

**STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND
EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SEXUAL
HARASSMENT IN MALAYSIAN WORKPLACES**

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STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MALAYSIAN WORKPLACES

by

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Bachelor of Science (Honours) in Forensic Science**

January 2025

CERTIFICATE

This certifies that the dissertation entitled “STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MALAYSIAN WORKPLACES” is the authentic documentation of the research conducted by “HARWANI BINTI OMAR” under my supervision between August 2024 and February 2025. I have read this dissertation and believe it to be completely sufficient in scope and quality to be submitted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Science (Honours) (Forensic Science) degree, and it complies with acceptable standards of scholarly presentation.

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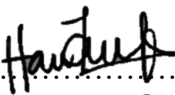
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own research, unless otherwise stated and duly acknowledged. I additionally declare that it has not been submitted in its entirety, either previously or concurrently, for any other degree at Universiti Sains Malaysia or any other institution. I grant Universiti Sains Malaysia the right to use the dissertation for teaching, research, and promotional purposes.


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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AT	Attribution Theory
CVI	Content Validity Index
CVR	Content Validity Ratio
DoSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
FYP	Final Year Project
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
ILO	International Labour Organisation
KAE	Knowledge, Attitudes, and Experiences
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
SCT	Social Cognitive Theory
SH	Sexual Harassment
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TPB	Theory of Planned Behaviour
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World Health Organization

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STUDY ON KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN MALAYSIAN WORKPLACES

ABSTRACT

This study examines knowledge, attitudes, and experiences (KAE) related to sexual harassment (SH) in Malaysian workplaces. A quantitative research approach was employed using an online survey to collect data from employees across various sectors. The survey instrument was adapted from established scales and validated sources to assess participants' understanding of SH, their attitudes toward it, and their personal or observed experiences in the workplace. The survey consisted of five parts: sociodemographic characteristics, knowledge of SH, attitudes toward SH, experiences of SH, and reporting behaviours. A total of 394 Malaysian employees participated in the study, with 271 respondents included in the final analysis after applying exclusion and withdrawal criteria. Statistical analyses, including Kruskal-Wallis test, Mann-Whitney U test, and Binary Logistic Regression; were conducted to identify significant relationships between KAE with SH reporting behaviour. Findings revealed that knowledge is relatively uniform between genders, employment sectors, and job levels. Attitudes toward SH were influenced by personal attributes, workplace culture and awareness campaigns. Meanwhile reporting behaviours were hindered by fear of retaliation, lack of trust in reporting mechanisms, and organisational inaction. The study highlights the need for transparent policies and improved workplace-specific-sector training. Future research should explore sector-specific awareness and training programmes, and enhance reporting mechanism as well as support system.

KAJIAN MENGENAI PENGETAHUAN, SIKAP, DAN PENGALAMAN BERKAITAN GANGGUAN SEKSUAL DI TEMPAT KERJA MALAYSIA

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji pengetahuan, sikap, dan pengalaman (KAE) berkaitan dengan gangguan seksual (GS) di tempat kerja di Malaysia. Pendekatan penyelidikan kuantitatif digunakan dengan menggunakan tinjauan dalam talian untuk mengumpul data daripada pekerja dari pelbagai sektor. Instrumen tinjauan diubah suai daripada skala yang telah ditetapkan dan sumber yang sah untuk menilai pemahaman peserta tentang GS, sikap mereka terhadapnya, dan pengalaman peribadi atau yang mereka saksikan di tempat kerja. Tinjauan terdiri daripada lima bahagian: ciri sosio-demografi, pengetahuan mengenai GS, sikap terhadap GS, pengalaman dengan GS, dan tingkah laku melaporkan. Seramai 394 pekerja Malaysia mengambil bahagian dalam kajian ini, dengan 271 responden dimasukkan dalam analisis akhir selepas menggunakan kriteria pengecualian dan penarikan diri. Analisis statistik, termasuk ujian Kruskal-Wallis, ujian Mann-Whitney U, dan Regresi Logistik Binari; dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti hubungan yang signifikan antara KAE dengan tingkah laku pelaporan GS. Penemuan kajian menunjukkan bahawa pengetahuan agak seragam di kalangan jantina, sektor pekerjaan, dan tahap pekerjaan. Sikap terhadap GS dipengaruhi oleh atribut peribadi, budaya tempat kerja, dan kempen kesedaran. Sementara itu, tingkah laku melaporkan terhalang oleh rasa takut terhadap balasan, kurangnya kepercayaan terhadap mekanisme pelaporan, dan tindakan yang tidak diambil oleh organisasi. Kajian ini menekankan keperluan untuk dasar yang telus dan latihan sektor yang lebih baik di tempat kerja. Penyelidikan masa depan perlu meneroka program kesedaran dan latihan mengikut sektor, serta meningkatkan mekanisme pelaporan dan sistem sokongan.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This is a Forensic Science undergraduate Final Year Project (FYP). This FYP focuses on knowledge, attitudes, and experiences (KAE) related to sexual harassment (SH) in Malaysian workplaces. Concerning these, this FYP explains the following: study background, problem statement, study rationale, research questions, research objectives, research hypotheses, operational definition, and significance of the study.

1.2 Study Background

Three important study backgrounds are described here. The first is about the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment incidents. The second is the diverse negative impacts of sexual harassment on individuals and organisations. The third is the need for a better approach to combat sexual harassment.

1.2.1 The widespread prevalence of sexual harassment incidents

According to Ranganathan et. al., (2021), the prevalence of sexual harassment is high across workplace, educational, and public settings; and women experience a higher prevalence than men. A recent study (Shalihin et. al., 2022) found that SH is a pervasive issue that is on the rise in Malaysian educational settings, including public and private colleges. Workplace SH affects individuals of both genders around the world (Vara-Horna et. al., 2023). However, women are more than twice as likely to experience SH compared to men (Casanovas et. al., 2022).

1.2.2 Diverse negative impact of sexual harassment on individuals and organisations

According to Maran, Varetto and Civilotti (2022), both the individual and the organisation may suffer greatly from direct SH experiences in the workplace. Women face stressors from stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, which can lead to SH, as they are a demographic minority in the workplace (Hashmi, Shahzad, & Abbas, 2022). Persistent stress can result in burnout (Kemper & Schwartz, 2020), which causes the victims to become emotionally drained, detached, and unappreciated of their achievements (Hashmi, Shahzad, & Abbas, 2022). Mun et. al., (2024) claimed that SH has an impact on an individual's psychological well-being and job satisfaction, and they consider quitting their jobs.

Other than workers who are individual victims, it also affects organisational productivity and employee well-being (Vara-Horna et. al., 2023). Victims often state they frequently notice a decline or deterioration in their productivity at work, an increase in job abandonment, and worsening of physical and mental health, including symptoms of disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Vara-Horna et. al., 2023). Earlier, Ford and Ivancic (2020) found that organisational culture also suffers as a result of SH as victims often believe that they are of no value to the organisation. This is because victims of SH encounter significant consequences such as harassment fatigue, poor resilience, and victim vulnerability (Ford & Ivancic, 2020). Many victims believe that organisations will protect perpetrators, and as such make victims feel unsafe or unsupported (Ford & Ivancic, 2020).

1.2.3 A better approach to combat sexual harassment is needed

A better strategy to increase awareness involving knowledge, attitudes, and experiences is necessary to better combat workplace SH. This is because SH experiences, whether personal or observed; have a big influence on how people see and react to SH issues. For instance, individuals who have personally witnessed harassment may have long-term psychological consequences, such as anxiety, depression, and a decreased sense of self-worth (Iroegbu et. al., 2024).

1.3 Problem statement

Three problem statements drive the need for this research. First, gaps in Malaysian legislation regarding SH victimization. Second, limited understanding of how employees' knowledge and attitudes influence their recognition and reporting of SH. Third, the underreporting of SH incidents.

1.3.1 Gaps in Malaysian legislation regarding sexual harassment victimization

Despite efforts to address SH, Malaysian legislation still has significant gaps in protecting victims and addressing the issue comprehensively (Hamin, Kamaruddin, & Wan Rosli, 2023). The lack of knowledge and poor attitudes of employees regarding SH incidents could be factors limiting the effectiveness of legal frameworks and policies designed to prevent as well as address SH at workplaces. For example, the Employment Act 1955 and Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill 2021 incorporate provisions pertaining to SH, however, it is still unclear how these legal measures will affect workplace culture, and there remains insufficient enforcement measures in safeguarding victims such as lack of organisational or employer duties, lack of protection against a hostile environment, and inadequate protection through

injunctions or restraining orders of SH (Hamin, Kamaruddin, & Wan Rosli, 2023). According to Hamin, Kamaruddin, and Wan Rosli (2023), the Employment Act 1955 and Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill 2021 omit important clauses defining sexual harassment, that employers need to ensure to prevent and deal with such behaviour.

1.3.2 Lack of comprehensive sexual harassment research on knowledge, attitudes, and experiences interact in Malaysian workplaces

Previous studies (Ranganathan et. al., 2021; Shalihin et. al., 2022) have highlighted the prevalence of SH in various sectors of the Malaysian workplace. According to research conducted in 2019, 60% of respondents from various professions stated that they experienced SH at work in Malaysia (Kamaruddin, Selamat, & Isa, 2021). However, there is limited research regarding how knowledge, attitudes, and experiences (KAE) related to SH interact in Malaysian workplaces, especially across different sectors. This lack is worrying as these factors significantly influence how SH incidents are recognized, interpreted, and reported. In addition, a limited understanding of employees' knowledge of legal provisions (for example, the Employment Act 1955 and Anti-Sexual Harassment Bill 2021) could influence their attitudes towards utilizing these protective measures in Malaysian workplaces.

1.3.3 Underreporting the sexual harassment incidents

Underreporting of SH remains a significant problem in Malaysia. According to Awang, Raja Mohd Khalid, and Mat Zam (2020), many victims of SH in Malaysia choose not to report their experiences out of fear of retaliation, mistrusting the reporting process, and worry about social stigma. More recently, Sumi, Kabir, and Alam (2023), found that most SH victims did not report the occurrence, though exact

figures were not specified. Researchers (Hamin et. al., 2022; Sumi, Kabir, & Alam, 2023) highlighted the lack of clear reporting mechanisms and the perceived ineffectiveness of the existing system as factors contributing to underreporting, other than fear of repercussions.

Earlier, Shafizul, Rahman, and Hamid (2020) suggested that there are significant variations in how SH is perceived and understood across different demographic groups in Malaysia. Aina and Kulasegaran (2020) highlighted that cultural factors can affect both the occurrence of SH and the willingness to report it, emphasising the need for context-specific research. Additionally, Sumi, Kabir, and Alam (2023) noted that cultural norms and values in Malaysia's multiethnic society may influence attitudes towards SH in ways that are not fully understood, and require further exploration.

1.4 Study rationale

Two study rationales have been identified. Firstly, to address gaps in knowledge regarding cultural contexts and awareness related to SH crimes. Secondly, to better understand the organisational context of underreporting SH.

1.4.1 Address gaps in knowledge regarding cultural context and awareness related to sexual harassment

Although some Malaysian workplaces have implemented policies and procedures to address SH complaints and actions, it is still unclear how widely known these policies are known among employees (Baqutayan et. al., 2021). Previous studies such as by Gautam and Tewari (2021) and Shalihin et. al., (2022); indicate that the problem persists across public and private sectors. Gautam and Tewari (2021) opined that coworkers'

approach to SH are insensitive and involve victim blaming. Based on the gaps identified in the works of Baqutayan et. al., (2021), Gautam and Tewari (2021), and Shalihin et al. (2002); this study aims to address gaps in knowledge regarding cultural contexts and awareness in Malaysian workplaces by investigating the KAE of employees towards SH.

1.4.2 Better understand the organisational context of underreporting sexual harassment

According to Baqutayan et. al., (2021), prevention strategies in Malaysian workplaces primarily focus on establishing formal policies, conducting awareness programmes, and implementing clear reporting procedures. However, these approaches may have not addressed barriers to reporting or the stigma associated with SH, as evidenced by Maran, Varetto, and Civilotti (2022). Those researchers (Maran, Varetto, and Civilotti, 2022) found that victims in 80.9% of cases did not discuss or report the SH incident with anyone at work. Addressing underreporting is crucial for strengthening prevention efforts in several ways such as identify specific SH patterns or forms, and understand why employees choose not to report (Maran, Varetto, & Civilotti, 2022). Hence, expectations from this research include identifying particular barriers to reporting SH incidents contextualised to Malaysian workplaces.

1.5 Research Question(s)

By investigating KAE related to sexual harassment in Malaysian workplaces, this study aims to address several research questions which are:

1. How do employees' understanding of sexual harassment differ across various sectors and job levels in Malaysia?

2. How do attitudes related to sexual harassment compare across sociodemographic markers such as gender, employment sectors, and job level?
3. What forms of sexual harassment are experienced by male and female employees in the Malaysian workplace?
4. How do knowledge, attitudes, and experiences interact to influence reporting behaviours?

1.6 Research Objectives

There is one general objective and four specific objectives in this study.

1.6.1 General objective:

To investigate the relationship between employees' knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and reporting behaviours; related to sexual harassment in the Malaysian workplace.

1.6.2 Specific objectives:

There are four specific objectives which are to:

1. Differentiate employees' understanding of sexual harassment across different sectors and job levels in Malaysia.
2. Differentiate attitudes related to sexual harassment across sociodemographic groups, such as gender, employment sectors and job levels.
3. Determine the forms of sexual harassment experienced between male and female employees in the Malaysian workplace.
4. Examine the relationship between knowledge, experiences, and attitudes toward sexual harassment, and how these factors influence their reporting behaviours.

1.7 Research Hypotheses

It is stated here that sociodemographic groups include gender, age range, ethnicity, occupation category, years working in current job, and employment sector. In this research, four hypotheses to be tested are:

1. H₀₁: There is no difference between sociodemographic groups on knowledge of sexual harassment.

H_{a1}: There are differences between sociodemographic groups on knowledge of sexual harassment.

2. H₀₂: There is no difference between sociodemographic groups on attitudes towards sexual harassment.

H_{a2}: There are differences between sociodemographic groups on attitudes towards sexual harassment.

3. H₀₃: There is no difference in the forms of sexual harassment experienced by male and female employees in the Malaysian workplace.

H_{a3}: There are differences in the forms of sexual harassment experienced by male and female employees in the Malaysian workplace.

4. H₀₄: There is no relationship between knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and sexual harassment reporting behaviour.

H_{a4}: There are relationships between knowledge, attitudes, experiences, and sexual harassment reporting behaviour.

1.8 Operational definition of terms

Operational definitions are crucial for clearly defining and measuring the key terms in this study. For this study, the operational definitions are described below.

1.8.1 Sexual harassment

The term “sexual harassment” (SH) according to Section 2, Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022 (Act 840) is defined as:

“any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature, in any form, whether verbal, non-verbal, visual, gestural or physical, directed at a person which is reasonably offensive or humiliating or is a threat to his well-being.”

(Act 840: 6)

This legal definition provides a comprehensive framework for understanding workplace SH in Malaysia, as it broadly encompasses multiple forms of harassment beyond physical contact. This definition recognises that SH can manifest as various behaviours including verbal comments, gestures, and visual plays. In addition, the legal definition emphasizes the “unwanted” nature of conduct, highlighting that the victim’s perception and consent are central to determining whether that specific behaviour constitutes harassment, and the conduct must be either offensive, humiliating, or poses a threat. SH can harm a person’s mental or emotional health, creating an environment where they feel unsafe or disrespected. These parameters provide employees and employers signs to recognize inappropriate workplace behaviour.

According to Mohamed et. al., (2021), most cases of SH occur within the workplace, but are categorised as social problems. Earlier, Guthrie (2020) claimed that SH can occur anywhere and at any time, including on public transportation, in public areas, educational institutions, sport facilities, private homes, social gatherings, and online

communities. Mohamed et. al., (2021:93) further stated: “sexual harassment can occur in a variety of settings, including phone calls, in-person meetings, texting or messaging, emails, and social media as well as spread through the presentation of materials or objects or through the personal belongings”. In other words, Mohamed et. al., (2021) highlighted that SH can manifest in various forms and settings, including in digital communication.

1.8.2 Knowledge, attitudes, and experiences related to sexual harassment

In this study, the terms of knowledge, attitudes, and experiences are defined as below. These terms are essential because each term represents a distinct aspect of understanding SH and its impact on workplace behaviour.

Knowledge is defined in the Oxford Advance Learner’s Dictionary (2024), as the following:

Explanation 1- The information, understanding and skills that you gain through education or experience.

Explanation 2- The state of knowing about a particular fact or situation.

Explanation 3- Information, is considered as a resource to be used and supplied in industry, rather than producing goods.

In this study, Explanation 1 is the most appropriate as it reflects knowledge as both theoretical and practical understanding, which is essential for assessing individuals’ awareness related to sexual harassment. As such, this definition is used for the purpose of this FYP.

Attitudes is defined in the Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (2024) in three ways:

Explanation 1- The way that you think and feel about somebody/something; the way that you behave towards somebody/something that shows how you think and feel.

Explanation 2- Confident, sometimes aggressive behaviour that shows you do not care about other people's opinions and that you want to do things in an individual way.

Explanation 3- A position of the body.

In this study, Explanation 1 is the most appropriate as it covers both thoughts and behaviour. This is necessary for understanding how individuals' beliefs and feelings towards SH shape their responses in the workplace.

Experiences is defined in the Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary (2024) in five ways:

Explanation 1- The knowledge and skill that you have gained through doing something for a period of time; the process of gaining this

Explanation 2- The things that have happened to you that influence the way you think and behave.

Explanation 3- An event or activity that affects you in some way.

Explanation 4 - What it is like for somebody to use a service, do an activity, attend an event, etc.

Explanation 5- Events or knowledge shared by all the members of a particular group in society, that influences the way they think and behave.

In this study, Explanation 2 is deemed the most appropriate as it emphasizes the influence of past events on current perceptions and actions. This is crucial in exploring how personal or observed incidents of SH shape the attitudes and responses of all employees in an organisation, irrespective if they were perpetrators, victims, witnesses, or bystanders.

1.9 Significance of the study

This research is significant in three ways. The findings of this study aim to increase awareness and change attitudes. The second significance is to address the underreporting of SH incidents. The third significance is to add to the criminology literature, specifically on knowledge, attitudes, and experiences related to SH.

1.9.1 Increasing awareness and changing attitudes

Research on SH is essential for educating the public, especially study respondents; and transform the way people view it. In Malaysia, the multicultural society may influence both the understanding of SH and the attitudes toward the issue, as cultural and religious values often shape people's perceptions of acceptable behaviour in the workplace. According to Sangadji, Hakim, and Rachman (2023), this diversity adds a layer of complexity, making it crucial to consider demographic and cultural factors in any effort to raise awareness and promote prevention. Howard et. al., (2024) found that SH has the potential to seriously impair women's well-being, and create unfavourable opinions about gender equality and justice in society; which emphasises the necessity of structural change based on empirical evidence (of which the results of the current study is part of).

1.9.2 Addressing underreporting of sexual harassment incident

Research on SH is crucial for understanding and addressing the issue of underreporting. Studies highlight that fear of retaliation, stigma, and lack of trust in reporting mechanisms contribute to this underreporting (Dahl & Knepper, 2021; James & Roberts, 2023). However, how far that claim is applicable to Malaysian workplaces is currently unknown. Studies in the Malaysian context can help to identify some of the relevant factors, specifically sociodemographic and organisational factors; that

contribute to underreporting, and subsequently enabling more effective strategies to encourage reporting.

1.9.3 Add to the criminology literature

The application of three theories: Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958), and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Conner & Armitage, 1998); will potentially provide a better understanding of SH in the context of Malaysian workplaces and add to the existing criminology literature. This information can then be used to assist the Malaysian criminal justice system and in crime prevention efforts. By integrating these theories, the study can offer a comprehensive perspective on how individuals perceive, react to, and report SH in the workplace. This multidimensional approach can inform policy development, workplace interventions, and training programmes to foster a safer and more supportive work environment in Malaysia.

1.10 Format of this FYP

This dissertation consists of six chapters, the first of which is devoted to the introduction. The study's background, rationale, goals, hypotheses, operational definitions, and significance are all included in this chapter. This is followed by a literature review chapter and a methodology chapter. Subsequent chapters are: results, discussion, and conclusion.

The final chapter concludes this study with recommendations for its improvement. The study's limitations are also discussed in this chapter. Lastly, references and appendices are attached at the end of the dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This section focuses on relevant literature, theories, and gaps in knowledge. This literature review focuses on SH in the workplace, at local and global levels. Sources of information were from Google Scholar, Science Direct, Frontiers, Elsevier, and related reading materials from the university library. The subsections herein are the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment, past research on workplace sexual harassment, gaps in knowledge, relevant theories, and theoretical framework.

2.2 Prevalence of workplace sexual harassment

This section focuses on the global prevalence of workplace SH and cross-country comparison. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2019), 40-50% of women experience unwanted sexual advances, physical contact, or other forms of SH at work. Two out of five people (43%) reported experiencing at least one instance of SH in the previous 12 months, and nearly three-quarters (72%) of the UK population reported having experienced SH in some capacity at some point in their lives (Adams, et. al., 2020). Certain industries show higher rates of SH. For instance, the health service sectors consistently report higher incidences, with studies indicating that 60% of nurses in these industries have experienced some form of SH (Song, Wang, & Wu, 2021).

A comparative analysis of SH comparing Malaysia and Bangladesh was done by Sumi, Kabir, and Alam (2023); claiming that SH has become a big problem because most women are sexually harassed in the workplace, public places, housing, and educational

institutions in Bangladesh. Most victims did not make a report regarding this problem (Sumi, Kabir, & Alam, 2023). Sumi, Kabir, and Alam (2023) claimed factors contributing to the challenges faced by individuals seeking justice, particularly in the context of SH; are insecurity, lack of awareness, the knowledge of slow trial procedures, the excruciating process of investigation, as well as delays in the justice delivery system. Additionally, many victims may endure harassment quietly, hindered by fears of disbelief, retaliation, or social stigma; and they only come forward after a colleague files a similar complaint, reflecting a significant delay in reporting (Azizul et. al., 2023).

In Korea, Jung & Yoon (2020) found that female employees' perceptions of SH have significant effects on their levels of psychological distress and deviant behaviour at work in the hospitality sector. Psychological distress appeared to contribute to deviant behaviour, especially when employees struggle to psychologically detach from work (Jung & Yoon, 2020). Similarly, Worke, Koricha, and Debelew (2021) found that female employees working in hotels, bars, restaurants, fast food restaurants, and cafeteria; are particularly affected. Most participants of the survey perceived SH in the form of touching, threatening, pressuring, experiencing verbal, physical, and non-verbal types (Worke, Koricha, & Debelew, 2021).

Regarding job level, Folke et. al., (2020) evidenced that amongst women supervisors, the risk of SH is larger in lower and mid-level positions when subordinates are mostly male. Pandey et. al., (2022), added support to this, as they found that senior nurses were not as victimized as junior nurses, and all perpetrators were male. However, Folke et. al., (2020: 180) stated “sexual harassment is more prevalent for women supervisors than for women employees”. The statement from Folke et. al., (2020: 180) suggests that

women in supervisory roles may face challenges due to their position of authority, as they often have more visibility and interaction with both subordinates and higher management. This makes them vulnerable to SH from various sources at the workplace.

Via a systematic review on SH, Kahsay et. al., (2020) found that female nurses experienced the highest rate of harassment compared to other professions. 35% of female nurses were verbally abused, 32.6% non-verbally abused, 31% physically abused, and 40.8% were harassed psychologically (Kahsay et. al., 2020). The harassers were patients (46.59%), physicians (41.10%), patients' family members (27.74%), nurses (20%), and other coworkers (17.8%) (Kahsay et. al., 2020). As a result, 44.6% of nurses developed mental health problems, 30.19% had physical health issues, 61.26% experienced emotional distress, 51.79% suffered psychological disturbances, and 16.02% faced social health problems (Kahsay et. al., 2020).

In some situations where retaliation for complaining occurs, victims of SH may have negative job actions such as being reassigned to a difficult position or salary reduction, leading to resignation or transferred away from their families and support system (Zakaria, Abdul Kadir, & Mat Lazim, 2019). Worke, Koricha, and Debelew (2021) found that several participants experienced physical forms of SH that left them with bruises, injuries, headaches, exhaustion, and other physical complications (for example, a fistula). The victims of SH may experience a range of symptoms following the incident, including headaches, stress, trauma, nausea, loss of appetite, anger, and fear (Worke, Koricha, & Debelew, 2021; Mun et. al., 2024).

In terms of mental health, research (Maran, Varetto, & Civilotti, 2022) indicates that age, sex, exposure to SH workplace, and self-efficacy techniques were significant predictors of mental health perceptions. According to Maran, Varetto, & Civilotti (2022), both men and women who witnessed SH were more likely to experience the emotional and psychological effects of the incident, compared to non-witnesses. Lee (2024) explored the decision-making process of bystanders who witness SH in the workplace, focusing on the factors that influence whether they choose to intervene or not as well as highlight the importance of organisational reporting procedures in encouraging bystander intervention. The findings provide valuable insights into promoting prosocial bystander behaviour to prevent workplace harassment (Lee, 2024).

In Malaysia, 1,218 cases of SH were reported between 2013 and 2018, with 79% of the victims being female (Kamaruddin, Selamat, & Md Isa, 2021). According to Hannah Yeoh, the Deputy Minister of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM), there were 47 reports of SH involving civil servants between 2015 and 2017 (Zakaria, Abdul Kadir, & Mat Lazim, 2019). However, the number of cases reported until June 2018 for the private sector was lower than the government sector which was 15 cases; and 13 cases had been completed, with disciplinary action taken against perpetrators (KPWKM, 2018).

In 2022, the Malaysian government enacted the Anti-Sexual Harassment Act 2022 (Act 840) to address the issue of SH in the country (Bernama, 2024). Act 840 aims to prevent and address SH in all sectors, including the workplace, educational institutions, and public spaces; which applies to a wide range of individuals, including employees,

independent contractors, customers, and visitors. KPWKM stated Act 840 “takes into account the importance of educating the people and increasing their understanding and awareness of the seriousness of issues involving SH before this act is fully enforced” (Bernama, 2023). This statement highlights the critical role of education in addressing SH as a proactive approach before the enforcement of related laws.

2.3 Past research on workplace sexual harassment

This section reviews previous local studies on workplace SH, focusing on key areas such as legislation, reporting SH incidents, and negative impacts on victims and witnesses. By examining previous local studies, this review aims to highlight the direct and indirect impacts, as well as the gaps in knowledge that justify the current study in Malaysia’s workplace sectors. This analysis highlights the unique contribution of the current study in addressing SH issues.

Zakaria, Abdul Kadir, and Mat Lazim (2019) found that the report for SH cases in Malaysia was low because the Code of Practice (Ministry of Human Resources, 1999) is not mandatory in private companies. The low reporting rate of SH cases in Malaysia’s private sector highlights a critical gap in policy, suggesting that without mandatory enforcement, the existing Code of Practice (Ministry of Human Resources, 1999) is unable to protect vulnerable employees effectively. It was only in 2023 that the Anti-sexual harassment came into force, with most of the sections yet to be enforceable.

In terms of reporting SH incidents in Malaysia, Pandey et. al., (2022) found that 90.9% of research participants verbally reported, and 14.3% did not report at all. From the aspect of self-perceived personal attribute, Pandey et. al., (2022) opined that research

conducted in Malaysia found a strong correlation between SH and physical attractiveness, with slender people having a nearly two-fold higher chance of experiencing SH compared to obese people. Earlier, Mohamed et. al., (2021) showed that there are significant, positive, and strong relationships between the awareness level of workplace SH and the Malaysian workplace environment; where less concern in the workplace environment led to a decrease in the awareness level. This finding is supported by a survey (Azizul et. al., 2023) which described 60% of respondents agreed that their Malaysia-based organisations only offered training and talked about the issue rather than having clear policies or explanations regarding SH.

Many victims of SH in Malaysia choose not to report their SH experiences (Awang, Raja Mohd Khalid, & Mat Zam, 2020; Hansen et. al., 2022). The risk factors for managing SH cases in sports have been identified including a lack of a code of practice, unclear protocols for the person in charge, and favouring those with more authority (Syahirah et. al., 2020). Pandey et. al., (2022: 21) opined that “reporting rate is very low due to fear of negative consequences and lack of knowledge about how and where to report”. This statement from Pandey et. al., (2022: 21) highlights significant barriers to reporting incidents, particularly in the context of victimisation which emphasise two primary issues: fear of negative consequences and lack of knowledge about reporting mechanisms.

The effects of SH can be experienced physically, psychologically, and economically or occupationally (Worke, Koricha, & Debelew, 2021). These effects not only affected the workplace victims, but also adversely impacts those who observe SH in action; particularly where these dysfunctional behaviours are common (Maran, Varetto, &

Civilotti, 2022). Outside of Malaysia, Vara-Horna et. al., (2023) claimed that the intention to leave the company rises by 15.2% and labour productivity falls by 43.1% when SH occurs at work. Meanwhile, witnessing or being exposed to workplace SH increases counter-productive behaviours by 39.6% and the intention to drop out by 11.3% (Vara-Horna et. al., 2023).

According to the KPWKM, “depression is a prevalent issue in Malaysia, and one of the contributing factors is the lack of protection and action against sexual harassment cases” (Bernama, 2024). This statement highlights a critical connection between SH and mental health, specifically depression in Malaysia; which suggests that the prevalence of depression in the country could be influenced by the inadequate protection and response to SH cases. Therefore, addressing the severe problem of SH in the workplace requires not only focusing on the direct victims but also on those who witness it, as they may experience discomfort of their own because SH contributes to a hostile environment for both the individual and the company (Maran, Varetto, & Civilotti, 2022).

Despite previous studies that identified reasons for underreporting, there remains a critical need for further research to explore complex cultural and sector-specific influences on SH issues within Malaysian workplaces. A contemporary study can also investigate knowledge gaps regarding reporting procedures and how these affect employees’ decisions to report SH incidents. Zara et. al., (2024) recently highlighted the necessity of continuing studies to concentrate on cultures that encourage SH and normalise its existence.

2.4 Gaps in knowledge

In this section, gaps in knowledge of workplace SH are described which are: lack of awareness and changing attitudes, and insufficient research on factors that contribute to underreporting.

2.4.1 Lack of awareness and changing attitudes

Two of the significant gaps in addressing workplace SH is the lack of awareness and the challenge of changing attitudes toward the problem of workplace SH. It is possible that many employees and employers do not fully comprehend what SH is, which could normalize inappropriate behaviour or prevent them from recognizing it. Nguyen (2022), claimed that numerous issues related to SH require investigation and resolution, including victim's insufficient awareness of the issue, reaction strategies, the process for filing complaints and making accusations, and laws on sexual offenses. It is more difficult to confront harassment when victims lack proper support, which is a result of the gradual change in attitudes regarding gender equality and respect in the workplace (Nguyen, 2023; Howard et. al., 2024). Therefore, to create an atmosphere in which SH is acknowledged and actively discouraged, raising awareness based on evidence such as via this research is important.

2.4.2 Insufficient research on factors that contribute to underreporting

Another gap is the lack of sufficient research on factors that contribute to underreporting. Despite the fact that SH has been studied for more than 20 years, not much is known about how organisations actively prevent SH in the workplace (Tan et. al., 2020). Although some initiatives have been introduced such as legislations and guidelines on sexual harassment in Malaysia, many organisations still lack evidence-

based programmes to prevent harassment or manage complaints effectively. Blake et. al., (2024) suggested three components that influence attitudes to report the SH incidents which are: informal knowledge of poorly managed incidents in the past, perceptions of ineffectiveness of reporting system and process, and perception of risks associated with reporting. However, how far Blake's (2024) suggestions are valid in the Malaysian context is currently unknown.

2.5 Relevant theories and Theoretical Framework

Several theories have been proposed to explain the occurrence and persistence of workplace SH. The application of these theories are related to gaps of knowledge about SH, specifically in KAE. The theories described here are Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1974), and Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991; Conner and Armitage, 1998).

2.5.1 Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura's (1977) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) is frequently referred to as a link between behavioural and cognitive learning theories because it emphasises how external factors, like rewards and punishments; and internal factors, like thinking and symbolic processing (e.g., attention, memory, and motivation); interact to determine behaviour. In other words, this theory explains how people learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and modelling; combined with the influence of internal cognitive processes like attention, memory, and motivation. For instance, the learned behaviour that is influenced by both external environment such as organisational culture and peer behaviour, and internal factors like individual beliefs as well as motivations; may underlie SH incidents.

SCT (Bandura, 1977) has been used in recent study to explain how people react to and learn from SH in the workplace. A study conducted by Liang (2024) showed that employees who observe others engaging in SH may be more likely to engage in such behaviours themselves, particularly if they perceive there are no consequences. For instance, Liang (2024) discovered that peer behaviours and organisational culture had significant impacts on employees' willingness to report SH incidents. Additionally, in keeping with Bandura's (1977) focus on internal cognitive elements like self-efficacy, people who feel more empowered to act and have a higher sense of self-efficacy are also more likely to report SH incidents.

2.5.2 Attribution Theory

Attribution Theory (AT) developed by Heider (1958) aims to explain how individuals interpret events and how this relates to their thinking and behaviour. This theory was then further expanded by Weiner (1974) (Savolainen, 2013). AT (Heider, 1958) focuses specifically on how people attribute causes to events and behaviours, frequently categorising them as either external (situational) or internal (dispositional). Ability, task difficulty, and effort; are the three factors that Heider (1958) identified as determining performance where he believed that task difficulty is an external cause of an outcome, while ability and effort are internal to the actor. Meanwhile, Weiner (1974) postulated that ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck; are the four primary perceived causes of achievement outcomes.

AT (Heider, 1958) can be applied in the context of SH in Malaysia workplaces to shape employees' attitudes and responses, as they may attribute to the cause either as internal factors (ability and effort), like the behaviour of the harasser; or as external factors (task

difficulty), such as workplace's tolerance for such behaviour. For instance, employees who experience or witness SH may see SH as due to internal factors, which may reinforce personality accountability; subsequently influencing their behaviour to report SH incidents. Thus, AT (Heider, 1958) helps explain why SH may be perceived differently across sectors and individuals in Malaysian workplaces.

In this context, employees may observe others experiencing or not reporting SH, and their attributions (whether internal: physical appearance or external: the difficulty of reporting SH, peer behaviour) will influence whether said employees feel motivated to report incidents themselves. For instance, delaying a public SH accusation would cause the victim to be viewed less favourably (Von Sikorski & Saumer, 2020). This approach enhances the explanation of reporting behaviour by emphasising how personal and external attributions shape individuals' motivations and responses to SH incidents.

2.5.3 Theory of Planned Behaviour

This theory was developed by Ajzen (1991), which posits that an individual's behaviour is driven by their intention to perform the behaviour, which in turn is influenced by three factors: attitudes toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. Conner and Armitage (1998) who expanded the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) added six variables: belief salience, past behaviour or habit, perceived behavioural control (PBC) versus self-efficacy, moral norms, self-identity, and affective beliefs; increasing this theory's capacity for prediction. TPB (Conner & Armitage, 1998) can be applied in the context of SH to understand why individuals engage in or prevent harassment behaviours, as well as how organisational norms and policies shape these actions.