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Sexual Harassment Victimization Has No Age Limit but Our Perceptions Do: The Intersection of  
Victim Age and Prototypes of Sexual Harassment

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**Abstract**

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A woman's fit with prototypes of her gender group affects the ease with which others perceive her as targeted by sexual harassment and older women are viewed as less prototypically feminine than younger women. Using both implicit and explicit measures, we examined whether this bias in prototypes prevents older women from being recognized as victims of sexual harassment. University students ( $N = 114$ ) imagined being a human resources manager making judgments about what claims employees filed. They then viewed faces of younger and older women employees and, using MouseTracker software, judged whether these women filed a sexual harassment or manager behavioral claim. Participants were less likely to categorize older (vs. younger) women as having filed a sexual harassment claim. Participants also overwhelmingly agreed with the statement that "younger women are more likely to be harassed than older women". These results showcase how this bias, that younger women are more likely to be harassed than older women, is present at both conscious and subconscious levels of cognition, which will be key in designing future interventions.

## **Sexual Harassment Victimization Has No Age Limit but Our Perceptions Do: The Intersection of Victim Age and Prototypes of Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is one of the most common workplace discrimination claims reported to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The EEOC defines sexual harassment as repeated and severe incidents of unwanted sexual advances or coercion, requests for sexual favors, offensive remarks about a person's sex, or other harassment of a sexual nature (EEOC, n.d.). Women of any age are at risk of being victimized, however older women are often discredited as victims of harassment based on age-related stereotypes, including being unlikely targets of sexual desire (Anver, 1993; Cassino, 2018; Korthase, 1982). Just five years ago, Italian prosecutors dropped Elisabetta Cortani's high-profile case of sexual harassment citing that "harassment was 'incompatible' with the accusation... because... she was too old" to have been the target of sexual advances (Horowitz, 2018). She was only 49 years old at the time of the incident. The first step to addressing harassment, both interpersonally and legally, is perceiving and labeling an experience as sexual harassment. As such, it is important to understand what influences perceptions of women's likelihood of being victimized (Goh et al., 2021; Kaiser et al., 2022). The present study explores the neglect of middle-aged women in cognitive associations of sexual harassment victims.

Understanding the neglect of middle-aged women in representations of sexual harassment victims can be informed using a prototype lens. Prototypes are shared sets of attributes that constitute a category (Cohen, 1981; Rosch, 1978). The prototype of women consists of women who are attractive, young, straight, White, and embody feminine traits such as being communal, nurturing, and warm (Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Kite et al., 2008; Rudman

& Glick, 2001). The prototype of women overlaps with that of sexual harassment victims, such that the same feminine traits associated with women are associated with victims (Goh et al., 2021). Judgments of sexual harassment are facilitated when the victim fits with the prototype (Kaiser et al., 2022), leading non-prototypical women's sexual harassment to go less noticed (Goh et al., 2021).

Stereotypes of women are dynamic and can change over context and time, even across the same individuals' life spans (Itzin & Phillipson, 1995; Joye & Wilson, 2015; Snyder & Miene, 1994). As women age, they move away from the prototype of women; older women are less prototypic of the category of women relative to younger women. Consequently, aspects of the prototype may be applied less to older women than younger women. For example, middle-aged women professors were rated less warmly (a component of the prototype) than their younger selves, despite their competence ratings increasing over time. Students criticized middle-aged professors for not fulfilling prescriptive gender stereotypes (e.g., being less warm and communal; Chatman et al., 2022). In addition to prescriptive norms around warmth, older (vs. younger) women are also seen as less feminine and attractive (Chrisler, 2007; Foos & Clark, 2011; Furnham, et al., 2004), further distancing them from the prototype of women.

The invisibility of middle-aged women from cognitive representations of sexual harassment victims may also be derived from lay beliefs that sexual harassment stems from romantic attraction or sexual desire. It is a widely held misconception that sexual harassment stems only from sexual desire (Schultz, 1998; 2018). However, sexual harassment is often utilized against women that threaten men's dominance in the workforce and deviate from prescriptive gender norms (Chamberlain et al., 2008; Dall'Ara & Maass, 1999; Maass et al., 2003). As women advance in their careers and break gender norms, they often become

threatening to the status quo, which may lead to a response of dominance from men in the workplace (Thomas et al., 2013). Research has suggested that this widely held preconception about the role of desire as a motive, influenced by perceptions of attractiveness, could lead people to believe that younger women are more likely to be harassed (Jones, 2005).

Age is considered a primary component of interpersonal categorization (Fiske, 1998; Kunda, 1999) and is among the “Big Three” social categories that are the most immediately encoded when perceiving faces (race, gender, age; Brewer, 1988; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Freeman & Ambady, 2011; George & Hole, 1998; Messick & Mackie, 1989; Mouchetant-Rostaing & Girard, 2003). Due to their visual prominence (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), these categories can be encoded in as fast as 200 milliseconds (Dobs et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2020). Automatic processing is the encoding of information below the threshold for conscious awareness (Hasher & Zacks, 1979). Automatic processing methods reveal associative ageism in general contexts (de Paula Couto & Wentura, 2017) and have reliably predicted biased outcomes across myriad social identities (e.g., race, gender; Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Payne et al., 2017; Romero-Rivas et al., 2022). The MouseTracker software allows for the real-time processing of mental tasks through computer mouse tracking, unbeknownst to participants, to draw conclusions about cognitive associations participants have of stimuli. The package records the continual x- and y- coordinates (sampling 60-75 times a second) of participants’ computer mice as they make decisions about visual stimuli during an implicit association task, choosing between two outcome options, also known as response alternatives (see Appendix B; Freeman & Ambady, 2010). Mouse Tracker has the benefit of using multiple, implicit and explicit variables that address different components of the association and help to

avoid social desirability (Greenwald et al., 2009; Nosek et al., 2007; Teige-Mocigemba et al., 2010).

## **Present Study**

We used the MouseTracker program (Freeman & Ambady, 2010) to test whether younger women are viewed as more likely than older women to be sexual harassment victims. In a within-subjects design, participants viewed pictures of younger and older women, then guessed whether the women were victims of sexual harassment (vs. a control incident). We hypothesized that the women's age would influence their perceived likelihood of being sexually harassed. Specifically, participants would be less likely and more hesitant to categorize older women as having experienced sexual harassment, and showcase more response competition (i.e., having trouble deciding between the two response alternatives).

## **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a university undergraduate subject pool. After excluding two participants due to equipment malfunction,  $N = 114$  participants remained ( $M = 19.79$  years,  $SD = 2.15$  years). The sample was 65% women, 35% men, and no one selected another gender. Participants used a range of sexuality labels (80% straight, 14% bisexual, 2% gay or lesbian, 4% other or did not specify). The racial/ethnic breakdown was 61.4% East/Southeast Asian, 28.1% White, 8.8% Black or African American, 8.8% Latinx/Hispanic, 3.5% Middle Eastern, and 2.7% Native.<sup>1</sup>

## **Methods**

### **Face Stimuli**

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<sup>1</sup> Participants could and did choose more than one answer choice, thus percentages will not add up to 100%.

The stimuli were compiled from the FACES Database (Ebner et al., 2010), Chicago Face Database (Ma et al., 2015), and Face Research Lab (DeBruine & Jones 2017), resulting in 42 photographs ( $N = 21$  older,  $N = 21$  younger). The younger faces ranged from 26 to 28 years ( $M = 26.73$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ) and had an average perceived attractiveness of 4.27 ( $SD = 0.66$ ). The older faces ranged from 36 to 45 years ( $M = 39.96$ ,  $SD = 3.28$ ) and had an average perceived attractiveness of 4.02 out of 10 ( $SD = 0.83$ ). The perceived age of faces different significantly in the intended direction,  $t(40) = 17.98$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 5.55$ , 95%  $CI$  [4.19, 6.89], while perceived attractiveness did not differ between conditions,  $t(40) = -1.07$ ,  $p = .289$ ,  $d = 0.33$ , 95%  $CI$  [-0.28, 0.94] (see Appendix A for example faces).

## **Procedure**

Participants were assigned to serve as a mock Human Resources manager and make decisions about employee complaints. They learned that a computer error resulted in the deletion of all their employee complaint files and their job was to guess whether each employee submitted a *sexual harassment* or *manager behavioral* complaint. Each trial was accompanied with a photograph of a woman that was manipulated to look either younger or older. In this within-subjects design, participants saw each of the 42 faces twice for a total of 84 randomly ordered trials. To decrease socially desirable responding (i.e., selecting *manager behavioral* complaint for all targets), we told participants that roughly 50% of the employees filed each type of complaint. To capture direct beliefs, participants indicated their level of agreement with the statement “Sexual harassment is more likely to be directed at younger women compared to older women” (1 – *Strongly disagree*, 7 – *Strongly agree*). Finally, participants responded to demographic questions, including age, gender, sexuality, race, religiosity, and political orientation. All hypothesis and methods have been pre-registered, and anonymized data are

publicly available

([https://osf.io/q79vy/files/osfstorage?view\\_only=128dfc959e0c4ea29c27b0fd4dc50bef](https://osf.io/q79vy/files/osfstorage?view_only=128dfc959e0c4ea29c27b0fd4dc50bef)).

### **MouseTracker Variables**

To test whether younger women are more likely to be categorized as sexual harassment victims compared to older women, we analyzed three variables from the MouseTracker data: category selection, hesitancy (i.e., reaction time), and response competition (i.e., computer mouse trajectory) as calculated in Freeman and Ambady (2010). For each participant, variables across trials were averaged together, then grouped across participants by experimental condition, to compare average differences between groups.

#### *Category Selection*

We calculated the proportion of trials in which the participant selected *sexual harassment* category label (i.e., every time they did not select *behavioral manager*). At an aggregated level, this indicates how likely participants think younger (vs. older) women are to be victims.

#### *Hesitation*

To test the extent to which participants hesitated when making decisions to label a woman as being a sexual harassment victim or not, we calculated the average time between the start and end of each trial. Higher scores indicate a longer time to complete the trial, thus more hesitation.

#### *Response Competition*

To test the extent to which each category label (sexual harassment vs. manager behavioral complaint) was competing for participants' decision, we calculated the average area under the curve (AUC) and maximum deviation (MD) of the mouse trajectory. These two variables measure the extent to which a participant moves their mouse in a straight line (see

Appendix B for example mouse trajectory). Higher scores indicate greater response competition, (i.e., the opposite stimulus is drawing participants' attention), indicating that they are having greater difficulty making a decision.

## **Hypotheses**

1. Younger (vs. older) women will be more likely to be categorized as *sexual harassment* (vs. control) claimants.
2. Younger (vs. older) women will be subject to less hesitation when participants are making the decisions to categorize them as sexual harassment claimants.
3. Younger (vs. older) women will be subject to less response competition when participants are making the decisions to categorize them as sexual harassment claimants.

## **Results**

### **H1: Category Selection**

Participants were more likely to categorize younger (vs. older) women as having made a *sexual harassment* complaint  $t(113) = 7.39, p < .001, d = 0.69, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.49, 0.90]$ .

### **H2: Reaction Time**

Participants showcased no difference in reaction time based on the target's age,  $t(113) = -0.08, p = .936, d = 0.01, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.18, 0.19]$ . Younger women were not faster to be categorized as sexual harassment victims than older women.

### **H3: Computer Mouse Trajectory**

Participants showcased no difference in AUC based on the target's age,  $t(114) = 1.25, p = .215, d = 0.12, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.07, 0.30]$ , nor MD,  $t(113) = 0.25, p = .805, d = 0.02, 95\% \text{ CI } [-0.16,$

0.21]. Younger women were not subjected to less response competition when being categorized as sexual harassment victims than older women.

### Exploratory Analysis

Participants, on average, agreed with the statement that younger women are more likely to be harassed compared to older women. The mean ( $M = 4.83$ ) was significantly higher than the midpoint ( $M = 4$ ) of the scale,  $t(114) = 7.42, p < .001, d = 0.69, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.49, 0.89]$ .

**Table 1**

*Dependent Variable Descriptives*

	<i>Younger Targets</i>		<i>Older Targets</i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Category Selection	22.30	5.75	26.90	6.19
Reaction Time	1241.55	201.42	1241.63	206.84
Area-Under-Curve	0.75	0.47	0.81	0.62
Maximum Deviation	0.41	0.21	0.42	0.25

**Table 2**

*Correlation Table Between Dependent Variables*

	Category Selection	Response Time	Area Under Curve	Maximum Deviation	Explicit Endorsement
Category Selection	--	--	--	--	--
Response Time	-.002	--	--	--	--

Area Under Curve	.20*	.18*	--	--	--
Maximum Deviation	.20*	.18*	.95*	--	--
Explicit Endorsement	.18	-.08	.05	.01	--

### Discussion

Incorporating age into research on gender and sexual harassment expands our understanding of prototypes of sexual harassment victims. Participants viewed faces of women ranging in age and, using the Mouse Tracker software, categorized each as either having made a *sexual harassment* or *manager behavioral* complaint. We used MouseTracker to test whether younger (vs. older) women are more likely to be perceived as sexual harassment victims. Indeed, participants were more likely to select *sexual harassment* when categorizing younger (vs. older faces) and, on average, endorsed the belief that younger women are more likely to be harassed when compared to older women. Thus, explicitly, participants endorsed the bias that older women were less likely targets of sexual harassment and categorized them as such. However, participants were no quicker or less hesitant to make these decisions when categorizing women as sexual harassment victims. Exploratory analyses also found no moderation by gender.

Previous research using MouseTracker to compare explicit and implicit biases found mixed results, which some showing only explicit (but not implicit) findings (e.g., Rule et al., 2014), and others who found the opposite (e.g., Roche et al., 2020). For example, Geiger and colleagues found that, after a conformity threat prime, participants showed an explicit (but not implicit) proclivity to recycle less (2018). Similarly, the present study shows explicit effects in

the absence of implicit effects. The explicit variables (i.e., response choice and belief endorsement) were assessed at different levels of analysis. Response choice is a micro variable (i.e., specific to individual targets), while belief endorsement is a macro variable (i.e., generalized to an entire group). Together, they offer convergent evidence that the belief of younger women as more likely victims of sexual harassment is strong. People are so confident in their endorsement of the belief that it heavily impacts the early stages of the decision-making process. Without hesitation or response competition, they automatically encode and categorize younger (vs. older) women as more likely to be sexual harassment victims. This particular pattern of cognitive processing has been found in contexts such as with political orientation (Geiger et al., 2020) and in health dilemmas (Gillebaart, 2018).

### **Constraints on Generalizability**

The sample consisted of primarily straight, Asian American, college aged women, a few of whom explicitly expressed concern over having to make judgements with so little information. While often it is the case that this type of sample exhibits greater social desirability, they generally showcased explicit belief in the prototype bias. Thus, the explicit effects may generalize to more diverse, non-college samples and we may even see significant implicit findings. The findings will likely also generalize across gender as prototypes are widely held beliefs embedded within culture and have not been shown to differ in previous research on sexual harassment victims (Goh et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, there was no difference between women ( $M = 4.74$ ) and men's ( $M = 5.0$ ) explicit endorsement of the bias,  $t(113) = 1.14$ ,  $p = .276$ ,  $d = 0.22$ , 95% CI [-0.21, 0.72]. However, this highly controlled experiment used no context about incidents and minimal information about targets (i.e., only facial pictures). It could be the case that with more context and individuating information, these results may change.

## **Conclusion**

The present research explored victim age as a component of the prototype of sexual harassment victims. The influence of sexual harassment prototypes on perceptions of likelihood of harassment could at least partially explain why some victims chose not to come forward or make official reports after experiencing harassment. According to a recent poll, women over 35 are significantly less likely to come forward with claims of sexual harassment (North, 2018). Studies have consistently shown that experiences of sexual harassment are one of the most common and detrimental barriers to career success for women (Fitzgerald, 1988; Willness, et al., 2007). Victims face a multitude of obstacles, both interpersonal (e.g., guilt and shame, fear of disbelief) and, as with Elisabetta Cortani and women like her, legal (e.g., high standard for evidence in court), on their path to healing and redress (Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Sable et al., 2006; Triplett, 2012). Understanding self- and other-perceptions of older victims through the lens of prototypes can highlight potential blind spots in employee trainings and public policy aimed at increasing access to legal recourse, and inform future interventions aimed at decreasing negative outcomes for nonprototypical victims.

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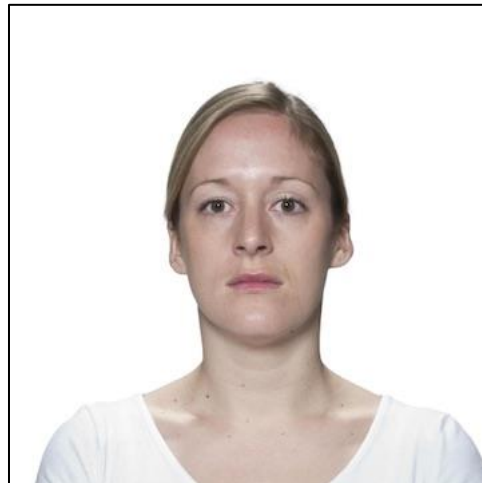
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## Appendix A

Older women:

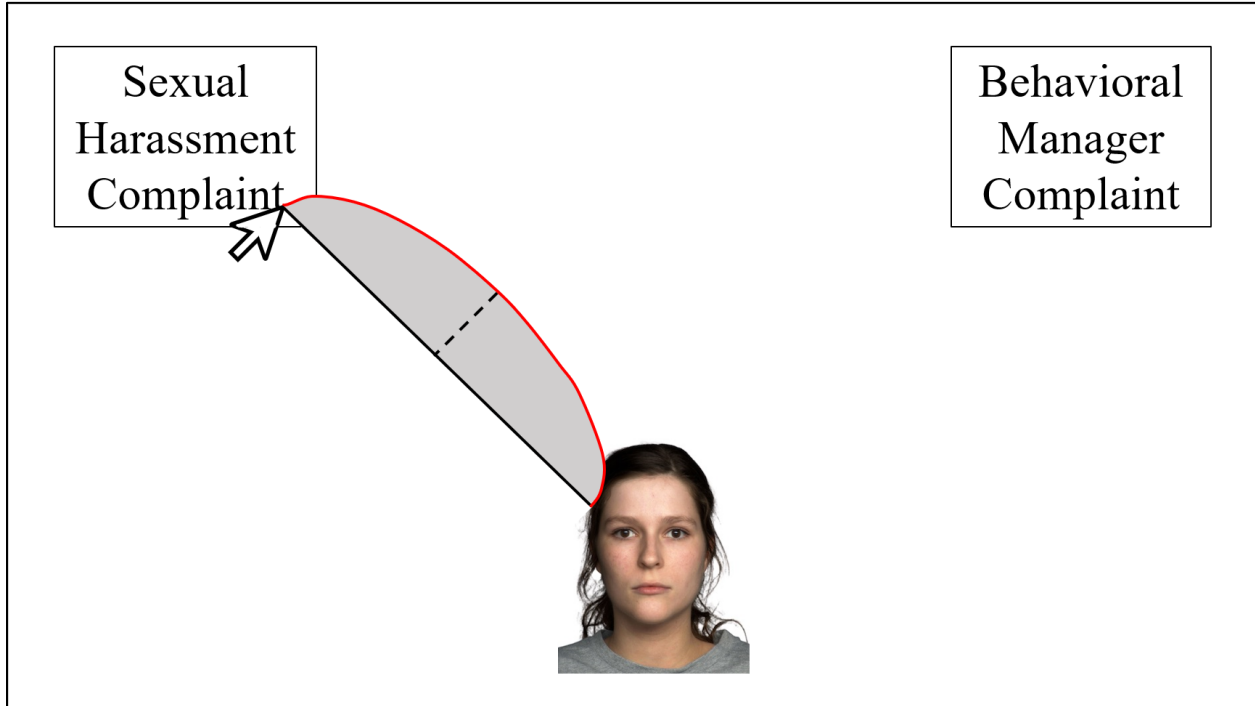


Younger women:



## Appendix B

MouseTracker Participant Screen:



Note: The red line indicates the actual mouse trajectory. The black line is computer generated after the data is collected and used to calculate the area under the curve (in grey).