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Sexual harassment by clients experienced by male and female clerks in retail businesses: A qualitative explorative study in an Italian sample

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of this work was to analyse, from a qualitative point of view, the terms used by a sample of male and female clerks to describe their experience of sexual harassment victimization by clients.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative explorative study. Semi-structured interviews were administered to clerks who self-declared victims of sexual harassment in workplace by clients. Fifteen men (aged 30-59 years, $M = 38.2$ years) and 15 women (aged 24-50 years, $M = 37.8$ years) were interviewed. They worked in supermarkets ($n = 18$), clothing stores ($n = 4$), shoe stores ($n = 3$), bookstores ($n = 1$), e-cigarette stores ($n = 1$), jewellery stores ($n = 1$), coffee pod stores ($n = 1$), tobacco stores ($n = 1$) and mobile accessories stores ($n = 1$). The text from interviews was analyzed using *Alceste 6.0*.

Results: As expected, men were more likely than women to describe the insults concerning the sexual sphere as an experience of sexual harassment. At the same time, the experience of victimization described by women are related to terms about approaches to have a sexual relationship.

Discussion and Conclusions: Findings from this investigation could be useful to implement educational measures tailored to clerks. In Italy, education and training on workplace health and safety are mandatory and comprises psychosocial risks. Therefore, preventive measures should be tailored to address workplace violence acted by clients on workers, including coping strategies (e.g., assertive communication and reporting to work management and/or police).

KEY WORDS: Sexual harassment; qualitative investigation; victims; workplace.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE: Sexual harassment is a kind of workplace violence that may be acted by clients on the clerks and requires the implementation of preventive measures, such as education and training to cope with it.

Competing interests: none declared

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'sexual harassment' (SH) was coined to describe sexual coercion and exploitation in the workplace [1]. In 1997, Fitzgerald, Swan, and Magley defined SH in the workplace as "unwanted sexual behavior at work, which is evaluated by the recipient as offensive, exceeding his resources, or threatening his well-being" [2, p. 5]. More specifically, SH can take many forms, ranging from subtle gestures or lingering looks, verbal cues such as nicknames, sexual comments, unwanted phone calls, inappropriate hair, clothing, or body touches or unwanted massages, and, in extreme cases, attempts at rape or sexual assault [3, 4]. According to the International Labour Conference [5], SH can be resolved in a single episode or become something systematic; for others, it can even fit into a framework of workplace bullying [6, 7].

European data on SH in Europe shows that 1% of the European working population has experienced at least one episode [8]. According to data from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights [9], 3.7 million women have been physically harassed in their lifetime, and approximately one-third were harassed in the workplace.

Gender differences in the perception of the phenomenon

Studies that highlight gender differences in SH have found that men are more tolerant of SH than women [10–14]. The investigation by McLellan and colleagues [15] revealed that men are more likely than women to believe that heterosexual relationships are contradictory. Investigations from Bohner and colleagues [16] have suggested that men, more than women, tend to endorse rape myths and are less likely than women to permanently rule out the possibility of sexually assaulting someone in certain circumstances [17].

Ford and Donis [18] investigated gender differences in the degree of tolerance toward sexual harassment and found that women are significantly less tolerant than men. These results are linked to the roles that the two genders usually assume in the harassing relationship, as men tend to be the perpetrators, while women are the victims. Moreover, women tend to see potentially harassing events as more serious SH than their male counterparts [19, 20]. The investigation by O'Connor and colleagues [21], have found that women are more likely to interpret unwanted sociosexual behavior as harassing than men, especially when the behavior or scenario is ambiguous. Furthermore, men do not seem to interpret as offensive certain behaviors that many women consider SH. For example, Gutek [22] found that women are more likely than men to perceive a physical approach as SH, while men are more likely to see the same approach as a compliment. Rotundo, Nguyen and Sackett [10] found that the gender difference is greater for behaviors that involve pressures to have a date (women are much more likely to perceive such actions as SH). Another important factor in the tolerance of SH was age. Tolerance for SH in women increases over time, but begins to decrease after age 50. In men, this relationship is reversed. Tolerance for SH is high among younger men, but this gradually decreases with age and increases again after age 50 [18]. The results also showed that the lowest levels of tolerance for SH were reported by young working women [18, 22].

Consequences of sexual harassment victimization

This phenomenon of violence has individual, social and organizational level consequences. At the individual level, there are short-term negative outcomes (e.g., embarrassment, distress, anger, fear) [9] and long-term negative outcomes on mental and physical health, such as depression, anxiety, somatization, decrease in performance, relational problems, turnover and intention to leave the job [23, 24]. At the organizational level, SH could affect job satisfaction and organizational commitment, increase perceived job stress or increase the risk of burnout [25]. At the social level, the perpetuation of the phenomenon, according to Kahsay and colleagues [26], could result in a perverse mechanism of legitimizing violence, resulting in the maintenance of gender inequality. Many women could take lower-paying jobs to avoid work environments with SH, thus weakening their social status and fueling the glass ceiling phenomenon [27]. According to data from the European Union Agency for Rights [9], the tendency to not report SH episodes contributes to the underestimation of the phenomenon (in a sample of 17,335 women, the percentage of women who have never reported SH was 35%).

Client aggression

Among the aggressive and violent events that can occur in the workplace, client aggression occurs when a client is the perpetrator of violent behavior against a clerk in the workplace. Fullerton and Punji [28] define this phenomenon as: "[behavior] in trade contexts [of services or goods] that violates the commonly accepted standards of conduct in such situations and that, therefore, is held despicable by marketers and by the majority of consumers" [28, p. 570]. This definition includes the boundaries of the phenomenon and its characteristics: first, customer behavior may fall within a wide range of work contexts in the service sector (e.g., shops, restaurants, supermarkets); second, the definition covers a wide range of behaviors, such as physical (e.g., hair pulling, pushing) and psychological (e.g., screaming, insulting) aggression. Moreover, it covers both face-to-face interactions and indirect clashes, such as phone calls or e-mails, which may, for example, occur in a call center. Clerks are repeatedly trained that the 'customer is always right', which reflects an implicit imbalance of power inherent in the relationship between clerks and clients [29–31]. According to Funk, Spencer and Herron [32],

the increasing phenomenon of client aggression seems partly due to organizations' ambivalent attitudes on the limits of tolerance for harassment to avoid dissatisfying the client. According to Fullerton and Punj [33], this type of action ensures that client aggression becomes part of everyday work, legitimizes it as normal and leads to it becoming an intrinsic feature of consumer society.

Harris and Reynolds [34], in a study of a sample of 106 interviews of clients, clerks and managers, found that all 'front line' clerks reported that they had witnessed or been involved in some form of client harassment on a daily basis. In addition, approximately 82% of clerks revealed that in the last year, they had witnessed or experienced harassment, while 52% claim that their working life had been significantly compromised by the experience. The experience of client aggression causes several consequences that affect individuals and their workplace, such as absenteeism. For example, Gettman and Gelfand [35] found that the extent of absenteeism depended on the stress caused by harassment. In particular, from this investigation, it emerged that SH by clients positively correlates with withdrawal behaviors. Consequences of client aggression were psychological and emotional outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion, depression and emotional dissonance (the discomfort derived from the discrepancy between the emotions experienced by the clerks and the surface emotions during working hours).

In Italy, a report by the Italian Institute of Statistics [36] estimates that 43.6% of working women (8.8 million people) have been victims of SH at least once in their lives; the estimated number of working men who have been victims of SH is 18.8% (3.7 million people). Eurofound [37] underscores that those working in the service sector (e.g., supermarket) are among the workers at greatest risk of SH. The service sector has grown rapidly in recent years; for example, Cristini and Laurini [38] reports that the number of supermarkets has grown compared to past years, comprising those open 24 hours a day. These workplaces expose clerks to a greater risk of sexual harassment, as they may be alone in the aisles or in contact with people under the influence of substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs).

Aim of this work

The aim of this work was to conduct a qualitative explorative study using semi-structured interviews to analyze the phenomenon of SH acted by clients on Italian clerks who work in retail. We choose to use the qualitative method because it permits to give “priority of data over theory” ([39], p. 230). According to Maran and Begotti, with the use of this approach to the phenomenon permits to be free from prior theoretical interpretations to avoid being conditioned by them. Moreover, the qualitative approach “allows researchers to better explore, describe, and interpret individual experiences” ([39], p. 230). From this perspective, the use of this approach permits to explore different aspects of individuals involvement in SH situations, such as the description of what SH is/isn't, the individual experiences and points of view, the motivation of the misbehavior, the consequences and the coping strategies adopted. As suggested by the literature cited previously, we expected that women were more likely than men to describe the SH experience in terms of pressure to make a date, physical approach, and so on. Moreover, we expected that men were more likely than women to describe insults concerning the sexual sphere as SH. Regarding consequences, we expected that men were more likely than women to describe the consequence of the victimization in terms of negative feelings such as anger, and we expected that women were more likely to describe the consequence of victimization in terms of symptoms of anxiety and depression.

METHODS

Study design and procedure

A study was carried out in a large city in northwestern Italy. During 2018-2019, we conducted a large investigation to analyze the prevalence of SH in the workplace and its consequences for men and women. To better understand the phenomenon and the language that characterize the clerks who work in retail, we chose a qualitative explorative study design: semi-structured interviews to clerks self-declared victims of SH in workplace by clients. The interviews were analyzed with a qualitative method to identify the terms that characterize the description of the episode of the SH experience and the scenario in which the episode occurred. Data were

collected by students (research assistants) trained by the researchers. Participants were contacted through email or telephone.

Study participants and sampling

Students in a Work and Organizational Psychology course were involved in the recruitment of participants. They received curricular credit for their involvement in the investigation. They asked students and friends working as clerks in retail if they had experienced SH by clients. The inclusion criteria were working as clerks in the service sector and experiencing SH in the workplace. For those clerks that replied in the affirmative, they were asked for their availability to interview. The exclusion criteria were have not experienced or to be witness (thus not to be the primary victim) of SH in workplace. Then, the students asked the clerks (victims and nonvictims) to refer acquaintances working in retail to whom requires if they ever never be victims of SH in workplace. The recruitment process of the participants continued until we reached the sufficient number of subjects. The sample size was reached in order to have a statistical power of at least 0.80 [40] and then according to the construction of a matrix in which were crossed two design variables: A) gender (1. male; 2. female); B) age (1. 18-30 years; 2. 31-45 years; 3. Over 45 years). For each crossing resulting from the multiplication of the 2*3 (=6) cells of the sample matrix designed, five clerks self-declared victims of sexual harassment were recruited for a total number of eligible subjects equal to 30. Once this number was reached, the recruitment was interrupted: according to Richards and Morse [41], the addition of new participants does not give additional information (namely saturation or theoretical redundancy). Thus, 15 men (aged 30-59 years, $M = 38.2$ years) and 15 women (aged 24-50 years, $M = 37.8$ years) were interviewed. They worked in supermarkets ($n = 18$), clothing stores ($n = 4$), shoe stores ($n = 3$), bookstores ($n = 1$), e-cigarette stores ($n = 1$), jewelry stores ($n = 1$), coffee pod stores ($n = 1$), tobacco stores ($n = 1$) and mobile accessories stores ($n = 1$). Participants did not receive any compensation for participation in this study.

Study instruments and measures

The semi structured interview contained open questions about the episode of sexual harassment, the scenario and the consequences. The premise was to describe the episode freely, as if they were explaining to a friend or a colleague. The questions were the following:

- *“Please, could you describe an episode of sexual harassment occurred to you, and the client was the aggressor?”*
- *“Could you describe where you were during the episode? And what were you doing?”*
- *“What about the client? Who him/her was (gender, age), what was she/he doing?”*
- *“Was another person there? (For example, a colleague, another client...)”*
- *“What about consequence? Did you report the experience to somebody? (Colleague, superior, family, friends...)”*

Finally, we asked for information about the respondents' sex, age and workplace.

Data analysis

The text from interviews was analyzed using *Alceste 6.0* [42]. Alceste processes verbal data following a descending hierarchical classification: the text is first divided into elementary context units (UCE) and second categorized into classes that are homogeneous. The homogeneity is based on the idea that a certain topic is expressed through similar words. Thus, throughout the software, it is possible to isolate and separate internal classes within specific populations: each class is formed on the basis of the co-occurrence of elementary context units. The software identifies the classes that are the most homogeneous in terms of content; thus, the classes have a semantic lexical universe that differs from the others. The software also performs a χ^2 test, that is, the association between words that comprise the classes. This process permits the identification of the specific vocabulary for each class, that is, the lexical worlds in the text [42], and those words that appear once (the so-called hapax). The hapax highlights the number of unique words, which are terms that the specific population does not share (the hapax does not enter in the output of the classes). Moreover, the software offers the opportunity to analyze the

Figure 1. Dendrogram of the classes.

As shown in Figure 1, the classification procedure opposed two pairs of classes: III-IV versus I-II. Overall, the four classes explained 66.13% of the variance. For each class, the first five words that characterize the class are identified in order of chi-squared (Tables 1 and 2) with the illustrative variables.

Table 1. Words characterizing classes III and IV.

Class III		Class IV	
Words	χ^2	Words	χ^2
Male	38.45	Workplace	29.03
Female	34.76	Colleague	26.09
Old	34.76	Employer	25.90
Age	34.42	Corner	24.38
Client	23.11	Working time	23.75
Illustrative variables: female, male		Illustrative variables: female, male, supermarket	

Note. χ^2 = Chi-squared

Below, each class is commented on; sentences in brackets are examples of the respondents' replies to questions. Class III explained 22.9% of the variance and was about the perpetrator: the lexical world refers to the episode of SH experienced by clerks (see Table 1). For both females and males, the perpetrator was described as a female or male client who was, in most cases, older than clerk. Examples of the episodes described by clerks are the following:

“... a 55-year-old lady client tells me “you’re beautiful, you’re my favorite clerk” and tries to make a date... she insisted a lot, even though she knew I had a partner... she knew

that I'm homosexual, and she insisted that if I knew her better, I could change my sexual orientation."

(Male, aged 32 years, clerk in a bookstore).

"I was verbally assaulted by a client in a serious state of intoxication, about sixty years old, who harassed me with an obscene proposal."

(Female, aged 34 years, clerk in a mobile accessory store).

Class IV refers to the scenario in which the episode of SH occurred. The illustrative variables showed that the scenario was described similarly by females and males employed in supermarkets in particular. In most cases when the incident occurred, the clerk was alone, without colleagues who could have intervened (27). In 19 cases, the clerk advised the employer of the victimization:

"I spoke to colleagues because I wanted to make a complaint, but having never been present during the harassment, they preferred not to testify. They believed the facts that I told them, because they knew the person and thought I might be right, but they were afraid of losing their jobs, so I did not report that he harassed me because there were no witnesses... I was afraid that the report could be turned against me... the employer always repeated to us that the 'client should be pampered.'"

(Female, aged 24 years, clerk in a supermarket).

Very interesting results are about the terms 'corner' and 'working time':

"I worked in a corner retail... a man the same age as my father was always around, he'd come out and go in from the supermarket nearby and look at me, telling me 'hey baby you're all alone, are you bored? I'm going to keep you company...'"

(Female, aged 24 years, clerk in an e-cigarette store).

"I have to be sociable with people and many times I was insulted and harassed at the end of the shift because I had to close the store... but my shift had ended... men, in

particular, asked me if I had a date, and that they were available to accompany me home...”

(Female, aged 25, clerk in a tobacco store).

The words characterizing Classes I-II are inserted in Table 2.

Table 2. Words characterizing classes I and II.

Class I		Class II	
Words	χ^2	Words	χ^2
Normal	19.03	Disease	27.51
Difficulties	16.09	Embarrassing	20.55
Justify	15.90	Guilty	20.30
Aggressiveness	14.38	Acceptance	20.30
Character	13.75	Attitude	19.50
Illustrative variables: male, supermarkets		Illustrative variables: female	

Note. χ^2 = Chi-squared

In class I, the illustrative variables showed that males in particular described the consequence in terms of subjective perception of SH (sensitivity due to a character predisposition). They were more likely than women to attribute the episode to client aggressiveness due to long waiting times at the cash register:

“A client, a male, insulting me, because of the long wait he had before being served at the register... He told me and my colleague (male) ‘Are you ladies? Are you not capable of doing your job, are you disabled or queers?’... I didn’t justify his aggressiveness, but he has a little bit of a reason... in that store there was a lack of clear rules concerning the tasks to be carried out... we lost a lot of time due to the absence of management rules about the work...”

(Male, aged 30 years, clerk in a supermarket).

“I think that some people exaggerated (when) talking about sexual harassment... it's part of our job to be insulted by clients, they are frustrated, they let off steam with us... I was insulted by clients... they see you as an object representing what you sell... I experienced sexual harassment by a female, I experienced discomfort for that situation... it's gone, I don't think about it anymore”.

(Male, aged 41 years, clerk in a shoes store).

As shown in Class II, women were more likely than men to experience negative feelings such as illness, embarrassment and guilt:

“I feel a sense of illness, humiliation, distress... I was embarrassed... For a week, or more, I didn't sleep well, and I was afraid to go to work... I left that store, I didn't work for a time, then I was hired in a different store.”

(Female, aged 39, clerk in a clothing store).

“... because of the sexual harassment I have suffered, I'm not fully satisfied with myself, and I experienced a lack of confidence in myself... I'm feeling guilty too for not being able to defend myself, to respond adequately... still now I wonder what I should have done.”

(Female, aged 24 years, clerk in an e-cigarette store).

Regarding the word attitude and acceptance, women stressed that some clients treat clerks as servants. Their role didn't permit them to reply as they wanted:

“Some clients have a master/servant attitude... The fact that I'm serving them puts them one step above me and allows them to behave in a certain way... so some clients have a misplaced attitude towards me or my colleagues.”

(Female, aged 27 years, clerk in a shoes store).

“In my workplace... the limit of normality has been lowered too much in my opinion. Certain vulgar attitudes by clients are considered normal by the employer, certain aggressive attitudes towards women... especially men think that everything they do towards women is normal... always pointing out a series of justifications to say no because “you do not work enough, there are not enough”, “you’re never enough”... to my employer I can’t say ‘hey, this client’s harassed me’ because he is not sensitive to this issue... he didn’t accept the idea that I could suffer for this misconduct... in his opinion it isn’t so important.”

(Female, aged 31, clerk in a coffee pod store).

DISCUSSION

The aim of this work was to analyze, from a qualitative point of view, the terms used to describe the experience of SH victimization by clients in a sample of male and female clerks. As expected, men were more likely than women to describe the insults concerning the sexual sphere as an experience of SH. At the same time, the experiences of victimization described by women are related to terms like the approaches to have a sexual relationship. An interesting finding concerned the rules that characterize the job and, as a consequence, the clerk’s characteristics related to job. The focus is on client satisfaction and the opportunity to build customer loyalty. For this purpose, especially in shops, clerks are hired for their personal characteristics, such as agreeableness, kindness and aesthetic appeal, to transmit to clients a certain message: The overall care of the person. From the interviews, emerged that clerks described the client expectation as the imbalance of power in which the clerk is at the customer’s disposal due to the money spent and the care expected [43]. Therefore, participant described as this job requires clerks to circumvent their personal feelings (such as aggression) and devote energy to satisfying the client. However, aggression can be useful to give an immediate response that the person is not available to victimize [44]. As shown by Burton, Hafetz and Henninger [45], greater physical or relational aggression was associated with less agreeableness and extraversion in

men, while in women, greater physical/relation aggression was associated with decreased capability for stress management and lower consciousness.

Another interesting result was the description of the age difference between clerk victims of sexual harassment and the perpetrators. This difference could generate a sense of impotence also linked to respect for older people [46, 47]. These perpetrators could perceive the fragility of the clerks due to the context (for example, being alone in the shop) and attempted a sexual approach that in other situations could not take place [48]. Moreover, in accordance with Bauman [49], the age of the perpetrator is important because people aged between 50 and 70 have difficulty accepting a postmodern vision of gender. These people still retain gender axioms produced by the patriarchal system, a closed system characterized by dichotomies: contrast between man and woman, masculinity and femininity and between dominant and natural heterosexuality and marginal and pathological homosexuality [50]. Furthermore, shops and supermarkets are the only places in which there is a social exchange that often involves young and old people. In particular, in the pandemic period, shops and supermarkets represented the only place in which people could meet others; thus, the sale was a moment of socialization and a place to vent anger. This phenomenon was well described by the British Retail Consortium [51], which highlighted that violence in retail is a phenomenon that has worsened since the onset of the pandemic.

Study strengths and limitations

The investigation has some strengths and limitations. The strength of the qualitative approach adopted permits deeper investigation of the phenomenon and description from the victims' perspective. Moreover, it permits us to better plan the tools for the quantitative survey. For example, in our opinion, it is important to investigate the imbalance of power perceived by clerk victims of SH, the increased number of clients in the pandemic period and the cooccurrence of harassment.

The first limitation was the sample of the investigation, we did not recruit secondary victims, such as witness. Future research could recruit also clerks that were witness of SH in workplace: a more integrative approach could be useful also to investigate the type of coping adopted by individuals and organizations [52]. A second limitation was the lack of opportunity to interview clerks in a large-scale distribution (e.g., sports, food and clothing retail chains). In these

workplaces, a recent investigation by Vignoli and colleagues [53], showed that negative relationship with clients could lead to poorer general health in clerks. Future investigation could analyze the relationship between perceived health in clerks and experience of SH acted by clients in large-scale distribution. Another limitation was that we did not consider some job rules in the interviews. For example, the dress code required in the shop and organizational rule about the regulation for alcohol servers [54] could affect the likelihood of SH. This rule could be investigated in further research that involves female waiters in particular [55].

Furthermore, each occupation has different levels of risks depending on factors including personal factors, temporal factors, and location factors. In this study, we did not consider the contextual and organizational variables characterizing the environment of the participants. Future research could increase numbers especially of young people working in insecure and irregular employment settings, it might be interesting to explore if such precarious arrangements are associated with SH [56]. In addition, it might be interesting to consider the kind of store, for example convenience stores are considered a place with more frequent episodes of violence and SH [57].

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from this investigation could be useful to implement a prevention course tailored to clerks. In Italy, education and training on workplace health and safety are mandatory and comprises psychosocial risks. Our purpose is to implement this course with more attention to the risk of violence from clients and strategies to cope with the phenomenon (for example, using assertive communication [58]) and, based on the gravity of the episode, to report to management and/or to police. Regarding management, it is important to underline the responsibility of their role in protecting the worker and ensuring his or her safety [59,60]. The adoption of a zero-tolerance policy for violence in the workplace could preserve the physical and emotional health of clerks and promote organizational values centered on shopping with respect for workers.

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