Understanding Iranian women's response to sexual harassment by customers: A directed content analysis based on the Theory of Planned Behavior

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Abstract

Introduction: Protecting the female workforce from sexual harassment is a legal duty for employees in most countries, nevertheless it is a common phenomenon. The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate how and why Iranian women working in retail sales responded when confronted by sexual harassment by customers.

Methods: The setting for this qualitative study was Shiraz, Iran, in 2020. Purposeful and snowball sampling was used to recruit 16 women with at least 12 months experience in clothing sales and experience of customer-based sexual harassment. The Theory of Planned Behavior was used as a conceptual theoretical framework for the semi-structured in-depth interview guide and directed content analysis of the data.

Results: All participants generally stayed silent, did not retaliate and did not report events of sexual harassment. Motivations to comply with employer expectations, threats of getting fired, negative judgments from important others, a lack of social support, and a fear of retaliation from the harasser were negative personal consequences which decreased their perceived power to respond.

Conclusion and policy implications: The Theory of Planned Behavior provided a good framework to explain saleswomen's responses to sexual harassment from customers. Silence and inaction were the norm because of perceived potentials for further personal harm, in common with other studies. Our findings indicate a need for educational interventions that can develop assertiveness skills to empower female employees to eliminate acceptance of customer-based sexual harassment as part of the job, as well as call upon the protection they should have from labor laws.

Keywords: Qualitative research, Sexual harassment, Theory of Planned Behavior, Women's health, Workplace

Introduction

Sexual harassment at work is a common phenomenon across the globe (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Quick & McFadyen, 2017; Yie & Ping, 2021), including in the Islamic Republic of Iran (Kahsay et al., 2020; Zeighami et al., 2023). It is predominantly a women's issue, and substantial investigations indicate that about half of working women have experienced some form of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Whaley & Tucker, 1998). Theories and models of workplace sexual harassment implicate status inequalities and asymmetric power relations between men and women, as well as pervasive discriminatory social norms that feed into organizational tolerance of sexual harassment (McDonald, 2012; Willness et al., 2007). Despite many campaigns to highlight the problem, and various national laws drafted to protect employees against sexual harassment (Berthet, 2021; Yasmin, 2021) cases of sexual harassment at work continue to be reported (Anierobi et al., 2022; Kahsay et al., 2020; Zeighami et al., 2023).

Sexual harassment for female employees has a long history, and although the term and legal recognition have only emerged in the 1970s (Bacchi and Jose, 1994), the poor reporting of sexual harassment across the globe, has only been seriously questioned in the academic literature since the #MeToo social movement against sexual harassment went viral in 2017 (Foster & Fullagar, 2018; Launer, 2018; Russell et al., 2021). Russell et al. (2021) asserted that only 5% of women formally report gender discrimination and sexual harassment, which they attributed to consequential negative consequences related to a personal impact on their career and their reputation. Interestingly, in their qualitative investigation, Russell et al. (2021) of the situation for female medics, service users – patients – were recognized as a focal part of a medics work and a source of sexual harassment, as well as colleagues. Russell et al. argued that power dynamics in some patient-care interactions influenced the type of behavioral response to sexual harassment. Specifically, junior medics in training felt disempowered and they were reluctant to speak out to avoid damage to their reputation, and harm to their career. They suggested that sexual harassment is a significant cultural issue in medicine, and cultural change takes time.

Workplace sexual harassment in Iran has to be considered against the religious-cultural background of Islam. The cultural, religious and legal framework in Iran is that any form of sexual harassment and abuse that violates the dignity and rights of an individual is condemned. In his writings the Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of respecting and protecting the honor and dignity of every person, whether male or female. Critically, all types of

harassment and abuse are considered sins and unethical behavior in Islamic teachings and the penalites for sexual harassment are severe, including public flogging. The Islamic Labour Code (ILC online) explicitly draws on the Quran to state that workers are entitled to work that is free of sexual harassment, and that employers should take steps to ensure that their employees are not subject to sexual harassment. The latter point clearly expects an employer to protect their staff against sexual harassment from customers. Further, Islam explicitly promotes modesty in dress and behavior as well as emphasizing the importance of consent in all forms of interaction, including sexual activity. The Quran teaches men and women to lower their gaze, preserve their modesty, and any physical or verbal progress without consent is forbidden in Islam (Ali, 2011). Nevertheless, sexual harassment is a persistent workplace problem in Iran, even if the true prevalence is difficult to verify (Zeighami et al., 2023). Despite the protection afforded by the Islamic Labour Code, incidents of sexual harassment in Iranian nurses have gone unreported because the religious cultural setting has caused discussion of sexual matters to be taboo (Zeighami et al., 2023). Healthcare is not the only context for sexual harassment. There is evidence of sexual harassment of female students by male lecturers on academic campuses in Iran, yet it goes unreported despite negative consequences for almost all students (Rostami, 2021). There is also a significant amount of evidence of sexual harassment from service users, or customers, in other service sectors (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2016).

Sexual harassment is a behavior that violates one's dignity and causes distress (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). The behaviors involved range from verbal approaches, inappropriate and unwanted sexual remarks that are degrading or humiliating, through to unpleasant physical conduct that can include touching, holding, grabbing, groping, and these may ultimately escalate to sexual coercion, and sexual assault, including rape (Espelage et al., 2016). It may also include exposure and showing pornographic material (McVey et al., 2021). Legally, sexual harassment depends upon the sexual attention bestowed on an individual being unwelcome, unwanted and unreciprocated (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). The experience of sexual harassment at work may also include subtle coercion through job-related pressures both positive or negative (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018). Challenges of identifying the extent of sexual harassment at work involve sociocultural understandings of acceptable and unacceptable interpersonal behaviors, and the presence or absence of overt organizational policies to protecting the female workforce. Without overt organizational support, employees in the service sector have reported that unwanted sexual advances from customers are seen as an inevitable fact of life at work (Good & Cooper, 2014).

A significant amount of work undertaken by women is in service industries where interacting with customers outside the organization as a core part of the job role. Investigations of workplace sexual harassment have largely focused on determining causes and consequences with a focus on the behaviors of employers and employees where the perpetrator is a member of the workforce. This is important, but it is also evident that more attention should be directed to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment because it is a common phenomenon (Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2014). The customer has a vital place in the functioning and success of businesses in the retail sector in particular, and there exists a tension for sales assistants who are expected to show respect and deference alongside trying to manage interactions to maximize the potential for a sale (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). When this power imbalance is known to both parties it can lead to harassment and abuse of sales employees because of their situational lower status (Korczynski & Evans, 2013). Forced acceptance or rejection of this behavior, directly and indirectly, affects the sales assistant's job and job performance, creating a frightening and unhealthy work environment (Campbell & Chinnery, 2018).

The power of customers is an important component in the examination of how lower status, low-paid sales assistants respond to sexual harassment and why the issue stubbornly persists. If sexual harassment from customers is going to be effectively tackled, then it is first important to understand how employees in the retail sales sector generally respond when they are confronted by unwanted sexual harassment. There is evidence that most employees in the service sector do not report sexual harassment to their employers, or make a formal complaint (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Good & Cooper, 2014) which also raises questions of why this is so. Good reasons for tackling the problem of sexual harassment by customers are provided in the international literature (Fitzgerald & Cortina, 2018; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Good & Cooper, 2014), nevertheless, sexual harassment by customers has not been studied at all in the context of Iranian society.

A primary investigation of the way women respond to unwanted sexual attention from customers is required to provide direction for theory-based intervention to ameliorate this significant public health problem. There are general theoretical frameworks that involve beliefs, social norms, personal control, self-efficacy, and motivation to explain behaviors that can be used to focus a study examining this phenomenon. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 2020) can be viewed as a suitable framework for a qualitative investigation of employees' experiential reactions to customer sexual harassment. The TPB uses an

expectancy-value framework, and takes account of outcomes expected if one performs a particular behavior alongside the value placed on those outcomes. The TBP has been the dominant theory used studies to predict health-related behaviors for over 30 years, and whilst it has been criticized, this is largely because in it not comprehensive in its predictive abilities (e.g. Sniehotta et al., 2014). Much of the criticism, however, has been refuted in various studies by Azjen and colleagues, and pertinent to this study, the TPB remains a clearly specified structural framework for considering the determinants of a behavior (Azjen, 2020). This is relevant for understanding how and why women respond to sexual harassment, which is a pre-requisite to effective intervention. As illustrated in Figure 1, key constructs of the TPB are attitudes to sexual harassment – which are dependent on outcome expectancies and values; subjective norms – which emerge from one's normative beliefs and motivations to comply; and perceived behavioral control – which is derived from one's control beliefs and perceived power. The TPB contends that attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control are the determinants of behavioral intentions, which in turn, lead to engaging in a volitional behavior.

Figure 1. Simple representation of the Theory of Planned Behavior
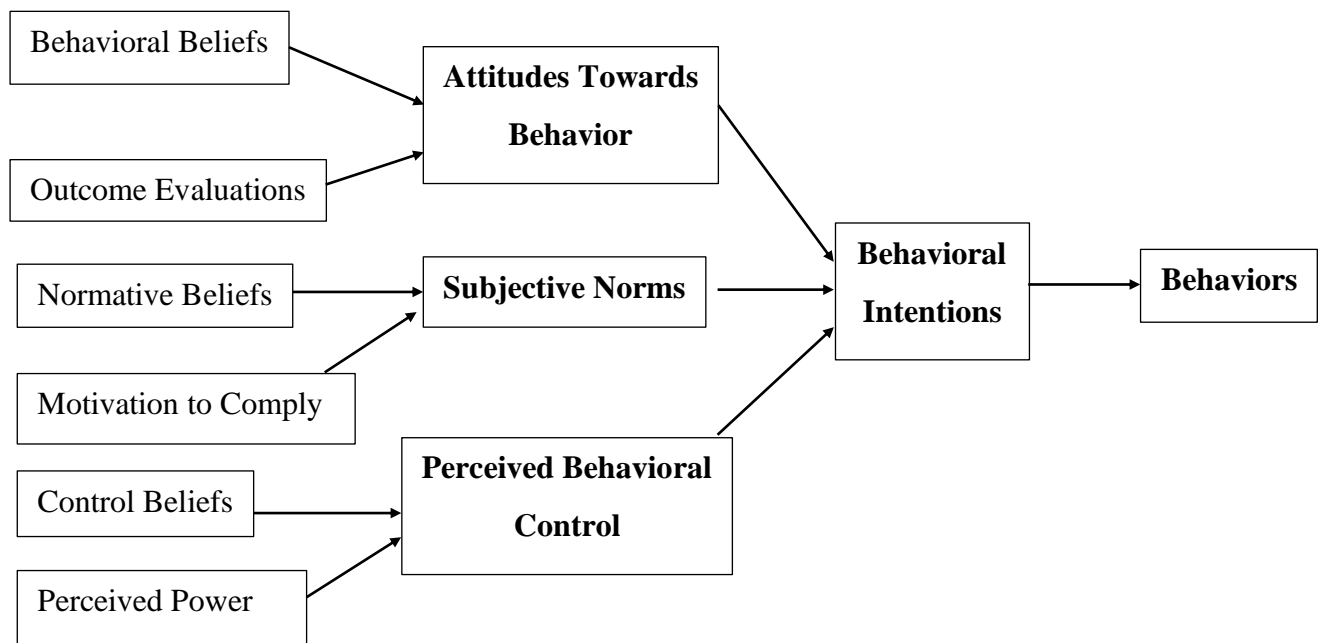
The aim of this qualitative study was to investigate *how* retail saleswomen respond to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment and *why,* using a directed content analysis methodology, guided by the five TPB constructs as a framework. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to broach this research question, and to examine the situation for women working in retail sales units, using a sample working in Iran. Qualitative research provides a range of interview and analysis methodologies that must be considered. The ability to use the well-established Theory of Planned Behavior to explore and understand behavior associated customer-perpetrated sexual harassment indicated directed content analysis, which uses a deductive response, as the most appropriate approach to use.

Methods

Design and Participants

This research was planned and conducted in 2020. The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (IR.SUMS.REC.1398.1366). The researchers followed the 16-step directed content analysis approach of Assarroudi et al. (2018) with the TPB as the theoretical framework to understand women's experience of customer-perpetrated sexual harassment.

Purposeful and snowball sampling was used to recruit sales assistants in small to medium-sized independent clothing stores in Shiraz, Iran. In these stores, the employer and one or two young women employed on short-term contracts as sales assistants work together. The contracts may be renewed, but not necessarily. The tasks of the sales assistants included attracting customers, advertising and promoting the clothes on sale towards making transactions. In such circumstances, exploitation of labor and some misbehavior such as sexual harassment may occur. Thus, this population was recognized as very suitable to investigate women's response to sexual harassment from customers. This can be a hard-to-reach group however, due to concerns about speaking out about any aspect of working conditions because of their short-term aspect of their employment, and social stigma. To achieve a suitable and sufficient sample the study was advertised locally, with direct leaflet drop in the stores as well as a relevant online information page. All adverts included contact email details of the lead researcher for expressions of interest. Respondents were emailed full information of the study, which reiterated the inclusion criteria: at least 12 months working full-time as a clothing sales

assistant, and experience of customer-based sexual harassment at work. Potential participants who remained interested, and were willing to provide informed consent, were invited to book a confidential interview at their convenience, which was arranged by email. The initial participants were encouraged to support the study with further recruitment of any colleagues known to meet the inclusion criteria. Recruitment continued alongside analysis until data saturation was achieved (Ando et al., 2014).

Data collection

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their information in the manuscript, all previous drafts, and that their voice recordings of the interviews would be deleted after the transcription process and member checking was completed.

A semi-structured interview guide based on the literature and the five constructs of the TBP was developed to examine responses to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment (Assaroudi et al., 2018). All questions were open-ended. Examples are: "How do you react to sexually harassing behaviors?" "Why is this so?" "What factors affect your reactions?" "Do you have any control over these factors?" "How do the expectations of important other's affect your reaction to sexual harassment?" "In what ways do important others support you?" "How important is it for you to follow the expectations and wishes of your important others?" Further probing questions such as "Can you explain … some more?" and "What does that mean?" were used after each question to encourage an in-depth response that included examples where possible (Olson, 2016). The guide was used, as well as iterative questioning to steer in-depth semi-structured interviews with participants at a private place and time of their convenience (generally the beginning or end of their business hours). The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded, with some discreet field notes made regarding body language. The voice recordings were then transcribed and analyses according to the manifest and latent content (Assarroudi et al., 2018).

Data analysis

The interviews transcripts were read several times to become fully immersed in the data and obtain the intended meaning (Assarroudi et al., 2018). A formative template deductively derived from the components of the TBP was developed (see Figure 1), which also allowed for new categories and themes that arose from the subsequent inductive coding of meaning units in the data to emerge. This method allowed data collection and analysis to be undertaken

simultaneously. In the first instance, after reading thoroughly, the text each transcript was divided into small meaning units. The meaning units were then summarized, and then selectively grouped into more compact codes whilst preserving their original meaning. Then, subcategories, generic categories and main categories were created by further grouping guided by a comparison of related codes in terms of their meanings, differences and similarities. Ultimately the purpose of this process was to develop main categories, or themes, that had a logical and conceptual connection to the predetermined classification of the TPB (intention, attitude towards behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavior control). When 16 interviews had been conducted, transcribed and analyzed the researchers were assured of saturation of themes and categories.

Data trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis processes was assessed through referring to the preparation, organization and reporting of this qualitative study (Assarroudi et al., 2019; Elo et al., 2014). The research team were qualified and experienced in this methodology, and the researcher's prolonged engagement in the field and member checking of the first few transcripts ensured that the analysis faithfully reported the participant's perceptions. That is, the first five women interviewed were asked to review the transcriptions of their statements for accuracy. All confirmed they were an accurate representation. Dependability was evaluated through external check, conformability was determined via peer check, and transferability was assessed by describing the study weaknesses and triangulation to reduce the effect of any investigator bias (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). The researcher was not an insider researcher, other than being female, nonetheless, every effort was made to bracket any suppositions (Gearing, 2004). Regarding reporting: The interviews were conducted in Persian. For the purpose of this paper, the selected quotes provided in the results section were translated from the verbatim transcripts into English with some acculturalization to ensure appropriate meaning is conveyed.

Results

The demographic details of the 16 participants are shown in Table 1. Their mean age was 27.44 years, and they had an average of seven years' experience of working in a customer-facing sales job. Most were educated to high school diploma level, and single.

Table 1. Participant's demographics

No.	Age (years)	Education	Marital status	Work experience (years)
1	44	Higher education degree	Married	10
2	35	High school diploma	Single	11
3	36	High school diploma	Married	9
4	31	High school diploma	Single	6
5	32	High school diploma	Single	6
6	23	High school diploma	Single	6
7	32	Higher education degree	Single	10
8	25	High school diploma	Married	4
9	23	High school diploma	Single	5
10	23	Under high school	Single	3
11	25	Higher education degree	Single	10
12	29	High school diploma	Single	7
13	29	High school diploma	Single	7
14	26	High school diploma	Single	6
15	30	High school diploma	Married	9
16	24	High school diploma	Single	4

Five themes (attitudes towards sexual harassment, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, behavioral intentions and behaviors) were derived from the directed content analysis of the data, using the TPB (see Figure 1) as means of theoretically determining the main categories and subcategories (Assarroudi et al., 2018).

Table 2 provides examples of meaning units, codes, and categories associated with the themes. We summarize the findings of the interview data below, using quotes as exemplars

Table 2. Meaning units, codes, categories and themes

Meaning unit	Code	Category	Theme
Usually, we don't say anything in response to nasty jokes made by male customers.	Remaining silent	Strategies for coping with sexual harassment	Behavior
The customer became so abusive that I had to leave the store.	Moving away from abuser		
What can I do except frown?	Non-verbal protest		
I usually say "Stop it!" And "Just stop it!". But I won't argue with them because ...	Verbal protest		
I called my friend over and the man went away.	Seeking help		
If I had my own shop, I would definitely respond. I don't, so I can't.	Decision to confront	Challenge of decision making	Behavioral intention
I won't react to such behaviors if I see them a thousand times now or in the future.	Decision to avoid confrontation		
I feel very good when I respond. I can defend myself and not let anyone bother me.	Feelings of power	Behavioral beliefs	Attitudes to sexual harassment
Well, if you respond, at least it gets rid of some of the stress.	Stress relief		
My own experience is that reacting to abuse makes the harasser realize that his behavior is inappropriate.	Cessation of sexual harassment	Expected outcomes	
When my employer notices that I am retaliating to some of them, he become angry.	Employer's dissatisfaction		
I mostly remain silent because I want to continue my job and I really need the money.	Importance of income		
I don't tell my family what happens in the shop. If they knew, they wouldn't let me work.	Harsh reactions of family		
My colleagues are in neighboring shops. I feel they expect me to remain silent, as well.	Perceived colleague preference	Normative beliefs	Subjective norms
My friends say I should respond to make him realize that his behavior is inappropriate.	Perceived friends' preference		
My employer does not like me answering back. I have been told many times that I have no right to tell them anything and that this makes customers run off.	Perceived employer preference		
Most of the time, I act according to my employer's expectations and I remain silent when I see such annoying behaviors, because my job is important to me.	Importance of meeting employer's requirements	Motivation to comply	
If my employer cared about me, allowed me to answer these customers and supported me, I would be able to deal with these customers more assertively.	Employer support	Control beliefs	Perceived behavioral control
At the time I'm being harassed. My colleagues don't usually support me.	Colleague support		
If I were to react every time, others will say "This is her own fault. Otherwise, why would she be harassed so many times?"	Perceived negative judgments from others	Perceived power	
When I was let go from my previous job, it took me several months to find a new one.	Ability to find another job		
I remember once a customer came to the shop, his face was so scary and he behaved strangely. I was scared of him coming back to the shop, so I showed no reaction.	Fear of retaliation from the harasser		

Behavior

The participants stated that over their course of work, they had used different responses such as silence, frowning, serious warning, arguing with the customer, leaving their workplace, and calling for a friend in the store next-door. However, as indicated in the quotes below, the most common reaction was silence.

> *Over the years I have been working, I've tried different reactions. Sometimes silence and sometimes I have frowned. ... Sometimes I have voiced my disapproval, but now I just stay silent and I do not say anything because I have to.* (07S)

> [One time] *the customer became so abusive that I had to leave the store. I called my friend over and the man went away. But generally, I frown to show that I hate their behavior. Most of the time, we have no choice but to be silent.* (14S)

Behavioral intentions

According to the TPB, intention precedes the occurrence of a behavior and is its most significant precursor. The interview data revealed various forms of intention, which mostly indicated a lack of confidence, as well as hesitation and uncertainty in the decision making of the sales assistants when confronted by sexually harassment from a customer. Several responses had the same flavor as the words of participant 05S: *"I see lots of these behaviors, but I do not want to react because it has consequences for me."* Another participant elaborated on a recurring experience from male customers:

> *The customer touches my hand until I take the money from him. I want to take it away immediately* [pulls hand away] *so that he stops his behavior* [sighs] *but I think if my employer notices, they will fire me. It is no laughing matter. I do not intend to react to such behaviors if I see them a thousand times now or in the future, because I have reacted many times before, but...* (13S)

Her voice trailed off, but the body language completed the explanation: the consequences would be negative if she were seen to be unfriendly.

Attitudes towards sexual harassment

The participants had varying perceptions and feelings concerning the type of behavior they needed to adopt against perpetrators of sexual harassment. They expressed a sense of authority

and self-control when they used ways such as warning, reacting seriously, or asking a friend for help. For example, one of the participants said:

> *I feel very good when I respond to them. I feel powerful. I feel I can defend myself and not let anyone bother me. But when I am asked not to respond* [by employer]*, I feel weak. I hate myself. I wish I was my own employer.* (11S)

Another participant mentioned: *"Well, if you respond, at least it gets rid of some of the stress. I felt much better when I have responded."* (09S)

We also saw evidence of two precursors to attitudes towards sexual harassment: Behavioral beliefs and outcome evaluations. Behavioral beliefs form the cognitive foundations of attitude and are concentrated on the perceived positive or negative consequences of behaviors. The participants did think about the positive and negative consequences of their behaviors. Their statements implied that even though reacting a customer's harassment curtailed further advances, it would cause them to face problems in their workplaces. Examples are:

> *I think it is better to react. According to my own experience, reacting to such behaviors makes the harasser realize that his behavior is inappropriate. But when you are silent, he thinks you like his behavior and you are playing hard to get. Of course, this only works when you do not have an employer or when you are self-employed.* (11S)

> *It is better to react. It can make him understand that you don't like his behavior and he will not repeat his behavior. But showing a reaction here causes troubles.* (12S)

The value that an individual gives to the perceived consequences for them plays a large part in decisions about the strength or weakness of an attitude. In this regard, the participants asserted that although overtly reacting to sexual harassment could have both positive (stopping the harasser's distressing behaviors) and negative (causing problems in the workplace) outcomes. Overall, they determined that not reacting was better, because the negative outcomes outweighed the positive ones, and whilst it could be very unpleasant, sexual harassment by customers was a transient behavior.

> *If I respond, the customer will not continue. He understands that I am upset. But when my employer notices that I am retaliating to some of them, they become angry. This is not good for me, and a transient behavior should not put me in trouble.* (04S)

13

My work experience shows that when I show I do not like his behavior, he gives up. But every time I have done this, I have run into a problem. That is why I now think we should not really care about it. It is not worth it, because it might cost us our job. (07S)

Subjective norms

Human beings are social creatures, and their behaviors influence and are shaped by their social environments. This interaction has both subjective and objective dimensions. According to the TPB, people's perceptions of how much the important others approve or disapprove of a particular behavior significantly influences their decisions on behaving in that way. In this regard, in the current study, participants declared that male employers and colleagues encouraged them not to react to harassment, while their female friends thought that they had to react seriously to such behaviors. Another commonality was seen in disclosures that their families (especially fathers and brothers) were completely unaware of the sexual harassment they experienced at work from customers. The sales assistants reported that if family members found out, they would not be allowed to go to work. This would ultimately be more distressing. A version of the follow quotes was given by all the participants – regardless of whether married or single.

> *My employer does not like me answering back and encourages me to be silent. I have been told many times that I have no right to tell them anything and this makes the customers run off. If my family knew what was happening to me at work, they would not let me go to work anymore. So, I do not tell my family about these behaviors at all. ... If they knew, they would not allow me to go to work. Besides, it would make them develop a negative attitude towards me and my place in society. One of my friends told her family about the problem and her family stopped her going to work at all for two months. To work again she had to change her workplace and her work shift. The reason was that her family did not want to be embarrassed or lose their reputation.* (01M)

> *The employer asks me not to respond to a customer if he insults me, but my friends believe that I should. ... I should respond to him to make him realize that his behavior is inappropriate. My family does not know such problems are happening here. If my father found out, he would not let me leave the house anymore. I just tell my sister."* (16S)

According to the TPB, subjective norm is influenced by two constructs: normative beliefs and motivation to comply. Normative beliefs refer to people's perceptions of how their important

others expect them to behave. The findings of the present study showed that participants' perceptions of how important others would want them to react to harassers, which was conflicting. As illustrated in the following quote participants believed their employers were unwilling to see any reactions towards customers who harassed them at work, whereas they believed their friends preferred to see retaliation, and their families would remove them from the situation completely.

> *I think my friends expect me to confront such people. Sometimes, they have told me that I should have screamed and* [her voice was raised] *confronted them loudly so that others might hear me. …* [Voice returned normal volume] *However, my employer has asked me not to say anything. My colleagues are in the neighboring shops, and I do not have much contact with them. … I do not know what they think, but I feel they expect me to remain silent, as well. My family members know nothing about these things. If it were otherwise, they would not let me go to work at all.* (06S)

The degree to which individuals were motivated to act according to their important others' perceived inclinations essentially played a significant role in their behavior. The study findings indicated that participants were highly motivated to follow their employer's rather than their friends implied or real direction. For example,

> "*Most of the time, I act according to my employer's expectations and I remain silent when I see such annoying behaviors, because my job is important to me.*" *(16S)*

> *My friends say that these people have problems and they ask me not to think about them, but to be careful and respond to them. My employer asks me not to respond to customers who harass me, because they will soon walk away. … I do not heed my friends' advice, because my job matters to me.* (08M)

Perceived behavioral control

The intention to perform an action or make a response is also influenced by one's perceptions of control over internal and environmental factors. The findings of the present study indicated that the participants had varying degrees of perceived control in terms of deciding what to do and whether and how to respond to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. While some participants reported a high perceived control, others reported lower levels of control. One of the four participants who was married and with nine years of work experience mentioned*:*

"Previously, when I saw a customer reaching out to touch me, my heart pounded with fear. Now though, I am no longer afraid, because I've seen enough. ... Now I can easily respond to them, although I do still have some boundaries." (15M)

It is useful to contrast this explanation though with another participant with the same demographic, and consider what changed to stop the previous responding to customer's harassment:

"I am not afraid of the customers who harass me, and I have reacted in my previous workplaces. It is not a difficult task. But I do not do it now." (03M)

People's perceptions of their personal and environmental resources impact on control beliefs, which ultimately influence decisions on what to do when confronted by a customer whose behavior is disrespectful in some way. The sales assistants believed that their employer's expectations were the most important barrier against their reaction. Getting fired, not being able to become self-employed, others' judgments about being a victim of harassment, lack of support from important others', and fear of harasser's revenge were all factors that prevented women from reacting to harassing behaviors, as illustrated here:

"I do not often react, because I do not want to get fired. If I had my own shop, I would not allow customers to come in and behave like this." (12S)

I do not react, because I have seen lots of similar behaviors. If I were to react every time, others will say "This is her own fault. Otherwise, would she be harassed so many times? No, there is definitely something wrong with her." (06S)

Some harassers are really frightening. I remember once a customer came to the shop, his face was so scary and he behaved strangely. I was really scared of him coming back to the shop, so I showed no reaction. Sometimes, I think about this, and feel stressed just thinking the harasser may come back to the shop ... There have been some harassers that have returned twice, even three times. (10S)

Nevertheless, factors such as support from other people in the shop (i.e. colleagues, employers, and other customers) and an ability to stand up to the harasser played an important role in facilitating women's response to abusive behaviors.

I respond to them when I am sure that my employer would back me up and there would be no problem, or even when other customers in the store support me as an employee and strongly criticize the harasser for his abusive behavior. (02S)

The degree to which people feel that they have the power to change the influential internal and external factors plays a role in the formation of the ultimate perceived behavioral control. Although all the participants had the required skills to respond to sexual harassment, factors such as getting fired, not being an employer, others' judgments about being a victim of harassment, a shortage of others' support, and a fear of retaliation by the customer decreased their perceived power to respond. For example,

If my employer allowed me to react to such behaviors, it would not have been difficult. But when the employer does not permit me to do so, it becomes hard for me to make any response, because of the consequences for me." (01M)

Another participant maintained:

"If it were not for my colleagues' judgments, it would not be difficult for me to react. But any retaliation from me would set tongues wagging. It is not just me. Other women have said that whenever they faced behaviors like this, they became speechless and it has become really hard for them to do anything." (15M)

Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study was to analyze the behavioral responses of female sales assistants to sexual harassment by customers, using the TPB as a framework. We found that when the sales assistants recognized customer-perpetrated sexual harassment, they showed a variety of passive to active reactions, however, the most common reaction was to remain silent and to try to ignore the harassment. This finding was in line with many previous studies that have reported that women most often act passively to sexual harassment, regardless of type of perpetrator (Adams et al., 2019; del Carmen Herrera et al., 2017; Russell et al., 2021), including in Iran (Behboobi-Moghadam et al., 2018; Rostami, 2021; Zeighami et al., 2023). The TPB was found to be a good framework for the directed content analysis approach (Assarroudi et al., 2018) used to answer the overarching research question regarding *what* were the dominant behaviors when saleswomen were confronted by sexual harassment, and the underpinning behavioral intentions. The methodology ultimately allowed an in-depth examination of *why*

decisions to respond passively, with silence and inaction, were enacted. The findings replicate and extend the extant literature and can be used to support the design of occupational health intervention studies to ameliorate this public health issue and the distress it causes.

In this study, we sought to understand behavioral intentions as the key predictor of a behavioral response to sexual harassment, according to the TPB. We found support for the TPB and indeed there were underlying explanations for behavioral intentions based on the saleswomen's attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. These constructs provided an account for why most women intentionally did not react to harassers. Interestingly, many reported a positive attitude towards reacting to call out and stop the sexual harassment, and that previous active responses to stop non-consensual sexual approaches made them feel good, generally this was not their normal response.

A valid reason for considering why this was not so can be seen in the finding that all participants were highly motivated to comply with their employers' expectations. Their employers made it clear that they did not want their employees to do anything that may lose a sale, and the women did not want to lose their job. That is, their acquiescence could be associated with the economic status and the high unemployment in Iran. Moreover, there is a relatively low presence of women in the labor market in Iran, and it is not easy to for women to find alternative employment or even to enter some types of work (e.g. taxi driving; Eisapareh et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the women's concern was not just be about keeping their job and career for economic reasons. Unemployment can affect people's living standards, but the participants also recognized that their work had social benefits. Job loss can have major psychological consequences such as stress, changes in perceived control, loss of confidence and dignity, helplessness, as well as financial stress (Brand, 2015). And as such, losing their job would deprive them of other benefits of employment such as social contact with people outside the family and opportunities to work with others to realize collective goals, which are important to physical and mental health (Isfahani et al., 2020). These psychosocial benefits were a significant reason why the women in this study refused to talk about sexual harassment events to their families. All the participants stated that their parents and brothers were completely unaware of such behaviors in the workplace, and this was kept hidden because if they became aware of the situation, they would not be permitted to go to work.

Despite the severe religious and cultural restrictions on nonconsensual sexual behavior in Iran (Alimoradi et al., 2017), there are perceptions, recognized by the women, that they would have

at least a share of the blame for what, at best, would be seen as disrespectful behavior. Any debate about the way to intervene to ameliorate sexual harassment must include systems that permit employees to be able to speak out about sexual harassment without personal cost and judgement regarding their contribution to a harassment situation. Critically, women have to be afforded protection from the pervasive lack of accountability for sexual harassers who are customers rather than employees. This culture shift, however, requires acknowledgement that violence against women occurs wherever there is inequality of power between men and women, and this exists in the majority of societies (Armstrong et al., 2018; Hadi, 2022). That is, this gender inequality is not peculiar to the Iranian context, and sexual harassment is one of the manifestations of violence against women that occurs in any context where power relations between men and women are unequal (Behboodi-Moghadam et al., 2018; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). Power inequality exists in the workplace (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993; Russell et al., 2021), and employers are the ones with the power to determine the standards of performance, and appropriate and acceptable behaviors (Cleveland & Kerst, 1993). It follows that employers play an important role in guiding the behaviors of their employees, and that interventions to change attitudes and social norms around gender must be directed towards them, alongside more properly enforcing the law, and labor codes to provide all employees, including women, with the protection they are legally entitled to.

The TPB construct implicates perceived behavioral control in behavioral intentions, and besides issues of employer power and getting fired, the findings of this study showed that there were several other barriers to reporting customer-perpetrated sexual harassment for the participants. These included factors such as others' awareness of the sexual harassment and the potentials of negative judgments of those who do know about it, and lack of support on the part of those present in the workplace. The judgment of important others has been implicated in other studies as predicting intentions to report harassment (e.g. Rostami, 2021) and similarly there are accounts that confirm that protecting one's credibility is an important consideration for women when deciding whether to report harassment (Foster & Fullagar, 2018). In the Iranian context, talking about sexual harassment is a taboo subject because it involves talking about degrading comments and slurs, and referring to sexual behaviors, all of which should not be done in public to preserve the victim's honor (Naghavi et al., 2019; Rostamzadeh & Mehregan, 2016). Regardless of their lack of consent (Ali, 2011), there are both public and private perceptions of being 'damaged goods' for future relationships (Rostami, 2021). Rostamzadeh et al. (2016) argued that one reason why Iranian women hide their experiences

of sexual harassment, even in the workplace, was their fear of colleagues' misunderstanding their personality, rather than recognizing sexual harassment as a form of violence against women. Due to the negative attitude towards Iranian women regarding sexual incidents, the women in our study were highly restrained and ashamed to report harassment, and it remains ongoing problem that should be recognized and stopped without impacting of the victims.

The lack of social support reported in this study, has been similarly reported elsewhere too. Cortina (2004) examined social support processes in the context of workplace sexual harassment among Hispanic Americans and similarly found poor levels of support seeking behaviors. Corina argued that the Hispanic culture demands deference to people with higher power which underlines some of the unwillingness to seek support, although they may seek support from friends and family. In this study, the participants were not even willing to seek support from their families. The in-depth interviews revealed that this was because they perceived behavior control lay with their families, rather than themselves, and the men in their families would prevent them from working. Indeed, we received some reports that this really had happened to women they knew. This is a significant challenge for intervention, nevertheless, it should be approached for there is previous work in various contexts that indicates that social support from colleagues, employers, and other customers can facilitate a response that ameliorates harassment events (McLean & Griffiths, 2019; Minnotte & Legerski, 2019).

In the current investigation, another barrier to actively responding to the sexual harassment was the fear that some harassers might take revenge. This finding concurs with reports of fear of revenge as a barrier to reporting sexual harassment in medical schools (Bates et al., 2018; Binder et al., 2018). Fear of revenge can be addressed through the theoretical framework of protection motivation (Prentice-Dunn & Rogers 1986), although to date, this has not been utilized in intervention studies to ameliorate any form of sexual harassment. We recommend that future studies are conducted using this or other relevant theoretical frameworks to tackle the issue. On the other hand, some participants stated that even in the absence of any restrictions, they were still unable to actively respond to sexual harassment. Assertiveness is one of the communication skills that facilitates the ability to reject a customer's approach, and express positive and negative emotions (Laranjeira & Querido, 2021). Since retail sales assistants constantly interact with all types of customers in the workplace, there is a critical necessity for them to be in possession of this skill to take care of themselves and decline sexual harassment. To support this assertion, there is some evidence that assertiveness training is

useful in decreasing sexual harassment (Adebayo & Ninggal, 2019; Udayarajan et al., 2019), and similarly, there is a need for to apply psycho-educational training – which has been seen to improve assertiveness and coping in sexually abused girls (Bagheri Panah & Jomehri, 2019) – to enable Iranian women to successfully manage unwanted advances in the workplace (Zeighami et al., 2023).

To the best of our knowledge, this was the first in-depth qualitative study related to understanding women's responses to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. This study was performed based on the TPB at the intrapersonal level and the results provide some direction for intervention studies using other theoretical frameworks. One of the limitations of qualitative studies is the generalization of findings to the whole population. Since the present study was conducted on a small population of female retail sales assistants, generalization of the results to other populations should be done with caution. Sampling of this hard-to-reach group achieved a fairly homogenous sample, nevertheless one that had rich experiences. Following Assarroudi's 16-step directed content analysis methodology, and application of the saturation criterion for all the concepts provided rigor and trustworthiness for our findings. Based on the integrity of our results which have been explained alongside the current literature, we argue that many of our findings extend to the wider world of work, and our recommendations for future intervention studies have global relevance. Another limitation of this study was that it only considered customer-perpetrated sexual harassment in retail sales with the sales assistants on the receiving end of the harassment. It is recommended that the views and responses of colleagues' and superiors – both managers and employer's – to sexual harassment of those for whom they have duty of care in their workplace should be sought in future studies to identify and create policies in workplaces to provide a safer environment for women working in any kind of service sector.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment of women by customers is a significant problem worldwide, but as confirmed in this study many women do not report their experiences, and they and not retaliate even verbally. The TPB provided a good framework for explaining how and why women behave in the way they do to customer-perpetrated sexual harassment. Key reasons were fear of losing their job, dishonor among important others, lack of support, and acceptance of power differentials. There is a need for better attention to labor laws that superficially outlaw sexual harassment. There is also a need for psycho-educational interventions with a focus on the

determinants of women's response to sexual harassment, and development of assertiveness skills to empower women and eliminate acceptance of this harmful workplace experience.

Declarations

Ethics approval

The study was carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences (IR.SUMS.REC.1398.1366).

Consent to participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were informed about the purpose of the study and assured of confidentiality and anonymity of their information in the manuscript, all previous drafts, and in their voice recordings of the interviews. The voice recordings were deleted after the transcription process and member checking was completed.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Availability of data

 The full interview data analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to its qualitative, confidential nature and the text originally being in Persian. An anonymized version can be made available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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