



Sexual Harassment in Politics. News about Victims' Delayed Sexual Harassment Accusations and Effects on Victim Blaming: A Mediation Model

Christian von Sikorski & Melanie Saumer

To cite this article: Christian von Sikorski & Melanie Saumer (2021) Sexual Harassment in Politics. News about Victims' Delayed Sexual Harassment Accusations and Effects on Victim Blaming: A Mediation Model, *Mass Communication and Society*, 24:2, 259-287, DOI: [10.1080/15205436.2020.1769136](https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1769136)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2020.1769136>



© 2020 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 12 Jun 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 3057



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Sexual Harassment in Politics. News about Victims' Delayed Sexual Harassment Accusations and Effects on Victim Blaming: A Mediation Model


Christian von Sikorski ^a and Melanie Saumer^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau; ^bDepartment of Communication, University of Vienna

ABSTRACT

The #MeToo movement has restarted an extensive and worldwide debate about sexual harassment especially directed against women. When women publicly accuse an alleged perpetrator they often do so with a strong delay and frequently come forward with allegations years after a harassment occurred. Yet, we lack research on how news about delayed sexual harassment accusations affect victim blaming. Drawing from construal level theory and attribution theory, we experimentally tested how participants react to news about a victim's *delayed* accusation (harassment occurred years ago), *non-delayed* accusation (harassment occurred days ago), or accusations with *no time* cue. Findings showed that delayed accusations resulted in the attribution of negative motives toward the victim. Negative motives, in turn, increased victim blaming.

The #MeToo movement has restarted an extensive and worldwide debate about sexual harassment as well as sexual assault especially directed against women. Similar to the US, the issue of sexual harassment has been the subject of intense public debate in Germany (the context of the present study). On a global level, more than one in three women are victims of sexual harassment or other forms of sexual violence (WHO, 2013). Also, about six-in-ten women in the U.S. say they have received unwanted sexual advances or have been sexually abused (27% among men) (Pew Research Center, 2018). Similarly, 60% of women in Germany reported that they had been victims

CONTACT Christian von Sikorski  vonsikorski@uni-landau.de  Department of Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau (at Landau), Fortstr. 7, Landau 76829, Germany; Melanie Saumer  melanie.saumer@univie.ac.at  Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Währinger Straße 29, A-1090, Vienna.

© 2020 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

of sexual harassment at least once since their 15th birthday (European Union, 2012). Sexual harassment can be conceptually differentiated from other forms of sexual violence (e.g., rape).¹ However, all forms of sexual violence may have severe psychological consequences such as depression, anxiety disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorders, which have been identified as relevant risk factors for various chronic diseases (e.g., O'Neil et al., 2018).

Despite these negative consequences women rarely report sexual harassment to authorities or publicly accuse a perpetrator (e.g., via the news media) because publicizing traumatic experiences is often a major challenge for victims (e.g., Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2011). When women do publicly accuse an alleged perpetrator they often do so with a strong delay (Balogh et al., 2003; Dewan, 2018). Prominent examples are the sexual harassment cases involving U.S. Republican politician Roy Moore (sexual harassment dated back about 40 years) or the case around Christine Blasey Ford. Blasey Ford publicly accused Brett Kavanaugh of sexual harassment in 2018, shortly after U.S. President Donald Trump nominated Kavanaugh as an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (harassment dated back some 36 years; Kessler, 2018). Similarly, women in Germany came forward with sexual harassment accusations against prominent public figures via the news media in recent years. Prominent examples include the case around Rainer Brüderle of Germany's liberal party FDP who was repeatedly accused of having made sexually harassing statements toward female journalists (e.g., "you can fill a Dirndl", while staring at a female journalist's breasts). Also, several women publicly accused Dieter Wedel (German director) of sexual harassment and sexual violence via the news media; some of the cases dated back to 1991.

A variety of reasons have been identified as to why victims regularly take years to come forward with sexual harassment allegations. That is,

¹The present study is based on Fitzgerald et al.'s (1995) understanding of sexual harassment. They define sexual harassment as consisting of a person's crude sexual remarks, unwanted sexual attention, unwanted touching, when a person bribes another person in exchange for sexual behavior. In contrast to sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape include some form of unwanted penetration and/or other explicit physical sexual acts against the will of the other (Lonsway et al., 2008). Sexual harassment and sexual assault/rape are characterized through their threatening nature but are distinguished by the intensity of physical abuse that is employed (Campbell et al., 2008). Importantly, this definitory separation does not implicate that sexual harassment should be treated as a less serious as all forms of sexual aggression can result in severe psychological damages (e.g., O'Neil et al., 2018). Furthermore, we use the term *victim* instead of, e.g., *survivor* (which has also been proposed; for a recent discussion see Harding, 2020), because most of the scientific literature uses the term victim, respectively, victim blaming (the phenomenon that we are examining in the present paper) to refer to individuals who have experienced forms of sexual aggression and who are held responsible for it (victim blaming).

individuals may need time to deal with traumatic events or may fear retaliation by the harasser (Balogh et al., 2003). Furthermore, victims may expect negative outcomes when making a sexual harassment public, e.g., need to change a job, negative effects on family members or friends. Also, self-blame among sexual harassment victims—even though victims are not to blame—may prevent victims from reporting a sexual harassment (Miller et al., 2007). Furthermore, victims may be afraid of being held responsible for a sexual harassment themselves (Ahrens, 2006). Indeed, numerous studies revealed that women—despite being victims of sexual harassment—are regularly blamed and held responsible for sexual harassment themselves. In fact, victim blaming is a frequent reaction to sexual harassment victims (Balogh et al., 2003; Dawtry et al., 2019; see also Abrams et al., 2003; Ask & Landström, 2010; Grubb & Turner, 2012).

In this context, it has been shown that certain media portrayals may not only play a crucial role regarding the public perception of sexual harassment but may also affect victim blaming (e.g., Dill et al., 2008; Dowler, 2006; Grauerholz & King, 1997; Sacks et al., 2018). More specifically, it has been shown that focusing on victim-specific aspects or behaviors such as mentioning that a victim consumed alcohol at a party and was then sexually harassed (Gravelin et al., 2019), or stating that a victim wore provocative clothing (Gravelin et al., 2019), or not mentioning that a victim physically resisted a harasser in a news report may substantially increase victim blaming (Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Needless to say, victim blaming may have very negative psychological and physiological consequences for sexual harassment victims (Ahrens, 2006; O'Neil et al., 2018).

In this regard, we theorized that the factor *time* is of particular importance as well. As the #MeToo movement exemplarily shows, victims regularly come forward with sexual harassment accusations years after a harassment occurred. Also, previous research showed that when a sexual harassment victim (i.e., student) filed a report against a harasser (i.e., professor) with a delay (compared to reporting it right away) an observer's evaluation of the case was affected, e.g., individuals judged the perpetrator more positively (Balogh et al., 2003). Thus, temporal aspects can play an important role for observers' sexual harassment perceptions. However, there is a paucity of research on how news coverage about delayed public sexual harassment accusations affects victim blaming. Furthermore, the underlying mechanisms of potential effects triggered by a delayed public accusation on victim blaming have not been studied and remain unknown. Yet, knowledge about how media coverage about sexual harassment may contribute to a reduction or prevention of victim blaming can be deemed highly important. Should certain forms of sexual harassment coverage be able to reduce the potential for victim blaming, the likelihood that other sexual harassment victims come forward and report

a sexual harassment may be increased. Hence, more offenders may be detected and punished, which may generally decrease the likelihood that other women will be sexual harassment victims.

In order to better understand the role of temporal aspects in media coverage about sexual harassment and how it affects victim blaming, we conducted an experimental study. We focused on a political context because the political arena—as the #MeToo movement has shown (Pew Research Center, 2018)—has been described as a work environment for women that may perpetuate and reinforce sexual harassment (Collier & Raney, 2018). In addition, sexual harassment cases in the field of politics are often discussed intensively in public and certain forms of media coverage (containing temporal cues) may influence public opinion formation (Matthes et al., 2018). Thus, we conducted an experiment with two central aims. First, drawing from construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010) as well as the compassion model introduced by Goetz et al. (2010), we examined how a female victim's delayed (non-delayed) public sexual harassment accusation against a male political candidate via the news media affects compassion for the victim as well as attitudes toward a victim. Given the results of previous research on delayed sexual harassment reporting, we expected that a delayed accusation would reduce audiences' compassion for a victim and would negatively affect attitudes toward a victim. Also, drawing from attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), we hypothesized that a delayed accusation would lead to negative and selfish motives being attributed toward a victim (i.e., victim wants to enrich herself financially). Second, we aimed at examining if lower levels of compassion, negative attitudes, and the attribution of negative motives help to explain potential effects on victim blaming. We conducted an online experiment with three conditions (delayed accusations, non-delayed accusations, control condition without any temporal cues) in Germany and exposed participants to two news articles (from quality and tabloid news outlets) about a sexual harassment case involving a high-ranking politician in each condition. We used two different news sources to increase the external validity of our manipulations, as suggested by Reeves et al. (2016).

Effects of news coverage about victims' delayed sexual harassment accusations

Sexual harassment is notoriously difficult to investigate and prosecute and oftentimes, there is a lack of evidence and independent witnesses. Also, news consumers exposed to a sexual harassment case “are frequently left with little more than two conflicting verbal accounts—that of the accuser and that of the accused—as a basis for their decision” (Ask & Landström, 2010, p. 393). In this context, certain media portrayals may significantly

influence public perceptions toward sexual harassment victims (e.g., Grauerholz & King, 1997; Sacks et al., 2018). More precisely, we theorized that temporal aspects are of particular importance in this context. First, when news consumers learn that a sexual harassment case happened a long time ago this may affect their emotional reaction (i.e., compassion) as well as their attitudes toward the victim. Second, when a victim comes forward with an accusation years after a sexual harassment occurred, this may lead to the attribution of negative motives toward the victim.

Effects on compassion for the victim

In general, news about sexual harassment victims usually causes media users to show compassion for the victim (Dowler, 2006). Compassion can generally be defined as “the feeling that arises in witnessing another’s suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help” (Goetz et al., 2010, p. 352). In their appraisal model of compassion, Goetz et al. (2010) describe specific conditions under which an observer feels compassion for a victim. Importantly, an observer has to decide if a target (a) needs or deserves one’s help or support, and (b) if sufficient resources to cope/help are available. If this is the case, the model predicts that individuals experience compassion for a victim (Goetz et al., 2010).

However, depending on specific details of a news coverage the level of compassion for the victim may significantly vary (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994). For example, Sacks et al. (2018) showed that compassion for a victim was significantly reduced when the news coverage did not mention that a perpetrator used physical force during a harassment, or when a news article mentioned that a victim had consumed alcoholic beverages.

Furthermore, research informed by construal level theory (CLT, Trope & Liberman, 2010) suggests that temporal details mentioned in news reports about sexual harassment may play an important role in this context (see also Lee, 2018). First, a growing body of research drawing from CLT showed that people form abstract mental representations (i.e., high-level construals) of temporally distant objects and persons, as well as concrete and detailed representations (i.e., low-level construals) of temporally close objects and persons. In other words, when we think about an event that happened in the distant past (compared with the identical event in the recent past), we do so in high-level terms or in a more abstract and less detailed manner (Trope & Liberman, 2010). Moreover, other people appear rather different from ourselves (as outgroup members) when we think about them in high-level terms, whereas similarity with other individuals increases when we think about them in low-level terms (Trope & Liberman, 2010). In this context, empirical findings clearly show that people

frequently experience less compassion for dissimilar others or outgroup members (Tarrant et al., 2009).

Also, CLT further suggests that “psychological distance from an object diminishes the intensity of affective responses to that object. People typically react more strongly to events that are closer to them in time” (Trope & Liberman, 2010, p. 451). Put differently—and in line with Goetz et al.’s (2010) appraisal model of compassion—, when a sexual harassment happened years ago (compared to several days ago), the intensity of a news consumer’s affective response toward a victim may be diminished. This is because when a harassment happened a long time ago a news consumer’s psychological distance to the event (i.e., sexual harassment) is rather large thus reducing his or her emotional responses toward the victim. This assumption is also in line with research informed by CLT showing that temporal distance results in less positive emotional reactions when thinking about a temporally distant event, compared to a temporally near event (Agerström et al., 2012). Also, individuals may come to the conclusion that “time heals all wounds” and that a victim may have had “enough time to deal with the consequences of a sexual harassment” (of course, time does not heal all wounds and oftentimes victims still suffer years after a harassment occurred). Accordingly, news consumers’ compassion for a victim may gradually go away as time passes. In this regard, first research results on the effects of delayed reporting of sexual harassment showed that observers were significantly affected by temporal information. That is, when participants learned that a professor had sexually harassed a (female) student and the victim reported the professor’s harassment to the university board with a delay (compared to reporting it right away), the delayed reporting (18 months later) resulted in less positive emotional reactions toward the victim (Balogh et al., 2003). Thus, based on CLT and the available empirical findings, we formulated our first hypothesis:

H1: News coverage about sexual harassment that happened a long time ago (delayed accusation) decreases compassion for the victim compared with (a) a control condition and (b) a sexual harassment that happened recently (non-delayed accusation).

In contrast, it remains unclear if the non-delayed condition results in a different perception of the victim compared with a control condition (no time cue). On the one hand, one may argue that compassion is increased for victims that come forward with sexual harassment allegations right away because it is likely that a victim is traumatized and suffering shortly after the harassment occurred and therefore deserves (a high level of) compassion. Yet, it may also be theorized that going public via the news media right after a sexual harassment occurred can be

interpreted by news consumers as “too early” and, e.g., as “a sign” that the harassment was not that bad after all (i.e., “if the victim is able to go public already, she is not really suffering or traumatized”). This may potentially result in less compassion for the victim or the non-delayed condition may have no effect on compassion for the victim at all. Due to the lack of prior empirical results, we thus formulated a research question (RQ1).

RQ1: How does the non-delayed accusation condition compared with a control condition affect compassion for the victim?

Effects on attitudes toward the victim

Similar to our earlier reasoning, we also expected that delaying a public accusation would result in less positive attitudes toward the victim. Again, drawing from CLT (Trope & Liberman, 2010), it can be theorized that assessing a victim that was victimized a long time ago will result in less positive attitudinal evaluations compared to evaluating a victim that was victimized recently. This is because the perceived social distance toward the victim should be larger (i.e., high-level construal) when the sexual harassment happened years ago (compared to recently). This assumption is also supported by empirical evidence (Stephan et al., 2011) revealing that observers felt less close to another person and evaluated a target person less positively (e.g., less familiar) when they thought about that person in connection with a temporally distant event (vs. close event). In addition, a different line of research shows that perceived victim legitimacy is an important factor when observers assess the relative legitimacy of sexual harassment victims (McNickle Rose & Randall, 1982). More precisely, this line of research suggests that when a sexual harassment victim comes forward years after a harassment occurred, she may be evaluated as a less legitimate victim (i.e., “she is not a real victim anymore”) compared with a harassment that happened recently. Thus, we formulated our second hypothesis (H2):

H2: News coverage about sexual harassment that happened a long time ago (delayed accusation) results in less positive attitudes toward the victim compared with (a) a control condition and (b) a sexual harassment that happened recently (non-delayed accusation).

In line with our earlier reasoning, we lack empirical evidence on how non-delayed sexual harassment information (compared with a control condition) will affect an individual. Therefore, we formulated the following research question (RQ2):

RQ2: How does the non-delayed accusation condition compared with a control condition affect attitudes toward the victim?

Effects on the attribution of negative motives toward the victim

When sexual harassment victims decide to make a sexual harassment claim public and, e.g., talk about it in the news media, the underlying motives for such a public accusation are frequently discussed. That is, observers tend to attribute negative motives toward a victim, e.g., that a victim's motive is retaliatory in nature (Balogh et al., 2003) and that she only tries to scandalize (von Sikorski, 2018) and damage the reputation of an (alleged) harasser (as was also discussed in the case around Christine Blasey Ford; see Roose, 2018).

According to attribution theory “the social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events” (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p. 23). More precisely, the theory generally assumes that individuals aim at explaining the causes of other persons' behaviors, whereas two types of attributions can be differentiated: situational and dispositional attributions (Weiner, 1985). A situational attribution means that the behavior of another person is mainly explained by the situation that the other person is in. In contrast, a dispositional attribution means that the behavior of another person is mainly explained by the particular disposition or the internal characteristics of another person. Put differently, the theory makes predictions about the causes or motives behind a certain type of behavior of another person. Based on attribution theory it can be theorized that observers should tend to make situational attributions when a sexual harassment victim publicly accuses a harasser right away. That is, an observer may assign the cause of a victim's behavior (public accusation) to an event (the sexual harassment) which is outside of the victim's control; i.e., “she was sexually harassed (situation) and therefore accuses the harasser publicly”. In contrast, observers should tend to make dispositional attributions when a sexual harassment victim delays her accusation against a harasser and comes forward publicly years after the harassment occurred. The rationale behind this is that delaying an accusation may make it more likely for an observer to believe that the victim had some control over the situation and that it was the victim's choice to independently choose at which point in time she decided to make the harassment public. If a victim is believed to have control (i.e., it's her choice) and can decide how long she delays a public accusation, this behavior may be attributed to the personal motives of a victim (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Weiner, 1985). Also, an observer may come to the conclusion that a victim “actively manages” and strategically chooses the particular point in time at which she goes public (as in the case of Christine Blasey Ford; shortly after Brett Kavanaugh nomination for the

U.S. Supreme Court) thus making it more likely that observers attribute negative motives to the victim (e.g., she wants to damage the harasser's reputation). Thus, based on attribution theory, we expected that delaying a public sexual harassment accusation will lead to the attribution of negative motives, as we formally articulated in our third hypothesis (H3).

H3: News coverage about sexual harassment that happened a long time ago (delayed accusation) results in the attribution of more negative motives toward the victim compared with (a) a control condition and (b) a sexual harassment that happened recently (non-delayed accusation).

Again, due to the lack of available research results and in line with our earlier reasoning, we formulated a research question in order to examine potential differences between the non-delayed condition and the control condition. Research question three (RQ3) reads as follows:

RQ3: How does the non-delayed accusation condition compared with a control condition affect the attribution of negative motives toward the victim?

Effects on victim blaming

Compassion for the victim as a predictor for victim blaming

Previous research shows that discrete emotions such as compassion may affect observers' blame attributions (e.g., Deitz et al., 1982; Feigenson & Park, 2006). That is, Deitz et al. (1982) showed that individuals high in victim empathy showed more positive feelings toward a sexual harassment victim and a more negative emotional reaction toward the perpetrator. Smith and Frieze (2003) study revealed a correlation between compassion for a sexual harassment victim and perceived victim responsibility, whereas the higher participants' compassion for the victim, the lower their perceived victim responsibility. More recently, Attreed and Kozlowski (2018) showed that respondents with low levels of compassion for a sexual harassment victim engaged in significantly more victim blaming. Thus, compassion for a victim can be understood as a type of safeguard mechanism. This means, that when an individual reaches the conclusion that a victim needs or deserves compassion (Goetz et al., 2010), this higher level of compassion can prevent victim blaming. Put differently, when compassion for a victim is low people obviously tend to believe that the victim is (at least partially) responsible for the sexual harassment herself.

In summary, previous research indicates that compassion for sexual harassment victims can be regarded as an important predictor for victim

blaming. Transferred to the context of the present study, we therefore theorized that lower levels of compassion for the victim—triggered by a delayed sexual harassment accusation via the news media—will result in an increase in victim blaming, as we formally articulated in our fourth hypothesis (H4):

H4: Lower levels of compassion for the victim is related to increases in victim blaming.

Attitudes toward the victim as a predictor for victim blaming

Similar to our earlier reasoning, we further theorized that negative attitudes toward the victim predict victim blaming. In this context, a large body of research shows that negative attitudes or false prior beliefs about sexual harassment (i.e., rape myths; see Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994) frequently result in blame attribution processes or victim blaming (Dawtry et al., 2019; Ward, 1988; for an overview see Gravelin et al., 2019; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Thus, we theorized that individuals with rather negative attitudes toward the victim (see Ward, 1988)—triggered by a delayed sexual harassment accusation via the news media—will show more victim blaming, as we formulated in our fifth hypothesis (H5):

H5: Negative attitudes toward the victim are related to increases in victim blaming.

Attribution of negative motives as a predictor for victim blaming

Finally, we theorized that the attribution of negative motives toward the victim predicts victim blaming. That is, individuals who believe that the victim's motivation to publicly accuse the perpetrator are (at least in parts) self-serving (i.e., the victim is craving for recognition; she wants to enrich herself financially; she wants to damage the image of the politician) may also think that the victim (strategically) uses the sexual harassment case for revenge and her own profit and she may thus be (partially) responsible for the harassment. This is because individuals who attribute negative motives toward the victim may also think that the victim is generally less credible, whereas low levels of victim credibility have been shown to predict victim blaming (Randal, 2010). Furthermore, news consumers may retrospectively attribute blame toward the victim following the (wrong) rationale: "If she uses the case for her own benefits and acts strategically now, she may have done so in the past as well; perhaps she even sought to be close to the politician in order to use contact with him for her own benefit". Although, such rationalizations are wrong and, of course, do not justify sexual

harassment in any way, observers frequently use various information of victim behavior (e.g., a woman wearing a tight dress at a party or negative victim motives) and attribute blame to a victim (Gravelin et al., 2019). The assumption that negative motives toward the victim may retrospectively increase victim blaming is also in line with earlier findings. Balogh et al. (2003) experimentally manipulated the alleged motive of a victim (positive/altruistic versus negative/retaliation) when reporting a sexual harassment to authorities. When observers were primed with a negative motive, they engaged in more victim blaming and the victim was also perceived as less credible. Transferred to the context of the present study, we assumed that individuals that attribute negative motives toward the victim will engage in more victim blaming. Thus, hypothesis six (H6) reads as follows, whereas our full hypothesized theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

H6: The attribution of negative motives toward the victim is related to increases in victim blaming.

In summary, we theorized that compassion, attitudes toward the victim, and negative motives are affected by temporal information in news coverage and that these perceived characteristics of the victim (in line with attribution theory, dispositional attribution: responsibility of a person is explained by disposition, characteristics of the person) affect victim blaming and not the other way around (i.e., temporal cues affect victim blaming, which affects compassion, attitudes and motives).

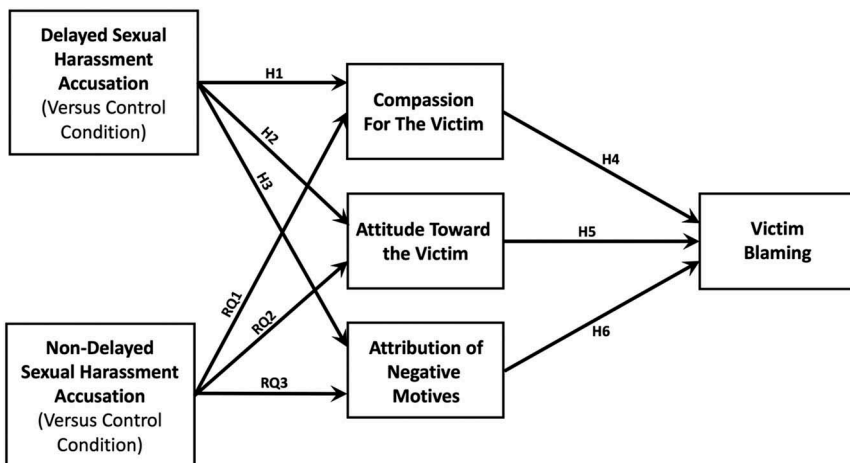


Figure 1. Hypothesized theoretical model.

Method

Participants and procedure

To test our hypotheses, we conducted an online experiment (September–October 2018) in a German news context employing a nonstudent convenience sample. A total of 254 German speaking participants (recruited via different online platforms) took part in the study ($M_{\text{age}} = 35.87$, $SD = 15.26$; age range: 17 to 77; 58.7% female; level of education: 1.2% no school degree, 10.3% compulsory/vocational school degree, 40.5% high school degree; 48% academic degree) and were randomly assigned to three groups: News articles reporting delayed sexual harassment accusations (harassment occurred 20 years ago) against a politician (experimental group 1, $n = 87$), otherwise identical news articles reporting non-delayed sexual harassment accusation (harassment occurred several days ago) against a politician (experimental group 2, $n = 86$), or otherwise identical news articles reporting about the case without any cues regarding the exact time when the sexual harassment had occurred (control condition, $n = 81$). After prior informed consent, participants accessed the survey software via an online link. Exposure time was not forced. The stimulus presentation was followed by the assessment of the mediators and the dependent variables. Also, participants were exposed to all constructs and questions in the questionnaire in the same order. Participants were then thanked and debriefed. At the time of the data collection, no prominent cases of sexual harassment were discussed in the German media.

Stimulus material

Based on existing news articles reporting about politicians involved in scandalous sexual harassment cases, we created two news articles (in German language). Similar to previous research (e.g., von Sikorski & Knoll, 2019; von Sikorski & Ludwig, 2018), we used a fictitious case to ensure that individuals neither had any prior knowledge about the case nor the victim or perpetrator, because a particular prior knowledge could have undermined the purpose of the present study, e.g., participants may have realized that the sexual harassment occurred recently (i.e., a couple of days ago) and not a long time ago (i.e., 20 years). Furthermore, we created and used two different news articles (an article published in a quality news outlet and another article published in a tabloid newspaper) to increase the external validity of our study, as suggested by Reeves et al. (2016). All participants first read the quality news article and were then exposed to the tabloid news article. Participants read both articles right after the other before the mediator variables and the dependent variables were collected (see von Sikorski, Matthes et al., 2018; von Sikorski et al., 2017).

The first article (see [Appendix A](#)) reported about a sexual harassment case at a private party. According to the article, a German EU politician (Stefan Wagner) of the German conservative party (CDU) sexually harassed a female employee of the German Bundestag (Katharina Gruber) at the party. The article was elaborately designed (e.g., layout, logo) to make it look like an authentic news article that had actually been published online on the platform of sueddeutsche.de (largest quality newspaper in Germany). The second article reported about the same sexual harassment case using a different style of writing (i.e., tabloid newspaper). The article was elaborately designed and participants were suggested that the article had actually been published online on the platform of bild.de (Germany's largest tabloid newspaper) ([Appendix A](#)). All of the participants were exposed to the identical two articles. However, group 1 participants were also exposed to information stating that the sexual harassment happened about 20 years ago (four cues within each text and one cue in each headline). In contrast, group 2 participants were exposed to the identical articles consisting of four cues within each text and one cue in each headline, e.g., stating that the sexual harassment "happened a couple of days ago" ([Appendix A](#)). Group 3 served as the control condition and participants were exposed to the two articles without any references regarding the time of the sexual harassment.

Measures

All items were presented to participants in German and items were translated from English to German where necessary. All items used can be found in the [Appendix B](#).

Manipulation check

To ensure that the experimental manipulation was successful, we performed a manipulation check. The results of the manipulation check revealed that the manipulations worked as intended (see [Appendix C](#) for details).

Data analysis

To test our hypotheses and find answers to our research questions, we performed an ordinary least squares path analysis using the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Experimental condition was dummy coded with the control group as reference group. Compassion for the victim, attitude toward the victim, and attribution of negative motives were modeled as mediator variables (parallel mediation model). Furthermore, victim blaming was entered as the dependent variable ([Figure 1](#)). Also, we regarded for the following control

variables (not shown in [Figure 1](#)). First, we controlled for empathy to ensure that the hypothesized effects on compassion were assessed independently of participants' individual level of empathy. This is because individuals with high levels of empathy may generally react more compassionate toward sexual harassment victims (compared with individuals low in empathy). Not controlling for empathy may therefore potentially undermine influences of the independent variable, i.e., (non-)delayed accusations. Second, previous research clearly indicates that partisanship affects political evaluations (e.g., Fischle, 2000). Since the politician who was accused of sexual harassment in the news articles belonged to the party CDU, we controlled for participants' prior CDU identification. This is because influences of the independent variable may be less pronounced for CDU identifiers compared to non-identifiers. Controlling for CDU identification thus ensured that all effects were assessed independently of individuals' party identification. Third, we controlled for participants' acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA) (Gerger et al., 2007; see also Burt, 1980) in order to assess all effects independently of individuals' respective prior beliefs. Controlling for AMMSA can be regarded important because individuals who score high (low) in AMMSA may be affected differently by the experimental manipulation, which may potentially undermine the purpose of the study. Fourth, gender has been shown to affect victim blaming (e.g., Gravelin et al., 2019). To ensure that all effects were assessed independently of participants' gender, we controlled for it in the present study. Using all of the four previously mentioned control variables can be regarded important in order to ensure that the purpose of our study—examining the effect of (non-)delayed sexual harassment accusations—was not undermined by third variables. 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples were used for statistical inference of indirect effects.

Results

First, we investigated the effects of exposure to the news articles on compassion for the victim. Supporting H1a, the results revealed a negative and significant effect of the delayed condition on participants' compassion for the victim compared with the control condition ($b = -0.81$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .002$) (mean values for compassion: delayed, $M = 3.94$, $SD = 1.82$; non-delayed, $M = 4.27$, $SD = 1.70$; control condition, $M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.50$). In contrast, the non-delayed condition showed no effect on participants' compassion for the victim compared with the control condition ($b = -0.32$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .221$). This answers RQ1. In order to be able to test for the effects between the two experimental conditions, we recoded our dummy variables (non-severe condition as reference group) and conducted the analysis again. Results revealed

a close to significant effect ($b = -0.48$, $SE = 0.26$, $p = .061$). Yet the p -value was above the threshold of 0.05. Thus, there was a difference by trend (i.e., less compassion for individuals exposed to the delayed condition) but no significant difference between the two experimental conditions. H1b was not supported.

Second, we examined the effects of exposure to the news articles on attitudes toward the victim. The results showed a non-significant effect of the delayed condition on attitudes toward the victim compared with the control condition ($b = -0.15$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .278$) (mean values for attitudes: delayed, $M = 4.17$, $SD = 0.92$; non-delayed, $M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.94$; control condition, $M = 4.30$, $SD = 0.91$). Thus, H2a was not supported. Answering RQ2, the results showed a non-significant effect for the non-delayed condition on attitudes toward the victim ($b = -0.10$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .482$). Again, we recoded our dummy variables (reference group: non-delayed condition) and conducted the analysis again. Results (comparison of the two experimental conditions) revealed a non-significant effect ($b = -0.05$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .702$). Thus, H2b was not supported. Third, we examined the effects of exposure to the news articles on the attribution of negative motives toward the victim (H3) (mean values for negative motives: delayed, $M = 3.17$, $SD = 1.19$; non-delayed, $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.27$; control condition, $M = 2.87$, $SD = 1.07$). The results revealed a significant effect ($b = 3.44$, $SE = 1.42$, $p = .016$) showing that exposure to the delayed condition increased the attribution of negative motives compared with the control condition. This supports H3a. In contrast, the non-delayed condition had no impact on negative motives ($b = 1.61$, $SE = 1.43$, $p = .262$). This answers RQ3. Again, we also compared the two experimental conditions. Results revealed a non-significant effect ($b = 1.83$, $SE = 1.40$, $p = .191$). H3b was not supported. Fourth, we examined if compassion affected victim blaming (H4). The results revealed a non-significant effect ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .164$). Compassion did not mediate the effect of exposure to news about the delayed accusation on victim blaming (indirect effect of exposure: $b = 0.05$, $SE = 0.38$), 95% confidence intervals (CIs) = $[-0.01, 0.15]$). Thus, H4 was not supported (Table 1). Fifth, we tested if attitudes toward the victim affected victim blaming. This was not the case ($b = -0.14$, $SE = 0.09$, $p = .142$) indicating that attitudes toward the victim did not serve as a relevant mediator variable (indirect effect of exposure: $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.03$), 95% confidence intervals (CIs) = $[-0.01, 0.10]$). Thus, H5 was not supported. Sixth, we tested if negative motives affected victim blaming. Supporting H6, the results showed that this was the case ($b = 0.06$, $SE = 0.01$, $p < .001$). The analysis also revealed that negative motives mediated the effect of exposure to the delayed accusation condition on victim blaming (indirect effect of exposure: $b = 0.20$, $SE = 0.09$), 95% confidence intervals (CIs) = $[0.05, 0.42]$ (Figure 2). Thus, individuals who were exposed to the delayed sexual harassment news articles

Table 1. Ordinary least squares path analysis, N = 254.

Variables	Compassion For The Victim	Attitude Toward The Victim	Attribution Of Negative Motives	Victim Blaming
Delayed Accusation	– 0.81(0.26)**	– 0.15(0.13)	3.44(1.42)*	– 0.20(0.16)
Non-Delayed Accusation	– 0.32(0.26)	– 0.10(0.13)	1.61(1.43)	0.13(0.16)
Compassion For The Victim				– 0.06(0.04) ⁺
Attitude Toward The Victim				– 0.14(0.09)
Attribution Of Negative Motives				0.06(0.01)**
Gender	– 0.08(0.23)	0.15(0.12)	– 1.59(1.25)	0.09(0.14)
CDU Party Identification	0.07(0.07)	0.00(0.04)	– 0.39(0.37)	0.09(0.04)*
Empathy	0.23(0.13)	0.10(0.06)	0.23(0.68)	0.09(0.08)
Acceptance: Myths About Sexual Aggress. (AMMSA)	– 0.08(0.02)***	– 0.08(0.01)***	– 1.35(0.12)***	– 0.06(0.02)***
Adj. R ²	0.07	0.18	0.33	0.49

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ⁺ $p < 0.10$

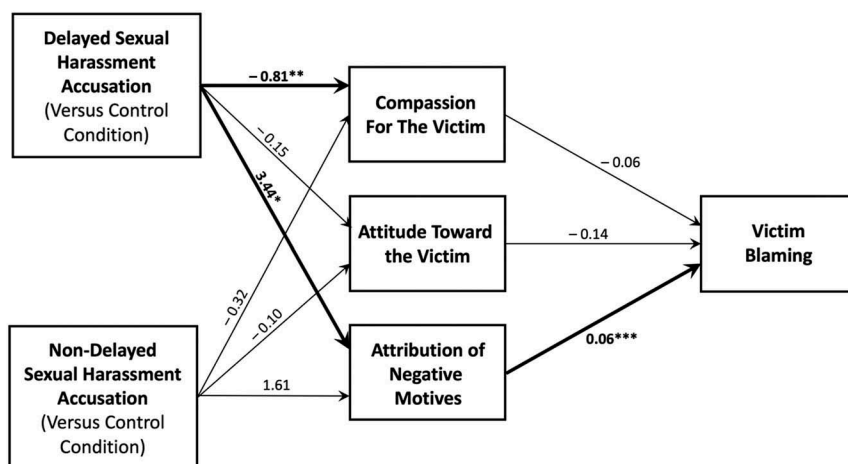


Figure 2. Mediation model showing the indirect effects of the delayed accusation condition on victim blaming via compassion for the victim, attitude toward the victim, and negative motives. 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals based on 10,000 bootstrap samples are shown for indirect effects. Bold lines indicate significant effects. Significant codes: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

attributed negative motives toward the victim and, in turn, negative motives significantly increased victim blaming.

Overall, there was a significant relationship between the three mediator variables. That is, there was a relationship between compassion and negative motives ($r = -.27$, $p < .001$) and between compassion and attitudes

toward the victim ($r = .32, p < .001$). Also, there was a relationship between negative motives and attitudes toward the victim ($r = -.64, p < .001$). However, all mediator variables were entered in the parallel mediation model simultaneously and therefore controlled each other's influences (Preacher & Hayes, 2008). Furthermore, we found no direct effect of the delayed accusation condition ($b = -0.20, SE = 0.16, p = .214$) or the non-delayed accusation condition on victim blaming ($b = 0.13, SE = 0.16, p = .431$). The results also showed that the control variable AMMSA (rape myths acceptance), which was modeled as a covariate revealed a significant effect ($b = -0.08, SE = 0.02, p = .001$). Individuals with higher levels of AMMSA generally showed less compassion for the victim. AMMSA also negatively affected attitudes toward the victim ($b = -0.08, SE = 0.01, p < .001$) showing that individuals with higher levels of AMMSA evaluated the victim less positive. Furthermore, AMMSA negatively affected victim blaming ($b = 0.06, SE = 0.02, p < .001$), whereas individuals with higher levels of AMMSA engaged in more victim blaming.² Finally, CDU party identification positively affected victim blaming ($b = 0.06, SE = 0.02, p < .001$) indicating that German conservative party identifiers engaged in more victim blaming. Empathy and gender showed no significant influences (Table 1). Adjusted R^2 values revealed that the predictors explained 7% of the variance of compassion, 18% of the variance of attitude toward the victim, 33% of the variance of attribution of negative motives, and 49% of the variance of victim blaming.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to examine how temporal aspects in regard to a victim's sexual harassment accusations publicized via the news media affect victim blaming. Precisely, we were interested in how delayed (non-delayed) accusations affect victim blaming. Also, we examined the underlying mechanisms and tested if compassion for the victim, attitudes toward the victim, and/or the attribution of negative motives toward the victim help to explain effects on victim blaming. Our results reveal that coming forward with a sexual harassment accusation years after the harassment occurred results in the attribution of negative motives toward the victim and, in turn, negative motives result in victim blaming.

Our results add to the literature in several ways. First, our findings corroborate and extend previous results showing that victim-specific behaviors highlighted in the news media may significantly affect victim blaming in

²We conducted a post-hoc analysis examining for potential interaction effects between the temporal manipulations and the AMMSA score. However, the analyses showed that AMMSA did not serve as a relevant moderator variable.

news consumers (Gravelin et al., 2019; Sacks et al., 2018; Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014). Second, temporal aspects, as predicted by construal level theory (Trope & Liberman, 2010), play an important role in this context (Balogh et al., 2003). As a truly unique finding, the present study not only reveals that delaying a public sexual harassment accusation can affect victim blaming, but also shines a light on the underlying mechanisms. That is, in line with attribution theory (Weiner, 1985) our findings show that the attribution of negative motives serves as an important mediator variable that helps to explain the effect on victim blaming. As theorized, delaying a sexual harassment accusation against a well-known public figure (i.e., politician) may result in the perception that the victim had at least a certain level of control and was able to (strategically) manage at what point in time she came forward with an accusation. When observers think that a victim “actively manages” the timing of an accusation, a dispositional attribution process should follow (Weiner, 1985) resulting in negative motives toward the victim (i.e., she wants to enrich herself financially; is craving for attention; wants to damage the image of the politician) and eventually in victim blaming.

Furthermore, our results show that individuals’ prior level of acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA; Gerger et al., 2007) had a significant impact. The first result is no surprise and corroborates previous research on AMMSA (see Van der Bruggen & Grubb, 2014) showing that individuals who score high on AMMSA generally showed less compassion for the victim and more negative attitudes toward her. Also, these individuals attributed negative motives toward the victim and engaged in victim blaming to a higher extent compared with low AMMSA individuals. Moreover, CDU party identification resulted in more victim blaming. One explanation for this finding is that the politician accused of the harassment in our study was affiliated to the conservative party. Individuals who identify with the CDU may have engaged in motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990; von Sikorski et al., 2019) defending their preexisting views which then resulted in victim blaming.

Yet, not all of our hypotheses were supported. First, and as expected, our findings revealed that exposure to a delayed accusation via the news media negatively affected individuals’ compassion for the victim. Yet, compassion did not serve as a relevant mediator variable. How can this be explained? It may be argued that compassion for the victim was not decreased sufficiently to affect victim blaming, as the mean score for individuals in the delayed condition still ranged around the midpoint ($M = 3.94$ on 7-point scale; control condition: $M = 4.57$). As mentioned earlier, compassion can be understood as a type of safeguard mechanism that prevents victim blaming. Future studies should therefore examine if compassion also predicts victim blaming when observers’ levels of compassion are substantially lower. One may argue that this could be the case when a victim comes forward with

a harassment accusation with a strong delay and when observers (at the same time) think that a victim is acting highly “strategic”, e.g., when publicly accusing a politician just before an important election. Under these circumstances compassion for the victim may be negatively affected in more substantial ways and may then affect victim blaming. Yet, this is just speculation and future studies should test this assumption.

Also, the delayed condition had no effect on participants’ attitudes toward the victim and victim evaluation did not mediate the effect of the condition on victim blaming. Initially, this result was rather counterintuitive because previous results suggest that information related to certain victim-specific behaviors can negatively affect victim evaluations (Ward, 1988; see also Gravelin et al., 2019). That is, research shows that observers blame the victim more when she, e.g., wore provocative clothing, consumed alcohol or did not adequately resist physically in a sexual harassment situation. Put differently, when the news media emphasizes these forms of victim-specific behaviors that are directly related to a harassment itself, observers negatively evaluate the victim and in turn engage in victim blaming (at least in parts). Yet this may be different when mediated information relates to the timing of publicly reporting a harassment. This type of information may have no effects on attitudes toward the victim. However, as already discussed, can affect the attribution of negative motives toward the victim.

Furthermore, we did not find any effects of the non-delayed condition compared with the control group and no relevant effects between the two experimental conditions. That is, it did not make a difference when news reports emphasized that the harassment occurred recently. This is an important finding because it shows that coming forward with a sexual harassment accusation right after it occurred is not automatically beneficial for a victim. One explanation for this finding may be that going public via the news media right after a sexual harassment occurred can be interpreted by news consumers as “too early” and, e.g., as “a sign” that the harassment was not that bad after all (i.e., “if the victim is able to go public already, she is not really suffering or traumatized”). Future research may therefore test other time delays, e.g., a delay of a couple of weeks. Moderate time delays, as one may argue, may actually have more positive effects (e.g., more compassion for the victim) compared with a strong delay but also control conditions without any temporal information.

Implications

The international debate around the #MeeToo movement drew a large amount of media attention and has put the issue of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence in the public focus. It goes without saying that journalists reporting about sexual harassment victims have

a great responsibility because certain types of news coverage may result in victim blaming, whereas victim blaming may lead to a phenomenon known as secondary victimization of sexual harassment victims (Ahrens, 2006). This means that women but also men—who are also regularly victims of sexual harassment, albeit less frequently than women (Pew Research Center, 2018)—are first victims of sexual harassment and are then victimized a second time, as they are held responsible for the sexual harassment. Thus, media coverage in this context has significant social and societal implications because when other (female or male) victims become aware of forms of victim blaming—due to a delayed accusation—this may actually deter other victims from going public because they might fear to be blamed for sexual harassment as well.

But how should journalists report about sexual harassment cases in which victims come forward publicly with a (strong) delay? For journalists, it is usually not possible to ignore the timing of a sexual harassment and to, e.g., leave the point in time at which the harassment occurred unmentioned. When a victim accuses a well-known public figure via the news media, the precise time when the harassment occurred is important information. However, journalists may precisely explain why a victim comes forward with a delay. Oftentimes sexual harassment victims are traumatized, experience post-traumatic stress syndromes or depression and need time until they feel able to publicly speak about their victimization (O’Neil et al., 2018). Providing specific insights on, e.g., why it was not possible for a victim to go public earlier may then affect the attribution of negative motives. Put differently, when journalists explain potential reasons for a victim’s late public sexual harassment accusation to their audiences (e.g., against a political actor), this may prevent the attribution of negative motives toward the victim. First research revealed that observers engage in less victim blaming when they were primed with altruistic motives (i.e., aim to protect other women from sexual harassment) for reporting a sexual harassment (Balogh et al., 2003). In fact, examining types of media coverage that buffer against unwanted effects such as victim blaming would be a valuable avenue for future research (see also Lee, 2018). Thus, scholars should examine if specific forms of news media reporting—providing comprehensible motives to news consumers—can eliminate or dampen victim blaming tendencies. In contrast, when victims fear secondary victimization (e.g., caused by certain types of news coverage) this may facilitate silencing effects (Ahrens, 2006) and the refusal of sexual harassment victims to come forward with harassment accusations (delayed or not). As a result, offenders could go undetected, increasing the likelihood that other women will be victims of sexual violence.

Limitations

This study has some noteworthy limitations. To begin with, we tested our assumptions in a German context. Although we believe that our findings should extend to other cultural contexts and areas of society, future studies should examine if the results can be replicated in non-Western countries as well as in nonpolitical contexts (e.g., the film industry). Also, we focused on sexual harassment. Future research should examine if the mechanism detected in the present study also applies to other forms of sexual aggression (e.g., rape). We used different (quality and tabloid) news articles to test for effects on victim blaming. Yet, future replication studies should also use other media channels (e.g., TV; social media, Armstrong & Mahone, 2017). Also, future studies may try to systematically vary temporal information precisely examining at which point in time observers start to attribute negative motives to female (but also male) sexual harassment victims. Furthermore, alternative control articles may be used, e.g., explicitly stating that investigators have not yet mentioned when exactly a sexual harassment occurred. Attribution of negative motives was measured with negatively formulated items only. Although, the reliability of the scale was fine future research should use both positively and negatively formulated items and research should also examine effects of (non-)delayed accusations via the news media on perpetrator perceptions and how certain perceptions toward the perpetrator affect victim blaming. Moreover, the relationship between our mediator variables and the outcome variable is correlational. Future research should manipulate the three mediator variables examining for causal effects on victim blaming. Those limitations notwithstanding, our findings pose important implications for understanding victim blaming and the role of temporal aspects in this context.

Conclusion

Temporal aspects play an important role in regard of public debates around sexual harassment, as in the case of the #MeToo movement. Our study shows that a victim's delayed public accusation against a harasser via the news media can indirectly increase victim blaming tendencies and may thus contribute to secondary victimization of sexual harassment victims. Also, our results reveal a social dilemma. On the one hand, victims making a past case public may be affected by victim blaming. When victims remain silent (because they feel unable to go public), on the other hand, this increases the chance that an important societal problem (sexual harassment) goes undetected. This also increases the chance that other women will be victims of sexual violence, as it becomes less likely for perpetrators of being publicly held accountable when victims remain silent. Overall,

more research is needed testing how journalists can best report delayed sexual harassment accusations (e.g., highlighting possible reasons for a delayed public accusation). Until we know more, journalists should be highly sensitive in regard to temporal aspects when reporting about sexual harassment cases in order to prevent victim blaming tendencies in news consumers.

Notes on contributors

Christian von Sikorski is an assistant professor (tenure track) of political psychology at the Department of Psychology, University of Koblenz-Landau, Germany.

Melanie Saumer is a teaching assistant at the Department of Communication, University of Vienna, Austria.

ORCID

Christian von Sikorski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3787-8277>

References

- Abrams, D., Viki, T., Masser, B., & Bohner, G. (2003). Perceptions of stranger and acquaintance rape: The role of benevolent and hostile sexism in victim blame and rape proclivity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(1), 111–125. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.84.1.111>
- Agerström, J., Björklund, F., & Carlsson, R. (2012). Emotions in time: Moral emotions appear more intense with temporal distance. *Social Cognition*, 30(2), 181–198. <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2012.30.2.181>
- Ahrens, C. E. (2006). Being silenced: The impact of negative social reactions on the disclosure of rape. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 38(3–4), 263–274. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-006-9069-9>
- Armstrong, C. L., & Mahone, J. (2017). “It’s on us.” The role of social media and rape culture in individual willingness to mobilize against sexual assault. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20(1), 92–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2016.1185127>
- Ask, K., & Landström, S. (2010). Why emotions matter: Expectancy violation and affective response mediate the emotional victim effect. *Law and Human Behavior*, 34(5), 392–401. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-009-9208-6>
- Attreed, K., & Kozlowski, D. (2018). Exploring the origins of blame: The role of empathy and gender role conformity in blaming victims of sexual assault. *Frontiers of Psychology Conference*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/conf.fpsyg.2018.74.00021>
- Balogh, D. W., Kite, M. E., Pickel, K. L., Canel, D., & Schroeder, J. (2003). The effects of delayed report and motive for reporting on perceptions of sexual harassment. *Sex Roles*, 48(7/8), 337–348. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022990530657>

- Burt, M. R. (1980). Cultural myths and supports for rape. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38(2), 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217>
- Campbell, R., Greeson, M. R., Bybee, D., & Raja, S. (2008). The co-occurrence of childhood sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and sexual harassment: A mediational model of posttraumatic stress disorder and physical health outcomes. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(2), 194–207. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.76.2.194>
- Collier, C. N., & Raney, T. (2018). Understanding sexism and sexual harassment in politics: A comparison of Westminster parliaments in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada. *Social Politics*, 25(3), 432–455. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxy024>
- Dawtry, R. J., Cozzolino, P. J., & Callan, M. J. (2019). I blame therefore I was: Rape myth acceptance, victim blaming, and memory reconstruction. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 1269–1282. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167218818475>
- Deitz, S. R., Blackwell, K. T., Daley, P. C., & Bentley, B. J. (1982). Measurement of empathy toward rape victims and rapists. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(2), 372–384. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.43.2.372>
- Dewan, S. (2018, September). Why women can take years to come forward with sexual assault allegations. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/18/us/kavanaugh-christine-blasey-ford.html>
- Dill, K., Brown, B. P., & Collins, M. A. (2008). Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44(5), 1402–1498. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2008.06.002>
- Dowler, K. (2006). Sex, lies, and videotape: The presentation of sex crime in local television news. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 34(4), 383–392. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2006.05.004>
- European Union. (2012). *Survey on violence against women in EU*. European Union. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/data-and-maps/survey-data-explorer-violence-against-women-survey>
- Feigenson, N., & Park, J. (2006). Emotions and attributions of legal responsibility and blame: A research review. *Law and Human Behavior*, 30(2), 143–161. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10979-006-9026-z>
- Fischle, M. (2000). Mass response to the Lewinsky scandal: Motivated reasoning or Bayesian updating? *Political Psychology*, 21(1), 135–159. <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00181>
- Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1991). *Social cognition* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Fitzgerald, L. F., Gelfand, M. J., & Drasgow, F. (1995). Measuring sexual harassment: Theoretical and psychometric advances. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 17(4), 425–445. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basps1704_2
- Gerger, H., Kley, H., Böhner, G., & Siebler, F. (2007). The acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA) scale: Development and validation in German and English. *Aggressive Behavior*, 33(5), 422–440. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20195>
- Goetz, J. L., Keltner, D., & Simon-Thomas, E. (2010). Compassion: An evolutionary analysis and empirical review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 136(3), 351–374. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018807>

- Grauerholz, E., & King, A. (1997). Prime time sexual harassment. *Violence against Women*, 3(2), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801297003002003>
- Gravelin, C. R., Biernat, M., & Bucher, C. A. (2019). Blaming the victim of acquaintance rape: Individual, situational, and sociocultural factors. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02422>
- Grubb, A., & Turner, E. (2012). Attribution of blame in rape cases: A review of the impact of rape myth acceptance, gender role conformity and substance use on victim blaming. *Aggressive and Violent Behavior*, 17(5), 443–452. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2012.06.002>
- Harding, K. (2020). I've been told I'm a survivor, not a victim. But what's wrong with being a victim? *Time*. <https://time.com/5789032/victim-survivor-sexual-assault/>
- Hayes, A. F. (2013). *Introduction to mediation, moderation, and conditional process analysis: A regression-based approach*. Guilford Press.
- Kessler, G. (2018). Brett Kavanaugh and allegations of sexual misconduct: The complete list. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/09/27/brett-kavanaugh-allegations-sexual-misconduct-complete-list/?utm_term=.58fc671dcf57
- Kunda, Z. (1990). The case for motivated reasoning. *Psychological Bulletin*, 108(3), 480–498. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480>
- Lawrence, E. J., Shaw, P., Baker, D., Baron-Cohen, S., & David, A. S. (2004). Measuring empathy: Reliability and validity of the empathy quotient. *Psychological Medicine*, 34(5), 911–924. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291703001624>
- Lee, S. J. (2018). The role of construal level in message effects research: A review and future directions. *Communication Theory*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qty030>
- Lonsway, K. A., Cortina, L. M., & Magley, V. J. (2008). Sexual harassment mythology: Definition, conceptualization, and measurement. *Sex Roles*, 58(9–10), 599–615. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-007-9367-1>
- Lonsway, K. A., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1994). Rape myths: In review. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 18(2), 133–164. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x>
- Matthes, J., Knoll, J., & von Sikorski, C. (2018). The “spiral of silence” revisited: A meta-analysis on the relationship between perceptions of opinion support and political opinion expression. *Communication Research*, 45(1), 3–33. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217745429>
- McNickle Rose, V., & Randall, S. C. (1982). The impact of investigator perceptions of victim legitimacy on the processing of rape/sexual assault cases. *Symbolic Interaction*, 5(1), 23–36. <https://doi.org/10.1525/si.1982.5.1.23>
- Miller, A. K., Markman, K. D., & Handley, I. M. (2007). Self-blame among sexual assault victims prospectively predicts revictimization: A perceived sociolegal context model of risk. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 29(2), 129–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01973530701331585>
- Nagel, B., Matsuo, H., McIntyre, K. P., & Morrison, N. (2005). Attitudes toward victims of rape. Effects of gender, race, religion, and social class. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 20(6), 725–737. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260505276072>

- O'Neil, A., Sojo, V., Fileborn, B., Scovelle, A. J., & Milner, A. (2018). The #MeToo movement: An opportunity in public health? *The Lancet*, 391(10140), 2587–2589. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)30991-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)30991-7)
- Pew Research Center. (2018). *Sexual harassment at work in the era of #metoo*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/12/14/gender-discrimination-comes-in-many-forms-for-todays-working-women/>
- Preacher, K. J., & Hayes, A. F. (2008). Asymptotic and resampling strategies for assessing and comparing indirect effects in multiple mediator models. *Behavior Research Methods*, 40(3), 879–891. <https://doi.org/10.3758/BRM.40.3.879>
- Randal, M. (2010). Sexual assault law, credibility, and “ideal victims”: Consent, resistance, and victim blaming. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 22(2), 397–433. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjwl.22.2.397>
- Reeves, B., Yeykelis, L., & Cummings, J. J. (2016). The use of media in media psychology. *Media Psychology*, 19(1), 49–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2015.1030083>
- Roose, K. (2018). Debunking 5 viral rumors about Christine Blasey Ford, Kavanaugh's accuser. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/19/us/politics/christine-blasey-ford-kavanaughs-fact-check.html>
- Sacks, M., Ackerman, A. R., & Shlosberg, A. (2018). Rape myths in the media: A content analysis of local newspaper reporting in the United States. *Deviant Behavior*, 39(9), 1237–1246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2017.1410608>
- Smith, C. A., & Frieze, I. H. (2003). Examining rape empathy from the perspective of the victim and the assailant. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33(3), 476–498. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2003.tb01907.x>
- Stephan, E., Liberman, N., & Trope, Y. (2011). The effects of time perspective and level of construal on social distance. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 47(2), 397–402. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2010.11.001>
- Tarrant, M., Dazeley, S., & Cottom, T. (2009). Social categorization and empathy for outgroup members. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 48(3), 427–446. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466608x373589>
- Trope, Y., & Liberman, N. (2010). Construal-level theory of psychological distance. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 440–463. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018963>
- van der Bruggen, M., & Grubb, A. R. (2014). A review of the literature relating to rape victim blaming: An analysis of the impact of observer and victim characteristics on attribution of blame in rape cases. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19(5), 523–531. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2014.07.008>
- von Sikorski, C. (2018). The aftermath of political scandals: A meta-analysis. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 3109–3133. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/7100/2418>
- von Sikorski, C., Heiss, R., & Matthes, J. (2019). How political scandals affect the electorate. Tracing the eroding and spillover effects of scandals with a panel study. *Political Psychology*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12638>
- von Sikorski, C., & Knoll, J. (2019). Framing political scandals: Exploring the multimodal effects of isolation cues in scandal news coverage on candidate evaluations and voting intentions. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, 206–228. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/9616/2529>
- von Sikorski, C., & Ludwig, M. (2018). The effects of visual isolation on the perception of scandalized politicians. *Communications: European Journal of*

- Communication Research*, 43(2), 235–257. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2017-0054>
- von Sikorski, C., Matthes, J., & Schmuck, D. (2018). The Islamic State in the news: Journalistic differentiation of Islamist terrorism from Islam, terror news proximity, and Islamophobic attitudes. *Communication Research*, 009365021880327. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218803276>
- von Sikorski, C., Schmuck, D., Matthes, J., & Binder, A. (2017). “Muslims are not terrorists”: Islamic state coverage, journalistic differentiation between terrorism and islam, fear reactions, and attitudes toward Muslims. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20(6), 825–848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1342131>
- Ward, C. (1988). The attitudes toward rape victims scale: Construction, validation, and cross-cultural applicability. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 12(2), 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1988.tb00932.x>
- Weiner, B. (1985). An attributional theory of achievement motivation and emotion. *Psychological Review*, 92(4), 548–573. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.92.4.548>
- WHO. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*.
- Wolitzky-Taylor, K. B., Resnick, H. S., Amstadter, A. B., McCauley, J. L., Ruggiero, K. J., & Kilpatrick, D. G. (2011). Reporting rape in a national sample of college women. *Journal of American College Health*, 59(7), 582–587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2010.515634>

Appendix A

(Stimulus texts with manipulations (bold) and articles (control condition) in original layout at the bottom)

STIMULUS ARTICLE 1: *sueddeutsche.de*

German EU politician Stefan Wagner is said to have sexually harassed Bundestag employee

Bundestag employee accuses the EU politician Stefan Wagner (CDU) of sexual harassment, which allegedly occurred at a private birthday **[20 years ago/last Friday/no time mentioned]**

By Wiebke Weber, Berlin

As it became known, the EU politician Stefan Wagner has been accused of sexual harassment of the former employee of the German Bundestag, Katharina Gruber, at a birthday party of a common political friend **[in 1998/last Friday/no time mentioned]**. In an interview with Die Welt, Gruber made the alleged events public: “It’s important to talk about it publicly and bring the truth to the table on what happened **[20 years ago/last Friday/no time mentioned]**”, said Gruber. According to Gruber, the politician first addressed her at a birthday party hosted by a common friend and CDU politician. He then verbally and physically harassed her. “I will never forget the incident and what happened **[20 years ago/last Friday/no time mentioned]**. At first he spoke to me in an offensive way, ran after me all the time and then physically approached me in an adjoining room, touched me on the chest and buttocks, and harassed me”, Gruber said in the interview. According to her she clearly signaled the politician several times: “Stop it, but he tried to kiss me, then I was able to free myself and left the event because I was completely scared,” Gruber goes on.

Wagner reacted yesterday via Twitter and distanced himself from these allegations: “I never had the intention to behave in any way inappropriately and in my opinion

I didn't do that. I respect the fact that Ms. Gruber obviously has a different view on it. But I think it's important to emphasize that I did not do anything wrong at this party *[in 1998/last Friday/no time mentioned]*".

STIMULUS ARTICLE 2: *bild.de*

"I was completely scared"

Berlin - Katharina Gruber accuses the EU politician Stefan Wagner (CDU) to have sexually harassed her *[20 years ago/last Friday/no mention of time]*.

By Matthias Müller

It is a balmy summer night in Berlin *[in 1998/last Friday/no mention of time]*. Katharina Gruber is happy and satisfied with her new job as a member of the Bundestag and is looking forward to the birthday party of a colleague. But the party fun comes to a sudden end for her, as the EU politician Stefan Wagner begins to harass her – and not only verbally. "He touched me on the chest and buttocks, and harassed me," says Gruber in an exclusive interview with Die Welt. When he came after her in an adjoining room, he also began to physically harass her she reports: Despite obtrusive signals that he should stop it he became increasingly intrusive. When he tried to kiss her, she was finally able to break free and hastily left the party. "I will never forget what happened *[20 years ago/last Friday/no time mentioned]*. I was completely scared", said Gruber. The EU politician Wagner commented yesterday via Twitter on the incident *[that happened 20 years ago/of last Friday/no time mentioned]* and clearly distanced himself from the alleged act: In his opinion, he didn't behave inappropriately. And: "It is important for me to emphasize that I didn't do anything wrong at this party *[in 1998/last Friday/no time mentioned]*", Wagner said.

Städteutsche Zeitung
SZ.de Zeitung Magazin

30. Juli 2018, 08:47 Uhr Sexuelle Belästigung
Deutscher EU-Politiker Stefan Wagner soll Bundestagsangestellte sexuell belästigt haben

Die Belästigung, die eine Bundestagsangestellte dem EU-Politiker Stefan Wagner (CDU) vorwirft, soll auf einer privaten Geburtstagsparty passiert sein.

Von Wiebke Weber, Berlin

Wie bekannt wurde, soll der EU-Politiker Stefan Wagner die Mitarbeiterin im Bundestag, Katharina Gruber, bei einer Geburtstagsfeier eines gemeinsamen politischen Freundes bedrängt und sexuell belästigt haben. In einem Interview mit *Die Welt* machte Gruber die angeblichen Vorkommnisse öffentlich: „Es ist wichtig, öffentlich darüber zu sprechen und die Wahrheit auf den Tisch zu bringen“, sagte Gruber.

Laut Gruber habe sie der Politiker bei einer Geburtstagsfeier eines befreundeten CDU-Politikers zunächst angesprochen, wäre dann aber verbal, später auch physisch zudringlich geworden. „Ich werde den Vorfall nie vergessen können. Zunächst sprach er mich anzüglich an, lief mir die ganze Zeit nach und kam mir dann körperlich in einem Nebenraum näher, fasste mich an, an Brust und Gesäß, und bedrängte mich“, sagte Gruber in dem Interview. Demnach signalisierte sie dem Politiker mehrfach eindeutig: „Hör damit auf, aber er versuchte mich zu küssen, ich riss mich dann los und verließ die Veranstaltung, ich war völlig verängstigt“, sagte Gruber weiter.

Wagner reagierte gestern via Twitter und distanzierte sich von den Anschuldigungen: „Ich hatte nie die Intention, mich in irgendeiner Weise unangemessen zu verhalten und habe das meiner Auffassung nach auch nicht getan. Dass Frau Gruber dies offensichtlich anders sieht, respektiere ich. Aber mir ist es wichtig zu betonen, dass ich mir bei dieser Feier nichts zu Schulden habe kommen lassen.“

Bild

30.07.2018 - 09:23 Uhr HOME > POLITIK > INNLAND > VORWURF DER SEXUELLEN BELÄSTIGUNG

Sexskandal auf Politiker-Party

„Ich war völlig verängstigt“

Von: MATTHIAS MÜLLER

30.07.2018 - 09:23 Uhr

Berlin – Katharina Gruber wirft dem EU-Politiker Stefan Wagner (CDU) vor, sie sexuell belästigt zu haben.

Es ist eine laue Sommernacht in Berlin. Katharina Gruber ist glücklich und zufrieden mit ihrem neuen Job als Bundestags-Mitarbeiterin, und freut sich auf die Geburtstagsparty eines Kollegen. Doch der Party-Spaß hat für sie ein jähes Ende, als der EU-Politiker Stefan Wagner anfängt, nicht nur verbal aufdringlich zu werden.

„Er fasste mich an, an Brust und Gesäß, und bedrängte mich“, erzählt Gruber in einem exklusiven Interview mit *Die Welt*. Als er ihr in einen Nebenraum nachließ, begann er sie auch körperlich zu bedrängen, berichtet sie: Er sei trotz eindeutiger Signale, dass er damit aufhören solle, immer zudringlicher geworden. Als er dann versuchte sie zu küssen, konnte sie sich endlich losreißen und verließ fluchtartig die Party. „Ich werde den Vorfall nie vergessen können. Ich war völlig verängstigt“, sagte Gruber.

EU-Politiker Wagner bezog gestern via Twitter Stellung zu den Vorkommnissen und distanzierte sich klar von der angeblichen Tat: Er habe sich seiner Auffassung nach nicht unangemessen verhalten. Und: „Mir ist es wichtig zu betonen, dass ich mir bei dieser Feier nichts zu Schulden habe kommen lassen“, sagte Wagner.

PS: Sind Sie bei Facebook? Werden Sie Fan von *BILD.de-Politik*!

f Twitter G+

Appendix B

CONTROL VARIABLES

Empathy (1 = disagree, 7 = agree; Lawrence et al. 2004; $\alpha = .73$; index: $M = 5.62$, $SD = 0.91$)

Please indicate how much the following statements apply to you:

- (1) When people are exploited, I feel the need to protect them.
- (2) I am a sensitive person.
- (3) The concerns and needs of other people do not really touch me. (recoded)
- (4) It doesn't particularly affect me when others suffer a misconduct. (recoded)

The acceptance of modern myths about sexual aggression (AMMSA; Burt, 1980; Gerger et al., 2007; 1 = disagree, 7 = agree; ($\alpha = .89$; $M = 2.17$, $SD = 1.60$))

Now we want to know about your views on women and men and their relationship to each other:

- (1) Many women loudly complain about sexual harassment, even for vain reasons, just to be considered emancipated.
- (2) Many women tend to exaggerate the problem of male violence.
- (3) The discussion on sexual harassment in the workplace has been led to misunderstand some harmless behavior as harassment.

Party identification (1 = very weakly, 7 = very strongly; CDU: $M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.60$)

How strongly do you identify with the following parties?

- 1) CDU/CSU 2) SPD 3) FDP 4) AFD 5) Bündnis90/Die Grünen 6) Die LINKE

MEDIATOR VARIABLES

Compassion for the victim (1 = disagree, 7 = agree; $M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.70$; Tarrant et al., 2009)

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statement:

- 1) When I think about the case, I feel compassion with the victim.

Attitude toward the victim (1 = negative, 7 = positive; $\alpha = .93$; index: $M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.92$; Nagel et al., 2005). *How do you evaluate Katherina Gruber?*

Not trustworthy-trustworthy; dishonest-honest; arrogant-modest; not principled-principled; unfair-fair; unbelievable-believable; immoral-moral; unqualified-qualified; cold-warm; incompetent-competent; unsympathetic-sympathetic

Negative motives toward the victim (1 = disagree, 7 = agree; $\alpha = .88$; index: $M = 3.03$, $SD = 1.19$; Balogh et al., 2003)

Please complete the following statements:

- (1) The motives of Ms Gruber are craving for recognition and the search for attention.
- (2) Ms Gruber's motive is craving for validation.
- (3) Ms. Gruber just wants to be in the public limelight and get pity.
- (4) The real purpose of these public charges against the politician is to get paid.
- (5) Ms Gruber wants to enrich herself financially.
- (6) It is not about the incident itself, but about what financially comes out for her.

- (7) Ms Gruber is not concerned with the actual case, but she only wants to damage the image of the politician.
- (8) The only aim of Ms Gruber is to publicly damage the reputation of the politician Stefan Wagner.
- (9) Ms Gruber's aim is to negatively affect the public image of the politician.

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Victim blaming (1 = disagree, 7 = agree; ($\alpha = .94$; index: $M = 2.29$, $SD = 1.36$; Abrams et al., 2003)

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements regarding Ms Gruber:

- (1) In my opinion, Ms Gruber is partly to blame.
- (2) Ms Gruber is at least partly responsible for the case.
- (3) There are always two to such an incident.
- (4) I am convinced that Ms Gruber has contributed her part to the incident.
- (5) I think that Ms Gruber had control over the situation in which the incident happened and is partly responsible.
- (6) I think Ms. Gruber should also blame herself for what happened.

Appendix C (Manipulation Check)

All participants answered the following three items (1 = disagree, 7 = agree): (1) "The articles stated that the sexual harassment happened 20 years ago" ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 2.72$), (2) "The articles stated that the sexual harassment happened a few days ago" ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 2.42$), (3) "There was no exact time mentioned in the articles regarding when the sexual harassment happened" ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 2.42$). First, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) revealed significant group differences regarding the first item, $F(2, 251) = 428.39$, $p < .001$, *Partial Eta Squared* = 0.77, indicating that participants in the delayed group ($M = 6.59$, $SD = 1.34$) were significantly more likely to agree with the first statement, compared with individuals in the non-recent group ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 1.19$) and the control condition ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.40$). Second, an ANOVA showed significant group differences regarding the second item, $F(2, 251) = 80.53$, $p < .001$, *Partial Eta Squared* = 0.39, indicating that participants in the non-delayed group ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 2.32$) were significantly more likely to agree with the second statement, compared to individuals in the delayed group ($M = 1.14$, $SD = .69$) and the control condition ($M = 3.30$, $SD = 2.25$). Third, an ANOVA revealed significant group differences regarding the third item, $F(2, 251) = 51.28$, $p < .001$, *Partial Eta Squared* = 0.29, indicating that participants in the control condition ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 2.45$) were significantly more likely to agree with the third statement, compared to individuals in the non-delayed group ($M = 3.23$, $SD = 2.90$) and delayed group ($M = 1.23$, $SD = 0.96$).