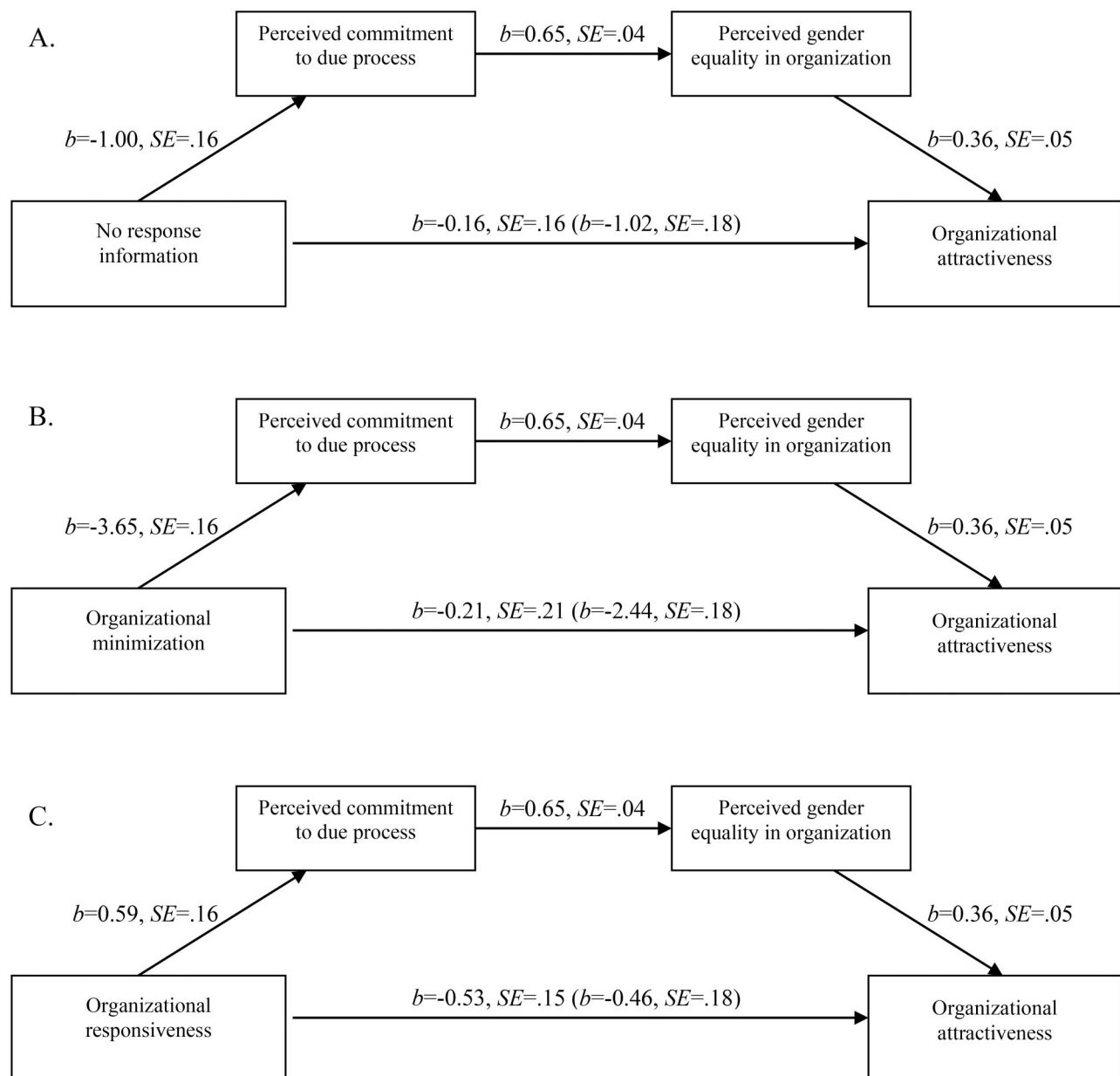


Figure 3. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between sexual harassment and organizational attractiveness through perceived commitment to fair process handling and perceived gender equality in Study 3. *Note:* The predictor is dummy-coded with the condition with no mention of sexual harassment as the reference group. The coefficients are presented for the focal dummy. The effect of the predictor on attractiveness without the inclusion of the mediator is in parentheses.

Moderation by SDO

We explored whether SDO moderated the relationship between experimental condition and (a) perceived gender equality, (b) organizational attractiveness, and (c) perceived organizational commitment to due process in handling harassment claims. We dummy-coded the multi-categorical experimental condition into three dummies, each representing an experimental condition consisting of sexual harassment claims (coded as 1); the control condition with no sexual harassment claim was the reference condition (coded as 0). The results are presented in Table 3.

We found that as expected, there was a large moderating effect of SDO on the relationships between the organizational minimization versus no response conditions and perceived commitment to due process as well as gender equality, such that the relationships were stronger among those with lower levels of SDO. That is, public backlash in terms of perceived organizational commitment to due process and gender equality was more prominent for those with lower SDO, i.e., who endorse gender-based egalitarian norms to a greater extent. Similarly, backlash in terms of organizational attractiveness in the no response and

Table 3. Regression results for moderations by SDO in Study 3.

	DV			DV			DV		
	Perceived gender equality	Low SDO <i>b</i> (SE)	High SDO <i>b</i> (SE)	Organizational attractiveness	Low SDO <i>b</i> (SE)	High SDO <i>b</i> (SE)	Perceived commitment to due process	Low SDO <i>b</i> (SE)	High SDO <i>b</i> (SE)
No response information	-1.63 (.17)			-.107 (.17)			-1.01 (.16)		
Organizational minimization	-2.65 (.16)			-2.24 (.17)			-3.66 (.16)		
Organizational responsiveness	-0.32 (.16)			-0.46 (.17)			0.56 (.16)		
SDO	0.09 (.11)			-0.11 (.11)			0.04 (.10)		
No response x SDO	0.36 (.15)	-1.94 (.21)	-1.24 (.23)	0.57 (.15)	-1.57 (.22)	-0.46 (.24)	0.04 (.14)		
Organizational minimization x SDO	0.40 (.15)	-3.00 (.21)	-2.22 (.24)	0.54 (.16)	-2.71 (.22)	-1.66 (.25)	0.45 (.15)	-1.05 (.20)	-3.17 (.22)
Organizational responsiveness x SDO	0.21 (.16)			0.07 (.16)			-0.32* (.15)	0.85 (.20)	0.22 (.23)

Note. SDO: mean-centered Social Dominance Orientation.

minimization conditions was most prominent for those lower on SDO. Interestingly, we found that the moderation effect of participants' SDO on the relationship between organizational responsiveness (vs. control) and perceived gender equality or organizational attractiveness was very small. That is, participants with relatively high and low levels of SDO responded similarly to organizations after learning of a sexual harassment claim without information about an organizational response versus those who read about the organization's responsive approach.

In Study 4 we aimed to replicate and expand these findings. Namely, we were interested in testing whether organizational responses would affect public perception of the organization at a more general level, beyond gender-specific issues. To this end, we examined how the presence of sexual harassment claims, and organizations' responses to those claims, affected general organizational trust as well as perceived organizational resilience in the face of a future financial crisis. By including these measures, we were able to determine whether the effects observed in Study 3 extend to dimensions unrelated to gender.

Study 4: the ancillary benefits of effective organizational responses to sexual harassment on public's perceptions in non-gendered domains

Study 3 found that organizations that respond to sexual harassment claims in proactive ways improve public perception of the organization by signaling their commitment to due process. Study 4 builds on this finding by examining whether the improvement in public perception is limited only to gender-related

issues, or if there are improvements in perceptions of the organization in non-gendered domains – specifically, whether the organization is also seen as more trustworthy in general and more resilient in the face of future financial crises. We predict that the improvement in perception of organizations is generalized and will show ancillary benefits.

Method

Participants and design

We recruited 505 participants (225 women, 277 men, three non-binary people, $M_{age} = 34.95$, $SD_{age} = 10.65$) on Mturk. After excluding 45 participants who failed a manipulation check or an attention check (9%)⁵, the final sample included 460 participants (211 women, 246 men, three non-binary people, $M_{age} = 35.23$, $SD_{age} = 10.70$). In terms of race, the sample consisted of 324 people who self-identified as White/European American, 55 as Black/African American, 37 as Latinx or Hispanic American, 35 as Asian American, and nine as multiracial or other.

Similar to Study 3, Study 4 consisted of a four-level, single factor between-subjects design: (i) no sexual harassment claim [control condition], (ii) sexual harassment claim without information about organizational response [no response information condition], (iii) sexual harassment claim and information and a minimizing organizational response [organizational minimization condition], (iv) sexual harassment claim and information and a proactive considerate organizational response [organizational responsiveness condition].

Procedure

The procedure was identical to Study 3 except for the addition of two measures. First, we added a six-item

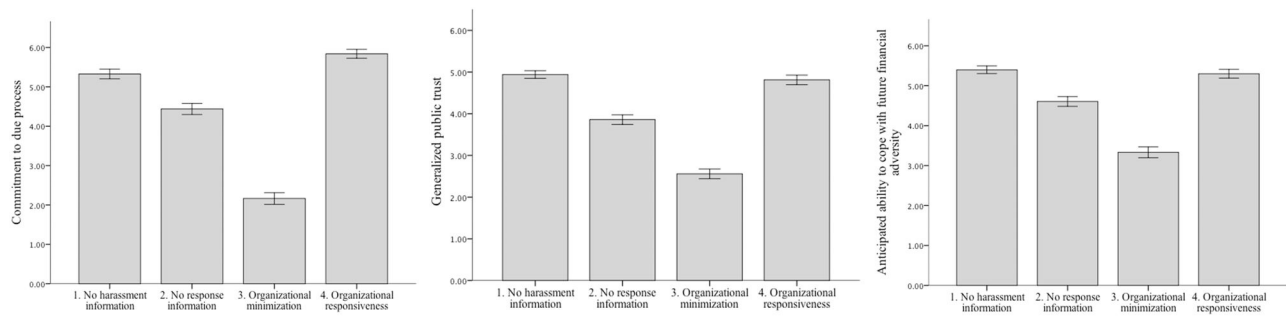


Figure 4. Means and standard errors per condition in Study 4.

public trust measurement, which we adapted from Mayer and Davis' (1999) integrity subscale (e.g., "Sound principles seem to guide this organization's actions.", 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree; $\alpha = .91$). Second, we assessed anticipated organizational resilience in the face of a future financial crisis by asking participants to imagine the company facing a major financial crisis in the next year and rate their agreement with three statements (e.g., "I think Company X would be able to make it through the crisis.", 1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree, $\alpha = .89$).

Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations between the variables can be found in Table 2.

Main effects of organizational response on perceived commitment to due process, public trust and anticipated organizational resilience in the face of future financial crisis

We performed ANOVAs to test the main effect of experimental condition on the dependent measures. These showed that there was a large effect of condition on perceived commitment to fair process, $\eta_p^2 = .50$, public trust, $\eta_p^2 = .39$, and on anticipated ability to cope with future financial adversity, $\eta_p^2 = .30$.

For each dependent measure, we performed simple contrast analyses. Means and standard errors per condition are presented in Figure 4. The three main findings confirm our predictions. First, replicating Study 3, we again observed a boost effect of organizational responsiveness. Namely, a responsive organization was seen as most committed to due process compared to all other conditions, including the condition in which participants received no information about a sexual harassment claim. Second, the responsiveness condition was the only condition which showed similar levels of general organizational trust as the condition where people received no information about a sexual

harassment claim, suggesting that responsiveness was effective in restoring organizational trust to baseline. All other conditions yielded lower levels of organizational trust compared to the control condition. Finally, and similar to the pattern of results of public trust, we observed that the responsiveness condition was the only condition that showed similar levels of anticipated organizational resilience in the face of a future financial crisis as the control condition, suggesting that organizational responsiveness was effective in restoring perceived organizational resilience to baseline. All other conditions yielded lower levels of anticipated organizational resilience compared to the control condition.

Together, these findings replicate the boost effect observed in Study 3: when confronted with sexual harassment, organizational responsiveness can boost public perception of their commitment to fair process beyond baseline (i.e., an organization where no sexual harassment claim has been made). Moreover, organizational responsiveness can restore or enhance public trust in the company and public's anticipation of the company's ability to effectively handle future adversity in non-gendered domains, such as financial crisis whereas organizational minimization further damages these perceptions. Thus, an effective approach to handling sexual harassment claims is associated with ancillary benefits for organizations' public image, even in domains that are not gender related.

Indirect effects

Contrasting the condition with no mention of sexual harassment to the remaining three conditions, we examined the indirect effect of sexual harassment claim on (i) public trust, and (ii) anticipated organizational resilience to a future financial crisis, through perceived organizational commitment to due process in handling sexual harassment claims. The path coefficients are presented in Figures 5 and 6.

An analysis of the indirect effects showed negative indirect effects of sexual harassment claim with no

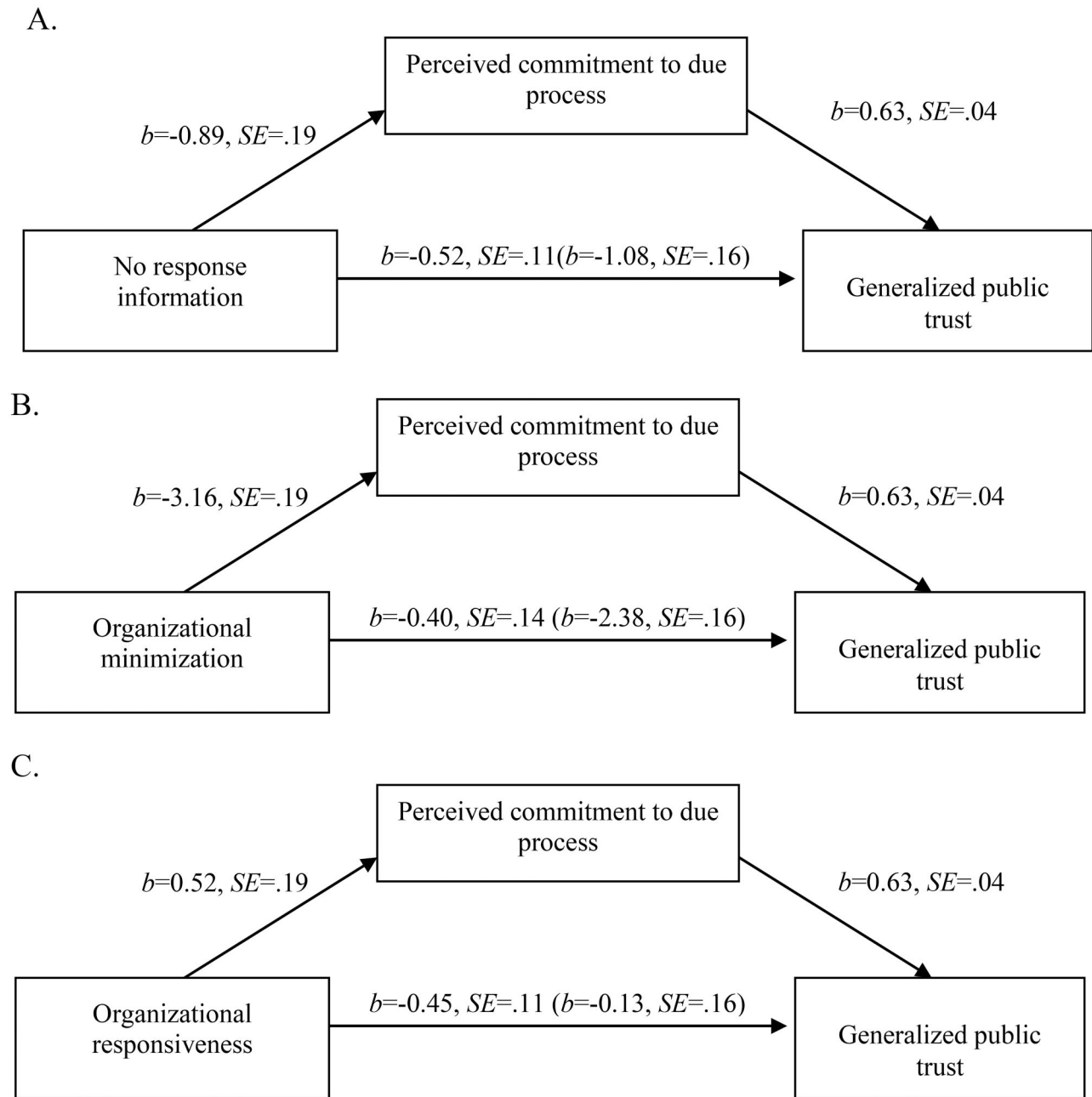


Figure 5. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between sexual harassment and generalized public trust through perceived commitment to due process in Study 4. Note: The effect of condition on outcomes without the inclusion of the mediator is in parentheses.

response information, $b = -0.56$, $SE = .12$, and of organizational minimization, $b = -1.99$, $SE = .15$, but a positive indirect effect of organizational responsiveness, $b = 0.32$, $SE = .11$, on public trust.

Similarly, there was a negative effect of sexual harassment claim with no response information, $b = -0.52$, $SE = .11$, and of organizational minimization, $b = -1.85$, $SE = .15$, but a positive indirect effect of organizational responsiveness, $b = 0.30$, $SE = .10$, on anticipated organizational resilience to future financial crisis.

Taken together, these findings showed that public perception of an organization were negatively affected by the presence of sexual harassment claims. This effect held true for men as well as women participants. Moreover, organizational responses to sexual harassment claims can shape public perception in major ways. Minimization damages perceptions of an organization beyond that of the sexual harassment claim occurring, whereas responsiveness can restore, and in some cases even boost, perceptions of the organization following sexual harassment claims.

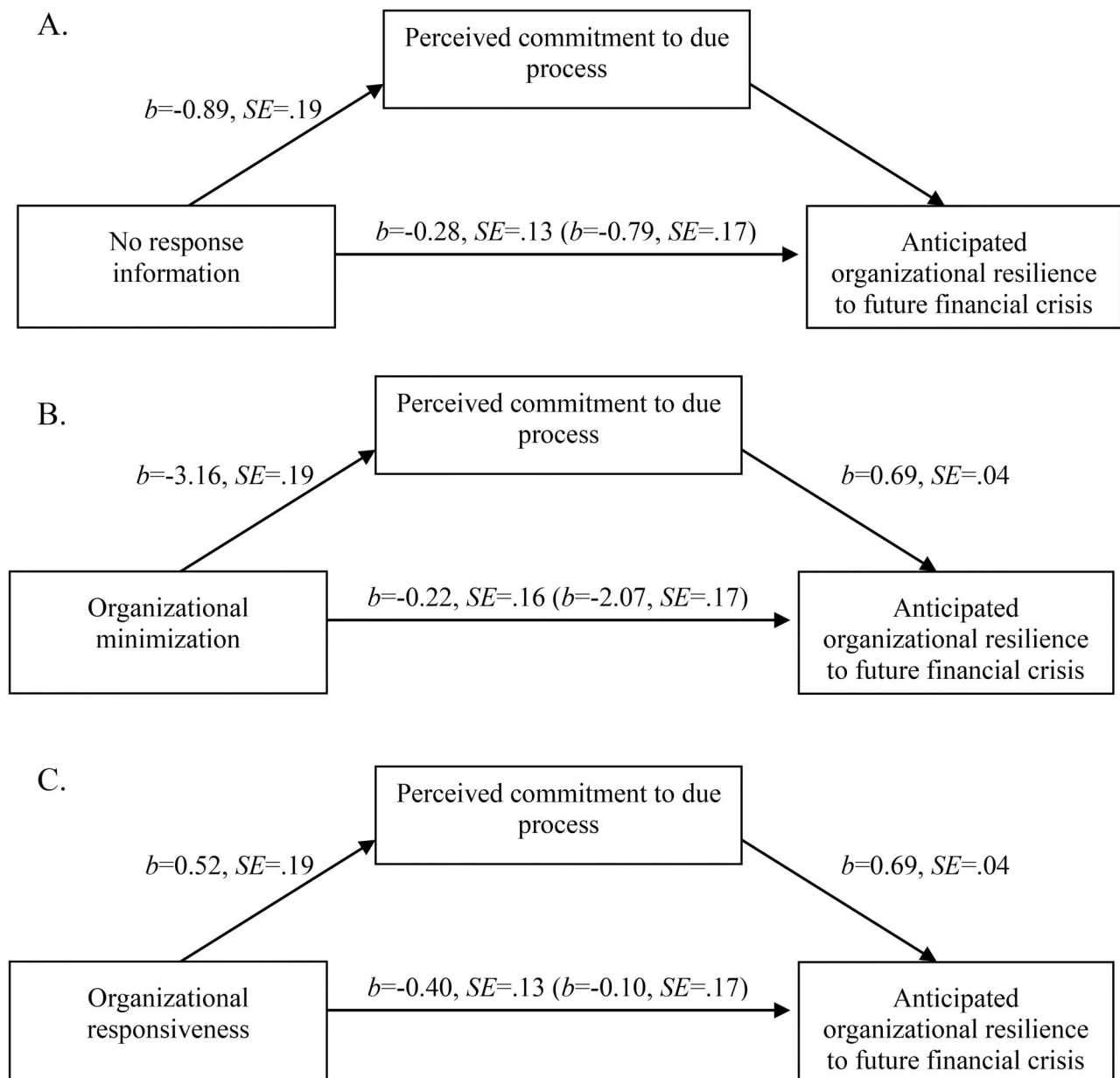


Figure 6. Unstandardized coefficients for the indirect relationship between sexual harassment and anticipated organizational resilience through perceived commitment to due process in Study 4. *Note:* The effect of condition on outcomes without the inclusion of the mediator is in parentheses.

Discussion

The current contribution examined organizational consequences of sexual harassment claims and identified optimal ways for organizations to respond to claims. We find that the general public construes a sexual harassment claim as a sign of reduced gender inequality in a given organization, which in turn reduces their attraction to that organization as an employer. Our work also reveals that organizations' immediate responses to sexual harassment claims can substantially alter the reputational damage as a

consequence of harassment by signaling a commitment to due process. Engaging in an accommodating proactive, rather than a defensive, minimizing, response to sexual harassment claims can enhance the public's trust in the organization's commitment to due process, which then heightens perceived gender equality and the concomitant organizational attractiveness. Moreover, an effective immediate response has ancillary benefits by augmenting public perception of organizational trustworthiness as well as anticipated ability to handle other, non-gendered crises in the future. Intriguingly, the results suggest that employing

an accommodating response to sexual harassment claims can restore a company's public image to a similar level as an organization where no such claim has taken place and, can in some cases even boost it by allowing the organization to signal their commitment to due process. By allowing the organization to enact and signal their values to the larger public, these dark episodes can thus offer an opportunity for effective image management.

Theoretical Implications

This work contributes to workplace harassment and organizational image management literatures. While the damaging consequences of sexual harassment for victims and direct witnesses within the company have been well-documented (e.g., Miner-Rubino & Cortina, 2007; Willness et al., 2007), its potential effects on third party judgments and public assumptions of the company have not (Kath et al., 2014). The latter is important given that this type of harassment has the potential to be highly consequential from an extra-organizational point of view (Dionisi & Barling, 2015).

Further, existing work on organizational crisis responses is characterized by descriptive typologies rather than prescriptive plans of action (Avery et al., 2010; Coombs, 2009; Tao & Kim, 2017). This paper contributes to the scholarly calls for empirical work offering insights into when and why organizational response strategies work. While many companies engage in a minimizing, dismissive, legal approach when confronted with sexual harassment claims to avoid lawsuits (e.g., Tao & Kim, 2017), the current work shows that this approach is likely to cause backlash from a reputation management perspective. In contrast, it suggests that an approach defined by fairness, care, and a proactive consideration of the claimant, helps to retain, and sometimes boost, a company's favorable image. Importantly, such an approach can be universally implemented, and has benefits since it allows organizations to signal the underlying virtue of commitment to due process. The observed ancillary benefits on generalized organizational trust and anticipated organizational resilience to crises in non-gendered areas further reveal that an accommodating immediate approach has additional advantages for companies.

Building on the signaling theory and social identity perspectives (Leach et al., 2007), the findings demonstrate that the general public is more likely to avoid the organization as a potential future employer

following a sexual harassment claim because such a claim lowers perceived gender equality in that context. This finding extends prior research showing that sexual harassment can increase turnover intentions among current employees of a company (Hershcovis et al., 2010). This work reveals that sexual harassment claims not only push away current employees but also can deteriorate the company's ability to attract new ones.

Practical Implications

Practically, the findings suggest that sexual harassment claims negatively impact organizational reputation. At the same time, we show that the ways in which organizations respond to sexual harassment claims can have important remedial effects for their reputation. Given the prevalence of sexual harassment in the workplace (Kearl, 2018), and more employees speaking up against sexual harassment (Palmer et al., 2021), this research sheds light on feasible action plans organizations can develop to address the issue.

First, this research highlights the importance for organizations to anticipate potential claims and have procedures in place for how to handle them adequately. When sexual harassment claims are made, we suggest that organizations should take a responsive approach. As witnessed in many high-profile sexual harassment lawsuits in the U.S., companies and involving parties are often quick to dismiss or deny the occurrence of sexual harassment to the public (e.g., Elan, 2022; Goodman et al., 2018). Our findings suggest that an immediate response that minimizes the (alleged) victim's experience and voice are not only potentially harmful to victims (Bergman et al., 2002), but also elicit negative responses against organizations from the public (Taylor, 2019). Instead, organizations should focus on taking swift action following the harassment claim, and showcase timeliness, consideration for victims, and procedures in place to conduct investigations in their response. They should first acknowledge the seriousness of the issue and express empathy for reporting employees. Moreover, they should develop contingency plans in consultation with experts, e.g., internal and external investigation procedures, protective measures for victims such as maintaining their privacy and protection against retaliation, and other processes necessary to allow for a proactive response after a sexual harassment claim.

Second, organizations should guarantee their response is transparent and maintains commitment to due process. It is important to note that we are not

encouraging organizations to implement window dressing measures in face of sexual harassment claims just for impression management. Instead, we put forth that organizations should take actions that align with the needs of reporting employees and the responsive type of procedures we have outlined in the current work. We identify the important mechanisms underlying the positive effects of a responsive approach to be enhanced perceptions that the organization is committed to due process and aims to have gender equality. Therefore, following a sexual harassment claim, organizations should intervene in a transparent way that communicates their authentic commitment to upholding principles of due process, fairness, and equality. For example, following an investigation, organizations should clearly communicate the investigation procedures while ensuring involved parties' privacy, and transparently report the findings to both involved parties. If the investigation reveals misconduct, organizations should not only take remedial actions (e.g., disciplinary measures and counseling), but also implement systematic changes to signal learning and progress from the incident and to foster a culture of inclusivity and equality.

Lastly, organizations should continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their responses to sexual harassment claims. Their procedures in place should stay updated to employees' needs and concerns. Organizational responses following sexual harassment claims usually involve multi-party coordination and should be tailored to the culture and characteristics of each organization. Therefore, best organizational practices need to be multifaceted and evolving, which makes it important for each organization to establish its own channels to monitor and receive employee feedback on how helpful and effective its specific set of procedures is. If an organization's previous handling of a sexual harassment claim elicits confusion or doubts, it should adjust its procedures accordingly based on feedback.

Limitations and future research directions

The current contribution's focus on fictitious organizations has a key advantage of isolating the causal impact of sexual harassment claims, without interference of individuals' pre-established impressions or ties to organizations. A limitation of this approach, however, is that we cannot draw conclusions about how individuals respond to organizations of which they have already formed an impression. It is possible that the observed effects are magnified or reduced for

organizations with which people identify (e.g., their favorite brand). Future work should examine how the effects are manifested when people have pre-established ties to a given organization or brand.

Second, in this work we focused on two broad types of organizational responses. It is, of course, possible to empirically examine a more fine-grained scale of responses. Future studies should further disentangle the effects of organizational proactive responses that differ in their specific focus (e.g., a focus on care for the victim versus offering procedural information). At the same time, this work focused on public reactions to sexual harassment claims that women make against men. While women are more common victims of sexual harassment than men because of the gender hierarchy where men tend to enjoy higher power and status than women, men can also be subject to sexual harassment. We expect our findings to generalize to public perceptions of sexual harassment claims filed by men because organizational responsiveness should create perceptions of commitment to due process regardless of gender, but future research should further examine the possible nuances in public perception with regard to different sexual harassment victim demographics.

Finally, the current work's main goal was to illuminate public perception of a company following a sexual harassment claim, dependent on an immediate response by that company. Future research should include behavioral measures to uncover the possible range of additional outcomes. For example, is the public less likely to use products from a company where a sexual harassment claim has taken place and/or do organizational responses alter these buying behaviors? Future work should examine whether consumer behavior would follow similar patterns as the ones described in the current work.

Conclusion

Four studies provide insights into the psychological process underlying general public responses to sexual harassment claims, and outline potential avenues for organizations to restore positive perceptions. Clearly, prevention of sexual harassment should remain a permanent priority for organizations. But given the consistent prevalence of sexual harassment, it is important to identify optimal ways for organizations to respond to sexual harassment claims when they arise. By demonstrating the benefits of responsive rather than minimizing organizational reactions to sexual harassment claims, the current work can help

inform organizational procedures surrounding adequate handling of sexual harassment claims, complementing organizational efforts aimed at prevention.

Notes

1. In order to test potential moderating influence of participants' gender, we oversampled in this study. Please see the [Online Supplement](#) for further details of a priori sample size determination and results for participant gender.
2. As a manipulation check, participants answered whether or not they read about a sexual harassment lawsuit filed against the company. As an attention check, participants were asked to choose a particular answer for a question to make sure they pay attention to instructions (see Oppenheimer et al., 2009). Participants who failed to answer either check correctly were excluded from the analyses.
3. Participants responded to the same attention check as in Study 1 (i.e., choose a particular answer for a question to make sure they pay attention to instructions). Participants who failed to answer the check correctly were excluded from the analyses.
4. Participants responded to the same manipulation and attention checks as in Study 1. Those who failed to answer either check correctly were excluded from the analyses.
5. Participants responded to the same manipulation and attention checks as in Study 1. Those who failed to answer either check correctly were excluded from the analyses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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