

**Email Sexual Harassment:
The Impact of Lean Communication Media
on Perceptions of Sexual Harassment**

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ABSTRACT

This study used a 2x3 research design to investigate the differences in perceptions between email versus face-to-face sexual harassment. By varying the level of harassment evident in scenarios, as well as the form of sexual harassment, we found that email harassment was perceived as more severe when the amount of harassment was low and the intent of the behaviors may have been more unclear, than when there were higher amounts of harassment. At higher amounts of harassment, where the purpose and intent of the behaviors were less ambiguous, the medium in which the harassment occurred had no effect on the perceptions of those behaviors. This study has implications for understanding the impact of different contexts on perceptions of sexual harassment as well as practical implications for how sexual harassment training is done in organizations.

Key Words: Sexual Harassment, Email Communication, Sex Role Identity

INTRODUCTION

Technology has greatly changed the way people communicate within organizations. Whereas in the past face-to-face or telephone conversations were the primary means of communication, email and internet technology have enabled employees to talk in “real time,” eliminating the cost of telephone conversations, and facilitating communication among employees who may be dispersed geographically. While there are advantages to technology-facilitated communication, some of the basic challenges of communication still exist. Issues such as miscommunication, conflict, and, ultimately, aggression are not eliminated.

Sexual harassment, defined as “sexual, work-related action taken with the expectation of imposing harm on another person or forcing his/her compliance in order to achieve some valued personal goal” (O’Leary-Kelly, Paetzold, & Griffin, 2000), is a common form of aggression. The Civil Rights Act (1964) and subsequent guidelines outlined by the EEOC outlaw sexual harassment in the workplace. The impact of sexual harassment on the target, in the form of stress and lower life satisfaction (Munson, Hulin, & Drasgow, 2000; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) and on organizations, in the form of increased civil liability (Sipior & Ward, 1999; Soewita & Kleiner, 2000) has been well documented. Additionally, sexual harassment does not always have to be intentional. An individual can behave in a certain way and be accused of harassment even if the intent to harass is not there. Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to find ways to decrease harassment and the impact of harassing behaviors on the organization and its employees.

While previous literature has examined how people perceive sexually harassing actions in a variety of contexts, little has been done to explore how these perceptions differ when the sexual harassment is conducted through electronic mail (email). Sexual harassment can easily be done

in a virtual context (Borstorff & Graham, 2006; Maass, Cadinu, Guarnieri, & Grasselli, 2003; Towns & Johnson, 2003), making it a viable manifestation of aggression for a variety of employees. In fact, between 1994 and 1997, at least 14 civil court cases used e-mail messages as evidence of a sexually harassing environment (Sipior & Ward, 1999). In the subsequent years, this number has most likely increased. With this disturbing new trend, it is unclear exactly how the email context may change perceptions of the harassing behaviors. Further, what other factors, such as gender (male versus female) or sex role identity (masculine versus feminine), may have an effect on how email harassment is perceived?

In order to protect the organization and its employees, managers and HR professionals need to understand how harassment is perceived in an email context. Therefore, the purpose of our paper is to investigate the threshold difference in perceptions of sexual harassment in both a face-to-face and email context. As we hypothesized, we found that email harassment can be perceived more negatively than is face to face harassment under certain conditions. To review our findings, our paper is outlined as follows. First, we begin with a review of the literature and our hypotheses on the nature of email communication and those factors that are known to have an impact on perceptions of sexual harassment. We will follow this with a discussion of our methodology and analysis, and conclude the paper with a discussion of our results and limitations as well as recommendations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

Sexual Harassment

Although sex discrimination was made illegal in 1964 under the Civil Rights Act, it wasn't until the 1980's when it became clear that sexual harassment, as defined by the EEOC as

including both quid pro quo and hostile working environment harassment, was considered a form of sex discrimination and thereby was considered illegal. Quid pro quo harassment involves, for example, an offer to exchange sexual favors for a promotion or a raise. The aggressor is typically in a position of power and the harassment is seen as a means to intimidate or control the victim. Hostile working environment harassment includes having an environment in which the sexually charged nature makes individuals uncomfortable; for example, having calendars with naked women all over the workplace or sharing sexually-oriented jokes. It does not necessarily involve a difference in power between the aggressor(s) and the victim(s), nor is it necessarily intentional in nature. Hostile working environment harassment is far more ambiguous than is quid pro quo harassment as it is dependent on the workplace context and the perceptions of the aggressor and the victim and is subject to interpretation based on those factors. What may be seen as harassing in one context, may be seen as humorous and acceptable in another context. Despite the ambiguous nature of hostile working environment harassment, researchers have made major advances in the last 25 years in understanding the nature of sexual harassment in the workplace.

There is, undoubtedly, a cost associated with sexual harassment in the workplace. Previous research has documented that sexual harassment can lead to a variety of negative outcomes for both the target of the harassment as well as the employing organization. Following exposure to sexual harassment, the negative psychological outcomes experienced by the target can include, but are not limited to: lowered life satisfaction and symptoms of post-traumatic stress (Munson, Hulin, & Drasgow, 2000; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997). The target can also experience several organizational outcomes, including increased absenteeism, lower job satisfaction, higher levels of job stress, and higher levels of intention to quit (Bergman, et al.,

2002; Harned, et al., 2002). Additionally, in certain cases where the employing organization should reasonably have known or been able to prevent the harassment, the organization can be held liable in a civil suit. Many organizations have been forced to pay large sums of money to targets of sexual harassment (Sipior & Ward, 1999; Soewita & Kleiner, 2000).

Most recently, research has focused on characteristics of the aggressor (O’Leary, Paetzold, and Griffin, 1995, 2000), perceptual and demographic characteristics affecting perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g., Rotundo, Nguyen & Sackett, 2001), possible outcomes or consequences (Gutek & Koss, 1993, Terpstra and Baker, 1986), reactions of third party observers, and target responses (e.g., Bowes-Sperry, L. & Powell, G.N., 1999). Understanding sexual harassment and the factors that influence the perceptions of the harassing behaviors and their outcomes is highly complex. We have only tapped the surface of understanding this phenomenon.

Email Communication

Email communication differs from face-to-face conversations in several important ways which increases the opportunity for sexual harassment to occur. Email is a unique form of communication, combining a written format with the capacity to have “real time” communication and feedback. This “real time” exchange was formerly reserved for face-to-face or telephone/teleconferencing communication. The Internet and World-Wide-Web, along with the use of email, became a part of business communication in the early 1990’s; and their presence in the workplace has become ubiquitous. While the advantages to email communication include more synchronous communication with geographically dispersed parties, there are several clear disadvantages to using email in the workplace, which make email a ripe

environment for harassment to occur (Sipior & Ward, 1999). The lack of social presence with email and the lean nature of the communication, as you will see, can lead to greater likelihood of hostile work environment harassment occurring.

Daft & Lengel (1986), in their seminal work, developed the theory of media richness which argues that the medium within which communication occurs varies in its ability to facilitate a shared meaning within a given time interval (for an extensive review of media richness theory, see Dennis & Kinney, 1998). According to Daft & Lengel (1986), there are four factors that influence media richness: the ability to transmit multiple cues, the immediacy of feedback, the language variety, and the personal focus of the medium. They further argued that managers could improve worker performance if they matched communication medium to the needs of organizational information processing tasks. The tasks vary on two dimensions, uncertainty and equivocality. Tasks of uncertainty simply lack sufficient information for full, shared understanding. Facilitating the delivery of the needed information should decrease the uncertainty of that task. Tasks of equivocality, however, are more ambiguous and lack a clear, shared meaning regardless of the amount of information provided. It is this ambiguity that can create conflicting interpretations of available information.

Daft & Lengel (1986) argue that richer media are better for ambiguous or equivocal tasks whereas leaner media can be more efficient in providing information in conditions of uncertainty. Face-to-face communication is considered a rich medium as it allows for immediate feedback, is very personal, and uses multiple cues to get across a message, such as tone as well as words. Even though email does provide for some immediacy of feedback through sequential communication (although typing takes longer than the same spoken words), it does not transmit multiple cues and it is a very impersonal focus, therefore it would fall under the category of lean

communication media and would not be appropriate for ambiguous. When the medium is mismatched with the task, this can lead to problems with miscommunication and misunderstandings, leaving open the potential for hostile work environment harassment.

Because email is not able to transmit multiple cues, many non-verbal or tonal aspects of communication are lost in this form of communication. Email users attempt to input emotion and tone in their communications via emoticons (:D = indicates a big smile) or shorthand language (LOL = laughing out loud), but an uninitiated recipient may not understand those cues or one may choose to ignore them even if they do understand what those cues mean.

According to Dennis & Kinney (1998), the types of cues used in communication can have a significant effect on social perceptions. In an email context, there is a loss of social presence (Short et al., 1976; Rice, 1993) and depersonalization and objectification of the individuals with whom one is communicating occurs (Williams, 1977). In turn, this may result in self-centeredness (Sproull & Kiesler, 1986) and generalized anti-social behavior (Siegel, et al., 1985) by the individuals communicating. As Weisband and Reinig (1995) state, in the e-mail context, “people lose their fear of social sanctions and criticism due to limited reminders of conventional human interaction (p. 45).” Flaming, the act of verbally harassing or “yelling” at someone via email, and even sexual harassment, are common examples of aggressive, anti-social behaviors. This is not to say that anti-social behaviors don’t occur in a face-to-face context, however, the frequency of anti-social behaviors increases significantly in an email context.

The reduction of social norms and situational cues can lead to an increased amount of self-disclosure within emails, which may not necessarily manifest itself in a face-to-face context. As Weisband and Reinig (1995) note, it is easier for people to self-disclose when no one is looking. People are generally more comfortable with expressing themselves and disclosing

personal feelings and sensitive information through email (Sipior & Ward, 1999). However, in a face-to-face context, there is no place to hide and, because of that close proximity, people are more likely to withhold personal information. In a sense, it is too close for comfort because there is no emotional distance. Email, more so than face-to-face communication, can lead to the creation of potentially sexually harassing situations because of the combination of an increased perception that one has the ability to reveal more about one's personal opinions, habits, or life, and a decreased perception of the presence of social norms.

Another characteristic of email is the way in which it is distributed. There is an incorrect perception that emails are ephemeral. Emails appear and disappear quickly, leading users to believe that the messages sent have no impact. "The fleeting nature of these messages results in reduced commitment to what is communicated and a greater sense of freedom in expression and self-disclosure, even when the message is disseminated to a large audience. (Sipior & Ward, 1999, 90)". Along with the belief that emails disappear quickly, many users of e-mail may feel more able to express themselves informally because of a false sense that e-mail messages are private. This sense of privacy stems from several sources. First, e-mail accounts are often password protected, providing the user with a sense of confidentiality (Robertson & Unger, 1997; Sipior & Ward, 1995). Secondly, e-mail users may mistakenly believe that privacy protection afforded to U.S. mail is also afforded to e-mail messages. Third, users may not realize the ease with which e-mail messages can be intercepted (Sipior & Ward, 1995). Finally, users may not be fully cognizant of the fact that deleted messages do not disappear from the system, and instead can be recovered (even if the e-mail has been overwritten) (Sipior & Ward, 1999).

On the receiving end, an email message that is perceived to be harassing can have a more lasting impact than if the same message was communicated face-to-face. Because a face-to-face

comment is heard, then is encoded in our memory, we may assume that the harassing comment was a misunderstanding or perhaps it was misheard as we only have our memories on which we can rely. It is easier to brush off a face-to-face comment because we might attribute our reaction to a poor memory or poor recollection of the actual event. Putting things in writing, however, even if the message sender believes the email message to be ephemeral, allows the recipient to continually revisit the message, perhaps even to obsess over its meaning, which may lead to greater perceptions of the negativity and inappropriateness of the message.

Clearly the nature of email harassment versus face-to-face harassment lends itself to greater misunderstandings and misinterpretations due to the absence of social cues and social constraints. Based on this we hypothesize the following:

H1: Email harassment will be perceived more negatively than will be face-to-face harassment.

Gender and Sex Role Identity

Women, by and large, are more likely than are men to perceive a behavior as sexually harassing. Research has shown that this may be due to the fact that females tend to experience more sexually harassing situations and, therefore, are more able to recognize sexually harassing actions (Rotundo, Nguyen, & Sackett, 2001). Wayne, Riordan, and Thomas (2001) found that when a situation involved a harasser and a target of different sexes, females were more likely than males to find the situation sexually harassing. Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of gender (sex at birth, defined as male or female) differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. They found that the difference between female and male perceptions of sexually harassing situations was greater when the behaviors involved hostile work environment harassment, derogatory attitudes toward women, or dating pressure, than when the behaviors involved more clear cut examples of harassment (e.g., sexual propositions or

sexual coercion). This is particularly important in the context of e-mail sexual harassment as incidents involving hostile work environment, derogatory attitudes towards women, and dating pressures are more easily manifested in a virtual context.

What is less understood is the impact of sex role identity on one's perceptions of sexual harassment. Recent research has found that the degree to which an observer *identifies* with a sex role or gender explains more variance in perceptions of harassment than simply the gender of the observer. This may, in fact, be different from the sex to which they were born. For example a male could identify quite highly with female characteristics and vice versa for women.

According to Bem (1978), an individual who identifies as more feminine may exhibit sex role characteristics such as being affectionate, sympathetic, compassionate and tender, whereas a more masculine individual would exhibit characteristics such as independence, assertiveness, a strong personality, and dominance. Cameron (2001) found that the centrality of gender identification helped to predict perceptions of personal discrimination in both males and females. That is, Cameron found that respondents who tended to think about and define themselves in terms of their gender also tended to perceive themselves as being discriminated against as either men or women.

Wade and Brittan-Powell (2001) found that men who identified more strongly with the male gender were more likely to hold negative attitudes about racial diversity and women's equality and also were more likely to have attitudes conducive to sexual harassment of women. On the other hand, they also found that men who identified less with the male gender had more positive attitudes about racial diversity and women's equality and were less likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual harassment. Consistent with the findings of Rotundo et al. (2001), because e-mail harassment predominantly falls within the domain of hostile work environment

harassment, the salience of sex role identity will be as important to perceptions of harassment as is the gender of the observer. Based on these observations, we propose the following hypotheses:

- H2: Women are more likely than are men to perceive harassing behaviors as negative.
- H3: The more feminine the observer, regardless of gender, the more likely they will perceive harassing behaviors as negative.

Amount of Harassment

Hostile work environment harassment, as noted above, is challenging to identify. Because hostile work environment harassment depends largely on the perceptions of the victim, there is a wide and less predictable scope of activities that could potentially be harassing. There is also a high degree of ambiguity associated with hostile work environment harassment, therefore the more information that can be given about the aggressor's intent by increasing the severity of the harassment experience, the less the ambiguity and the greater the likelihood the harassment will be perceived as more negative. As such, we argue the following hypothesis:

- H4: As the amount of the sexually harassing behaviors increases, there is less ambiguity regarding the aggressor's motives and participants are more likely to perceive the behaviors as negative.

Interaction Effects

We also believe there will be a series of interaction effects among our independent variables. Because women perceive harassment as more severe than do men, we believe women and more feminine observers will be more bothered in the conditions with the highest amounts of harassment than would men and more masculine observers.

- H5: There will be a positive two-way interaction between amount of harassment and gender/sex role identity such that when the severity of the harassment increases, women and

more feminine observers will perceive those behaviors more negatively than will men and more masculine observers.

Further, because hostile working environment harassment can be ambiguous and open to interpretation, and lean communication media are inappropriate for addressing ambiguous situations (Daft & Lengel, 1986), we believe that email harassment will be perceived more negatively than would be face-to-face harassment when there are lesser amounts of harassing activities.

H6: There will be a negative two-way interaction between harassment medium and amount of harassment such that email harassment will be perceived more negatively than will be face-to-face harassment in conditions of less harassment.

Traditionally, men have made greater use of the Internet than have women (Dholakia, 2006). Although a recent study by Gefen and Straub (1997) has found there are no gender differences in email usage, according to Dholakia (2006) the perception still holds that men make greater use of the Internet than do women. Because of that level of usage, they are expected to be more familiar with the medium and thereby more comfortable using the medium. Greater comfort would logically be linked to greater tolerance for the ambiguities and lack of social cues associated with Internet communication.

Although men may use the Internet more often, how males and females use the Internet clearly differs. According to Hupfer and Detlor (2007), women have typically been associated with using the Internet for relationship building (e.g., contacting family members, associating with on-line communities) whereas men tend to use the Internet for information seeking and furthering self-interest. Gefen and Straub (1997) found that females view email as having a higher social presence than did males, in their study.

Hupfer and Detlor (2007) investigated the relationship between gender and usage further and found that self-orientation versus communal orientation was a better predictor of Internet use than was gender itself. Self-orientation is most greatly associated with a masculine sex role identity and communal orientation is most greatly associated with a feminine sex role identity. If someone with a communal orientation were to perceive harassment via the Internet it is likely they will perceive that to be more severe than face-to-face harassment because it is inconsistent with their use of the Internet. Therefore, we offer the following hypotheses:

H7: There will be a positive two-way interaction between harassment medium and gender/sex role identity such that women and more feminine observers are more likely than are men and more masculine observers to perceive harassing behaviors in an email context more negative than those behaviors in a face-to-face context.

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The data were collected via an on-line survey posted on Websurveyor® and the sampling pool was obtained through Zoomerang™ Sample. Invitations were extended to members of Zoomerang™ Sample who were 22 and older, working adults and who receive credits and rewards for participating in surveys through Zoomerang™. Zoomerang™ Sample has a worldwide total population of 2.5 million members from 5 countries, including the US, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and Australia. Demographics of the U.S. panel members approximately match those of the U.S. Census. The Zoomerang™ panel has 67% women (as compared to 51% in the total U.S. population) and average 35-44 years of age (the same for the U.S. population). We contracted to obtain 300 usable surveys, therefore Zoomerang™ sent out

1,680 invitations. Our sample was made up of 47% women, who were on average 44.97 years of age, leaving our sample more comparable to the gender makeup of the U.S., although lower than the panel demographics, but comparable in age to the U.S. and Zoomerang™ panel. This data leaves us confident that our sample adequately represents that of the U.S. working population.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study investigated the relationship between harassment form (email versus face-to-face) and amount of harassment (low, moderate, and high amounts) in a 2 x 3 design.

Participants were given access to the instrument on the Websurveyor® website that contained the scenario information we were manipulating, as well as an on-line survey. The first page contained a brief introduction to the study and an on-line consent form. If participants clicked on yes to consent to the study, they were given access to one of six scenarios to which they were randomly assigned based on the first initial of their last name. Adjustments were made to the random assignment during the data collection to ensure that cells had an even distribution of responses. Each scenario varied the harassment form and the level of harassment, as noted above (e.g., Email-Low harassment, Email-Moderate harassment, Email-High harassment, etc.). If participants clicked no, they were taken out of the survey site and thanked for their interest in the study.

Following the scenario page, participants were guided through a series of questions asking them about their perceptions of the scenarios, as well as a series of self-assessment and demographic variables. Once the last questions were answered, the participants were taken to a final page where they were thanked for their participation and then debriefed on the specific purpose of the study.

A total of 398 people responded to the survey invitation. Of those who responded, however, 26 refused to consent to participate once faced with the survey topic and were subsequently removed from the on-line survey. This left 372 individuals who consented to participate in the study. Although the cells were unbalanced in the study, SPSS was able to account for the unbalanced design by using Type III Sum of Squares, thereby precluding the need to make cells equal and treatments orthogonal.

Although this represents a 22.1% usable response rate (372/1680) based on the initial number of invitations distributed, this number does not represent the complete picture of the response rate. For financial reasons, we limited ourselves to a sample of approximately 300 usable responses. Based on Zoomerang's™ expertise, the invitations were randomly sent out to a subset of their panel members that was expected to yield the number of usable responses we desired. Once we achieved the desired contracted sample size, the agreement was that we would shut the survey down. Due to the unexpected speed with which data was collected, in less than 24 hours, our sample was slightly larger than the initial contracted amount (372 vs 300) because we didn't anticipate the response rate and couldn't shut it down as soon as intended. Regardless, the speed with which data was collected indicates that if we did not have financial constraints, the response rate would likely have been greater than 22.1%, although it is impossible to estimate what that response rate would have been.

MEASURES

Independent/Treatment Variables. The treatment variables (IV) included: Form of Harassment (face-to-face versus email; email = 1), Amount of Harassment (low, moderate, high), Gender (female = 1), and Sex Role Identity based on Bem's Sex Role Inventory. In the Bem's

Sex Role Inventory, scores on the standardized male scale score¹ are subtracted from the standardized female scale score², with lower numbers (or more negative numbers) indicating the participant adhered to more masculine sex role behaviors (low female – high male) and larger numbers indicating more feminine sex role behaviors (high female – low male). Numbers around the mean indicate androgynous (high female – high male score) or undifferentiated (low female – low male score) sex roles. For the purpose of this study, we did not address issues of those who are androgynous or undifferentiated, as outlined in the Bem measure, but only dealt with the range from more masculine to more feminine.

The scenarios were created by using an additive approach to the conditions included in the scenario to ensure each level of harassment would have more sexually harassing and less ambiguous amounts behaviors than the previous level. All harassment stayed within the realm of what one would consider “hostile working environment” harassment to highlight the potential ambiguity and variance in interpretations of the harassing behaviors. The defendant was a male and the plaintiff was a female. The defendant (male) was the plaintiff’s (female’s) boss. The respondents were also told that the two parties had always had a friendly working relationship and they worked down the hall from each other. At the first level, participants were told the defendant told the plaintiff “she looked nice today” in both email and face to face contexts. At the second, moderate level, participants were told the defendant complimented the plaintiff, as in the first level and also said “she looked as ‘hot’” as a picture of a naked woman. Again this was done in both an email and a face to face context. Lastly, in the third, highest level, they were

¹ Masculinity scale includes the sum of scores on the following dimensions: Defend my own beliefs, Independent, Assertive, Strong personality, Forceful, Have leadership abilities, Willing to take risks, Dominant, Willing to take a stand, and Aggressive. The raw score is then standardized and used to calculate the Sex Role scale score.

² Femininity scale includes the sum of scores on the following dimensions: Affectionate, Sympathetic, Sensitive to needs of others, Understanding, Compassionate, Eager to soothe hurt feelings, Warm, Tender, Love children, and Gentle. The raw score is then standardized and used to calculate the Sex Role scale score.

told the defendant complimented the plaintiff, told her she'd look 'hot' naked and also propositioned her to have a "horizontal good time with him", again, in both an email and a face to face context. In the last scenario the request for a "horizontal good time" was not associated with any condition of employment to keep it out of the realm of quid pro quo harassment.

[Insert Figure 1 About Here]

Dependent Variable. The Dependent Variable (DV) was borrowed from Wayne, Riordan & Thomas (2001), and measured Perceptions of Sexually Harassing Behaviors which was a 3 item scale. The scale averaged participant's perceptions of the appropriateness, seriousness and offensiveness of the scenario to which they were randomly assigned, on a 1-6 Likert-type scale. The higher the score, the more negative the perceptions of the harassing behaviors.

Control Variables. We chose several Control Variables (CVs) based on evidence from previous research and further refined the list based on correlations in our study. Given that we collected our data on-line, it also required us to control for on-line sampling effects. We felt age was important because clearly there are generational differences in perceptions about what is and isn't appropriate in the workplace. Further, younger respondents would be more comfortable with the Internet, as a rule, than would be older respondents. We also felt the extent to which someone had full time work experience would impact perceptions of what is acceptable in the workplace. If someone was harassed or was ever accused of harassing another, that would also affect perceptions of what is considered sexually harassing. We also wanted to control for an individual's comfort level with the Internet as that may impact their perceptions of the harassment that occurred in the email context. Further, because we collected data on the

Internet, it was important to control for their level of comfort as that might affect their reasons for responding to the survey in the first place. Additionally, the more hours someone spent on the Internet per week one would also assume the greater the comfort they felt in using the Internet and email for communication. Finally, controlling for number of hours spent on the Internet could also control for the sampling bias of using an on-line survey. Based on this information and the subsequent correlations, the CVs we used included: Age, Years of Full Time Work Experience, indication if participants were Ever Harassed (yes = 1), indication if participants were Ever Accused of Harassment (yes = 1), Amount of Hours spent on the Internet per week, and degree of Comfort with the Internet (1-7 Likert-type scale, 7 = extremely comfortable).

RESULTS

A manipulation check was done on the perceptions of the scenarios, and it was discovered that the middle and highest amounts of harassment were not perceived differently based on the DV harassment perceptions. Therefore, the second and third levels were collapsed into one category making the variable a dichotomous categorical variable indicating one of two amounts of harassment, and coded “0” indicating the scenario where the plaintiff was complimented on how she was dressed, and “1” indicating the compliment PLUS additional harassing behaviors.

The descriptive statistics for this study are located in Table 1. Amount of Harassment has statistically significant correlations with the DV Harassment Perceptions ($r=.86$, $p<.01$), Age ($r=-.11$, $p<.05$), and FT Work ($r=-.10$, $p<.05$). Age ($r=-.19$, $p<.01$), FT Work ($r=-.17$, $p<.01$) and Harassment Perceptions ($r= .16$, $p<.01$) were also significant with Harassment Form. The last

significant correlations of note included those significant correlations with gender: Sex Role Identity ($r=.14$, $p<.01$), Age ($r=-.18$, $p<.01$), FT Work ($r=-.21$, $p<.01$), Were Respondents Ever Harassed ($r=.24$, $p<.01$), Were Respondents Ever Accused of Harassment ($r=-.17$, $p<.01$), and Respondent Comfort with the Internet ($r=-.11$, $p<.05$). Even though Hours on the Internet was only correlated with Age ($r=.17$, $p<.01$) and FT Work ($r=.14$, $p<.01$), we kept that variable in the analysis in the hopes that we could control for any selection bias associated with doing an on-line survey in the first place. Based on these results, we developed our list of CVs. The scale reliability using Cohen's Alpha for our DV, Harassment Perceptions, was very strong at $\alpha=.94$.

[Insert Table 1 About Here]

Our regression results are shown in Table 2. In all cases we used hierarchical regression, loading the CVs on the first step, then the IV main effects on the second step, followed by the interaction effects on the third step. We did find multi-collinearity among some of the treatments and interaction terms so in order to handle that we centered the treatments, as well as gender and sex role identity variables (as recommended by Aiken & West, 1991) and this problem was eliminated.

The first set of analyses were done using Gender as an IV and the second set of analyses removed Gender and replaced it with Sex Role Identity. Our first hypothesis (H1) predicted that Email Harassment would be perceived more negatively than would Face to Face Harassment. Regression results showed that Harassment Form was statistically significant regardless of whether Gender or Sex Role Identity were used as an IV (in both cases: $\beta = .12$, $p < .001$). As the interaction effects were added, Harassment Form still remained significant in both equations however the coefficients differed slightly depending on whether it was with Gender ($\beta = .22$, $p < .01$) or Sex Role Identity ($\beta = .11$, $p < .001$), thereby strongly supporting H1.

[Insert Table 2 About Here]

[Insert Table 3 About Here]

In H2, we predicted that women would perceive harassment more negatively than would men. Additionally, in H3 we also predicted that more feminine respondents would perceive harassment more negatively than would more masculine respondents. In both cases these main effects were not found during the second step of the analysis, as Gender had a $\beta = .02$, $p = .58$, and Sex Role Identity had a $\beta = .01$, $p = .75$, respectively. However, once the interaction effects were added for the analyses done with Gender, we found, contrary to previous research findings, that men were more sensitive to our harassment scenarios than were women and perceived the scenarios as more harassing ($\beta = -.29$, $p < .001$). This was not found, however, with Sex Role Identity as the coefficient remained small and insignificant even when the interactions were added ($\beta = .03$). Therefore, both H2 and H3 were not supported.

Hypothesis 4 posited that perceptions of harassment would increase in negativity as the Amount of Harassment increased. H4 was supported with both Gender and Sex Role Identity as IVs, as Amount of Harassment had, in both cases, a $\beta = 0.86$, $p < .001$, and remained strong and significant even when the interaction effects were added ($\beta = .84$, $p < .001$ and $\beta = .86$, $p < .001$ respectively).

Hypothesis 5 posited that there would be a two-way interaction between Amount of Harassment and Gender/Sex Role Identity. This hypothesis was partially supported. As you can see from the regression results, Gender had a significant effect on the amount of harassment ($\beta = .34$, $p < .001$), with women perceiving the higher amounts of harassment as more severe than did men. In testing for Sex Role Identity effects interacting with Amount of Harassment, however, we found no support for our hypothesis.

Hypothesis 6 argued there would be a two-way interaction such that email harassment would be perceived as more severe under conditions of lower amounts of ambiguous harassing behaviors than under conditions with higher amounts of harassment. H6 was supported such that at Low Amounts of Harassment, Email harassment was found to be more negative than was Face-to-Face harassment with both Gender ($\beta = -0.33$, $p < .001$) and Sex Role Identity ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < .001$). There was no support for H7, positing a two-way interaction between Gender/Sex Role Identity and harassment form.

DISCUSSION

Although Gender does not appear to have as significant an impact within our sample on perceptions of harassment as did the treatment variables (Amount of Harassment and Harassment Form), overall results for this study were much stronger when Gender was included versus Sex Role Identity. While at first blush, it may appear problematic that Gender had no main effect in the second step of the regression, it did show up later, albeit in the opposite direction than intended, and also with the interaction effect as predicted with Amount of Harassment. One interpretation may be that men in our sample have become more enlightened such that there is no initial Gender effect on the overall perceptions of harassment. Men and women may both be clear about what constitutes harassment. This lends us confidence that training and awareness efforts within organizations may actually be having the intended effect on how people perceive potentially harassing behaviors. The fact, however, that women have a stronger aversion to harassment at the more ambiguous and lesser amounts of harassment still indicates we have a long way to go to educate people on the grey areas of what constitutes harassment.

Another explanation for the lack of initial significant effect, as well as the shift in direction and significance of the Gender main effect in step three of the analysis, is that

suppression may have occurred and by including the interaction effects, we have a clearer view of the impact that Gender has on Perceptions of Harassment. This does not nullify our interpretation that perhaps men may be more enlightened and educated as to what constitutes harassment, but it does explain why that effect may not have shown up in the second step of the analyses.

As for the impact of Sex Role Identity, by and large the results were weaker than those analyses that included Gender. It appears that Sex Role Identity may not add much to this study as we conceptualized it. It may be that Gender plays a larger role than does Sex Role Identity because even masculine identified females, or those who may be high on both dimensions (i.e., Androgynous), may still experience harassment “because of their sex.” Therefore, perceptions may not be impacted by sex role identification but simply by virtue of the fact one is female and more likely than are men to experience harassment in the workplace. In a post-hoc analysis, we interacted both Gender and Sex Role Identity and found insignificant results.

Clearly, however, no matter whether Gender or Sex Role Identity were included in the analyses, both Harassment Form and Amount of Harassment behaved in the posited manner based on theory and past research. Even though more harassment was interpreted as more severe in aggregate than a simple compliment, as would be expected, when less information was available and it was more ambiguous, the email form inflated respondent’s reactions to the harassment consistently. Lower amounts of ambiguous harassing activities lend themselves to misinterpretation when it is communicated in a lean communication media. Without the appropriate social cues, and richness of information, the threshold for what is considered harassing is clearly lowered when communicated in email format.

These findings have clear implications for sexual harassment awareness training and for lawyers as they prepare juries and clients for legal proceedings. Even though a behavior may not be construed as harassing in a face to face context, email context changes the nature and interpretation of those behaviors and it changes how we think of the range of behaviors that are harassing. We may attribute the behaviors as more harassing simply because we lack many pieces of information that would give us clarity of interpretation. A compliment in an email context may seem like stalking (why not say it face to face?) whereas the same compliment in a face to face context, in passing, is construed as harmless. This broadens the scope of events that may be construed as harassing in the workplace.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has several strengths and limitations. First, it extends our understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, contributing to this growing body of research. Through understanding the impact of email on perceptions of harassment as well as the role of gender, we are building a richer understanding of the universe of variables that may impact the occurrence, as well the perception, of sexual harassment.

Second, it is an important combination of the communication, information technology, and sexual harassment literatures. As the use of technologies increases in organizations, we face new challenges in how to best manage our workforce and legally protect the organization and its employees. The increased use of email complicates how we have traditionally viewed sexual harassment. Understanding exactly how email impacts our perceptions of sexual harassment enables organizations to take the appropriate steps to make employees aware of this as a problem through awareness training programs.

Third, we also used an on-line survey and data source to efficiently present and collect our data from respondents. In attempting to take advantage of the rich world of technology, we have found an efficient manner for data collection, which opens the door to many more potential respondents that would otherwise be unreachable using traditional survey methods. There is a growing trend of researchers who are using Internet-based panels and on-line surveys to gather data. While traditionally market researchers have tapped into this resource, more mainstream academic researchers have used this source as well, including those in the field of management and human resource management (e.g., Judge, Ilies & Scott, 2006; Piccolo & Colquitt, In Press; Wallace & Vodanovich, In Press). Further, we believe the sample to be representative of the general working population, lending strength to our study. Admittedly, since we were studying email harassment, this may have biased our results; however, we did include Comfort with the Internet as well as Hours on the Internet as CVs, hopefully controlling for any bias that may be inherent in collecting the data on-line and may have an impact on the perceptions of the scenarios.

An additional challenge includes the potential for common method variance by having respondents answer all questions in one sitting. Our research design and financial limitations constrained us to collecting the data during one session on the Internet. Our findings, however, do not support a substantive claim of common method variance for explaining our results, and we are confident in our findings.

Future research should further investigate those variables that may interact with the email context to impact perceptions of harassment. For example, moving beyond gender and sex role identity, one could investigate issues of race, social dominance orientation or technophobia to see if these issues interact with and exacerbate the perceived negativity of harassment.

Additionally, it would be interesting to see the impact of these findings on a juror's verdict as this has direct implications for organizational liability. Lastly, it is important to investigate the nuances of email and technological communication to more specifically identify which aspect of email communication has the greatest impact on harassment perceptions.

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Figure 1
Experimental Scenarios

Case background:

Ms. Smith, a 30 year old white female, worked for Mr. Doe, a 30 year old white male, in the office of a large, nationwide company for two years before this incident occurred. While they had worked closely with one another over this time, they had never become friends, but had a good working relationship. In order to perform their jobs effectively, Ms. Smith and Mr. Doe must interact on a regular basis. In the office, their desks were located down the hall from each other. Neither individual worked in an enclosed office.

Face to Face

Scenario 1: Over the last two months, when Ms. Smith came by his office, Mr. Doe has made comments to Ms. Smith regarding her appearance. During one such instance, Mr. Doe stated, “You look nice in the jacket you were wearing today”. Ms. Smith has not felt uncomfortable during these interactions.

Scenario 2: Over the last two months, when Ms. Smith came by his office, Mr. Doe has made comments to Ms. Smith regarding her appearance. During one such instance, Mr. Doe stated, “You look nice in the jacket you are wearing today. But I bet you look as hot as this woman does without your clothes on!” Mr. Doe was pointing to a picture of a naked woman from the Playboy website. Ms. Smith felt uncomfortable with this interaction and confronted Mr. Doe about his behavior. Ms. Smith also contacted Mr. Doe's supervisor, Mr. Baker, regarding Mr. Doe's behaviors. After being made aware of the situation, Mr. Baker also confronted Mr. Doe and asked him to cease his behavior. As Mr. Doe did not comply with multiple requests to cease referring to pictures of naked women in the workplace, Ms. Smith has filed a complaint in federal court alleging sexual harassment.

Scenario 3: Over the last two months, when Ms. Smith came by his office, Mr. Doe has made comments to Ms. Smith regarding her appearance. During one such instance, Mr. Doe stated, “You look nice in the jacket you are wearing today. But I bet you look as hot as this woman does without your clothes on!” Mr. Doe was pointing to a picture of a naked woman from the Playboy website. He went on to say, “Do you want to have a horizontal good time with me?” Ms. Smith felt uncomfortable with this interaction and confronted Mr. Doe about his behavior. Ms. Smith also contacted Mr. Doe's supervisor, Mr. Baker, regarding Mr. Doe's behaviors. After being made aware of the situation, Mr. Baker also confronted Mr. Doe and asked him to cease his behavior. As Mr. Doe did not comply with multiple requests to cease referring to pictures of naked women in the workplace and propositioning Ms. Smith, Ms. Smith has filed a complaint in federal court alleging sexual harassment.

Email Harassment

Scenario 1: Over the last two months, Mr. Doe has sent emails to Ms. Smith commenting on her appearance. In one email, Mr. Doe stated, “You looked nice in the jacket you were wearing today.” Ms. Smith has not felt uncomfortable receiving these emails.

Scenario 2: Over the last two months, Mr. Doe has sent emails to Ms. Smith commenting on her appearance. In one email, Mr. Doe stated, “You looked nice in the jacket you were wearing today. But I bet you look as hot as this woman does without your clothes on”! In the email was a picture of a naked woman from the Playboy website. Ms. Smith felt uncomfortable receiving this email and confronted Mr. Doe about his behavior. Ms. Smith also contacted Mr. Doe's supervisor, Mr. Baker, regarding Mr. Doe's behaviors. After being made aware of the situation, Mr. Baker also confronted Mr. Doe and asked him to cease his behavior. As Mr. Doe did not comply with multiple requests to cease sending emails containing pictures of naked women, Ms. Smith has filed a complaint in federal court alleging sexual harassment.

Scenario 3: Over the last two months, Mr. Doe has sent emails to Ms. Smith commenting on her appearance. In one email, Mr. Doe stated, “You looked nice in the jacket you were wearing today. But I bet you look as hot as this woman does without your clothes on! Do you want to have a HGTWM (horizontal good time with me)”? In the email was a picture of a naked woman from the Playboy website. Ms. Smith felt uncomfortable receiving this email and confronted Mr. Doe about his behavior. Ms. Smith also contacted Mr. Doe's supervisor, Mr. Baker, regarding Mr. Doe's behaviors. After being made aware of the situation, Mr. Baker also confronted Mr. Doe and asked him to cease his behavior. As Mr. Doe did not comply with multiple requests to cease sending emails containing pictures of naked women and propositioning Ms. Smith, Ms. Smith has filed a complaint in federal court alleging sexual harassment.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	Mean	STD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Amt of Harassment (1=more harass.)	0.58	0.49	-				
2 Harassment Form (1=email)	0.50	0.50	0.06	-			
3 Harassment Perceptions ^a	3.97	1.90	0.86 **	0.16 **	(0.94)		
4 Gender (1=female)	0.48	0.50	0.03	0.02	0.03	-	
5 Sex Role Identity ^b	-2.46	15.09	-0.08	0.04	-0.06	0.14 **	-
6 Age	45.02	12.20	-0.11 *	-0.19 **	-0.11	-0.18 **	-0.08
7 Full Time Work	24.06	12.08	-0.10 *	-0.17 **	-0.06	-0.21 **	-0.12 *
8 Ever Harassed	0.24	0.42	0.01	-0.02	0.01	0.24 **	-0.05
9 Ever Accused of Harassment	0.04	0.20	0.02	0.00	0.05	-0.15 **	-0.08
10 Internet Comfort	6.46	1.27	-0.02	0.04	-0.01	-0.11 *	-0.07
11 Hours on the Internet	23.11	14.71	-0.01	0.04	0.01	-0.02	0.07

^aScale Reliability for Harassment Perceptions is on the diagonal, bolded and in parentheses.

^bThe Sex Role Identity T-Score ranged from -66 to +38. The lower the number the more masculine the behaviors.

* p<.05, ** p<.01

Table 1 (continued)
Descriptive Statistics

VARIABLES	6	7	8	9	10
1 Amt of Harassment (1=more harass.)					
2 Harassment Form (1=email)					
3 Harassment Perceptions ^a					
4 Gender (1=female)					
5 Sex Role Identity ^b					
6 Age	-				
7 Full Time Work	0.87 **	-			
8 Ever Harassed	-0.03	0.03	-		
9 Ever Accused of Harassment	0.13 *	0.14 **	0.07	-	
10 Internet Comfort	-0.04	0.00	-0.03	0.04	-
11 Hours on the Internet	0.17 **	0.14 **	0.03	-0.01	0.11 *

^aScale Reliability for Harassment Perceptions is on the diagonal, bolded and in parentheses.

^bThe Sex Role Identity T-Score ranged from -66 to +38. The lower the number the more masculine the behaviors.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Table 2
 Regression Analyses
 DV = Harassment Perceptions
 Gender

	1	2	3
Control Variables			
Age	-0.14	-0.04	-0.04
FT Work	0.05	0.09	0.06
Ever Harassed? (1=yes)	0.00	0.00	0.02
Ever Accused of Harassment? (1=yes)	0.06	0.02	0.01
Internet Comfort (7=extremely comfortable)	-0.02	0.00	0.00
Internet Hours	0.02	0.00	0.00
Independent Variables			
Harassment Form (1=email)		0.12 ***	0.22 **
Gender		0.02	-0.29 ***
Amount of Harassment (1=more harassment)		0.86 ***	0.84 ***
Form X Gender			0.14
Form X Amount of Harassment			-0.33 ***
Gender X Amount of Harassment			0.34 ***
Adjusted R ²	0.00	0.76 ***	0.77 ***

^aThe Sex Role Identity T-Score ranged from -66 to +38. The lower the number the more masculine the behaviors.

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 3
 Regression Analyses
 DV = Harassment Perceptions
 Sex Role Identity

	1	2	3
Control Variables			
Age	-0.14	-0.04	-0.03
FT Work	0.05	0.09	0.06
Ever Harassed? (1=yes)	0.00	0.01	0.03
Ever Accused of Harassment? (1=yes)	0.06	0.02	0.00
Internet Comfort (7=extremely comfortable)	-0.02	0.00	0.00
Internet Hours	0.02	0.00	0.00
Independent Variables			
Harassment Form		0.12 ***	0.11 ***
Sex Role Identity ^a		0.01	0.03
Amount of Harassment (1 = more harassment)		0.86 ***	0.86 ***
Form X Sex Role			-0.03
Form X Amount of Harassment			-0.16 ***
Sex Role X Amount of Harassment			0.05
Adjusted R²	0.00	0.76 ***	0.78 ***

^aThe Sex Role Identity T-Score ranged from -66 to +38. The lower the number the more masculine the behaviors.

* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001