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Sexualized Victims of Stranger Harassment and Victim Blaming: The Moderating Role of Right-Wing Authoritarianism

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Abstract

A growing body of research documents the adverse effects of sexualized appearance on people's attitudes toward women victims of blatant forms of gender violence. However, the impact of sexualization of women victims of subtle forms of gender violence and the moderating role of people's conservativism on victim blaming remain under-investigated. In the current study, we examined the effects of sexualization on blame attribution to victims of a stranger harassment incident, considering the moderating role of participants' Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA). Two hundred and thirty-six participants (31.8% male; $M_{age} = 30.52$, $SD = 12.70$) completed an RWA scale and then read a fictitious Facebook's post where the victim herself described the stranger harassment episode that happened down the street (vs. at a house party). The post was presented with a sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) portrayal of the victim. Finally, participants rated the severity of the episode and expressed to what extent they blamed the victim. As predicted, harassment at the house party (vs. down the street) was perceived as less severe, and sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) victims were blamed to a greater extent. Our major results revealed that people's RWA synergizes with the victim's sexualization in shaping blame attribution. People with an average and a high level of RWA tend to blame to a greater extent the sexualized victim of stranger harassment, while blame attributions did not change according to victim's sexualization for people with a low level of RWA.

Keywords Sexualization · Right-Wing Authoritarianism · Victim blaming · Stranger harassment

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Introduction

The sexualized portrayal of women and girls by Western media has constantly increased in the last decades. Consequently, sexualized practices of clothing have become the norm in clothing choices for several girls and women (Allen and Gervais 2012). Despite the success of the sexualized practices of clothing, research has shown that people react negatively to a sexualized appearance, perceiving sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) women as less than fully human (Vaes et al. 2011) and as possessing less mind (Loughnan et al. 2010; for reviews see Loughnan and Pacilli 2014; Ward 2016).

In the context of extreme forms of gender violence, a relevant line of research has specifically examined the consequences of a sexualized appearance, highlighting its crucial role in shaping attitudes towards mistreated women. For instance, as concerns rape crimes, people perceive sexualized vs. non-sexualized rape victims as less affected by the sexual assault and as needing less time to get over it (Loughnan et al. 2013). Further, sexualized victims are more blamed (Loughnan et al. 2013), with the responsibility of the incident often shifting from the rapist to the victim herself (Bernard et al. 2015). A sexualized appearance negatively affects the perception and evaluation of victims of intimate partner violence as well. In particular, Pacilli et al. (2017) found that the perception of sexualized vs. non-sexualized women victimized by their partners as less capable of suffering diminished people's willingness to provide help to them.

By focusing mostly on blatant forms, research has under-investigated the perception of the sexualized victims of subtler forms of gender violence. A relevant case of a common and subtle gender violence is stranger harassment, that can be defined as unwanted sexual attentions—either based on verbal (e.g., sexual remark) or non-verbal (e.g., catcalls and unwelcome physical contacts) behaviors—perpetrated by unknown men towards women in public space (Bowman 1993). To the best of our knowledge in the present work we have been the first who investigated the consequences of sexualization on the evaluation of victims of a stranger harassment incident, considering the moderating role of participants' political standpoint, operationalized as Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA: see Altemeyer 1981).

When examining attitudes towards mistreated women, research on sexualization has investigated the appearance of the victims as a unique antecedent of people's negative attitudes toward them. Thus, the role of individuals' ideological standpoint in affecting the relationship between sexualization and negative judgments of gender violence victims has been overlooked (but see Cikara et al. 2011 for the moderating role of hostile sexism). Drawing upon these two gaps, this study attempted to extend the research literature by jointly investigating the interactive role of victim's sexualization and people's ideological standpoints on the perception of women victims of stranger harassment.

Stranger Harassment

Stranger harassment is a common experience for most women around the globe: The 81.5% of European and the 85% of U.S. women report experiences of stranger harassment (Livingston et al. 2015). Stranger harassment can be considered as a symbolic device of a sexist culture that reminds women that public spaces are men's

prerogative (Gardner 1995; Thompson 1993). By merely being in a public area, women violate this gendered territoriality, and thus they can be treated not as persons, but as bodies available for men's unwanted sexual desire (Davidson et al. 2015; Fairchild and Rudman 2008). Even though stranger harassment is often dismissed as an innocuous, normal, and even romantic experience in women's lives (e.g., "*it is just compliment*"), the literature provided evidence that it is a social problem that negatively affects women's lives. Research found that stranger harassment shapes women's perceptions of social environments, transforming public domains in hostile environments for them. Indeed, stranger harassment is associated with fear of rape (Macmillan et al. 2000), perceived likelihood of being victim of gender crimes (but not of non-gender crimes; Donnelly and Calogero 2018), restriction of movement (Fairchild and Rudman 2008), and alteration of habitual transportations routes (Livingston et al. 2015). It has also been shown that situational characteristics and personal beliefs can alter women's perception of stranger harassment. Indeed, stranger harassment is considered less severe when the harasser is an attractive young man (Fairchild 2010), when the episode takes place in a bar (vs. a store and a park: McCarty et al. 2014; Fairchild 2010), and when the harassed woman considers the current gender relations as fair (Saunders et al. 2016).

Although interesting, these studies, focusing mostly on the effects of women's experience of stranger harassment, overlook the broader social perception of the phenomenon and its victims. An exception is a work by Saunders et al. (2016), who demonstrated that men high in hostile sexism believe that women harassed by strangers should react to the episodes by making benign attribution and blaming themselves. This preliminary evidence confirms the social nature of the problem and the need for a more in-depth knowledge on how people's attitude toward stranger harassment can contribute to reinforce the imbalanced power between sexes.

Victim Blame and Right-Wing Authoritarianism

The consideration of the victims of gender violence as at least partially responsible for what happened is a widespread practice. Research profusely investigated to disentangle which variables significantly contribute to the allocation of blame to rape victims (Grubb and Turner 2012; Van der Bruggen and Grubb 2014). Among victim characteristics, numerous studies identified victims' physical appearance—such as attire (Edmonds and Cahoon 1986), the amount of revealed skin (Workman and Freeburg 1999), and sexualization (Loughnan et al. 2013)—as crucial factors in undermining the victim's status. Insomuch, as blaming the victim is a bias in the eyes of the perceivers, victim blame is not just about what victim was wearing at the time of the assault.

By trivializing gender violence, one of the primary functions of victim blame is maintaining the gender hierarchy and status quo of gender relations (Kay et al. 2005). Indeed, the adherence to a conservative ideology is an important predictor of derogation of gender violence victims (Anderson et al. 1997). While the tendency to blame rape victims has been accounted for by gender-related conservativism (e.g., gender role stereotypes, benevolent sexism), far less is known about the effects of a

broader conservative ideology on the judgement of the victim (Lambert and Raichle 2000; Rollero and Tartaglia 2018).

We suggest that Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) might be an important factor involved in the process of victim blame. RWA is the covariation of three co-existing attitudes: Authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism. Authoritarians are likely to adhere to traditional values, to reject social change and to consider conformity, conservatism, and security as the most relevant social values (Altemeyer 1981, 1988). For its peculiar features, RWA is a predictor of negative attitudes towards deviant and dissident groups, perceived as a threat to the traditional norms, moral values, and the maintenance of the social order (Duckitt 2006). Consistently, authoritarians tend to respond with intolerance and hostility to women who defy traditional gender norms (Jost and Kay 2005; Sibley et al. 2007). Indeed, people with higher level of RWA embrace benevolent sexism (Sibley et al. 2007) and accept to a greater extent rape myths (Manoussaki and Veitch 2015). To the extent that people higher vs. lower in benevolent sexism tend to blame rape victims to a greater extent because they perceive victims' behaviors as inappropriate and transgressive of traditional gender roles (Abrams et al. 2003), we suggest that RWA might significantly moderate people attribution of blame to sexualized women victims of stranger harassment.

The Present Research

Linking the line of research on sexualization and that on victim blame, the aim of the present study was to examine whether people's RWA contributes in shaping social perception of sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) women victims of stranger harassment in different contexts (public: down the street vs. private: at a house party).

As mentioned above, stranger harassment potentially threatens women's presence in public domains by transforming such contexts in hostile environments for them. Indeed, women's perception of stranger harassment changes according to the context where it happens, with stranger harassment down the street and in a park perceived as more severe and threatening than when it occurs in a bar or a store (McCarty et al. 2014; Fairchild 2010). We could expect that in certain contexts such as bars and house parties the climate is permissive and tolerant enough towards the expression of sexual attentions. Consequently, these episodes are perceived as innocuous jokes, rather than proper sexually harassing conducts, while streets could be seen as unsafe places full of ill-intentioned people where such attentions might be an antecedent for sexual assault (McCarty et al. 2014). Thus, we hypothesized that stranger harassment at a house party would be perceived as less severe and harassing compared to the same stranger harassment happening down the street (Hp1).

Studies on victim blame and sexualization demonstrated that people's reaction to gender violence largely depends on victims' physical appearance, with sexualized versus non-sexualized victims perceived as more responsible for their mistreatments (Loughnan et al. 2013). Consistently, we hypothesized that the victim's sexualization would shape assignment of blame to the victims, with sexualized (vs.

non-sexualized) stranger harassment victims considered more responsible for being harassed (Hp2).

Research has argued that women who invade a male domain such as a public space should be prepared to be treated as bodies available for unwanted men's comments and desires (Davidson et al. 2015; Fairchild and Rudman 2008). Thus, we further hypothesized that participants would blame the sexualized victims to a greater extent in the case of stranger harassment down the street (vs. at a house party). In statistical terms, we expected the interaction between the place where the harassment happens and sexualization of the victim to foster victim blame (Hp3).

According to Manoussaki and Veitch (2015), high levels of RWA contribute in shaping the perception of gender violence as not a proper crime but rather as a reaction to women's provocative and suggestive behaviors. Thus, in the case of stranger harassment, it is realistic that participants with higher levels of RWA would consider sexualized women as more responsible for being harassed. Greater responsiblity for being harassed might be particularly true in the case of stranger harassment happening down the street, in a domain where men traditionally have had more access and freedom. Thus, we hypothesized that in the case of stranger harassment occurring down the street, participants with a high level of RWA would perceive sexualized victims as more responsible for being harassed (Hp4).

Method

Design and Participants

A 2 (sexualization: sexualized vs. non-sexualized victim)×2 (context of the stranger harassment: down the street vs. at a house party) between participants experimental design was adopted. An a priori power analysis was conducted for sample size estimation (Faul et al. 2007). It was estimated that a sample size of at least 128 participants was required to observe a medium effect size ($f = .25$) in a F-test with an alpha$= .05$ and power$= .80$. Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling and we reached a slightly superior number, i.e. two hundred and thirty-six Italian participants (31.8% male; $M_{age} = 30.52$, $SD = 12.70$). Out of these participants, 57.6% reported having experienced episodes of stranger harassment directly, with 20% of male and 75.2% of female participants experienced stranger harassment at least once in their life, and 80.9% of the total sample reported having experienced episodes of stranger harassment indirectly (e.g., as the experience of a friend).

Pre-test

First, we conducted an online research for pictures portraying sexualized and non-sexualized women. Based on previous works (e.g., Bernard et al. 2015; Loughnan et al. 2013), two pairs of pictures taken from the Internet were pilot tested with a separate sample of thirty-five participants (8.6% male, $M_{age} = 27.59$, $SD = 9.57$). Sexualized targets were characterized by a revealing attire (e.g., a short dress), while

non-sexualized targets were characterized by casual outfit (e.g., trousers and t-shirt). Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they considered the target provocative, sexy, alluring, sensual, and seductive on a 9-point scale (from $1 = not\ at\ all$ to $9 = very\ much\ so$). Based on $\alpha = .80$, we summated the scores on these items, to compute a perceived sexualization index. In line with the expectation, sexualized targets ($M = 5.42$, $SD = 1.50$) were perceived significantly more sexualized that non-sexualized targets ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.14$), $t(32) = 5.56$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = .97$.[1]

Procedure and Materials

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki, and it fulfilled the ethical standard procedure recommended by the Italian Association of Psychology (AIP). Before taking part in the study, participants were informed of their right to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw consent to participate at any time during the study without reprisal. Data collection was conducted using the online software SurveyMonkey.

As already mentioned, participants were recruited through a snowball sampling: Researcher assistants and an undergraduate in psychology sent an e-mail to their contacts asking them the availability to complete a short online questionnaire and to send it to other people. For this reason, our final sample was composed of both students and non-students, randomly assigned to one of the four experimental conditions crossed between *target's sexualization* (sexualized vs. non-sexualized) and *the context where the episode of stranger harassment happened* (down the street vs. at a house party).

Before the experimental manipulation, participants were asked to complete a set of items about their ideological standpoint.

RWA Participants' level of RWA was assessed using ten balanced items from Roccato and Russo's (2015) Italian short version of Altemeyer's (1996) RWA Scale (e.g., "The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get back to our traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas"). Participants indicated their level of agreement to the items on a 4-point scale (from $1 = strongly\ disagree$ to $4 = strongly\ agree$; Cronbach's $\alpha = .73$). Individual RWA levels were computed as summated scores, with high scores indicating high RWA levels.

Manipulation of Women's Sexualization After that, according to their experimental condition participants were presented with one picture of a woman, named Anna, portrayed either in a sexualized or in a non-sexualized manner and were instructed to look carefully at her.

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[1] The two pictures we used in the sexualized target condition were perceived by the participants as similar in terms of the degree of sexualization ($M = 5.22$; $SD = 1.64$ and $M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.63$), $t(31) = 1.95$, $p = .060$, Cohen's $d = .35$. We found the same result for the pictures in the non-sexualized target condition ($M = 3.95$; $SD = 1.41$ and $M = 3.52$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(33) = 1.26$, $p = .215$, Cohen's $d = .22$.

Women's Sexualization Manipulation Check Subsequently, as in the pre-test, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they perceived the target to be provocative, sexy, alluring, sensual, and seductive on a 9-point scale (from 1 = *not at all* to 9 = *very much so*). Based on α = .90, we averaged these items to compute a perceived sexualization index. A *t* test for independent samples showed that our manipulation of sexualization was successful, with sexualized women (*M* = 5.43, *SD* = 1.60) perceived as more sexualized than non-sexualized women (*M* = 3.44, *SD* = 1.38), $t(234) = 10.23$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.33$.

The Harassment Scenario Then, participants were instructed to read carefully Anna's fictitious Facebook's post describing her experience of stranger harassment and to make a series of judgments about her and the scenario. Specifically, according to their experimental condition, participants read that Anna was walking down the street (vs. was at a house party) when she noticed that a man was watching her. The man started to talk to Anna, commenting her physical appearance. When Anna asked him to stop bothering her, he got close to her, making sexual comments and touching her elbow. Notably, given that research literature provided evidence that harassers' age affects the perception of the episode (Fairchild 2010), to avoid confound in how participants imaged the event, we specified that the harasser was about the same age of the victim.

The Harassment Scenario Manipulation Check To check the efficacy of the manipulation of the context of the stranger harassment, we asked participants to indicate whether the episode they read happened at a house party or down the street or whether they did not remember such information. All participants correctly recalled the context of the stranger harassment; thus, our manipulation was successful.

Perception of the Episode Participants were asked to what extent they consider the episode serious and harassing on a 4-point scale (from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *very much so*; $r(236) = .70$, $p < .001$.

Victim Blame Five items adapted from the Victim Blame measure (Abrams et al. 2003; Bernard et al. 2015) were used (e.g., "How much do you think Anna was responsible for the way things turned out?"). Participants indicated their level of agreement with the items on a 7-point scale (from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*; Cronbach's α = .69).

Results

Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics for the variables we used and the bivariate correlations between them.

A 2 (sexualization: sexualized vs. non-sexualized victim) × 2 (context of the stranger harassment: down the street vs. at a house party) between participants ANOVA was conducted for each dependent variable. Given that neither a main effect of

Table 1 Correlations among key variables

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Sexualization	–	–	1				
2. Context	–	–	−.05	1			
3. RWA	1.91	.50	.00	.01	1		
4. Perception of the episode	2.83	.75	.07	.15*	-.06	1	
5. Victim blame	1.51	.75	.25***	.00	.31***	.00	1

Sexualization was coded as: 0 = non-sexualized, 1 = sexualized; Context of the harassment was coded as: 0 = at a house party, 1 = down the street

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

participants' gender nor its interaction with the experimental conditions emerged as significant on any of our dependent variables, this variable was omitted from the following analyses.

Perception of the Episode

In line with Hp1, an ANOVA revealed that the perception of severity and harassment of the episode changed according to the context where the stranger harassment happened, with harassment at the house party ($M = 2.69$, $SD = .75$) perceived as less severe and sexually harassing than harassment down the street ($M = 2.92$, $SD = .73$), $F(1, 232) = 5.21$, $p = .023$, $\eta p^2 = .022$. Neither sexualization, $F(1, 232) = 1.10$, $p = .295$, $\eta p^2 = .005$, nor the interaction between the context and the sexualization, $F(1, 232) = .029$, $p = .865$, $\eta p^2 = .000$, emerged as significant.

Victim Blame

In line with Hp2, the victim's sexualization emerged as significant factor, $F(1, 232) = 13.06$, $p < .001$, $\eta p^2 = .053$. Sexualized women ($M = 1.70$, $SD = .88$) were blamed more than non-sexualized women ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .53$). However, counter to Hp3, the context of the harassment did not show either a significant main effect on victim blame, $F(1, 232) = .029$, $p = .865$, $\eta p^2 = .000$ or a significant interaction with sexualization, $F(1, 232) = .641$, $p = .424$, $\eta p^2 = .003$.

Moderation Analysis

We hypothesized that in the case of stranger harassment occurring down the street, participants with a high level of RWA would perceive sexualized victims as more responsible for being harassed (Hp4). However, since the ANOVA analysis showed neither a main effect of the context of harassment nor an interaction between sexualization and the context of harassment on blame attribution, we excluded the context of harassment from the moderation model and, thus, we tested a simpler moderation model with participants' RWA as unique moderator.

We conducted a moderation analysis by using the PROCESS macro (Model 1) for SPSS with 1000 bootstrapping resamples (Hayes 2013). The sexualization of the victim was entered as predictor (non-sexualized $=0$; sexualized $=1$), participants' RWA as moderator, and victim blame as the outcome variable. The overall equation was significant $R^2 = .183$, $F(3, 232) = 17.33$, $p < .001$. The effect of RWA, $b = .23$, $SE = .13$ (95% CI $= -0.0156$ to 0.4846) did not emerge as significant. The effect of sexualization on victim blame lost its statistical significance, $b = -.53$, $SE = .35$ (95% CI $= -1.2239$ to 0.1739). Considering the moderated path from sexualization to victim blame, the two-way interaction between sexualization and RWA was significant, $b = .47$, $SE = .18$ (95% CI $= 0.1159$ to 0.8233).

A closer look at the conditional effect of sexualization on victim blame at values of the moderator (RWA) revealed a partial confirmation of our expectation (Hp4). Indeed, we did not find a significant effect for participants with lower levels of RWA, $b = .14$, $SE = .13$ (95% CI $= -0.1069$ to 0.3883). However, we found that participants with average levels of RWA, $b = .37$, $SE = .09$ (95% CI $= 0.1985$ to 0.5483), and participants with higher levels of RWA, $b = .61$, $SE = .13$ (95% CI $= 0.3585$ to 0.8536), tended to blame more sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) victims in the case of stranger harassment.

Based on Hayes (2013), we concluded that the lack of direct effect does not compromise the validity of the overall model. Thus, our results suggested that people' RWA synergizes with sexualization in shaping attribution of blame to victims of stranger harassment. While people with low levels of RWA did not express different degrees of blame according to victim's physical appearance, people with average and high levels of RWA tended to blame sexualized victims of stranger harassment to a greater extent.

Discussion

Research has shown the crucial role of a sexualized appearance in negatively affecting the perception of victims of extreme and blatant forms of gender violence (e.g., Loughnan et al. 2013; Pacilli et al. 2017). Nevertheless, very little attention has been paid to the role of sexualization in the judgment of women victims of a subtle form of violence such as stranger harassment, and whether and how this influence may change according to individuals' ideological standpoint (e.g., RWA). In order to deepen our understanding of these issues and linking these two different lines of research, the present study aimed to go a step further investigating whether people's conservative ideology, assessed in terms of RWA, affects attribution of blame to sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) women victims of stranger harassment in different contexts (down the street vs. at a house party).

In line with other studies that have demonstrated that women's perception of the severity of stranger harassment changes according to the context where the episode happens (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; McCarty et al. 2014), in our study we found that stranger harassment occurring down the street is perceived more severe and harassing than stranger harassment happening at a house party. Our results seem to confirm that the context in which the episode occurs is a crucial factor when

exploring the perception of stranger harassment (McCarty et al. 2014). Therefore, a double standard emerges. The same detrimental episode may be considered less severe only because it happened in a context, such as party, in which the climate and norms are permissive towards sexual harassment conducts (McCarty et al. 2014; Pryor 1995). The present study supports the notion that stranger harassment toward women is more accepted according to the specific place where it occurs. It seems that the context can be able to reduce the seriousness of violence and of its negative social psychological effects on the victim (e.g., lack of agency, self-objectification, body shame, fear of, and perceived risk of rape; Esacove 1998; Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Despite our predictions, we found neither a significant effect of the context of the episode nor an interaction between this last variable and the victim's appearance on the attribution of blame to the harassed woman.

With regard to the effects of victims' physical appearance on judgment of victimhood, our research corroborated the findings of previous studies (Edmonds and Cahoon 1986; Loughnan et al. 2013; Workman and Freeburg 1999) by providing further evidence that individuals blame to a greater extent sexualized (vs. non-sexualized) victims also in a case of stranger harassment. Thus, even in a situation of a subtle form of gender violence, the appearance of victims may affect the perception of a stranger harassment episode and reverse the role of the key actors of the incident: The victim becomes the instigator. Although the difference between sexualized and non-sexualized experimental conditions was significant, a point worth noting is that, overall, the mean levels of victim blaming expressed by participants were low. The degree of victim blaming found in this study was in line with the trend observed in the existing literature, where it has been shown that, regardless of the manipulation of victims' characteristics and the assessment of observers' ideological standpoint, people typically express low level of victim blaming (Grubb and Harrower 2008; van der Bruggen and Grubb 2014).

Relatively to the moderating role of RWA, our expectation was partially confirmed, with our results showing that people's RWA jointly works with sexualization in shaping attribution of blame to victims of stranger harassment. In particular, we found that people with an average and a high level of RWA tend to blame to a greater extent the sexualized victim of stranger harassment, while blame attributions did not change according to victim's sexualization for people with a low level of RWA.

Authoritarians typically tend to respond with intolerance and hostility to women who defy prescriptive gender roles (Jost and Kay 2005; Sibley et al. 2007) and they endorse higher level of benevolent sexism which in turn affects assignment of blame to victims (Abrams et al. 2003). Thus, gender violence might be considered, in a symbolic vein, a way to punish deviant women and to preserve men domination over women (Lambert and Raichle 2000). In this light, a possible explanation for our results is that people with average and high levels of RWA tend to perceive sexualized women, due to provocativeness of their attire, as deviant women who challenge the gendered norms related to the access to public domains (Manoussaki and Veitch 2015) and, thus, they tend to consider them more responsible for what happened. This might be particularly true for people with higher levels of RWA, who might

have internalized these conservative and patriarchal values so profoundly that blame attribution might play a punitive function as a result of a supposed transgression of the gendered territoriality's rules.

The role of RWA deserves a specific reasoning, in that we have been among the first to use such variable in this research field. In the literature, RWA is typically adopted as a predictor of attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Cornelis and Van Hiel 2014), or as an effect of individual and contextual variables (e.g., Stenner 2005). Our study was noteworthy because it was one of the few using RWA as a moderator of the relations between specific causes and effects. Recent research shows that, far from being a stable personality variable, RWA changes as a consequence of contextual variables, mainly of societal threat to safety (e.g., Onraet et al. 2013). Based on this, a link between threatening societal conditions and the worsening of the women's social perception according to appearance could be postulated. Future research could test this link empirically.

Limitations and Future Directions

In our study, results showed that RWA and sexualization together jeopardize the victim status. In this regard, the present research focused its attention on different factors (such as characteristics of the victim, of the context and of the perceiver) that might affect the perception of the stranger harassment episode but did not account for possible consequences of the diminished victimhood in terms of behavioral outcomes of possible bystanders of the incident. Thus, future research could investigate—also exposing people to a stranger harassment episode directly (Saunders et al. 2016)—whether the assignment of blame to sexualized victims by authoritarians undermines their willingness to provide help to those victims.

However, beyond this limitation, our study had also some strong points. First, we extended the research literature on possible moderators of the relationship between sexualization and negative social perception contextualizing our investigation in a realistic scenario. Second, we extended the research literature on victim blame and sexualization considering a subtle, common and trivialized (Livingston et al. 2015) form of gender violence, that is stranger harassment. Third, due to our experimental approach, we could deal with genuine causal links as concerns the relations between our independent and our dependent variables.

Conclusions

This study extends the knowledge on how sexualization and perceivers' ideological standpoint biases attribution of blame to victims of stranger harassment. Linking the line of research on sexualization with that on victim blame, this study provides evidence that average and high levels of RWA negatively affect the victim status of sexualized women in case of stranger harassment. Our results indicate the need for a deeper understanding of the factors that prompt such derogating view, and, at a practical level, the need to increase and reinforce existing programs and

awareness-raising campaigns to highlight the seriousness of this form of violence. In fact, even if stranger harassment is commonly considered a trivial behavior (Livingston et al. 2015), it has a profound impact on women's lives. Due to its subtle nature, stranger harassment seems less harmful than other form of violence, such as sexual harassment involving non-strangers, but research literature has demonstrated that this belief it is not true (Macmillan et al. 2000). In line with these considerations, designing interventions on stranger harassment is necessary not only to reduce the negative impact on physical and psychological women's well-being and to promote their opportunity to use the public space freely but also to help bystanders to recognize and act against this form of violence. Stranger harassment is a symptom of a societal problem (Saunders et al. 2016) that should be actively confronted since it limits women's freedom and reinforces gender inequality.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Standards All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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