### The Salespeople's Reactions to Customer Sexual Harassment: A Case Study of Taiwan's Life Insurance Industry

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the impacts of customer reward power, customer coercive power, perceived behavioral control and personal factors on the full-time life insurance salespeople's intentions to report quid pro quo and hostile work environment types of customer sexual harassment. This study collects quantitative data through questionnaire surveys. 743 valid questionnaires are gathered for the analyses. The findings of this research show that quid pro quo customer sexual harassment is intolerable to the respondents, and it will not become more tolerable because of the benefits these respondents could get in the wrongful behaviors. The regression analyses then support the effects of customer reward power on the whistleblowing intentions in quid pro quo customer sexual harassment. Perceived behavioral control is found to be the most influential factor that affects the whistleblowing intentions. This is the first empirical study to test the relationships among these variables. The findings could provide some implications for the researchers, official authorities and life insurance companies.

**KEYWORDS**: customer sexual harassment, customer reward power, customer coercive power, perceived behavioral control, life insurance salespeople

#### 1 INTRODUCTION

Despite previous studies have discussed the negative influences of customer sexual harassment on the well-beings of service workers (Hughes and Tadic, 1998; Madera, Guchait and Dawson, 2018), few studies have compared the service workers' reactions to different types of customer sexual harassment behaviors. According to literature, customer sexual harassment contains guid pro guo and hostile work environment types of harassment (Tseng, 2013; Tseng and Kang, 2015; Otsri, 2020). Quid pro quo customer sexual harassment takes place when a harasser (a customer) makes an unwanted sex-based behavior toward the victim (a service worker) in exchange for benefits. Hostile environment customer sexual harassment, on the other hand, is an unwanted sex-based behavior by a customer that creates an offensive, threaten or hostile work environment for the service workers. Since guid pro quo harassment occurs when opportunities or benefits (such as promotion) are made depending on the provision of sexual favors, and hostile environment sexual harassment usually creates a hostile, or intimidating working environment that affects the victim's well-being, the two types of customer sexual harassment are viewed as separate conditions (Icenogle et al., 2002; Otsri, 2020). By using Taiwan's life insurance salespeople as a research sample, the purpose of this research is to provide an understanding of service workers' intentions to report the two types of customer sexual harassment behaviors.

To better understand the whistleblowing intentions, the role of customer power should not be ignored. Researchers have provided interpretive frameworks to understand the relationship between power and people's reactions to sexual harassment behaviors (Sindhu, 2017). Some studies acknowledge that power is at the core of sexual harassment problems (Sapiro, 2018). Nonetheless, there are no empirical studies have examined the relationship between customer power and service workers' whistleblowing intentions toward customer sexual harassment behaviors. This study proposes that customer reward power and customer coercive power can offer better explanations of the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors.

In this study, we further argue that perceived behavioral control (PBC) is another factor that can affect the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report the two types of customer sexual harassment behaviors. Perceived behavioral control is defined as an individual's perception of how easy or difficult it is to perform a certain behavior (Johe and Bhullar, 2016). According to Ajzen's (2005) theory of planned behavior, behavioral intentions are directly influenced by perceived behavioral control. Empirical studies have also confirmed a significant relationship between perceived behavioral control and behavioral intentions (Armitage and Christian, 2017). Thus, this study proposes that perceived behavioral control will predict the life insurance salespeople's intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors.

Finally, it is pointed out that people with relatively a lower social status could be easier to be the target of sexual harassment (Sheets and Braver, 1999). The existing literature has also found the significant relationships between personal factors (such as gender) and sexual harassment problems (Rothgerber et al., 2020). This study explores the relationships between personal factors and the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors. Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of this study.

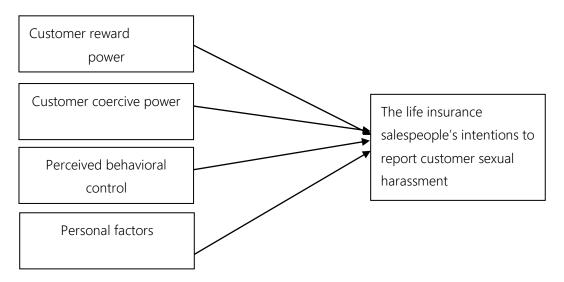


Figure 1. The conceptual model of this research

#### 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

# 2.1 Customer reward power and the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors.

Customer reward power is based on the customer's ability to reward or remunerate the service workers for obedience (Zhao et al., 2008). In this research, we argue that customer reward power is associated with the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors. The argument is plausible because customer reward power represents a customer's ability to control over the desired benefits (e.g. customer purchases) that the salespeople need. Thus, we believe that the perception of customer reward power should be significantly associated with the salespeople's whistleblowing intentions.

The following research hypothesis is proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Perception of customer reward power is negatively associated with the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

# 2.2 Customer coercive power and its impacts on the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

Customer coercive power refers to a customer's ability to influence the service workers through the use of violence or punishment (Huo et al., 2016). Coercive power can be used by customers to make the service workers feel fears (Grégoire et al., 2018). Since fears have significant effects on behavioral intentions (Benk, Çakmak and Budak, 2011; Pan and Houser, 2019), it can be argued that customer coercive power may lead to the changes of the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions.

To test whether or not customer coercive power negatively relates to the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions, the following hypothesis is formulated.



Hypothesis 2: Perception of customer coercive power is negatively associated with the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

# 2.3 The influences of perceived behavioral control on the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

According to the theory of planned behavior, perceived behavioral control is strongly predictive of behavioral intentions (Kashif, Zarkada and Ramayah, 2018). Empirical research has also found a significant relationship between perceived behavioral control and intentions (Alleyne, Haniffa and Hudaib, 2019). Based on those studies, it is expected that perceived behavioral control is positively related to the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors to the management. A hypothesis is provided.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived behavioral control is positively associated with the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

## 2.4 Personal factors and the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors

#### 2.4.1 Gender difference

In this study, it is expected that the female life insurance salespeople would possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment than the male life insurance salespeople. The argument is plausible, because Asian women are taught to be more dependent and obedient than Asian men (Haj-Yahya, Schnell and Khattab, 2018). Hence, it is argued that the female life insurance salespeople are less likely to report the customer sexual harassment behaviors. The following hypothesis is provided.

H4a: The female life insurance salespeople will possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors than the male life insurance salespeople

#### 2.4.2 Age

Since ethical judgments are positively associated with ethical intentions (Barnett and Vaicys, 2000), this study proposes that, compared to the newcomers or young life insurance salespeople, senior life insurance salespeople will have higher intentions to report the customer sexual harassment behaviors. On the other hand, young life insurance salespeople are usually in a lower job position, and therefore the young life insurance salespeople may be less powerful than the senior life insurance salespeople. Based on this, we argue that the young life insurance salespeople may possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors. To test the relationship between age and the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions, a hypothesis is proposed.

H4b: The young life insurance salespeople will possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors than the senior life insurance salespeople

#### 2.4.3 Marriage

Some scholars also point out that marital status can represent a kind of social status, and those who have already married could be considered more powerful (Strohschein and Ram, 2017; Chen and Williams, 2018). Yet, there has been no research about the relationship between marital status and service workers' intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors. This study proposes that unmarried life insurance salespeople are less likely to report the customer sexual harassment behaviors. A hypothesis is developed.

H4c: The unmarried life insurance salespeople will possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors than the married life insurance salespeople

#### 2.4.4 Education

Education may play an important role in influencing the intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors. No study has examined this issue. To examine the potential impact of education on the salespeople's whistleblowing intentions, the following hypothesis is developed.

H4d: The life insurance salespeople who have not received higher education will possess a lower intention to report customer sexual harassment behaviors than the life insurance salespeople who have received higher education

#### 3 METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Sample

In order to study the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report customer sexual harassment behaviors, the life insurance salespeople from the well-known life insurance companies located in different cities were recruited by approaching the management of life insurance companies. The formal investigation was conducted in the respondents' offices. Conversations were not allowed among the respondents during the investigation. Before the formal investigation, the respondents were informed the purpose of this study. The guarantee of anonymity and confidentiality were also mentioned. To make sure the responses were returned anonymously and confidentially to the author(s), the respondents were asked to put the paper-based questionnaires into the envelopes after they had completed the questionnaires.

#### 3.2 Date Information

The empirical investigations were conducted during November 17, 2020 to December 17, 2020. Follow-up calls were done about one week later after questionnaire submission. 840 questionnaires were randomly distributed to the participants, and 791 questionnaires were returned. Of the 791 returned questionnaires, 743 valid and complete questionnaires were used for analyses. This represented a usable response rate of 88.45%. Table 1 showed the profile of respondents.

Table 1: The profile of respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentage
, 412 244 514 5		



Version		
A	374	50.3%
В	369	49.7%
Gender		
Female	480	64.6%
Male	263	35.4%
Age		
20~29	163	21.9%
30~39	215	28.9%
40~49	210	28.3%
50 or above	155	20.9%
Education		
Senior high school	166	22.3%
Bachelor's degree	531	71.5%
Post-graduate degree	46	6.2%
Marriage		
Single	337	45.4%
Married	406	54.6%

#### 3.3 Data collection method

The data were collected through anonymous questionnaires. A questionnaire with scenario-based approach was used in the studies on gender based harassment (Tseng, 2014; Clarke, Ford and Sulsky, 2016). Given the difficulty to observe the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions in reality, the hypotheses of this study were also tested with data collected through a scenario-based approach. The present study designed two versions of scenario-based questionnaires (version A and version B). Two versions of questionnaires were developed because quid pro quo and hostile environment sexual harassment were conceptually different.

Each version of the questionnaire contained only one scenario, and each scenario described one type of customer sexual harassment. As showed in Table 2, the scenario in questionnaire version A described quid pro quo sexual harassment by a customer, and the scenario in questionnaire version B was about hostile environment sexual harassment by a customer.

Table 2: Scenarios in questionnaire versions A and B

Versions	Scenarios	
Scenario A  Quid pro quo sexual harassment	X was a salesperson of your company. One day, a customer (the opposite sex customer) wanted to buy new products from X. In order to let the customer had better understanding of the details of products, X met the customer at a restaurant not far from the company. In the process of discussing the products, the customer asked X for some sexual requirements, and the customer promised to buy a large number of the products recommended by X as long as X was willing to cooperate. X was very angry and uncomfortable about the customer's behavior and considering whether to report the customer's sexual harassment behavior to the management of company, so as to deal with the problem.	
Scenario B	X was a salesperson of your company. One day, a	
Hostile environment sexual harassment	customer (the opposite sex customer) wanted to buy	



naw products from V. In order to let the customer had	
new products from X. In order to let the customer had	
better understanding of the details of products, X met	
the customer at a restaurant not far from the	
company. In the process of discussing the products,	
the customer made some sexual demands to X in a	
violent and threatening tone. If X was not willing to	
cooperate, the customer would use some means to	
further intimidate and threaten X. X was very angry	
and uncomfortable about the customer's behavior and	
considering whether to report the customer's sexual	
harassment behavior to the management of company,	
so as to deal with the problem.	
•	

#### 3.4 Measurement

All measures except for the personal factors were assessed by using a seven-point Likert-type scale anchored on "totally agree" (value = 7) to "totally disagree" (value = 1). The measurement was provided in Table 3. Customer reward power and customer coercive power were measured by adapting the research of Rahim (1988). The measurement for perceived behavioral control and whistleblowing intentions were developed based on previous studies as well (Ajzen, 2005; Ajzen and Fishbein, 2005; Armitage and Christian, 2017).

Constructs Items 1. In general, I rely on customers' (Flow control valves) Air operated valves purchases heavily. 1. In general, my customers have the Customer reward power ability to punish me if I do not comply with their wishes. 1. If I were X, I would find it easy to report the customer sexual harassment Customer coercive power behavior to the management of my company. 1. If I were X, I would definitely report the customer sexual harassment Perceived behavioral control behavior to the management of my company.

Table 3: Example question items

Finally, we tested the personal factors that were likely to influence the salespeople's intentions to report the customer sexual harassment behaviors. The variables included gender, age, marriage and education.

#### 3.5 Construct checks

To check the reliability, convergent validity and discriminant validity of the constructs, the indicators of Cronbach's α, composite reliabilities, factor loadings, average variance extracted (AVE) values, and the square root of AVE were analyzed by using partial least squares regression (PLS regression). All indicators satisfied the statistical requirements, showing the reliability, convergence and discriminant validity of this research were acceptable. The problems of common method variance were examined through using the Harman's one factor test and a confirmatory factor analysis. Since a single factor did not emerge and the first factor did not account for most of the variance, common method bias



was unlikely to be a serious issue in this research. Variance inflation factors (VIFs) were further checked to examine the effect of multicollinearity. The values of VIFs associated with each independent variable were less than 4, suggesting no serious concerns for multicollinearity.

#### 4 RESULTS

Table 4: Results for version

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Variables	Quid pro quo customer sexual harassment	Hostile work environment	Quid pro quo + Hostile work environment
Gender	-0.016	-0.040	-0.028
Age	0.080	0.130*	0.103**
Marriage	0.033	-0.042	-0.005
Education	0.149**	0.069	0.108**
CRP	-0.107*	-0.006	-0.052
ССР	0.015	-0.031	-0.012
PBC	0.499**	0.489**	0.491**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.271	0.255	0.265
F-value	20.763	19.015	39.185
Sample size	374	369	743

Note 1: \*Significant at p < 0.05; \*\* Significant at p < 0.01. T-values are given in parentheses. Note 2: CRP = customer reward power; CCP = customer coercive power; PBC = perceived behavioral control.

#### 4.1 Model 1

Model 1 presents the regression analysis for the impacts of personal factors (i.e. gender, age, marriage and education), customer reward power, customer coercive power and perceived behavioral control on the respondents' intentions to report quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behaviors (sample size = 374). Table 4 presents the results. Hypothesis 1 posits that the respondents' perception of customer reward power is negatively related to their intentions to report quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behaviors. The results show that the coefficient of customer reward power is negatively and significantly related to the whistleblowing intentions ( $\beta = -0.107$ ; p < 0.05). The finding indicates that the respondents will possess a lower level of intention to report the quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behavior when strong customer reward power is perceived by them. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported in questionnaire version A. Hypothesis 2 predicts a negative effect of customer coercive power on the life insurance salespeople's intentions to report the quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behaviors. The negative coefficient of customer coercive power is insignificant ( $\beta = 0.015$ , p > 0.05), showing that customer coercive power is not related to the whistleblowing intentions (Hypothesis 2 is not supported). This research then checks how perceived behavioral control is related to the respondents' whistleblowing intentions. The positive coefficient between perceived behavioral control and whistleblowing intentions ( $\beta$  = 0.499, p < 0.01) shows that the respondents with a stronger level of perceived behavioral control will be more likely to report the guid pro quo customer sexual harassment behavior to



their management. The positive sign for the coefficient between education and whistleblowing intentions is consistent with the prediction of Hypothesis 4d ( $\beta$  = 0.149, p < 0.01), showing that the more educated salespeople will have higher whistleblowing intentions toward quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behaviors.

#### 4.2 Model 2

The scenario in questionnaire version B contains a case of hostile environment sexual harassment. Model 2 presents the results of regression analyses (sample size = 369). According to Table 4, the coefficient for the relationship between perceived behavioral control and whistleblowing intentions is significant and positive ( $\beta$  = 0.489, p < 0.01), suggesting that Hypothesis 3 is supported for questionnaire version B. The positive coefficient for the relationship between age and whistleblowing intentions suggests that age is influential to the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions ( $\beta$  = 0.130, p < 0.05). This results are consistent with the prediction of Hypothesis 4b. The effects of customer reward power and customer coercive power on the whistleblowing intentions do not show significant results. Thus, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are not supported.

#### 4.3 Model 3

Model 3 focuses on the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions toward the two types of customer sexual harassment behaviors (sample size = 743). We find that age, education and perceived behavioral control influence the respondents' intentions to report the customer sexual harassment behaviors. Accordingly, Hypotheses 3, 4b and 4d are supported. The results of Model 3 show that the influences of age and education are stronger than the influences of gender and marriage. In addition, it is found that perceived behavioral control is very important to explain the whistleblowing intentions, and its effects remain strong and stable for all the models.

#### 5 CONCLUSION

By using Taiwan's life insurance salespeople as a sample, this study examines the salespeople's whistleblowing intentions toward two types of customer sexual harassment behaviors. This study further proposes that the variables such as customer reward power, customer coercive power, perceived behavioral control and personal factors can determine the whistleblowing intentions.

### **Theoretical implications**

Some theoretical implications related to the literature on customer sexual harassment could be drawn. To begin with, this study can show us how the types of customer sexual harassment may relate to the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions. Although several studies have pointed out that positive outcomes have substantial effects in enhancing people's positive attitudes and intentions, the findings of this research shows that quid pro quo customer sexual harassment is intolerable to the respondents, and it will not become more tolerable because of the benefits these respondents could get in the wrongful behaviors.

On the other hand, it should be noted that the relevant studies are less clear about the relationships among customer reward power, customer coercive power and the service



workers' intentions to report customer sexual harassment. The theoretical contribution of this study includes the support for the link between customer reward power and behavioral intentions to report the quid pro quo customer sexual harassment behaviors. Thus, this study provides further insight into to the relationship between customer power and the life insurance salespeople's whistleblowing intentions toward customer sexual harassment behaviors.

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