

**Identity Under Threat: The impact of Workplace Sexual Harassment and Media  
Representation on Organizational Identity at Daily Work**

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### **Statement of originality**

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### **Abstract**

This qualitative study examines the interplay between workplace sexual harassment, media representation, and organizational identity. Employees within a case organization named Daily Work are interviewed on these subjects. Despite the central harassment incident at Daily Work under investigation being perceived as a misunderstanding by most employees, the pervasiveness of sexual harassment is still apparent, with approximately half of the interviewees reporting direct encounters.

Both nuanced and skeptical perspectives emerged towards the way media portrayed certain cases within Daily Work. Most employees perceived the media coverage as sensationalized, and news narratives did therefore exert minimal influence on their perceptions of Daily Work's organizational identity. Instead, the organizational identity tarnished due to Daily Work's handling of the harassment situation. Cover-up tactics in combination with a delayed response to the media lead to eroded trust among employees. Overall, Daily Work's crisis management is perceived as ineffective by employees. This is for example evidenced by the failed appointment of an ombudsperson.

The findings of the study contribute to several fields, including Social Identity Theory and Organizational Crisis Theory. Practical insights are given for organizations navigating reputation challenges in the face of workplace sexual harassment.

## Introduction

Sexual harassment remains an all too prevalent reality in today's workplaces. Sexual harassment at the workplace is broadly defined as unwanted sex-related behavior at work that is appraised by the recipient as offensive, exceeding their resources, or threatening their well-being (Fitzgerald et al., 1997).

In recent years, multiple organizations have faced challenges posed by incidents of sexual harassment. There have been numerous, fairly recent, reported cases and corresponding media attention on sexual harassment incidents at the workplace (see appendix A). The number of reported cases that made it to the national news shows the prevalence of this issue, and how such cases can have potential repercussions on organizations.

Sexual harassment is a complex and multifaceted issue that has evolved from being trivialized to being recognized as a significant social problem (Morgan, 2005). This results in contentious debate on the topic, particularly due to its sensitive and subjective nature. Nonetheless, the fact that exposure to sexual behavior has a negative impact on employee work and psychological well-being, cannot be justified, according to Berdahl and Aquino (2009). Some studies even estimated that almost one in every two women is likely to experience sexual harassment during their employment (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). However, another study shows that men are also potential recipients of sexual harassment at the workplace (Dionisi & Barling, 2018).

Sexual harassment at the workplace can impact recipients with implications for their career (e.g., job satisfaction and work withdrawal), their psychological state (e.g., distress and well-being), and health outcomes (Willness et al., 2007). Research by Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) also showed that occurrences of sexual harassment at the workplace can have a negative impact on organizational commitment and even increased turnover intentions among individual employees. Studies by Duffy and Sperry (2007) also came up with consequences of sexual harassment at the workplace, namely identity conflicts and decreased job satisfaction. Dutton et al. (2010) delved deeper into identity threats, due to sexual harassment experiences, which could in turn affect one's sense of professional self-worth.

All in all, sexual harassment incidents do have profound implications for employees, but also for the organization they are employed by. Therefore, it becomes interesting to examine how sexual harassment at the workplace may impact organizational identity.

The concept of organizational identity, as discussed by Sidorenkov and Borokhovski (2021), emphasizes viewing organizational identity at the individual level as a dynamic process that evolves over time through individual experiences and interactions within the organization.

Organizational identity serves as a crucial element within the organizational framework (Dhalla, 2007). This concept guides employees' interpretation of organizational issues, thereby influencing their perceptions and actions within the organization.

Lots of research has been conducted on the antecedents of organizational identity, but also on how it influences different aspects of organizational functioning (Dhalla, 2007). For example, studies by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Hatch and Schultz (2002) examined the role of organizational identity and its potential negative consequences for organizational cohesion and culture. The concept of organizational identity may influence employee engagement and commitment (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). In addition, studies conducted by Albert and Whetten (1985) and Dutton et al. (1994) discuss the importance of organizational identity and its impact on various organizational outcomes. The article by Dutton et al. (1994) specifically looks at how organizational identity shapes behaviors and interactions within an organization.

To expand upon the existing literature on workplace sexual harassment and organizational identity, this study will also focus on the role played by media coverage. Media coverage of such incidents can shape public and stakeholder perceptions of organizations during times of crises (Coombs, 2014). For example, research has shown that tone and framing used by media can influence organizational reputation and stakeholder trust (Coombs, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

Media interference could thus have considerable ramifications for organizations whose instances of sexual harassment have gotten local or national media attention. This study will therefore also aim to explore the effect of media coverage of such incidents on the relationship between incidents of workplace sexual harassment and the organizational identity. In this sense, the role of media coverage will be examined as an additional influence on the concept of organizational identity.

Organizational scandals have been a subject of interest in multiple studies. The same goes for studies exploring the impact they have on organizational identity. However, there is a noticeable gap in the literature. Namely, the specific role of sexual harassment scandals and the role of media coverage in shaping organizational identity in such instances. Existing research has focused somewhat on the effects of organizational scandals on organizational identity (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Piazza & Jourdan, 2024; Kepplinger et al., 2012). However, there remains a lack of research regarding the dynamics that sexual harassment incidents introduce into this relationship.

By focusing on news articles as a catalyst for influencing perceptions of harassment and organizational identity, this study seeks to address this research gap. While this direction of the study receives considerable attention, it is not limited to only the discussion about media coverage as a catalyst between the relationship of workplace sexual harassment and organizational identity. The influence of workplace sexual harassment on the organizational identity among employees can still be seen as the main relationship under investigation.

A nuanced research question encouraged in-depth understanding and exploration of subjective experiences, interpretations, and reactions of employees to (the media coverage of) workplace sexual harassment incidents and their consequences for the organizational identity. Therefore, the research question is formulated as follows: *"How does workplace sexual harassment influence the*

*organizational identity as perceived by individual employees at Daily Work, and how does media coverage play a role in this relationship?"*

As sexual harassment is a sensitive topic, both the harassment case and the organization under investigation will be anonymized in this case-study. Throughout the study, the author consistently employed the pseudonym "Daily Work" for the organization to maintain confidentiality. Daily Work can be seen as a prominent Dutch organization and has experienced its own share of workplace sexual harassment incidents, with corresponding national media attention as well. Specifically, this study examined a harassment case at Daily Work involving the former Head of the organization and a former lower-ranked employee.

To answer the research question, this study utilizes a qualitative approach. Specifically, semi-structured interviews with employees within Daily Work as the sample and news articles regarding workplace sexual harassment incidents are used to collect data. Participants are recruited randomly. The sample criteria looked for diversity in gender, the type of job (e.g., department) and seniority level to gather information that captures the biggest range of perspectives.

The interviews included open-ended questions to explore participants' individual interpretations and perceptions of the organizational identity within Daily Work. The interpretations of media articles on workplace sexual harassment incidents are considered as well. The Interview protocol is outlined (see appendix B).

In addition to examining the perceptions of Daily Work's employees, the researcher examined these perceptions in a retrospective way, allowing for an in-depth look at how incidents of sexual harassment could have a lasting impact on the employees. This retrospective approach supported the researcher in understanding the effects of workplace sexual harassment on individual employees and, consequently, their perceptions of organizational identity.

The key results of this study reveal that incidents of workplace sexual harassment and the organization's response to them significantly impact employees' perceptions of organizational identity, while the corresponding media coverage exerted minimal influence. Employees feel that sexual harassment is still a serious issue at Daily Work, leading to a deteriorated sense of organizational identity and trust. The study highlights the importance of transparent and effective handling of harassment incidents by organizations to maintain employee trust and a positive organizational identity.

The findings contribute to the existing literature because the relationship between harassment incidents and organizational identity are investigated. Additionally, the role of media coverage in these dynamics has been studied. This study aligns with the frameworks of Social Identity Theory by Ashforth and Mael (1989) and the Organizational Crisis Theory by Coombs and Holladay (2014).

## **Theoretical framework**

This section of the study delves into the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is divided into five different sub-chapters. The first sub-chapter describes the conceptualization of workplace sexual harassment. The emphasis is on sexual harassment and its influence on both individuals and organizations, which will support the researcher to understand its dimensions. The second sub-chapter describes the concept of organizational identity. Organizational identification is touched upon, but organizational identity will serve as the main impacted concept under investigation. The third sub-chapter will focus on the role of media coverage in shaping the direct relationship between cases of sexual harassment at the workplace and organizational identity. The fourth sub-chapter will highlight the proposed focus on individual-level processes. Finally, the last sub-chapter combines all concepts into a theoretical framework that guides the study's investigation. The contribution of this study to the most important theories is also mentioned.

### **Conceptualization of workplace sexual harassment**

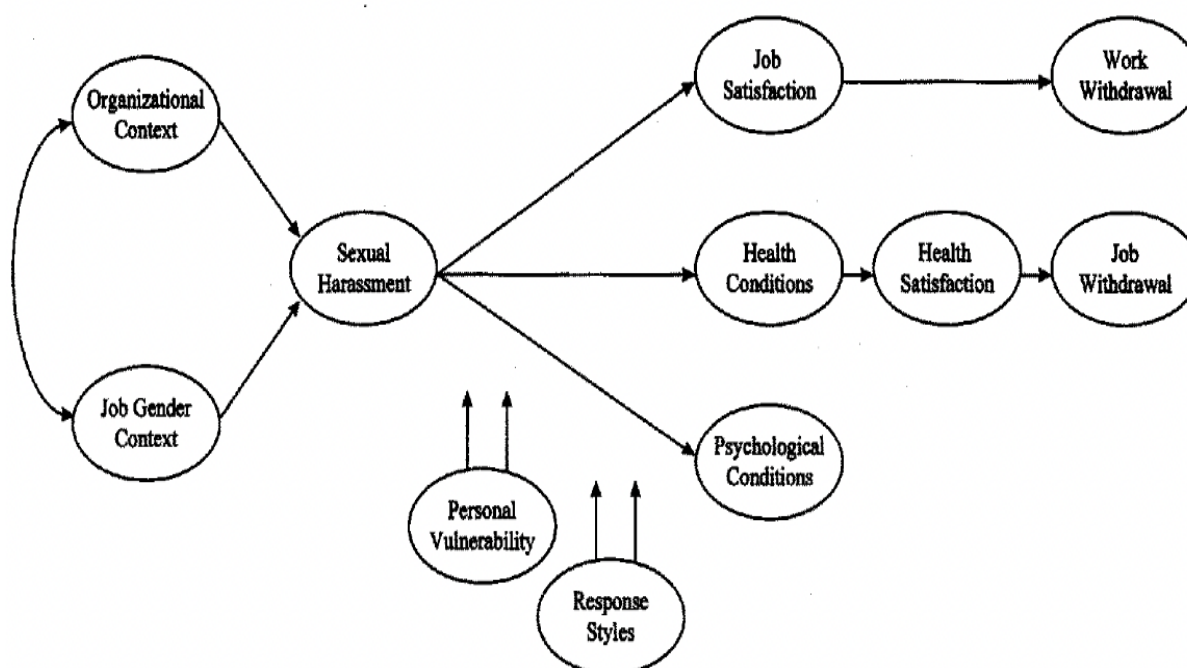
Hereunder, the concept of workplace sexual harassment is discussed. The definition of workplace sexual harassment, its importance for this study, and its influence on both individuals and organizations are described.

According to the articles of Fitzgerald et al. (1997) and Willness et al. (2007), sexual harassment at the workplace is a function of two conditions: organizational climate and job gender context. The organizational climate, which refers to the tolerance of sexual harassment within an organization, and the job gender context, which includes factors such as the gender composition of the workforce and the nature of job duties, are identified as antecedents of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). These two conditions largely determine the prevalence of sexual harassment at the workplace.

As stated in the introduction section, sexual harassment at the workplace influences individual job satisfaction, health conditions and psychological conditions (Willness et al., 2007). Work withdrawal refers to attempts to avoid certain tasks (e.g., absenteeism), whereas job withdrawal refers more to retirement intentions. Personal vulnerability and individual response styles to the harassment situation itself moderate the impact of sexual harassment on the consequences.

Figure 1

*Integrated model of antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment (Willness et al., 2007)*



The study by Willness et al. (2007) provides the reader with a meta-analysis in which the findings of multiple studies are summarized, while using different research methodologies, data sources, and analytical approaches. The figure above shows the findings of the article, by visualizing the antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment, and their causal relationships identified over the years.

In another study, a comprehensive review of sexual harassment literature spanning twenty-five years is conducted (Dionisi & Barling, 2018). The authors mention diverse negative impacts of sexual harassment, including stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as organizational consequences such as reduced productivity, reputational harm, and higher turnover rates. They also addressed gender dynamics in sexual harassment incidents. The authors noted that while women are disproportionately impacted by incidents of sexual harassment, men can also be victims.

A study named "Sexual Behavior at Work: Fun or Folly?" by Berdahl and Aquino (2009) shows that fifty-eight percent of the respondents in this study were exposed to sexual behavior in the past two years at their workplace. Some women and especially men reported to enjoy sexual behavior at work (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009). Even though some respondents perceived certain experiences positively, it's important to recognize that exposure to sexual harassment, which is unwanted sex-related behavior, has a negative effect on both employee work performance and psychological well-being (Fitzgerald et al., 1997; Berdahl & Aquino, 2009; Dionisi & Barling, 2018). These negative



effects are especially visible among individuals who have encountered unwanted experiences, which makes sexual harassment at the workplace ethically unjustifiable (Berdahl & Aquino, 2009).

### **Organizational identity**

Hereunder the concept of organizational identity is discussed. This sub-chapter examines how individuals at Daily Work perceive and relate to the organization.

The concept of organizational identity is a key component in this study. As stated in the introduction section, the study by Sidorenkov and Borokhovski (2021) examines the concept of organizational identity. According to the article, organizational identity refers to the extent to which individuals identify with and feel a sense of belonging to their organization (Sidorenkov & Borokhovski, 2021). It encompasses the cognitive and affective components of identification, reflecting how employees perceive themselves as part of the organization and how they emotionally connect to it.

Whetten (2006) also examined the concept of organizational identity, a study which originated from the foundational work of Albert and Whetten (1985). Whetten (2006) later redefined the concept and argued that organizational identity must be considered as a set of enduring and central attributes that distinguish an organization from others. These enduring characteristics influence organizational behaviors, but also affect decision-making processes, and thus serves as a “bedrock” of an organization's identity (Whetten, 2006).

Legitimate identity claims constitute another key component related to the concept of organizational identity (Whetten, 2006). These claims are expressions of an organization's enduring attributes that especially show up during periods of organizational evolution or identity threats. In other words, social identity claims are the assertions by individuals or groups about their identity within an organization. These claims are either explicit or implicit statements about who they are, what they stand for, and how they relate to others within an organization. Employees rely on- and use these identity claims, especially when navigating complex organizational situations and when trying to maintain organizational coherence.

For this study, the insights of Albert and Whetten (1985) and the revised work by Whetten (2006) can support the understanding of how organizational identity can be threatened, tested, and reshaped, for example in the aftermath of instances of sexual harassment.

Whetten (2006) also delves into identity-referencing discourse. Social identity claims and identity-referencing discourse are related concepts but not the same. Identity-referencing discourse involves the communication used by individuals, particularly to reinforce their identity. It includes the ways in which people talk about themselves, their group, or organization in relation to their identity. Thus, while social identity claims can be seen as the actual assertions of identity, identity-referencing discourse should be seen as the broader communication and discourse surrounding identity. In essence, social identity claims are referred to as the content of the identity assertions, while identity-referencing discourse is the way in which these claims are communicated and reinforced.

Organizational identity is best understood as a hierarchically structured framework of attributes (Whetten, 2006). Within this framework there are higher-level features guiding organizational behaviors among employees and adaptation to changes in the external environment. The hierarchical nature of this framework of attributes shapes how organizations respond to the challenges, such as incidents of sexual harassment, while also sticking to their core identity.

### **Role of media coverage**

The study will also investigate the additional influence of media coverage on organizational identity, as stated in the introduction section.

The research gap described in the introduction suggests that the influence of media coverage on organizational identity has not received significant attention. Therefore, examining how and if media coverage of harassment incidents influences (internal) stakeholders could provide valuable insights into this underexplored area of research. Therefore, the combination of articles in this sub-chapter functions just as a reference point to delve into the impact of media coverage on Daily Work's organizational identity.

Media coverage of organizational crises, such as cases of sexual harassment at the workplace, can have an influence on public- and stakeholder perceptions and ultimately on organizational outcomes (Bortree, 2011). This study by Bortree (2011) focuses on media narratives and how these narratives shape how organizations are viewed by the public and stakeholders. Reputation, trust, and stakeholder relationships are examples of factors that changed due to media narratives. By looking at how media coverage influences public opinions and organizational identity, the study reveals that organizational crisis covered in the media can have lasting effects on how organizations are perceived, by both the public and internal and external stakeholders. (Bortree, 2011)

By applying the findings of Bortree (2011) to the context of Daily Work, valuable insights can be gained. The news articles themselves, as well as Daily Work's response to the media coverage of sexual harassment incidents may influence employees' perceptions of the organization's identity.

Within the article of Folger and Cropanzano (1998), the theory of fairness is mentioned, suggesting that employees may take into account the control an organization itself has over events in crisis situations.

Another article described the halo effect in crisis management (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The halo effect can be seen as the value of gaining a pre-crisis reputation which can function as a protective shield for organizations, may potential crises emerge. This is because stakeholders tend to rely on prior expectations of the organization. In that sense, these stakeholders (e.g., employees) discount negative information during a crisis due to the pre-crisis reputation gained by organizations.

This supports the idea of the importance of reputation in crisis communication (Ulmer et al., 2006). Stakeholders perceive and give meaning to responsibility differently in crisis situations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). The halo effect can influence this process of sensemaking and sense giving, which in turn can impact organizational identity.

In conclusion, the article of Coombs and Holladay (2014) tell us that media coverage of incidents like sexual harassment can erode trust among employees and damage an organization's reputation in general. The main take-away is that an organization can try to gain a positive prior reputation, because this is proven to mitigate reputational damage and to still have a positive organizational identity, even in the face of organizational crisis.

### **Integration of Individual-Level Processes**

This sub-chapter elaborates on the choice of focus on individual-level processes in interpreting media coverage of harassment incidents and its influence on organizational identity. The importance of exploring subjective experiences and interpretations of Daily Work's employees for this study is underscored.

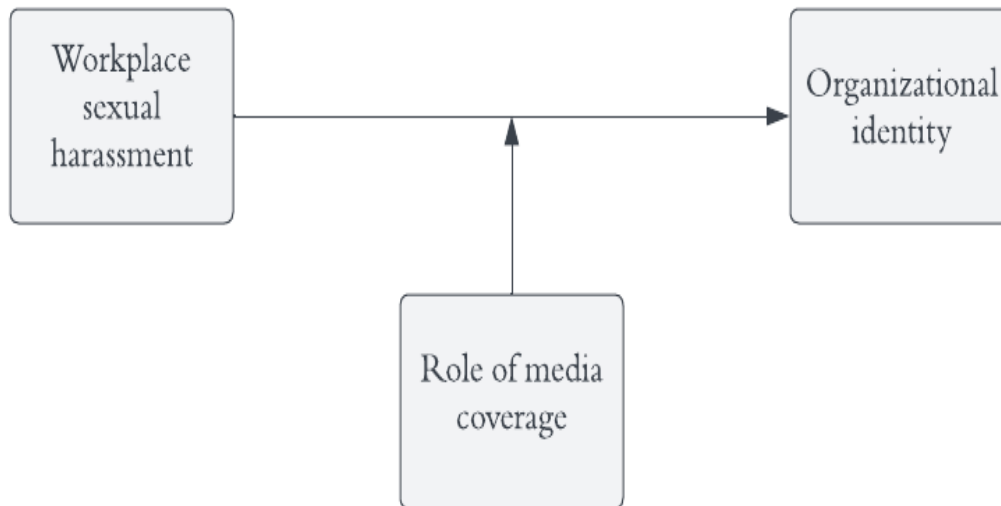
The harassment case at Daily Work and its influence on the organizational identity is the first relationship, and the additional role of media coverage is the second relationship under investigation. Therefore, the center of attention will be on individual-level processes specific to employees at Daily Work. Individual perceptions and cognitive biases shape reactions to incidents of sexual harassment in general, as shown before, but also to media coverage on these harassment incidents. In this study, it is thus especially interesting how this combination of concepts could have an effect on Daily Work's organizational identity.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) introduced the Social Identity Theory as a framework. Employees perceive themselves in relation to groups, particularly within organizational contexts. Social identification is mentioned as a concept that shapes individuals' behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions within organizations. Factors such as prestige, group distinctiveness, salience of out-groups, and traditional causes of group formation are considered as key influencers of social identification. Additionally, the findings of the article suggest that individuals can develop a sense of belonging and loyalty to an organization.

Although this sub-chapter could support the study, it mainly serves as a foundation for stressing the importance of individual-level processes in interpreting media coverage of harassment incidents and its influence on employees' perceptions of Daily Work's organizational identity.

### **Theoretical Framework of the Study**

In this last sub-chapter, the discussed concepts are combined into a theoretical framework that guides the study's investigation. The emphasis is on (the how media coverage of) the harassment incidents at Daily Work intersects with individual interpretations to shape employees' perceptions of its organizational identity. The potential contributions to existing theories are also given. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed relationships studied in this research.

**Figure 2***Theoretical Framework*

In examining the relationship between workplace sexual harassment and employees' perceptions of Daily Work's organizational identity, the media coverage is considered as well. This suggests that how employees interpret Daily Work's identity may be shaped by media representations of the workplace sexual harassment incidents. By exploring these relationships in a qualitative manner, the study aims to provide insights into the complex interplay between organizational scandals, media representation, and organizational identity formation.

With its potential insights and findings, this research seeks to advance existing theories in the field. Firstly, the study seeks to support the Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This particularly refers to organizational identification and organizational identity and their implications for the behavior of individuals working for organizations. Second, this study will seek to support the organizational crisis theory with its findings (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). This theory explores how organizations navigate and address organizational crises, like Daily Work's handling of the harassment situation. Extra insights are gained in the context of workplace sexual harassment incidents and their impact on organizational identity.

### **Methodology**

This section of the study outlines the methodology of the research. The chapter is divided into five different sub-chapters. First, the choice for a qualitative research design is substantiated. The second subchapter delves into the sampling and gives context to why the participants are important. The third subchapter delves into the data collection methods. In the fourth chapter the data-analysis methods are substantiated. The fifth chapter explains how the findings will be reported, and in the sixth sub-chapter the quality assurance is discussed.

## **Research design**

This study utilizes a qualitative research design. This type of research design will allow for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences, interpretations, and perceptions of the organizational identity among employees within Daily Work (Maxwell, 2009). This research design is chosen because a qualitative research design will allow the researcher to explore unknown subjects that require more context, like the role of media coverage in shaping employees' perceptions of organizational identity. In general, qualitative research will help to explore the impact of workplace sexual harassment on the organizational identity of Daily Work. The role of media coverage will act as an additional influence.

A case study methodology is used to explore the impact of workplace sexual harassment on organizational identity within Daily Work and the media coverage of these instances as an additional influence. Case study research is particularly suited for examining complex phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2017). Because the harassment case at Daily Work took place in the past, the focus on the case in a retrospective manner does allow for an in-depth investigation of Daily Work's employees' perceptions on the topic, and how the case at the time has lasting effects on the perceived organizational identity. The philosophical underpinnings of using a case study methodology align well with an interpretive approach (Gerring, 2004). Case study will allow for an examination of subjective experiences and social constructions of reality by employees and is thus particularly suited for studying the role of media coverage.

Thus, the research will also employ an interpretive approach. The main reason for the use of this approach, is that the study demands more of an explanation of why and how certain phenomenon happen, rather than providing a prescriptive solution to the problem (Lincoln, 1995). Interpretivism on its own will allow for an in-depth examination of individual perceptions. Therefore, this approach is suited to let participants in the sample to express their subjective experiences, feelings, and perspectives.

In conclusion, this case-study utilizes both a qualitative and interpretive approach to explore the impact of workplace sexual harassment on organizational identity among employees within Daily Work, with the role of media coverage as an additional effect.

### ***Justification for qualitative design***

A qualitative approach is chosen to dive deeper into the multifaceted nature of workplace sexual harassment and its implications for Daily Work's organizational identity. Thus, a rich exploration of individual perspectives can be performed with this design. Additionally, contextual factors can be explored that may influence the phenomena above.

### ***Rationale for case study***

Daily Work serves as an ideal case for this study. This is because of Daily Work's history with workplace sexual harassment incidents and corresponding media attention. This organizational context

provides the researcher with a rich setting for examining how these incidents influence perceptions of organizational identity among employees.

### Sampling

The sample of this study is based on employees within Daily Work. Participants will be recruited randomly to ensure diversity in gender, job type (department), and seniority level. This demographic information about the participant is important, as a more diverse sample will lead to a wider range of different perspectives. Inclusion criteria include being an active employee at Daily Work during the period of data collection and during the period of the harassment case.

It is important to mention that the type of job could lead to traceability of the participants. To ensure confidentiality, job types will be anonymized by referencing the word “department” followed by a letter of the alphabet (e.g., department X). The characteristics of the participants can be read in table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Characteristics sample*

Interviewee number	Gender	Job type	Seniority level
1	Male	Department X	Junior
2	Non-binary	Department Y	Junior
3	Female	Department X	Senior
4	Male	Department X	Senior
5	Male	Department Z	Middle
6	Female	Department Y	Middle
7	Male	Department X	Senior
8	Female	Department Z	Senior
9	Male	Department X	Senior
10	Male	Department X	Senior
11	Male	Department X	Senior
12	Male	Department Y	Middle
13	Male	Department Z	Middle

**Data collection**

Semi-structured interviews are used as the data collection method for this study. These types of interviews are flexible in nature, giving the researcher the flexibility to ask questions that provide some form of direction, while still allowing the researcher to ask probing questions. With this approach, the interviewer could deepen the interview and ensure that the critical information needed for the study got gathered.

The study conducted a total of 13 interviews and a few news articles are used during these interviews. To ensure that the researcher could get enough data in a short span of time, the number of interviews held is relatively low. Nonetheless, this number of interviews achieved data saturation, and a lot of information is gathered.

The first interviewees were contacted through the organization's helpdesk, while ensuring they fit the sampling criteria. Employees were then asked to suggest more employees that could provide additional information about the harassment case. This tactic to gather new information can be seen as a snowball approach, as the initial interviewee is asked to mention other employees who could have valuable insights for the study.

All interviews are conducted one-on-one (Online) and recorded with consent of the interviewees. This took away the need to write down notes, which enabled the researcher to focus completely on the interview itself. The recordings are also transcribed. The characteristics of the interviews are shown in table 2.

**Table 2***Characteristics interviews*

Interviewee	Location	Date	Duration
1	Online	23 <sup>rd</sup> of April 2024	00:52
2	Online	2 <sup>nd</sup> of May 2024	00:51
3	Online	17 <sup>th</sup> of April 2024	01:00
4	Online	24 <sup>th</sup> of April 2024	00:55
5	Online	7 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:47
6	Online	16 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:42
7	Online	27 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:50
8	Online	17 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:49
9	Online	22 <sup>nd</sup> of May 2024	01:02
10	Online	28 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:55
11	Online	29 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	01:04
12	Online	30 <sup>th</sup> of May 2024	00:51
13	Online	15 <sup>th</sup> of April 2024	01:02

To ensure consistency and reliability, all interviews are done with online calls, with similar environmental conditions. At the very least, the rooms participants found themselves in were quiet, comfortable settings free from interruptions. These criteria are taken as standards, which prevented the answers to questions from potential biases. Variations in the data collection process are also eliminated, which in turn enhanced the reliability and validity of the study.

***Rationale for open-ended questions***

Open-ended questions are utilized in this study. This will allow employees to express their experiences, feelings, and interpretations, without being constrained by pre-defined response options. With this approach, perspectives on workplace sexual harassment and organizational identity are explored deeper. This provided the researcher with more rich and nuanced data for analysis.

***Ensuring ethical considerations***

This study will also adhere to the Dutch code of conduct for research integrity (NWO, 2018). This ensures the highest ethical standards at all stages of the study. Informed consent, confidentiality, and data integrity are crucial to protect interviewees'/participants' rights and privacy. Honesty and transparency regarding potential findings guided the reporting of findings. As such, there was no tolerance for manipulation throughout the study. Adherence to the Dutch code conduct for research integrity guarantees the reliability of the research outcomes.



Moreover, participant anonymity is assured. Given the sensitive nature of the harassment case examined in this study, maintaining strict confidentiality is paramount. This involves employing pseudonyms and general descriptors to prevent identification of any involved individuals or specific incidents. In practice, all collected data is anonymized immediately upon recording, with all personal identifiers removed before analysis. Furthermore, access to raw data is restricted to the researcher and supervisors only. This way, sensitive information remains protected. These measures are critical to safeguard the privacy and well-being of the interviewees and to uphold the integrity and ethical standards of the research process.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis will be employed as the data analysis method for this study. Thematic analysis is used by analyzing the interview transcripts and to uncover themes, patterns, and other insights relevant to the research question, to eventually come up with emerged themes for the findings section. The approach thus facilitated recurring ideas and themes. Thematic analysis allowed for an exploration of employees' responses to the interview questions. The Gioia methodology guided the analysis process because it focuses on the importance of rigor and transparency in inductive research (Gioia et al., 2012).

### ***Coding style***

In conducting the thematic analysis of the interview data, a flexible and iterative coding process was employed. Following an inductive approach, codes were generated organically from the raw interview transcripts, allowing for the emergence of themes. Rather than adhering strictly to preconceived themes derived from the research question and theoretical framework, codes were developed based on the rich and varied content of the interviews themselves.

This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of the data's complexities as new themes and patterns were identified and integrated into the analysis. Codes were linked to specific phrases and quotations from the interviewees, which were then grouped into main themes for the findings section of the study. For example, the codes "prevalence perceptions," "hierarchy," "ranking structure," "personal experience," "colleague experience," and "example case" were grouped into the theme "Impact of workplace sexual harassment."

The code manager illustrates how these codes are grouped into the main themes for the findings section (see appendix C). The researcher used ATLAS.ti version 8.0 for Mac to code the data, and the analysis generated the themes presented in the findings section.

### **Reporting of findings**

The guidelines outlined by Sonnenschein et al. (2009) provided a base for reporting the findings of this study. The guidelines emphasize the integration of citations along with interpretations in the main text. Additionally, tables could be used to present qualitative data, while not obligatory. Tables and visual representations could enhance the clarity and informativeness of the findings.

### ***Ensuring Transparency***

To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, transparency in the reported findings is a critical element. Descriptions of data analysis procedures, participant quotations and contextual explanations are provided throughout the study. This offers the readers a clear understanding of the findings and interpretations.

### **Quality assurance**

To ensure the trustworthiness and the rigor of the study, the following measures will be implemented throughout the whole project.

#### ***Reflexivity***

Reflexivity is an important aspect within the overall research methodology. Researchers must acknowledge and reflect on their own biases, perspectives, and assumptions throughout the study (Pop, 2017). This quality measure is used to create self-awareness and ensures the credibility and validity of research findings of the study (Shaw, 2010). Reflexivity will also enhance the transparency and reliability, according to Finlay (2002).

#### ***Triangulation***

Triangulation is another key methodological approach. It involves using multiple data sources for the data collection, and therefore enhances the reliability and validity of research findings (Johnson et al., 2020). This is done by conducting interviews with employees and showing these participants news articles regarding the harassment case. The use of multiple sources allowed for a cross-validation of data, thereby also strengthening the credibility. Additionally, triangulation enhanced the robustness by consistent reporting of the findings (Guttormsen & Moore, 2023).

#### ***Peer review***

Peer review involves experts that critically reflect on the study (Lear et al., 2018). Feedback and insights from experts, in this case supervisor Niina Erkama and second examiner Stephanie Koorneef, contributed to the validity of the research (Macam, 2017). Peer review also helped to maintain high standards of academic integrity (Hall & Callery, 2001).

#### ***Peer debriefing and member checking***

Regular discussion with peers and student-colleagues are used as opportunities for validation and reflections of interpretations. These discussions particularly took place within the cycle meetings, but also by asking interviewees about additional perspectives on the topic at the end of each interview. Also, interviewed employees had the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of the interview transcripts. This in turn enhanced the creditability of the findings.

## **Findings**

Based on the previous chapters and the information gathered during the data collection, several themes, patterns, and categories are identified. The first theme that emerged is about the impact of workplace sexual harassment on the perceived organizational identity among employees. The second theme explores the impact of media reporting on this relationship. In the third theme,

Daily Work's response and communication are examined, as a lot of participants provided a wide range of interesting perspectives on this situation.

### **Impact of Workplace Sexual Harassment**

#### *Views on the harassment case*

Almost all interviewees expressed worthy opinions on the central harassment case under investigation, namely, the case regarding the former head of Daily Work. While one interviewee showed a considerable amount of criticism towards the head, most of the interviewees examined the case with a nuanced perspective and look at the incident as a misunderstanding between the head and the victim. Some of those interviewees really question the seriousness of the incident and think that the victim wrongly assumed the situation to be sexually charged, and that the serious consequences for the head are not justified.

Interviewee 9 is an example of an interviewee who showed criticism towards the way the harassment case developed:

Look, I can imagine that the female employee initially thought, huh? What's going on here, huh? If someone asks about [...] But normally, the air should be cleared in a conversation. Well, apparently, that was not the case here. So, so this was actually about a, a, a terrible misunderstanding that got out of hand. But those other cases, so those that happened in department X. Yes, I think those are serious cases. (Interviewee 9)

This interviewee expressed a feeling of injustice towards the way the harassment case at Daily Work developed. The phrase "the air should be cleared in a conversation" shows the interviewee's perception of the seriousness of the situation. However, the interviewee also shows that he does look critically at other cases of sexual harassment within Daily Work. The statement "I think those are serious cases" supports his critical view on the central harassment case in this study on the one hand, but on the other hand it shows that this interviewee does not attempt to deny that there are existing problems regarding sexual harassment within Daily Work.

Another interviewee supported the critical view towards the central harassment case in this study:

And here, really. A very sincere, hardworking person with a lot of heart for the organization has been dragged through the mud. And this was a very serious case where, considering all the circumstances, nothing more could be done for the head of Daily Work. At the time, I also expressed solidarity towards the head, sent a card, sent a book, etc. It was just. Yes, it was just terrible and unfair. Look, that someone experiences a situation like that. Yes, that can happen. I also sometimes say things that someone can interpret ambiguously, that happens. But you are very much looking for malice if you read a sexual message in the words of this man, and yet that happened! (Interviewee 10)

This interviewee perceived the harassment case as "terrible and unfair". The phrases "dragged through the mud" and "you are very much looking for malice if you read a sexual message in the words of this

man” show that this interviewee is not pleased with the way the victim interpreted the remarks of the head. It also shows a feeling of injustice regarding the consequences for the Head.

It is important to understand how the individual experiences and viewpoints contribute to the overall perception of sexual harassment at the workplace, apart from just the central case in this study. That is why the next paragraph will explore employees’ general attitudes towards sexual harassment at Daily Work and review other instances within the organization to offer a more complete picture of the issue.

### ***Experiences and prevalence perceptions of workplace sexual harassment in general***

The interviewees’ perceptions of the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment within Daily Work differed substantially. Some employees did not witness any form of workplace sexual harassment with direct colleagues or themselves, while other employees recounted multiple experiences related to sexual harassment at Daily Work. These experiences ranged from subtle forms of sexual harassment, like gender-based discrimination, to overt instances of verbal or physical harassment. Some employees talked about instances of inappropriate comments or jokes. Other employees reported more severe incidents of unwanted advances or explicit behavior, which shows the breadth of the issue in general.

For example, one interviewee has witnessed complaints against a colleague in the same department. Interviewee 2 stated the following after a question about personal/colleague experiences with sexual harassment at the workplace:

He’s been called to account by higher leadership about the fact that there’s several complaints against him for harassment. Like these little blow kisses. It’s really \*\* weird to do that to your like, younger female and queer colleagues and like to your clients. And everyone you know... he’s been told this a million times and he keeps doing it. So, there’s. So, then it also just starts getting bad. Like it gets worse because he knows he’s not supposed to, and he still does it. And so, it doesn’t feel like he takes any of the direction he’s getting very seriously. It seems like he’s just completely unaware, like it seems he’s just totally oblivious. And so that is what almost makes it difficult because like I have talked about this with my other colleagues where we were just like... what is this? And everyone is like, yeah, but it’s hard to do, you know, because he doesn’t mean that in a bad way. And like, you know, he is just... Oh, that is just how he is? And I’m just like, well, still not great. (Interviewee 2)

Interviewee 2 describes that a male colleague has repeatedly received complaints about his behavior, specifically for making gestures like blowing kisses to younger female and queer colleagues as well as clients. The researcher recognized the interviewee’s frustration during the interview and understands the discomfort this causes among coworkers, as the interviewee starts swearing as well. There is also difficulty in addressing the issue. Other colleagues may dismiss the behavior as harmless or just part of the colleague's personality, even though it is inappropriate and unwelcome to other colleagues. This

phrase shows again the complexity of dealing with repeated inappropriate behavior in the workplace, especially when it is minimized or excused by some.

As about half of the interviewees experienced instances of sexual harassment at the workplace themselves or heard it from direct colleagues, there is also the other half that did not witness or hear about sexual harassment incidents at Daily Work, apart from the cases that made it to the Dutch news outlets.

I am afraid it happens more often than we all think and hope. But I have personally never experienced anything like it. I also heard little to nothing about it, so yes, that is a bit of a strange discrepancy. (Interviewee 5)

Despite having never personally experienced any form of sexual harassment at Daily Work, this employee believes that it occurs more frequently than is generally acknowledged. The interviewee finds it a "strange discrepancy" that, despite having no personal experience with such incidents, he does hear about them in the news.

Thus, employees' experiences and perceptions of the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment varied significantly. To illustrate the broad spectrum of views, alongside strong and nuanced opinions on the matter, some interviewees felt that concerns about sexual harassment are sometimes exaggerated. After a question about the prevalence perception of sexual harassment within Daily Work, interviewee 10 stated the following:

Well, it exists. It is clearly present. But now it's being made to seem like it plays a role in everything, and that's simply not the case. In this regard, to exaggerate slightly for clarity, it almost feels like every interaction nowadays is viewed from a sexualizing, eroticizing perspective, and that's just not true. Yes, and moreover, there is also a difference between a smile and a wink and an actual act; they are not the same and are almost being equated. So much is now seen from an intimidating, sexualizing perspective. And that, I find very troubling, because it undermines the natural interaction between people. (Interviewee 10)

First, interviewee 10 acknowledges the presence of workplace sexual harassment. Immediately after, the interviewee expresses concern that it is being overstated. By saying "it's being made to seem like it plays a role in everything," the interviewee shows he thinks that the issue is being exaggerated to the point where almost every interaction is viewed through a "sexualizing, eroticizing perspective." This exaggeration, according to the interviewee, is not accurate.

Furthermore, the importance of distinguishing between different behaviors is emphasized. The interviewee tells us that there is a significant difference between "a smile and a wink and an actual act". Opinions thus seem to vary on the definition of sexual harassment. While some consider only explicit acts as harassment, others include subtle behaviors. This discrepancy suggests a subjective understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment.

### ***Underlying causes***

After asking the interviewees about their personal experiences and prevalence perceptions of sexual harassment at Daily Work, the researcher asked about interviewee's perspective on the underlying causes of the issue. Most interviewees mention hierarchical structures and power differences of the organization as underlying causes of workplace sexual harassment.

Hierarchy and power imbalances are indeed an explanation for why these kinds of incidents occur. However, that should not be an excuse for it, which means that the organization need policies in place that ensure these incidents can be prevented, or at least ensure that action is taken if they do occur. (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 5 recognizes these structural factors as explanations for why incidents of sexual harassment occur. However, the interviewee also stresses that these factors should not serve as excuses for allowing harassment to persist. Instead, he advocates for the implementation of policies aimed at preventing and addressing sexual harassment effectively within the organization.

Another employee supports the perspective that power imbalances and hierarchy can foster sexual harassment to occur:

So, I think that it certainly occurred just as often in the past, and maybe even more often, and that it was much more difficult to report such incidents back then because, strangely enough, the social acceptance of these kinds of relationships, which were clearly unequal and could escalate out of control due to power imbalances, was much less recognized and acknowledged at the time. What I mean is that there are now also many more reports being made, and thus much more visibility is created, which also becomes more visible in the statistics, leading to the conclusion that it now occurs much more often. But what you really see is that it is much more reported. And I have not witnessed it with direct colleagues, more through word of mouth. And that is not directly related to the issue Daily Work's head had, but to another issue, where there is a power imbalance between a higher-ranked employee and a lower-ranked employee, and these power imbalances can foster this. (Interviewee 11)

Interviewee 11 gave a lot of other insights into the historical context of workplace sexual harassment throughout the interview. He wasn't alone in discussing the historical perspective; indeed, other interviewees articulated similar views on the matter. Furthermore, the interviewee elaborates on his view that there is now greater visibility and reporting of sexual harassment incidents, leading to the perception that it occurs more frequently. On the other hand, the interviewee links the issue of power imbalances to another instance within Daily Work. The researcher interpreted this as indicating that these dynamics may contribute to fostering sexual harassment.

### ***Effects on organizational identity***

The perceptions of sexual harassment varied significantly, but so did the perceptions of the effect of harassment incidents on Daily Work's organizational identity among employees. However, the cases of sexual harassment and the corresponding media attention they received have influenced the organizational identity for almost all interviewees. Most of those participants did feel like the

incidents themselves led to a deteriorated organizational identity, independent of their initial attitudes towards sexual harassment. Previous sub-themes show that while some employees perceive concerns about sexual harassment as exaggerated and others believe sexual harassment at the workplace receives too little attention, both groups of employees seem to agree that the incidents at Daily Work have contributed to a deteriorating organizational identity.

To understand precisely how the harassment cases impacted the organizational identity among employees, the researcher asked targeted questions. For example, interviewee 7 shared his perception of how the organizational identity could be influenced:

Yes. I think that in response to this so-called scandal and various other so-called scandals, a culture has emerged where you must walk on eggshells to avoid getting reported.

Implementing various measures and organizing meetings to address inappropriate behavior will likely increase the number of reports, but not the severity of the incidents. I believe that a large portion of these reports will be minor, with only a few being genuinely serious, like in Case X. This has changed dramatically. Nowadays, there is much more of a stifling culture... you can't make jokes anymore. By stifling, I mean a very dull, dry department where only serious comments can be made and even a smile is practically forbidden. People are walking on eggshells, afraid to speak out. There's a culture where complaints and reports are filed very quickly. This does not make people feel safer. (Interviewee 7)

First, interviewee 7 had a strong opinion on the topic throughout the whole interview and uses phrases like "so-called scandals". This interviewee can be characterized as having an exaggerated view on harassment incidents. Interviewee 7 describes the impact of harassment incidents on organizational identity by stating, "a culture has emerged where you must walk on eggshells to avoid getting reported." He notes, "Implementing various measures... will likely increase the number of reports, but not the severity," indicating that while reporting may rise, most cases are minor. He adds, "Nowadays, there is much more of a stifling culture... you can't make jokes anymore," reflecting a shift to a more rigid environment. He concludes, "People are walking on eggshells, afraid to speak out... This does not make people feel safer," kind of indicating a paradox where increased vigilance has led to fear and restraint, rather than enhanced safety.

After the researcher asked about how the harassment incidents at Daily Work affected the organizational identity, interviewee 5 answered the following:

That obviously doesn't do any good for Daily Work's identity for several reasons. Daily work's image to the outside world, a trust crisis. It brings all kinds of loyalty problems with it. People start to doubt the way these kinds of problems are handled within the organization. But the atmosphere internally wasn't so bad, I think. At least I didn't experience it that way. But if stories go around, whether it's justified or not. That doesn't matter, but if those go around, then that doesn't do any good for the trust people have in the policy regarding sexual harassment.

And that also ensures that people who are inclined to do these kinds of things can do so freely, with impunity. (Interviewee 5)

Interviewee 5's response shows the negative consequences sexual harassment incidents have on Daily Work's organizational identity. Specifically, these incidents lead to several adverse outcomes, including a tarnished "image" of Daily Work in the public eye, a "trust crisis" within the organization, and "loyalty problems" among employees. However, the interviewee adds nuance by stating that he personally was not affected by the harassment incidents. Furthermore, there is a growing "doubt" surrounding the organization's approach to addressing such issues internally. Despite an internal atmosphere that may not have been notably affected, the circulation of stories, regardless of their veracity, contributes to a decline in trust in the organization's "policies" regarding sexual harassment.

As more employees recounted their concerns about the way Daily Work handled the incidents, a separate extra theme emerged, which will be the third main theme: organizational response and communication.

## **Role of Media Coverage**

### ***Individual perceptions of Media Coverage***

During the interviews, the researcher showed the interviewees an article regarding the sexual harassment case at Daily Work by a well-known Dutch news outlet. The article can be described as an investigation by an external organization, which describes instances of sexual harassment within Daily Work. Employees responded similarly to the article, with most of the reactions ranging from nuanced views to highly negative ones regarding the way media represents these instances.

Interviewee 9 is an example of an employee with a negative view towards the media. He stated the following:

They made a blunder, I believe, because... This was a large misunderstanding, I must also say that I am somewhat influenced by the person, you know? I mean, I don't know the head personally. But well, I have spoken to him before, and I find him an incredibly amiable man, so I just can't imagine that he would knowingly engage in improper behavior. So, his story that it's about unfortunate remarks, I believe that. So, the fact that the media paid so much attention to it. I just think that's a blunder. Especially that they didn't correct it later as far as I know.

(Interviewee 9)

Interviewee 9's words can be interpreted as a deep-seated skepticism towards the media's way of portraying the sexual harassment case at Daily Work. He expresses his belief that the media made a significant error by focusing so heavily on the issue. This interviewee perceives this as a misunderstanding. The use of the word "blunder" suggests a strong disapproval of the media's actions in general. Additionally, the media's portrayal contradicts with his own experiences and perceptions, because he sees the harasser as "an incredibly amiable man", which is certainly not the way the media described the former head of Daily Work. The phrase "his story that it's about unfortunate remarks, I believe that" indicates that interviewee 9 has an acceptance towards the accused's explanation.



Interviewee 10 supports this with the following statement after the researcher asked about his opinion on the media coverage:

Very poor. A very suggestive report was given. So, there were really harmful things happening. And things that just don't add up. Reporting that was suggestive where you say, yes, what's been stated is not untrue. But you read between the lines and think, well, journalistic care was really lacking. I've worked for magazines myself, if I had written about things in this way, [...] I would have been kicked out. It wouldn't have worked; this was far too suggestive. [...] And yes, especially in the media, people are often quite keen on sensational things. They find that appealing. Due to these kinds of issues, where you can really doubt the sincerity of certain media outlets, it's about the reporter, it's about the attention, and by that, I don't mean the attention to the problem, but the attention to the journalism, to the journalist themselves. (Interviewee 10)

Interviewee 10 describes the media report as "very suggestive," suggesting a strong disapproval of its tone and implications, in line with previous interviewee. By stating that "there were really harmful things happening" and talking about discrepancies in the reporting, this interviewee implies a lack of journalistic integrity and accuracy. The phrase "journalistic care was really lacking" underscores this belief. Interestingly, interviewee 10 has his own experiences with working for magazines, and he emphasizes the severity of the report's suggestive nature, suggesting that such writing would not be tolerated in the years he worked as a journalist. His mention of media sensationalism and the comment about doubting the sincerity of certain media outlets highlights a fundamental mistrust in the integrity of journalism.

Interviewee 11 also supports the previous views on the way media reported the harassment cases. He stated the following:

Well, in general, I think it's particularly interesting for the media to be able to publish such a story because it increases sales figures. Yes, it's as simple as that. I also think that the media really exaggerated... there were reports almost every day and I think, well, my opinion is that it's a case of character assassination. I'll just say it honestly. I truly think everything was blown out of proportion and it was all very one-sidedly portrayed. This made the head of Daily Work completely, let's say, defenseless in the media because he couldn't defend himself. And, "exploited" isn't the word, but it's still very eager how the media published that he really played a harmful role there. This was no longer objective reporting for me. I find this very tendentious. (Interviewee 11)

Interviewee 11 echoes the sentiment of skepticism towards the media's portrayal of the sexual harassment case even more. Next to previous interviewees, interviewee 11 also expresses his belief that the media exaggerated the situation. He adds to this belief with the belief that the media's exaggerating reporting is leading to what they perceive as character assassination and that the media coverage was one-sided and blown out of proportion, leaving the former head of Daily Work

defenseless. Furthermore, he criticizes the lack of objectivity in the reporting, describing it as tendentious rather than objective.

### ***Impact on Organizational Identity***

The findings from the interviews indicate that the media coverage of the sexual harassment case at Daily Work has had a minimal impact on the organization's identity. Despite the highly negative and skeptical perceptions of the media's portrayal among most of the interviewees, as evidenced by the comments from Interviewees 9, 10, and 11, the external narratives by the media did not significantly alter their view of the organization. The consistent views suggest that employees did not internalize the media's negative portrayal into their own understanding of Daily Work's identity. Instead, they maintained a critical stance towards the media, seeing the reports as an external exaggeration rather than a fair reflection of the harassment case and the organization itself. Consequently, the media's portrayal had little to no effect on how the employees perceive the organizational identity.

### **Organizational Responses and Communication**

#### ***Strategies and policies used by Daily Work***

The interviewees' perceptions of the way Daily Work managed the harassment incidents and tried to maintain its organizational identity are discussed. Almost all interviewees think Daily Work made mistakes regarding their communication strategies and policies used. In this theme it becomes clear how these mistakes have impacted the organizational identity among Daily Work's employees.

Firstly, interviewee 4 vented his hart about his view on the way Daily Work managed the harassment case:

Well, what I'm saying is. So, they didn't act radically enough, covered up too much, reacted too fearfully towards the media, like, oh yes, especially don't attract a scandal and therefore just cover it up, but that doesn't help. That doesn't solve any problems. And you really must be willing to make radical decisions, even if that goes against the opinion of the media. You then see, measures are taken. Like, confidential advisors. Or the ombudswoman. That is, of course, a bit of a cover-up, like okay, you've been able to pour your heart out to someone and then that's the end of it. Because an ombudsperson should actually have instruments to intervene. (Interviewee 4)

Most interestingly, the so-called "cover-up tactics" are mentioned by multiple interviewees. The phrases "reacted to fearfully" and "you really must be willing to make radical decisions" suggest that Daily Work tried to cover-up the incidents and tried to paint over it while not fixing the problem. The employee also states that "measures are taken" in the form of an appointed ombudswoman, which is an employee that investigates and addresses complaints made by individuals within organizations. The interviewee sees the appointment as a cover-up tactic because this person did not have the instruments to intervene and take radical actions.

Apart from this view, another interesting story about this ombudswoman and the overall organizational response by Daily Work is shared by interviewee 9:

But that the media pays attention to it. I think that's justified because, to be honest, I think organizations themselves are incredibly good at trying to cover things up, so they act like they're looking for a solution and that there's a lot of attention for it, but in reality... I think they often try to cover things up, and then the media jumps on it. I think that's justified. Look, at our department, but then you take it a bit broadly, but then it's not just about sexual harassment, but social insecurity is the problem that we've been dealing with for several years in staff surveys. We just don't come out well, so employees just indicate that they often don't feel socially safe. That there is also a lot of gossip, but the department administration keeps saying, yes, we see that in those surveys, but no complaints have been filed. Yes, but why are no complaints filed... Because people are afraid to complain because they think, yes, then I'll be the one to suffer. And then nothing will happen organizationally. And I think that fear is justified. This is really a bit of a response for show. First of all, they now refer to that program of recognizing and appreciating, and nothing has really come of it. So that's, that's all for show. [...] And so, it remains a great environment, but... I see an increasing discrepancy between... That they also want to project that great environment exists, but how things then often go in practice, that clashes quite a bit. And for example, that our ombudswoman now actually leaves prematurely? Yes, that is a warning sign, and it doesn't surprise me, but it is, yes, then as an organization you should be deeply ashamed, especially after several scandals have taken place. (Interviewee 9)

This interviewee's reaction sums up most of the interviewee's perspectives on Daily Work's organizational response in general. The same elements have been mentioned by multiple interviewees, with for example the "cover-up tactics" used again, the "discrepancy" between reality and practice, and the ombudswoman Daily Work appointed. This interviewee adds to the narrative by mentioning that the ombudsperson left and says that the organization should be "deeply ashamed" about that. Other interviewees confirmed this account, stating that she left because she did not feel taken seriously.

### ***Effects on perceptions of organizational identity***

Up to now, it has become clear that Daily Work tried to postpone the harassment case, by using the so-called "cover-up tactics". Subsequently, several well-known Dutch media outlets were alerted by the victim of the central harassment case, leading to intense media scrutiny. In response, Daily Work decided to openly share the story themselves afterwards. This discreet way of dealing with the harassment case and media attention has had a negative effect on employees' perceptions of Daily Work's organizational identity. An example of why this situation has impacted the organizational identity among employees is given by interviewee 10:

The organizational identity, how the employees view the organization, has taken a huge hit due to the way Daily Work responded, and indeed also the time it took for them to respond,

which created an atmosphere of distrust. Yes, this atmosphere of distrust arose due to administrative ambiguity, and if there's anything to blame the former head for, you could say, who is now also a victim himself, yes, that there was too much uncertainty for too long, but the uncertainty was there. People had to wait for all sorts of things to come out. Well, too much uncertainty arose, and the time, huh, that it took so long, and not knowing what was going on, played a very nasty role in this. Certainly true. But the organization itself also played a role in this with the uncertainty. If they had been more open, then they would have preempted the media suggestions. This is a consequence of the vagueness, one of the consequences. It partly has to do with the ambiguity that the organization itself created.

(Interviewee 10)

Multiple employees corroborated interviewee 10's view on the way Daily Work managed the incidents. Interviewee 10 provides a critical view of how Daily Work handled the harassment case and its aftermath. According to the interviewee, the "organizational identity," which refers to how employees perceive the organization, "has taken a huge hit" due to the organization's response. The interviewee points out that the delayed response "created an atmosphere of distrust" among the employees.

The key issues mentioned by the interviewee include "administrative ambiguity" and "too much uncertainty for too long. He believes that if Daily Work "had been more open," they could have "preempted the media suggestions," thereby avoiding some of the negative consequences. The vagueness and ambiguity created by the organization itself are seen as significant factors contributing to the current distrust. The interviewee concludes that this lack of transparency and the extended period of not knowing what was going on are key reasons for the damaged organizational identity.

### **Discussion**

First, the findings of this study contribute to Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This is done by examining the impact of sexual harassment incidents on organizational identity within Daily Work. Such incidents lead to a deteriorating organizational identity among employees because they perceive a more oppressive working environment and a heightened sense of insecurity because of workplace sexual harassment. This is an example out of the findings section which aligns with the concept of social identification. Social identification is caused by a situation where individuals' perceptions of the organization are influenced by shared experiences and values (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Next to this, the study also looked at Daily Work's organizational responses to the harassment incidents in shaping employees' perceptions. The way Daily Work handled the harassment situation, including the failed appointment of an ombudsperson and subsequent actions, shaped employee trust and organizational identity negatively. This reinforces the Social Identity Theory's emphasis on the congruence between organizational actions and the identity perceived by members (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

While media reporting had little impact, employees' views were influenced by Daily Work's response to the media and the handling of the situation. This helps to understand the interplay between external influences, the organizational actions and responses to these influences, and how those could influence employees' sense of identity (Coombs & Holladay, 2014).

This study echoes the important role of organizational actions and responses in shaping (internal) stakeholder perceptions during crises. This aligns with the core principles of crisis communication management (Coombs & Holladay, 2014). By combining crisis communication theory with Social Identity Theory, this study supports the reader to gain a better understanding of how organizational identity can be shaped by both internal organizational actions and external influences. It also provides practical guidance for improving crisis management strategies.

The findings on hierarchy and power imbalances as contributory causes of sexual harassment provide potential additional dimensions to the integrated model of sexual harassment antecedents (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). The model identifies organizational climate and job gender context as critical factors influencing the prevalence of sexual harassment. By including hierarchy and power imbalances as a combined additional dimension, this study adds the role of power dynamics within the organizational structure. This is because most interviewees think the presence of hierarchy and power imbalances can exacerbate the organizational climate for sexual harassment. It can create environments where individuals in higher power positions feel entitled to engage in harassing behaviors without or with less fear of consequences.

Overall, this study enriches both Social Identity Theory and crisis communication theory. This is done mostly by illustrating the interplay between organizational identity, internal stakeholder perceptions, and crisis response strategies.

### **Conclusion**

The central harassment case under investigation is perceived as a misunderstanding by most employees. That does not take away the fact that most of those employees also think sexual harassment at Daily Work is still significantly present. About half of them has witnessed instances of sexual harassment at Daily Work themselves or within their direct working environment. Their overall views on instances of sexual harassment at the workplace varied significantly. Some employees believe that increased opportunities to report incidents will lead to exaggeration, while others feel that the issue continues to receive too little attention.

Interestingly, both groups indicated a deteriorating organizational identity among employees due to instances of sexual harassment at Daily Work. Some employees believe that such scandals create a more oppressive working environment, where individuals are afraid to speak out, leading to a heightened sense of insecurity. Others feel that trust in Daily Work has diminished because they doubt the organization's handling of the harassment situation, believing that a similar approach in the future will continue to erode trust.

The media coverage itself did not significantly affect how employees view Daily Work. Perspectives on the media's role in the central harassment case ranged from nuanced to skeptical ones. Most employees believe the media reported in a suggestive and sensationalized manner. As a result, the media coverage had little additional negative impact on employees' perceptions of the organizational identity. However, it was the way Daily Work responded to the media and handled the situation that affected these perceptions. For example, several employees mentioned that Daily Work used cover-up tactics more often in the past, and that the organization only decided to respond openly to the situation after the media became involved and reported on the incident. This led to diminishing trust among employees. Daily Work appointed an ombudsperson to address potential future instances of workplace sexual harassment. Unfortunately, this individual did not feel taken seriously and subsequently left, further eroding trust. Because Daily Work seeks to convey a sense of responsibility regarding social safety, the discrepancy between what they aim to convey, and the reality creates even more doubt among employees.

All in all, incidents of sexual harassment themselves and how the organization handled them led to a deteriorated perception of Daily Work's organizational identity among employees, while the media coverage seem to have little to no impact on the concept.

While the study provides valuable insights overall, the researcher must acknowledge certain limitations that may impact the interpretation of the findings. The sample size of participants involved in the study was relatively small and this could limit the generalizability of the results to a broader population. Additionally, the retrospective nature of the case study approach may have caused recall bias and memory distortions among interviewees when reflecting on past events. Also, the focus was on one single organization, which further limits the generalizability of the findings, because other organizations with other dynamics may have responded differently. These methodological constraints should be considered when interpreting the findings and applying them to other organizational contexts, as practical implications.

Additionally, the researcher decided not to include gender dynamics, which is a significant limitation. The focus is kept narrow, and the study aimed to analyze in detail the effects on organizational identity without the added complexity of gender-based analysis. Gender dynamics are crucial because of its influence on power structures and interactions, which in turn are causes for the occurrence and reporting of harassment (Fitzgerald et al., 1997). The absence of this perspective leaves a gap for future research. This gap should include the role of gender dynamics in shaping perceptions to sexual harassment and their implications for organizational identity. This will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the issue.

Next to gender-dynamics, future research could explore in-depth the longitudinal effects of workplace sexual harassment on organizational identity over time. Such as study could examine how perceptions evolve and change in response to media representations and the corresponding organizational response. Although this study found that media had little effect, exploring the role of

organizational communication strategies in mitigating the negative impact of media coverage on organizational identity could provide valuable insights for crisis management practices, as within other organizations the media could have stronger effects.

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**Appendix A**  
**Cases of workplace sexual harassment**

Case	Description	Source
1. BNNVARA Sexual Harassment Case (2017):	A case involving sexual harassment within the Dutch broadcasting organization BNNVARA. There were female employees who accused a male presenter of sexual intimidation. This led to an investigation and controversy in general.	AD.nl. (2024). <a href="https://www.ad.nl/show/bnnvara-kreeg-ook-meldingen-over-fysiek-en-seksueel-wangedrag-matthijs-van-nieuwkerk/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F">https://www.ad.nl/show/bnnvara-kreeg-ook-meldingen-over-fysiek-en-seksueel-wangedrag-matthijs-van-nieuwkerk/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F</a>
2. Timmermans Affair (2017):	Timmermans Affair (2016): A case involving Frans Timmermans, who faced incidents of sexual harassment when he was young. The statement created public controversy.	RTL Nieuws. (2017). <a href="https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nederland/artikel/3736276/misbruikte-frans-timmermans-slachtoffers-spreek-je-uit">https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nederland/artikel/3736276/misbruikte-frans-timmermans-slachtoffers-spreek-je-uit</a>
4. Several university Cases (2010):	Reports emerged of sexual harassment and misconduct by professors and staff members at multiple universities in the Netherlands.	AD.nl. (2020). <a href="https://www.ad.nl/wetenschap/fors-meer-meldingen-seksuele-intimidatie-op-universiteiten~a307d8bd/">https://www.ad.nl/wetenschap/fors-meer-meldingen-seksuele-intimidatie-op-universiteiten~a307d8bd/</a>
5. KNVB Case (2022):	Reports of sexual harassment within the Dutch Football Association (KNVB), involving a staff member of a football club. The case got a lot of media attention and investigations into the club's workplace culture were conducted.	NOS.nl. (2023). <a href="https://nos.nl/artikel/2498031-overmars-jaar-geschorst-wegens-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-in-ajax-periode">https://nos.nl/artikel/2498031-overmars-jaar-geschorst-wegens-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-in-ajax-periode</a>
6. Police Case (2021):	Several female officers at the Walcheren Police Department came forward with allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination by male colleagues and superiors.	BNNVARA. (2023). <a href="https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/agenten-ontslagen-na-seksuele-intimidatie-hitler-grappen-en-fantaseren-over-ophangen-van-marokkanen">https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/agenten-ontslagen-na-seksuele-intimidatie-hitler-grappen-en-fantaseren-over-ophangen-van-marokkanen</a>
7. Dutch Broadcasting Foundation	Employees of a Dutch broadcasting organization (NPO) came forward with allegations of sexual harassment by senior	NU.nl. (2023). <a href="https://www.nu.nl/media/6255804/tomegbers-komende-maanden-niet-aan-het-werk-voor-nos-sport.html">https://www.nu.nl/media/6255804/tomegbers-komende-maanden-niet-aan-het-werk-voor-nos-sport.html</a>

(NPO) Case (2023):	executives and producers within the organization.	
8. KLM Case (2020):	Reports of sexual harassment emerged within a Dutch aviation company KLM. This mainly involved a pilot. The case raised concerns about how safe the work environments in the aviation sector are.	NOS.nl. (2023). <a href="https://nos.nl/regio/noord-holland/artikel/379914-klm-mag-piloot-ontslaan-na-20-jaar-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-stelletje-kutwijken">https://nos.nl/regio/noord-holland/artikel/379914-klm-mag-piloot-ontslaan-na-20-jaar-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-stelletje-kutwijken</a>
9. The voice of Holland case	Reports emerged of sexual harassment and abuse within the production of the Dutch television show “The Voice of Holland”. This mainly involved the abuse of power by individuals associated with the program. The case created widespread public controversy.	RTL Nieuws. (2023). <a href="https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5281447/voice-holland-seksueel-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-machtsmisbruik">https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/5281447/voice-holland-seksueel-grensoverschrijdend-gedrag-machtsmisbruik</a>

**Appendix B**  
**Interview protocol**

<b>Section</b>	<b>Subsection</b>	<b>Sample Questions</b>
Introduction	- Introduce Purpose	1. Can you briefly introduce yourself?
	- Assure Confidentiality	2. Before we begin, I want to tell you that your responses will be kept confidential. That means that your identity will be fully anonymized in the study.
		3. If you still have any concerns about confidentiality or anonymity, then you may now discuss these before we proceed.
Participant Information	- Collect Demographics	4. Could you please provide me with some demographic information. This includes your age, gender, department (which will be anonymized), and how long you've been working at/ associated with Daily Work?
Warm-up Questions	- Establish Rapport	5a. How long have you been associated with Daily Work, and in what capacity?
		5b. Can you describe your role and responsibilities within Daily Work?
		5c. What motivated you to join Daily Work, and how has your experience been so far in general?
Exploration of Workplace Sexual Harassment	- Discuss Prevalence and Experience	6a. From your perspective, how prevalent do you think workplace sexual harassment is within organizations like Daily Work?
		6b. Have you had any personal experiences with- or observed any instances of workplace sexual harassment at Daily Work?
		6c. How do you think that the harassment case affects the overall work environment and employee morale at Daily Work?

Interpretation of Media Coverage (News articles are briefly scanned through at this stage)	- Analyze Media Portrayal	7a. What is your opinion on how the media portrays instances of workplace sexual harassment involving Daily Work?
		7b. How do you think media coverage influences public perception of the Daily Work's organizational identity?
		7c. Do you believe media reports accurately represent Daily Work's response to harassment incidents?
Individual Experiences and Perceptions	- Share Personal Insights	8a. Can you share any personal experiences or observations related to the organizational culture at Daily Work?
		8b. How do you perceive Daily Work's values and mission, based on your interactions and experiences?
		8c. In what ways do you feel connected or disconnected from Daily Work's organizational identity?
Reflection on Long-term Impact	- Analyze Future Implications	9a. How do you anticipate incidents of workplace sexual harassment and media coverage affecting Daily Work's reputation and organizational identity in the long run?
		9b. Have you observed any changes in Daily Work's culture or policies because of media scrutiny on harassment incidents?
		9c. What strategies or policies do you believe Daily Work should implement to maintain or restore its organizational identity considering such challenges?
Closing	- Express Gratitude and Reassurance	10. Thank you for your time and valuable insights. Your participation is greatly appreciated.
		11. Do you have any questions? (Yes, discussion) (No, do you have any additional perspectives you'd like to discuss before we conclude?)



		12. I want to reassure you again that your responses will be kept confidential. You do not have to worry, but if you have any further inquiries, please feel free to reach out to me.
		13. Finally, I appreciate your time and contribution to the research.

**Appendix C**  
**The code manager**

<b>Code</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Code Group</b>
Organizational culture. Organizational identity	85	Organizational identity
Organizational response	82	Organizational response and communication
Prevalence perceptions	77	Impact of workplace sexual harassment
Organizational response perception	52	Organizational response and communication
Effects on work environment	41	Organizational identity
Media perception	40	Role of media coverage
Hierarchy. Ranking structure	35	Impact of workplace sexual harassment
Personal experiences	32	Impact of workplace sexual harassment
Organizational culture	30	Organizational identity
Strategies and policies	21	Organizational response and communication
Long-term effects	21	Organizational response and communication
Organizational identity	19	Organizational identity
Work experience Daily Work	15	Organizational identity
Colleague experience	15	Impact of workplace sexual harassment
Financial situation	13	Others
Organization	12	Organizational response and communication
Personal coping strategies	9	Organizational response and communication
Media effect	9	Role of media coverage
Example case	8	Impact of workplace sexual harassment
Organizational support	7	Organizational response and communication
Management problems	7	Others
Trust	6	Organizational identity
Damage to image	4	Organizational identity