

Self-Labeling Sexual Harassment¹

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This study was designed to examine personal, stimulus, and organizational factors that predict the self-labeling of sexual harassment. Hypotheses were developed based on the social cognitive schema framework, which suggests that the activation of a victim's schema of sexual harassment influences self-labeling incidents as sexual harassment. Results of a secondary analysis of the 1995 Department of Defense *Gender Issues* dataset generally supported the hypotheses in that self-labeling is a multi-faceted process. Several findings were in the opposite direction from that predicted (e.g., perceptions that the military was implementing sexual harassment policies were negatively associated with self-labeling). Alternative explanations for the complexity of the self-labeling process were also examined.

KEY WORDS: sexual harassment; labeling; schema; military personnel.

Research indicates that roughly one-half of all civilian women and close to two-thirds of all women in the military will experience sexual harassment at some point in their working lives (e.g., Culbertson, Rosenfeld, & Newell, 1993; Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, & Magley, 1997; Rosen & Martin, 1998). By definition, these experiences are unwelcome and unwanted. However, relatively few harassed women actually use the label sexual harassment in constructing an understanding of their experiences. Indeed, recent research suggests that only 20–30% of harassed women label their experiences as sexual harassment (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999; Rosen & Martin, 1998). This low rate of self-labeling is particularly puzzling given the increased attention to sexual harassment in both media and organizational contexts,

in part fueled by high profile legal cases and changing legal standards for workplace discrimination.

Much of the research on self-labeling has been focused on understanding what predicts whether or not a victim labels her experiences as harassment. This literature has identified a variety of predictors that can be summarized as having to do with the harasser or the harassment itself, such as the frequency of harassing incidents and the race, sexual orientation, and relative power of the perpetrator (e.g., Ellis, Barak, & Pinto, 1991; Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Stockdale, Vaux, & Cashin, 1995), or having to do with the target of the harassment, such as sex and the negative affect and distress experienced (e.g., Stockdale et al., 1995). Although such examinations were needed within the literature, a careful reading of that work seems to suggest that the factors that affect an individual's labeling of her experiences are theoretically unrelated. Furthermore, the literature is heavily focused on identifying what factors predict self-labeling, yet ignores the underlying processes through which an individual's experiences move from being perceived as "something bad" to "sexual harassment." The primary purpose of this article is to extend the literature on self-labeling by addressing those gaps. Specifically, we developed a theoretical framework for understanding self-labeling of

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sexual harassment that is grounded in social cognitive schema theory and informed by an understanding of the context in which the schemas were formed and in which the harassment occurred for the present analysis, the U.S. military.

Theoretical Underpinnings of a Schema-Based Understanding of Self-Labeling

Research in social cognition suggests that individuals deal with the attention and memory demands of complex social information with the help of *schemas*, that is, cognitive structures that organize prior knowledge and inform understanding of future encounters in a given domain (Fiske & Linville, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The schemas function as guides that allow individuals to form expectations about and assign meaning to new, unfamiliar situations, or recall information related to past encounters. Like other shortcuts, however, the use of these generalized, abstracted “frames” to guide perceptions and understandings of our social world can result in undesirable side effects. Once a schema is activated, subsequent attention, data interpretation, and memory are likely to be biased toward schema consistent information, which results in the maintenance, and even strengthening, of the schemas. Similarly, when a stimulus or event consists of features that do not conform to a specific schema, individuals are less likely to label it as an example of that schema subject, which often results in mistaken interpretation. For example, several studies have shown that women who are victims of legally defined sexual assault are less likely to label their experience as sexual assault if the incident was characterized by elements that are part of the traditional sexual script, rather than the normative sexual assault script (e.g., Bondurant, 2001; Kahn, Mathie, & Torgler, 1994).

One of the most important features of schema theory—indeed, what distinguishes it from earlier theory in memory and social cognition—is the role played by social context. One’s own unique experiences within a social context, for example, influence the *formation* of specific schemas and the content of these schemas. Thus, although the existence and use of schemas is universal, the type and content of schemas vary widely across individuals. Likewise, the social context influences the *activation* of schemas, and contextual cues often determine whether or not a given schema is likely to be activated and used in

a given situation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Taylor & Crocker, 1981).

From this social cognitive schema theory and research, it is clear that schemas play a central role in our social perception—they guide our understanding of ourselves and our experiences within the social world. In the current study we used this literature as a framework for understanding the self-labeling of sexual harassment, by developing and testing a set of theoretically and empirically derived models.

Stimulus Factors Associated with Self-Labeling

First, we predicted that both the *type of experience* and *frequency of experienced behaviors* would be significantly related to the labeling of the behaviors as harassment, for reasons related to schema accessibility. Because a sex-related behavior that is perceived to be offensive (i.e., sexual harassment) is more likely to be consistent with schema contents than are other work-based behaviors, the presence of a harassing behavior would cause the schemas to be activated with a greater probability than would the absence of such a behavior.

Although all types of offensive behavior should theoretically activate one’s harassment schema, egregious forms of harassment such as sexual coercion should most readily serve as activating cues. This may be particularly true in the military, given its understanding and presentation of harassment, based on the legal definition of sexual harassment. For example, the Navy and Marines use a “traffic signal” model in training programs. This model clearly distinguishes among “Red Zone” behaviors, such as assault and sexual coercion that always constitute sexual harassment, ambiguous “Yellow Zone” behaviors that may or may not be considered sexual harassment, and “Green Zone” behaviors, such as polite compliments, that are generally acceptable (Department of the Navy, 1993). Given this model that explicitly compartmentalizes harassment based on severity, we expected that the experience of sexual coercion would be most likely to predict self-labeling. Similarly, the greater the number of incidents a woman experiences, the more likely it is that one of the incidents would be consistent with the contents of her sexual harassment schema, and thus the more likely she would be to label the experiences as harassment. This rationale and the resulting hypothesis are consistent with attribution theory’s claims related to behavioral consistency (Kelley, 1967) and

with previous research on the self-labeling of sexual harassment (e.g., Ellis et al., 1991).

We predicted that the *perpetrator's organizational power* would be significantly related to self-labeling, such that the victims of incidents committed by higher power perpetrators would be more likely to label. Due in part to the normative perceptions of sexual harassment, sex-related behavior is most likely to be consistent with a harassment schema in cases in which the perpetrator is able to wield some form of power over the victim. Research in sexual harassment and other forms of victimization is consistent with our prediction—victims are more likely to label when the harassment is committed by a perpetrator of equal or higher organizational status (e.g., Ellis et al., 1991; Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000; Stockdale et al., 1995). The effect of organizational power should be especially pronounced in this military sample, given the salience of the hierarchical structure and the sensitivity to power differentials (i.e., rank) in this high power distance sub-culture (Ottati, Triandis, & Hui, 1999).

Personal Factors Associated with Self-Labeling

Demographic and Attitudinal Characteristics

Our Demographic and Attitudinal Characteristics model included a number of characteristics related to the victim of the harassment. *Gender* was hypothesized to be a significant predictor, such that women would be more likely than men to self-label. Widely publicized sexual harassment cases, combined with the much higher incidence of sexual harassment in women, likely lead to strong perceptions that associate the experience of sexual harassment with women (Moyer & Nath, 1998). Given this perceived (and actual) relation between gender and sexual harassment, women's schemas should be more likely than those of men to include the label "sexual harassment" associated with offensive sex-related behaviors. Previous research on labeling in both civilian and military populations, as well as in college student populations, is consistent with these predicted gender differences (e.g., Rosen & Martin, 1998; Shepela & Levesque, 1998; Stockdale et al., 1995; Thomas, 1995).

We expected *pay grade* to be a significant predictor of self-labeling in military personnel, based on accessible knowledge about sexual harassment. Specifically, individuals at higher paygrade levels should

have had more exposure to harassment sensitivity training and consequently should have more accessible cognitive schemas and labels for harassment. For similar reasons, we expected individuals who are *married* and who have more *education* and *knowledge of sexual harassment* also to be more likely to label their experiences as harassment; there is some empirical evidence of the predicted relationship between education and labeling (Ragins & Scandura, 1995).

Beyond demographic variables, we predicted that several cognitive and attitudinal variables would also be significantly related to the victims' labeling. We included measures of *beliefs that there is little sex discrimination* in the military and *negative attitudes toward sexual harassment* (i.e., attitudes that minimize the importance and seriousness of harassment), based on the assumption that individuals who believe that sexual harassment does not occur or is not a "big deal" would be less likely to have well-formed schemas for harassing behaviors or the cognitive label for sexual harassment (Ellis et al., 1991; Magley et al., 1999).

Further, we examined the relationship between *organizational commitment* and self-labeling, because we reasoned that the greater one's commitment (particularly one's affective commitment), the more likely one would be to experience cognitive dissonance after labeling a behavior as sexual harassment (Festinger, 1957). Similarly, individuals who are highly committed to their jobs and the organization should feel the need to justify this commitment; being a victim of sexual harassment would likely run counter to this process of justification. To reduce the dissonance, individuals may deny that their experiences actually constituted sexual harassment (i.e., perceive their experiences to be inconsistent with their sexual harassment schema). Thus, we predicted that higher commitment would be associated with lower levels of self-labeling. Although there is no previous research on the relation between the self-labeling of sexual harassment and organizational commitment, parallel research has been conducted on partner abuse. Consistent with our rationale, this research provides evidence for a negative relation between relationship commitment and the self-labeling of abuse (Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000).

Affective Responses

We predicted that individuals who experience harassing behaviors would be more likely to label

them as harassment if they appraised them as severe and personally relevant and if they perceived that their psychological well-being had suffered as a result. Most individuals in our society likely have at least rudimentary schemas of sexual harassment. However, many of these schemas may consist of only the most egregious, unambiguous behaviors, in part because they are formed as a result of exposure to media coverage of high profile court cases that often involve the severest forms of harassment. Thus, for many individuals, only a behavior that was appraised as very severe and/or that had resulted in extensive psychological damage would cause the harassment schema to be accessed and the label to be used. Consequently, we predicted that *primary appraisal* (assessment of the stressor as stressful; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and *psychological disruption* as a result of the harassment would be positively related to self-labeling. This prediction is consistent with previous research on the labeling of sexual harassment and with research on the self-labeling of partner abuse (e.g., Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000; Stockdale et al., 1995; Terpstra & Baker, 1989).

Organizational Factors Associated with Self-Labeling

As discussed earlier, most previous research has included a fairly limited scope of predictors, generally including only personal and/or stimulus-related factors. In the current study, we included a set of organizational factors in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the labeling phenomenon. Specifically, we proposed models related to the job-gender context, the organizational climate, and sexual harassment awareness training.

Job-Gender Context

We posited a model to examine the effects of the *job-gender context* that represents both the gender context of the victim's work environment and the location or context in which the harassment occurred. Given normative perceptions of sexual harassment as a work-based phenomenon, we expected victims to be more likely to label an incident as harassment if it occurred in their workplace or if it occurred while they were on duty. In other words, victims' schema of sexual harassment are more likely to be activated when their experiences match the manner in which

they conceptualize it—self-labeling is likely to occur with this schema activation. The distinction between workplace and social situation seems particularly relevant in the active duty military context, given that social interactions often take place in the vicinity of the work environment (e.g., in clubs on base) and often involve other military personnel. Consistent with our prediction, evidence from the literature on harassment in the military suggests that labeling is highly influenced by the context in which the behavior takes place, such that behaviors that occur while on duty are much more likely to be perceived as harassment than behaviors that occur in social settings (Thomas, 1995).

More specifically, however, we reasoned that these work-based experiences would interact with the gendered nature of the working environment. Considerable research has shown that sexual harassment of women is more likely to occur in contexts in which women are in the numerical minority, where men are the supervisors, and where women are working in gender atypical jobs (e.g., Ellis et al., 1991; Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Gruber, 1992; Rags & Scandura, 1995), contexts that are particularly prevalent in the military (Culbertson et al., 1993). According to literature in social cognition, gender is highly salient in these contexts, and this salience is likely to lead to the activation of gender-related schemas (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). It seems likely that this gender salience effect would be amplified in the military, given its overwhelming focus on men and "masculine" pursuits (Addelston & Stirratt, 1996; Duniwin, 1994; Garsombke, 1988). Thus, we hypothesized that victims would be most likely to label when their gender was salient and their experiences occurred at work.

Organizational Climate

We also developed an organizational climate model to examine the implications of perceived organizational tolerance on the propensity to self-label, both in terms of the perceived appropriateness of the *organization's implementation* of its sexual harassment policy and in terms of the victim's perception that the organization was providing appropriate *resources* for dealing with the sexual harassment (Hunter-Williams, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1999). Given the important role of contextual cues in schema activation, we expected to see more activation of the sexual harassment schema, and therefore

more frequent labeling, in a context in which sexual harassment is taken seriously. We further reasoned that an organization seen as having the relevant resources and as implementing its harassment policy appropriately would be more likely to foster a climate conducive to self-labeling, in part because negative attitudes toward women who label harassment should be less likely in such an organization.

Training

Finally, we examined a model that consists of three predictors related to sexual harassment awareness training—*length of training*, *knowledge acquired from training*, and *perceived effectiveness of training*. Because schema content is informed largely by an individual's own experiences, including exposure to relevant information, we expected all three training-related variables to be positively related to the likelihood that victims would label their experiences as harassment.

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

The study reported here was based on data from the *1995 Status of the Armed Forces: Gender Issues Survey* (Form B; Bastion, Lancaster, & Reyst, 1996). Based on stratified random sampling procedures (stratifying on gender, race, Service, personnel category, and location) to ensure adequate sample sizes for analyses of subgroups of particular interest—particularly oversampling for women and ethnic minorities—approximately 50,000 individuals with at least 6 months of service to the military were selected for the initial sample. State-of-the-art procedures were employed to maximize response rates (for additional details see Bastion et al., 1996; Hay & Elig, 1999).

Ultimately, 22,372 women and 5,924 men provided responses that were usable for analyses in this study from Form B of the survey, yielding an overall response rate of 58%. Of these, 15,966 (14,500 women and 1,466 men) endorsed some unwanted sex-related experience over the past 12 months (see below for more details) and answered the item that pertained to self-labeling; these respondents are the focus of the current research.⁵ This sample of respon-

dents was ethnically diverse (65.7% non-Hispanic White; 25.1% non-Hispanic Black; 4% Hispanic; 3.5% Asian/Pacific Islander; 1.6% American Indian or Native Alaskan) and had varied educational backgrounds (15.5% high school diploma or less; 49.5% some college or an Associate's degree; 14.2% Bachelor's degree; 20.8% some graduate training or degree). Although the majority of this sample was presently married (51.4%), a sizable number had never been married (29.6%); 19% were widowed, divorced, or separated. On average, this sample of respondents was 31 years old and had served in the military for slightly more than 9 years. Given the stratification procedures, participants represented all pay grades and all Services of the military.

Survey Instrument

The Form B survey booklet was designed and formatted to facilitate ease and reliability of responding and to minimize any response bias or demand effects. Thus, the questionnaire began by requesting that participants provide demographic and other innocuous information (gender, age, education, ethnicity and race, marital status, Service, pay grade, and years of active duty). This was followed by a set of questions about the respondent's military career and Service.

Whenever possible, we summed items that seemed to tap into the same theoretical construct in an effort to provide more reliable assessments of these constructs than are possible with single-item measures. A variety of preliminary analyses were first conducted to identify items that were relatively homogeneous and internally consistent; once identified and scored appropriately, these homogeneous items were summed to form multi-item composites. Table I lists the reliability estimates (i.e., coefficient alpha) and descriptive statistics for each composite. (The full 34 × 34 correlation matrix that includes all predictors and self-labeling is available from the first author upon request.) Subsections below provide details about constructs of interest for the current study; we present them according to their relevant model, beginning with the Stimulus Factors Models as the self-labeling item fell within this section of the survey.

⁵Although the number of respondents with complete data varied

for each model tested due to missing data, we analyzed data, on average, from 15,104 male and female respondents to the survey.

Table I. Construct Measurement^a

Constructs		# items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
Self-labeling		1	3.08	1.41	— ^b
Stimulus factors					
Type of experience	Presence of sexist hostility	1	.53	.50	— ^b
	Presence of sexual hostility	1	.44	.50	— ^b
	Presence of unwanted sexual attention	1	.25	.43	— ^b
	Presence of sexual coercion	1	.04	.21	— ^b
Frequency of experience	Frequency	23 ^c	1.88	1.80	.53 ^d
Perpetrator power	Number of supervisory perpetrators	1	.70	.77	— ^b
Personal factors					
Demographic/attitudinal characteristics	Beliefs of little sex discrimination in military	2	5.69	2.02	.57
	Negative sexual harassment attitudes	2	4.92	1.79	.63
	Emotional commitment	5	16.83	3.94	.76
	Behavioral commitment	6	20.69	4.57	.79
	Knowledge of sexual harassment	2	5.86	1.76	.57
Affective response	Primary appraisal	4	8.60	4.16	.82
	Psychological disruption	3	3.58	2.70	.63
	Work-related outcomes	4	3.67	4.44	.89
Organizational factors					
Climate	Perceptions of implementation	11	-1.89	8.06	.90
	Resources	4	5.54	2.11	.75
Training	Training knowledge	4	2.68	1.64	.91
	Perceived effectiveness	1	2.81	.84	— ^b
	Length of training	1	1.93	1.47	— ^b

^aConstructs are included in this table when mean descriptive information was considered of value to understanding the nature of the analyses.

^bCronbach's alpha does not apply to binary indices.

^cThe maximum number of items is 23. Because respondents endorsed only those items that were part of their specific experiences, the actual number of items endorsed varied a fair amount, as indicated with the descriptive statistics.

^dAs discussed by Mazzeo et al. (2001), coefficient alpha of the SEQ-DoD One Situation is likely to be underestimated given the manner in which respondents provide details of a single incident rather than patterns of experiences over time.

Stimulus Factors Models and Self-Labeling

Respondents answered 23 items about any unwanted sex-related experiences in the military during the previous 12 months. These items, largely based on Fitzgerald et al.'s (1988) *Sexual Experiences Questionnaire* (SEQ), are referred to as the *SEQ-DoD*. The SEQ is widely used, has excellent psychometric properties (Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995; Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995), and is generally regarded as the best paper-and-pencil instrument available for assessing harassment experiences (Arvey & Cavanaugh, 1995; for a recent review of the SEQ, see Gutek, Murphy, & Douma, 2004). In addition to the SEQ items, several new items were written for the *SEQ-DoD* (e.g., "How often during the past 12 months have you been in situations involving military personnel... where one or more of these individuals... whistled, called, or hooted at you in a sexual way?"). Factor analyses reported in Fitzgerald, Magley, Drasgow, and Waldo (1999) indicate the *SEQ-DoD* taps four underlying dimen-

sions of unwanted sex-related experiences: *sexist hostility*, *sexual hostility*, *unwanted sexual attention*, and *sexual coercion*—where the first three map onto the traditional legal definition of hostile work environment (HWE) sexual harassment and the latter onto *quid pro quo* (QPQ) sexual harassment. Because the items inquire about *specific behaviors*, they are less subjective and provide a more accurate assessment than asking respondents if they have been sexually harassed, if they have experienced unwanted sexual attention, and the like.

Following completion of the *SEQ-DoD* items, respondents were asked to consider, of the experiences they had had, the "situation that had the greatest effect on them"; they then indicated which of the 23 *SEQ-DoD* behaviors they had encountered during this situation. We summed these dichotomously scored indicators of their "One Situation" to obtain a simple frequency count of the behaviors that comprised the One Situation, which we used for the Frequency of Experience model. In addition, based on the factor structure of the *SEQ-DoD* (which

was recently confirmed on the One Situation data; Mazzeo, Bergman, Buchanan, Drasgow, & Fitzgerald, 2001), we determined whether the “One Situation” involved each of the four possible types of sexual harassment and dichotomously coded them as presence/absence for the Type of Experiences model.

Participants answered a series of questions about their “One Situation.” The extent to which the participant self-labeled this experience as sexual harassment was assessed with the question “Do you consider this situation to have been sexual harassment?” Participants responded on a 5-point scale that ranged from “definitely not sexual harassment” to “definitely was sexual harassment.” Although the mean (3.08) and standard deviation (1.41) indicate a centered distribution, most interesting is the full frequency distribution. That is, virtually equal proportions of participants endorsed every response option: 19.8% endorsed “definitely was not sexual harassment,” 17.1% endorsed “probably was not sexual harassment,” 19.1% endorsed “uncertain,” 23.9% endorsed “probably was sexual harassment,” and 20.2% endorsed “definitely was sexual harassment.” Finally, we operationalized Perpetrator Power as the number of perpetrators who were higher in rank and/or status than the victim; there were seven such options from which respondents could choose, including, for example, the “immediate military supervisor” and the “unit commander.”

Personal Factors Models

Again, respondents were first queried on various background and career issues. For the Demographic/Attitudinal Characteristics model, we were interested in participants’ sex, age, marital status, education, tenure, and current pay grade. We retained age and tenure as continuous variables for inclusion in the model; although education is not explicitly a continuous variable, we retained the nine levels provided in the dataset (they ranged from 1 for “no high school diploma” to 9 for “graduate degree”). We coded the categorical variables as follows: sex (0, male; 1, female) and marital status (0, currently unmarried; 1, currently married). Finally, based on information provided by the DoD, we recoded current pay grade into seven levels (E1–E3, E4, E5–E6, E7–E9, W1–W5, O1–O3, and O4 and above), such that a higher value indicates higher organizational status in the military.

In addition to these predictors, five non-demographic predictors related to individual differences were measured as part of the Demographic/Attitudinal Characteristics model: (1) beliefs that there is little sex discrimination in the military, (2) negative attitudes toward sexual harassment, (3) emotional commitment, (4) behavioral commitment, and (5) knowledge about sexual harassment. Participants’ beliefs that there is little sex discrimination in the military were assessed with a two-item composite (“Men and women have equal opportunities for promotion in my Service” [reverse-scored] and “Men have an unfair advantage over women when it comes to having a successful military career”), and participants’ negative attitudes toward sexual harassment were assessed with a two-item composite (“Much of what women call sexual harassment is actually just a misunderstanding” and “Too much attention has been paid to sexual harassment in the past several years”). In both cases, participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statements on 5-point Likert scales, such that higher values indicate stronger agreement with the construct.

Emotional and behavioral commitment were assessed with five- and six-item composites, respectively, which ask the respondents to indicate on a 5-point Likert scale the extent to which they agree with statements related to their commitment—either emotionally or behaviorally—to the military organization. A sample item for the emotional commitment composite is “I feel myself to be part of this organization”; a sample item for the behavioral commitment composite is “Being a member of this organization inspires me to do the best job I can.” Higher scores on both of these indicate a higher degree of allegiance to the armed services. Finally, knowledge about sexual harassment was assessed with a two-item composite that asks participants the extent to which they know what kinds of actions constitute sexual harassment and the extent to which they understand the process for reporting sexual harassment. Participants responded to both of the knowledge items on a 5-point scale (0 for “not at all” to 4 for “very large extent”) such that a higher value indicates greater knowledge.

With respect to the Affective Response model, the first predictor, primary appraisal, consisted of a four-item composite related to the extent to which the victim appraised the incident as upsetting and threatening. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they found the harassing situation to be annoying, offensive, disturbing,

and threatening. The second variable, psychological disruption, consisted of three items that ask respondents the extent to which they became embarrassed and upset as a result of the harassing incident. Finally, the work outcomes variable was assessed with four items that represent the perceived negative effects of the situation on the victim's work (e.g., "My feelings about being in the military service were negatively affected"). Participants responded on a 5-point scale for items that assess all three affect variables (0 for "not at all" to 4 for "very large extent").

Organizational Factors Models

We created the predictor variables in the Job-Gender Context model by crossing the gender context of the victim's work environment and the location in which the harassment occurred. The gender context of the victim's work environment was assessed with two items that ask whether the respondent worked "in a military occupational specialty not usually held by personnel of your gender" (i.e., non-traditional job) and "in a work environment where personnel of your gender are uncommon" (i.e., non-traditional environment) and with two items that ask about the gender of the respondent's immediate supervisor and coworkers (same or different from the victim). The location of the harassment was also assessed with two items, the first of which asked whether the situation had occurred at work or some other place, and the second of which asked whether the situation occurred during duty hours or off-duty. Respondents answered both of these latter questions using a 4-point scale (1 for "none of it occurred at work/during duty hours" to 4 for "all of it occurred at work/during duty hours"); we considered values of 3 or 4 to indicate experiences that occurred at work or during duty hours.

The final section of the survey asked respondents their opinions concerning a variety of military personnel policies, with particular emphasis on gender-related issues. Based on work conducted by Hunter-Williams et al. (1999), we created multi-item composites that assess two aspects of the military climate toward sexual harassment for use in our Climate model. Eleven items assessed the extent to which respondents perceived their military unit to implement practices to curb sexual harassment (e.g., "Senior leadership of my Service makes honest and reasonable efforts to stop sexual harassment"), and four items gauged dissemination of resources for

managing harassment situations (e.g., "Is your current duty station publicizing the availability of formal complaint channels?"). Response options for items in both of these composites ranged from standard 5-point Likert scales (i.e., "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree") to dichotomously scored "yes/no" responses; because of this variation in response scale, we standardized all items before forming composites.

Finally, the Training model included three components of sexual harassment awareness training. First, length of training was assessed with an item that asks respondents to indicate on a 7-point scale ("I haven't received any training" to "5 days or more") how much training they had had during the previous 12 months. Training knowledge, that is the various aspects of knowledge the participant acquired through the training programs (e.g., policies, procedures for reporting sexual harassment), was assessed with a four-item composite. Finally, perceived effectiveness was assessed with one item that asks respondents to indicate on a 4-point scale (1 for "not at all effective" to 4 for "very effective") how effective they thought the training was in "making personnel aware of behaviors which might be seen as sexual harassment."

RESULTS

In each regression analysis, the criterion variable was the acknowledgment of sexual harassment as assessed with the self-labeling question. Models were tested from the most simplistic to the most inclusive. Specifically, all predictor variables for a model were first entered in a single block within each model separately. Significant predictors were then tested against others within the particular class of models (e.g., personal factors). Finally, a single model including all remaining significant predictors was tested. We built to this final, combined model in an effort to isolate those factors that were most predictive of self-labeling sexual harassment.

Stimulus Factors Models

Frequency Model

The first stimulus model tested was based on the frequency count of sexual harassment incidents experienced in participants' One Situation; this model accounted for 8% of the variance in self-labeling (see Table II). Results of the regression analyses

Table II. Initial Test of Stimulus Factors in the Prediction of Self-Labeling

Model	Predictor	β	R^2	n
Frequency of experience	Frequency	.29***	.08	15,494
	Type of experience			
Type of experience	Presence of sexist hostility	.14***	.09	15,494
	Presence of sexual hostility	.14***		
	Presence of unwanted sexual attention	.26***		
	Presence of sexual coercion	.13***		
Perpetrator power	Number of supervisory perpetrators	.17***	.03	16,115
Combined stimulus factors	Presence of sexist hostility	-.01	.13	15,406
	Presence of sexual hostility	.03**		
	Presence of unwanted sexual attention	.17***		
	Presence of sexual coercion	.06***		
	Frequency	.18***		
	Number of supervisory perpetrators	.14***		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

indicated that the frequency of sexual harassment did predict self-labeling. As expected, victims of a greater number of harassing incidents were significantly more likely to label the target incident as sexual harassment.

Type of Experience Model

The Type of Experience model accounted for a total of 9% of the variance in self-labeling. Presence of any of the four types of harassment—sexist hostility, sexual hostility, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion—significantly predicted self-labeling.

Perpetrator Power Model

Regression analyses indicated that, consistent with our predictions, perpetrator power was significantly and positively related to the self-labeling of sexual harassment and it accounted for 3% of the variance in self-labeling.

Combined Stimulus Factors Model

All of the stimulus factor predictors were significant in the above individual models and were, thus, included in the single, combined model. Those that retained their significance also retained their directional relation with self-labeling as discussed above; presence of sexist hostility no longer significantly predicted self-labeling. (Out of concern that our frequency measure did not account for the full frequency of each specific behavior experienced in respondents' specific incident, we also ran both the first frequency model and the combined stimulus

model with sexual harassment frequency measured as the full SEQ-DoD response to those behaviors endorsed as comprising the specific incident. Results were substantively and practically identical to those presented above.)

Personal Factors Models

Demographic and Attitudinal Characteristics Model

The Personal Characteristics model included 11 predictors related to individual differences in the victims, six demographic predictors and five attitudinal predictors (see Table III). Results of regression analyses using the demographic predictors accounted for 15% of the variance in self-labeling and indicated that *age* and *marital status* did not significantly predict self-labeling, whereas *gender* did significantly predict self-labeling, such that women were far more likely than men to self-label. *Pay grade* did significantly predict self-labeling, such that military personnel in the lower pay grade categories were more likely to self-label. In terms of the other demographic variables, *tenure* did not significantly predict self-labeling, whereas *education* did significantly predict self-labeling, such that more highly educated individuals were less likely to label their experiences as harassment.⁶

⁶Given serious confounding between education and pay grade, $\chi^2(48, N = 16,730) = 17,294.74, p < .0001$, we tested this model two additional times; the first time we controlled for education in a first block in the regression, adding pay grade in the second block and the second time we controlled for pay grade in a first block, adding education in the second block. These predictors were significant in both blocks of the model, which suggests that each added uniquely to the prediction of self-labeling.

Table III. Initial Test of Personal Factors in the Prediction of Self-Labeling

Model	Predictor	β	R^2	n
Demographic/attitudinal characteristics	Age	-.03	.15	13,573
	Gender	.18***		
	Marital status	-.01		
	Pay grade	-.06***		
	Tenure	-.02		
	Education	-.04**		
	Beliefs of little sex discrimination in military	-.07***		
	Negative sexual harassment attitudes	-.23***		
	Emotional commitment	-.13***		
	Behavioral commitment	.07***		
Affective response	Knowledge of sexual harassment	-.04***	.26	15,428
	Primary appraisal	.37***		
	Psychological disruption	.17***		
Combined personal factors	Work-related outcomes	.00	.30	14,615
	Gender	.11***		
	Pay grade	-.05***		
	Education	-.02		
	Beliefs of little sex discrimination in military	-.03***		
	Negative sexual harassment attitudes	-.15***		
	Emotional commitment	-.01		
	Behavioral commitment	.01		
	Knowledge of sexual harassment	-.03***		
Primary appraisal	.31***			
Psychological disruption	.15***			

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

All five of the non-demographic variables significantly predicted self-labeling. As expected, *beliefs that there is little sex discrimination in the military*, *negative attitudes toward sexual harassment*, and *emotional commitment* were all negatively related to self-labeling, whereas *knowledge about sexual harassment* was positively related to self-labeling. However, contrary to predictions, *behavioral commitment* was positively related to self-labeling.

Affective Response Model

The Affect model included three predictor variables related to the victim's experience of negative emotional and behavioral consequences of the harassment and accounted for 26% of the variance in self-labeling—the strongest of any individual model. Regression analyses indicated that both the primary appraisal and the psychological disruption variables significantly predicted self-labeling: victims who had more negative appraisal or experienced more negative emotional consequences as a result of the incident were more likely to label it as sexual harassment. However, inconsistent with our prediction and the results of previous research, the work out-

comes variable was not a significant predictor of self-labeling.

Combined Personal Factors Model

When we tested the significant personal factor predictors that remained from the above individual models in a single model, all significant predictors retained their directional relation with self-labeling as indicated above; however, several predictors were rendered non-significant. Specifically, with this wide array of personal factors, education, emotional commitment, and behavioral commitment no longer influenced self-labeling.

Organizational Factors Models

Job–Gender Context Model

Results of regression analyses indicated that only one job–gender context variable was a significant predictor of the self-labeling of harassment, and it accounted for 1% of the variance in self-labeling (see Table IV). Victims who were harassed while

Table IV. Initial Test of Organizational Factors in the Prediction of Self-Labeling

Model	Predictor	β	R^2	n
Job-gender context	Other-sex supervisor and occurred at work	.03	.01	16,291
	Other-sex coworkers and occurred at work	-.02		
	Non-traditional job and occurred at work	-.01		
	Non-traditional environment and occurred at work	.03		
	Other-sex supervisor and occurred on duty	.02		
	Other-sex coworkers and occurred on duty	.07*		
	Non-traditional job and occurred on duty	.03		
	Non-traditional environment and occurred on duty	.00		
Climate	Perceptions of implementation	-.28***	.08	15,442
	Resources	-.01		
Training	Training knowledge	-.06***	.03	12,509
	Perceived training effectiveness	-.14***		
	Length of training	.01		
Combined organizational factors	Other-sex coworkers and occurred on duty	.07***	.08	12,147
	Perceptions of implementation	-.24***		
	Training knowledge	-.02		
	Perceived training effectiveness	-.04***		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

on-duty in a workplace that consisted mostly of co-workers of the other sex were more likely to label the sexual harassment than were victims who were harassed while off-duty in a workplace that consisted mostly of co-workers of the same sex.

Climate Model

The regression model to examine climate influences on self-labeling accounted for 8% of the variance in self-labeling. Although the provision of resources for victims of sexual harassment did not contribute to victims' self-labeling, as perceptions of the implementation of policy increased, self-labeling decreased—a pattern the opposite of what we predicted.

Sexual Harassment Awareness Training Model

Three variables related to different aspects of sexual harassment training—length of training, training knowledge, and perceived effectiveness of training—were included in the model and accounted for 3% of the variance in self-labeling. Regression analyses indicated that, although length of training was not significantly related to the self-labeling of the situation as harassment, both training knowledge and perceived effectiveness were significant predictors of the self-labeling criterion. However, contrary to our predictions, training knowledge and perceived effectiveness were negatively related to self-labeling—

victims with more sexual harassment knowledge and victims who perceived the training to be more effective were *less* likely to label their experiences as harassment.

Combined Organizational Factors Model

When we tested the significant organizational factor predictors that remained from the above individual models in a single, combined model, all significant predictors again retained their directional relation with self-labeling as indicated above. With this broader set of predictors, training knowledge no longer was found to influence self-labeling.

Combined Models Simultaneously Predicting Self-Labeling

In an effort to examine most carefully the predictors of self-labeling, we wanted to test simultaneously the influence of all of the potential predictors that remained from the above three combined models. As found previously when we combined models, the direction of the relation between the remaining significant predictors and self-labeling remained the same as the results of the individual tests of the eight models (see Table V). As would be expected, when we took into account all of the predictors, the magnitude of some of the predictors changed a bit (i.e., with presence of sexist hostility, frequency of experience, and perceptions of policy implementation). Several

Table V. Final Test of Remaining Statistically Significant Factors in the Prediction of Self-Labeling

Model	Predictor	β	R^2	n
Stimulus factors	Presence of sexual hostility	.08***	.34	11,031
	Presence of unwanted sexual attention	.15***		
	Presence of sexual coercion	.02*		
	Frequency	.06***		
	Number of supervisory perpetrators	.00		
Personal factors	Gender	.11***		
	Pay grade	-.04***		
	Beliefs of little sex discrimination in military	-.01		
	Negative sexual harassment attitudes	-.12***		
	Knowledge of sexual harassment	.02**		
	Primary appraisal	.29***		
Organizational factors	Psychological disruption	.11***		
	Other-sex coworkers and occurred on duty	.01		
	Perceptions of implementation	-.09***		
	Perceived training effectiveness	-.04***		

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

predictors—beliefs about discrimination, presence of sexual coercion, perpetrator power, and the only remaining job–gender context variable (other-sex coworkers and occurred on duty)—were rendered non-significant with the test of the complete, combined model.

Given the strong influence of stimulus factors on self-labeling (e.g., Stockdale & Vaux, 1993), we wanted to assess the impact of personal and organizational factors on self-labeling after controlling for stimulus factors. To accomplish this, we ran a hierarchical regression in which we added stimulus factors in the first block and added personal and organizational factors in a second block to determine if they accounted for a significant amount of variance over and above that already explained by the stimulus factors. Stimulus factors alone accounted for 12.9% of the variance in self-labeling, $F(5, 11026) = 325.80$, $p < .0001$. Personal and organizational factors contributed an additional 21.2% in the prediction of self-labeling, $F\text{-change}(10, 11016) = 353.17$, $p < .0001$. (Betas for the full model are identical to those presented in Table V.)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to extend current understanding of what predicts the self-labeling of sexual harassment, based on a large sample of military personnel and situated within a schema framework. To accomplish this, we tested eight theoretically and empirically derived models of personal, stimulus-related and organizational predictors

of self-labeling using regression analysis and gradually built them into one larger model predicting self-labeling.

Results of the analyses indicated that, consistent with prior theory and research (Giuffre & Williams, 1994; Magley et al., 1999; Stockdale et al., 1995), multiple factors influence the extent to which victims label their experiences as sexual harassment, with personal factors representing the most important set of predictors. Specifically, one demographic variable (gender), two affective variables (primary appraisal of and psychological disruption perceived to be related to the incident), and two cognitive variables (negative attitudes toward sexual harassment and sexual harassment knowledge), significantly predicted self-labeling and were related to the criterion in the expected direction. In addition, as predicted, type of experience (sexual hostility and unwanted sexual attention) and frequency of the harassing behaviors—all stimulus factors—were positively related to the self-labeling criterion; although significantly contributing to the variance in self-labeling, these stimulus factors did not overpower the effects of personal and organizational factors.

Although results provided supportive evidence for many of our predictions, there was also one personal variable (pay grade) and several organizational variables (training length, training knowledge, perceived training effectiveness, distribution of resources, and perceptions of policy implementation) that were shown to have no relation or an unexpected relation with the propensity to self-label. Interestingly, several of these predictors are related to knowledge, education, and training. Based

on research on schema formation and accessibility, we expected victims who were more highly educated, more knowledgeable, and had longer, more effective training on sexual harassment issues to be more likely to form comprehensive, well-informed schemas and to access the schemas and use the sexual harassment label to apply to their experiences. Results indicated that the opposite was actually the case—those who felt the policies were better implemented and better trained victims were *less* likely to self-label their experiences.

Why Don't Victims Self-Label Sexual Harassment?

The primary goal in most organizational training programs is the acquisition of *knowledge, skills, and abilities* (KSAs) from the training program and the transfer of these KSAs to a specific organizational context (e.g., Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Although the specific KSAs that are targeted in sexual harassment training vary to some extent with the type of program and target audience, the understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment is typically a fundamental component of training. Thus, one would expect individuals who participate in extensive, effective training to have a relatively good understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. Indeed, we found relatively large, positive correlations between knowledge and both training length and training effectiveness ($r = .67$ and $r = .38$, respectively). It follows that more extensive, effective training on sexual harassment theoretically should lead to well-developed, easily accessible sexual harassment schemas and should therefore prompt more labeling of sexual harassment. Although previous research suggests that this is true for the labeling of harassment when *others* are the victims (Wilkerson, 1999), our results indicate that it does not hold true in the case of *self-labeling*. On the contrary, better trained victims and victims who felt policies were better implemented were actually less likely to self-label.

This pattern of results suggests that the self-labeling phenomenon is more complicated than previously assumed. What other processes are operating to prevent a knowledgeable, well-trained victim from labeling her experiences as sexual harassment? If we assume that self-labeling requires both the *ability* to recognize sexual harassment and the *motivation* to internalize the label, there are at least two possibilities: (1) the general knowledge that one gains

through formal education or sexual harassment training leads to an increased ability to recognize sexual harassment in the abstract, or when it is perpetrated against others, but not when it is perpetrated against oneself; or (2) more knowledgeable victims of sexual harassment are motivated to resist internalizing the label.

The latter explanation is consistent with the premises of labeling theory. Briefly, labeling theory was originally developed to describe the dynamics between societal forces, labels, and deviant behavior of the mentally ill (e.g., Lemert, 1951). More recent conceptions of the theory focus more on motivations of the mentally ill to resist the labels placed on them by society. Specifically, individuals are motivated to reject negative labels out of concern for their self-concept and in order to maintain a consistent self-image (Link, Cullen, Struening, Shrout, & Dohrenwend, 1989). Societal stereotypes describing sexual harassment victims as “whiners,” losers, or instigators of the harassment (e.g., Koss, 1990) may well lead individuals to perceive the label of sexual harassment “victim” as quite negative. According to the rationale of labeling theory, resisting the sexual harassment label may act as a preventive coping mechanism for dealing with the possible negative repercussions to one's self-esteem and self-image—issues that may be particularly relevant within the masculine, hierarchical culture of the military.

In a related vein, victims may be motivated to resist the label for reasons implied by the theory of belief in a just-world (Lerner, 1980), which claims we believe that people tend to get what they deserve. Based on this rationale, in order for a victim to admit that she was sexually harassed, she must acknowledge that she did something to deserve the demoralizing and offensive treatment. Obviously, victims would likely be motivated to avoid such thought patterns. In addition to managing impressions of themselves and their own self-concepts, victims of harassment might be motivated to resist the sexual harassment label in order to manage *others'* impressions. Given that women who label their harassment are viewed unfavorably by others on a variety of dimensions (Marin & Guadagno, 1999), this apprehension seems warranted.

Although it is possible that many victims of sexual harassment are able to label hypothetical incidents as harassment but do not label their own experiences due to the motivational reasons outlined above, it is also possible that there are *cognitive* reasons for the seeming inconsistency. Specifically, it is

possible that individuals who have a well-developed schema of harassment readily perceive and label *hypothetical* incidents as harassment but perceive them quite differently when they occur in the context of their own lives. Although this may seem counterintuitive, there is a substantial literature demonstrating the so-called actor–observer bias (i.e., actor–observer differences in the perceptions of events) in a variety of contexts (e.g., Jones & Nisbett, 1971). Perhaps most relevant is the convincing use of the actor–observer bias to describe similar labeling results in the context of another common form of victimization—partner violence (Hamby & Gray-Little, 2000). Similarly, a number of studies on job-related discrimination by Crosby suggest that people have a harder time recognizing personal discrimination than discrimination aimed at others (see Crosby, Cordova, & Jaskar, 1993), and it is likely that there is a cognitive basis for this “denial of personal discrimination” phenomenon (Crosby, Clayton, Alksnis, & Hemker, 1986). This literature suggests that it may be short-sighted to blame victims for their intentional denial (a coping mechanism which is often characterized as pathological); indeed, there is mounting evidence that a cognitive bias may be operating instead.

In addition to the motivational and cognitive reasons outlined above, it is possible that the negative relation between training and self-labeling is related to the distinction between the psychological definition and legal definition of sexual harassment. Because they are widely available, are interpretable and have direct organizational implications, many organizational training programs on sexual harassment use the legal criteria as a basis for understanding and discussing harassment. However, research suggests that these legal criteria are not necessarily inclusive of women’s psychological or experiential definition of harassment (Fitzgerald, 1990; Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magley, 1997). Thus, it may be possible for a woman to experience and label a specific incident as harassment before training but not label it as harassment following a training program based on the stricter legal definition of harassment.

Is Self-Labeling Important?

One obvious implication of our results is that although sexual harassment training programs may be effective in reaching many objectives (Magley et al., 1999; Wilkerson, 1999), they are ineffective in terms of increasing self-labeling. This leads to the obvious

question—is self-labeling an appropriate training objective? Is it important, either at an individual level or at an organizational level?

An accumulating body of research indicates that victims who do not label their experiences as harassment fare no worse than victims who do self-label. Indeed, self-labelers and non-labelers apparently endure the same negative psychological, work-related and health outcomes (Magley et al., 1999; Munson, Miner, & Hulin, 2001). Thus, one could argue that at least in terms of the potential consequences of harassment to the victim, self-labeling does not appear to be important. However, it could also be argued that labeling an offensive behavior as “sexual harassment” would be beneficial to the victim in other ways. Proponents of feminist standpoint theory, for example, might suggest that self-labeling provides women with an opportunity to reclaim their “lost voices” (Gilligan, 1982) allowing for a “desilencing” in these women and ultimately providing a mechanism for challenging the power of men (Gergen, 2001).

Similarly, feminist social constructionists may claim that the use of the sexual harassment label should give the incidents meaning within a social context. The label, like other elements of language, provides a frame through which victims can perceive and understand their experiences, a process which may well lead to a transfer of blame from oneself to the perpetrator. Social constructionists could even argue that the potential implications extend beyond the victims—the use of the term sexual harassment allows for the possibility of political change that would otherwise be unlikely, and draws together people with similar experiences, serving to “solidify the social connections among them” (Gergen, 2001, p. 31). Finally, the self-labeling of harassment could be important from an organizational level as it represents the first step in determining the actual incidence and scope of harassment within the organization, which in turn should inform organizational policy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Perhaps the most limiting feature of this work is the measurement of constructs available from the 1995 DoD dataset. Although this dataset is quite rich with respect to its breadth, sampling method, and number of respondents, it sacrifices solid construct measurement for breadth of constructs. As evidenced by the minimally acceptable internal consistency among several of our multi-item composites,

future research could benefit from more careful construct measurement.

A second methodological concern relates to the study's reliance on non-experimental, cross-sectional data. Although the literature suggests the presence of a causal relation between the personal, stimulus, and organizational factors and self-labeling, we recognize that cross-sectional, correlational data do not allow for causal inferences and are therefore limited in their scope and implications (e.g., Newcomb, 1990). However, it could be argued that the decision to use cross-sectional, rather than longitudinal data in the current study is justifiable given the early stage of research in this area. Specifically, cross-sectional data allow a relatively inexpensive and efficient test of the theoretical framework and hypothesized relations that is useful before undertaking the much more time consuming and costly experimental or longitudinal research (Markel & Frone, 1998). Thus, although we acknowledge that experimental or longitudinal research represents an important pursuit for the future, we also recognize that, given the study's purposes and the state of knowledge in this domain, cross-sectional research can also play an important role.

Similarly, because we utilized archival data, we were unable to specifically assess the possibility that schema formation and accessibility explicitly mediate the relations among personal, stimulus, and organizational factors with self-labeling. However, given the theory explicating purposes of the study and the very limited literature related to cognitive processes underlying self-labeling, we believe this exploratory methodology was quite appropriate. A useful next step would include the explicit measurement of the sexual harassment schema.

Although framing self-labeling within the cognitive schema literature broadens the theoretical rationale for our arguments, it was not entirely sufficient for accounting for the complexities inherent in the self-labeling process. Within the cognitive psychological literature, more recent effort has been placed into understanding cognitions from what are called *neural networks* (e.g., Martindale, 1991). Specifically, neural networks suggest that cognitions are intricately woven connections of pieces of information. Activation of any piece of information can lead to activation of a related piece of information; however, such connections are more or less likely to be activated given experience with the larger set of relations. Additionally, contextual cues can influence the activation of connections. Future work on self-

labeling sexual harassment could examine such complex modeling.

When asked about their more general experiences of sexual harassment (i.e., not their specific incident upon which we based the primary analyses for this study), approximately 78% of the female and 38% of the male military personnel had experienced at least one instance of unwanted sex-related behavior in the previous 12 months (Fitzgerald et al., 1999). However, only 24% of those men and 65% of those women who had endorsed any of the harassment items called even some of these general experiences "sexual harassment." Clearly, such discrepancy is what leads to an examination of what predicts self-labeling. An interesting path for future research might be to investigate what victims are naming their experiences, if not "sexual harassment." From previously mentioned discussions, naming victimization is an important psychological process. Examining more carefully the alternative "names" that sexual harassment carries might provide considerable insight into the psychology of sexual harassment.

CONCLUSION

There is an inherent association between self-labeling and the use of organizational grievance procedures in that it is unlikely that victims would file complaints without having first labeled their experiences as sexual harassment (Magley et al., 1999). Given this, the study of self-labeling sexual harassment is a crucial organizational issue. When considering the meager impact that training had on self-labeling, organizations certainly need to consider how best to establish mechanisms for preventing the occurrence of sexual harassment without relying upon victims coming forward. Without such preventative measures, employees – particularly those who are traditionally underrepresented, such as women in the military and other male-dominated workplaces – remain vulnerable to hostile experiences that have been widely found to wield significant negative impact on psychological and work-related states.

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