



Sexual harassment in the workplace: Rituals as Prevention and Management Strategies in COVID-19 Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to increase our understanding regarding the use of rituals as the prevention and management strategies for the external consequences resulting from sexual harassment in the workplace during the COVID-19 crisis. We conducted a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews ($N = 30$) with employees in five hospitals and analyzed the data with a grounded theory approach. The results indicated that rituals could positively influence reputation repair and legitimacy construction. Moreover, interaction patterns between organizations and stakeholders mediated the relationships between rituals and prevention and management results heterogeneously. Managerial perceptions, ritual factors and cultural factors influence rituals to achieve more effective results in terms of prevention and management. By presenting a process model illustrating rituals' unique capacity to prevent and manage the threats of workplace sexual harassment, we contribute to the literature on workplace sexual harassment and rituals in three ways. First, we extend the workplace sexual harassment literature by exploring prevention and management strategies for external consequence/reputation threats. Second, we present a process model to illustrate how rituals impact the results of sexual harassment prevention and management strategies. Third, we illustrate the mediating and moderating factors and their contributions toward developing better rituals that function in such prevention and management strategies.

1. Introduction

Sexual harassment in the workplace is a threat to both employees [1,2] and organizations [3,4]. On the one hand, workplace sexual harassment causes internal consequences for victims, including depression [5], burnout [6], anxiety [7], and post-traumatic stress disorder [8]. On the other hand, workplace sexual harassment also causes external consequences that emotionally or financially harm stakeholders, including the public, investors, suppliers, and shareholders, giving them reasons to think badly of the organization [9, 10]. When stakeholders perceive the organization as responsible for workplace sexual harassment, they may cut ties with it and participate in propagating its negative reputation [11–13]. If an organization's reputation shifts from favorable to unfavorable, attracting customers, generating investment interest, and improving financial performance will become difficult [9,14].

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Existing studies discuss the prevention and management strategies of workplace sexual harassment in terms of employee responses [15], prevention mechanism construction [16], and policy development [17,18]. These studies primarily focus on influencing factors and consequences within organizations, but we know little about organizational efforts to prevent and manage the external consequences (e.g., loss of reputation and capital). Since organizational legitimacy means that an organization suffers less and recovers more quickly [9], the strategy's objective for preventing a reputational threat due to workplace sexual harassment should be to construct legitimacy by meeting stakeholder expectations. This approach will minimize the threat the next time a similar incident occurs [19]. The management strategy's objective for a reputational threat due to workplace sexual harassment should be to resolve the victim's problem satisfactorily and repair the organization's negative reputation by communicating sufficiently with stakeholders [20,21]. The anticipated outcome is that the organization will recover the benefits lost from reputational damage.

Regarding the aforementioned prevention and management objectives, active interaction with stakeholders is essential [21]. However, when sexual harassment has occurred and stakeholders have cut ties with the organization and evaluated it negatively, how can positive interaction with stakeholders be achieved? According to the interactive ritual chain theory, rituals used during the COVID-19 crisis would be instrumental. On the one hand, it is noteworthy that workplace sexual harassment can have a far-reaching deleterious impact through media channels, and as such, the efficacy of the corresponding ritual is contingent upon its implementation within a context characterized by extensive public involvement and interaction [9]. The COVID-19 crisis, being a major nationwide emergency, necessitated the participation of local communities in their respective healthcare establishments' prevention efforts, irrespective of their pre-existing negative perceptions [22]. The efficacy of rituals can only be maximized when a broad spectrum of stakeholders is involved. On the other hand, it is critical to emphasize that during the COVID-19 crisis, the primary objective was to safeguard stakeholders from harm, as opposed to restoring the reputation of the respective organizations [23,24]. The medical organizations initiated efforts to develop crisis management strategies and send medical teams to rescue patients [25]. These behaviors can be seen as rituals in the research. As discrete practices oriented toward mediating crises [26], rituals are used to resolve conflicts [27], confront changes [28], reinforce membership [29], and support institutional maintenance [30]. These unique capacities make rituals central to increasing adherence to stakeholders and constructing organizational legitimacy [31]. Given the effectiveness of rituals in resolving conflicts, organizations may use them to address reputational threats.

In this paper, we argue that during the COVID-19 crisis, using rituals to address reputational threats caused by workplace sexual harassment has been an effective prevention and management strategy. Specifically, we ask, what are the particular forms of these rituals? How does the process of rituals affect the results of sexual harassment prevention and management? Moreover, what mediating and moderating variables strengthen the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results? We examined these questions through a qualitative study of five hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic in China for the period December 2020 to June 2021.

Our research provides three contributions to the existing literature. First, our study extends the literature on workplace harassment by exploring preventative and management strategies for reputational threats, which are external consequences. Second, our research advances the theoretical understanding of preventative and management strategies for workplace harassment by proposing a process model to elucidate the role of rituals. Third, in contrast to previous studies that view rituals as one-way communication, our study adds to the body of research on effective ritual operations by adopting an interactive ritual perspective and identifying the mediating and moderating variables in the ritual process.

2. Literature review and theory background

2.1. Reputational threat: the external Consequence of sexual harassment in the workplace

Previous research divided the consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace into internal damage [32,33] and external damage [9]. Inside the organization, sexual harassment can cause "systemic trauma" for employees [2], with effects on victims including depression, professional burnout, and even post-traumatic stress disorder [8,34,35]. All these affect employees' careers: harassment may make them inclined to quit and have long-term economic effects [36].

Outside the organization, one of the consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace is the threat to the organization's reputation. Reputation is a comprehensive assessment by stakeholders on how much an organization meets stakeholder expectations according to its past behavior [37,38]. Stakeholders are any group of people who can influence or be influenced by the organization's behavior, such as the public, investors, suppliers, and shareholders [39]. As a valuable intangible asset, reputational assets can attract customers, generate investment interest, improve financial performance, attract top employee talent, increase return on assets, and create a competitive advantage [40,41]. Stakeholders compare what they know about the organization to some standard to determine if it meets their expectations of how it should behave. A failure to meet expectations and an expectation gap can threaten the organization's reputation [42].

Workplace sexual harassment has the potential to threaten an organization's reputation as it gives people a reason to hold the organization in low regard [43]. In this regard, the role of news media and the internet is paramount [2]. Most stakeholders will become aware of a workplace sexual harassment incident through news coverage [5]. When reputation shifts from favorable to unfavorable, stakeholders may alter their ways of interacting with the organization [21]. The benefits associated with the previously mentioned good reputation may dissipate [11]. Additionally, stakeholders may sever ties with the organization and disseminate negative word-of-mouth about it [9].

The prevention and management of the external consequences caused by sexual harassment in the workplace are cognizant of the value of reputation [9]. Compared to organizations with legitimacy, those with poor treatment of stakeholders in the past will be

perceived to be more responsible for workplace sexual harassment and suffer more direct and indirect reputational damage [11]. Therefore, the prevention strategy’s objective for the reputational threat should be to construct legitimacy by meeting stakeholder expectations. This will minimize the reputation threat next time a similar incident occurs [19]. The management strategy’s objective for a reputational threat should be to resolve the victim’s problem satisfactorily and repair the organization’s negative reputation by communicating sufficiently with stakeholders [21,44]. The anticipated outcome is that the organization will recover the benefits lost from reputational damage.

The current research on sexual harassment in the workplace mainly focuses on the prevention and management strategies inside the organizations [16,45], but how to prevent and manage its external consequences has not been sufficiently discussed. Therefore, our study differs from the strategies summarized in existing theories and focuses on prevention and management strategies for reputation threats.

2.2. Interactive ritual chain theory: the Role of Rituals as prevention and management strategies for the external Consequences of workplace sexual harassment in the Context of COVID-19

When sexual harassment has already happened and stakeholders have cut ties with the organization, how can the organization achieve positive interaction with stakeholders? Using rituals in another specific crisis will be instrumental.

According to the interactive ritual chain theory, rituals are defined rituals as bounded, repetitive, and continuous activities that give symbolic meaning when performed in a specific, predetermined context to achieve a specific goal or ambition [46]. Rituals comprise intuitively recognizable, stereotyped, rigid, and repetitive behavior, often given special symbolic meaning [47]. As collective meaning-making vehicles, rituals provide “organizational moments that can mobilize and guide energy” [26]. Based on collective meaning-making function, rituals are critical to forming strong ties since they have a powerful influence on participants beyond the scope of the ritual itself [48], mediating tension inherent in different forces [28,49]. For example, the essence of a reputation threat is that the organization has violated the stakeholders’ expectations. Rituals can repair the reputation by meeting the vital core expectations of one or more stakeholders [50]. Furthermore, rituals allow organizations to legitimize their authority through symbolic means, promote ideological positions, and manipulate social relations by influencing how shareholders think and feel [51].

From an interactive ritual chain perspective, it is argued that rituals are indispensable in preventing and managing the external consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace [9]. However, the efficacy of rituals is contingent upon the engagement of organizational stakeholders [26]. When workplace sexual harassment occurs, its adverse effects often extend beyond the organization and impact the wider society through media coverage [18]. The COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in early 2020 was a rapidly spreading, highly contagious, and difficult-to-contain outbreak [22]. In response to this crisis, stakeholders were compelled to participate in medical organizations’ epidemic prevention efforts, despite any prior biases they may have held against the organization [21]. Therefore, rituals can play a crucial role in shaping the psychological perceptions of a diverse range of stakeholders during such crises [44].

Based on the above theory and discussion, we propose the research framework (Fig. 1). In our study, as an initial step in theory development, we considered the effects of different rituals on the prevention and management results of workplace sexual harassment during the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, we focus on how interaction pattern mediates the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results heterogeneously. Moreover, we will show what moderating variables strengthen the effectiveness of prevention and management strategies.

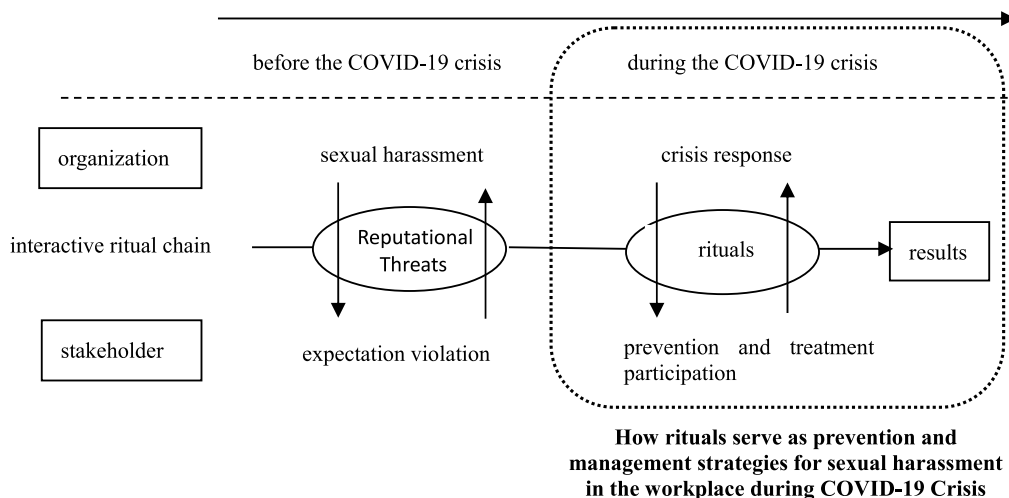


Fig. 1. Research framework.

3. Methods

3.1. Study Design

We used the grounded theory approach and conducted an inductive, qualitative inquiry with doctors and leaders from five hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Due to their workplace sexual harassment scandal, the five hospitals faced collective anger from their stakeholders, leaving their reputations in tatters. Stakeholders feel these hospitals do not eliminate sexual harassment risks and resolve problems from their management perspective. In such cases, hospitals need positive interaction with stakeholders to address reputational threats. By conducting semi-structured key informant interviews, we aimed to capture how different forms of rituals were interpreted, shaped, and put into practice as prevention and management strategies during the COVID-19 crisis. The grounded theory approach provides a rich and detailed description of the whole process of how rituals work. Fig. 2 presents the process and procedure of the grounded theory approach.

3.2. Recruitment and sample Characteristics

By request, the five hospitals were willing to provide a participant list at different levels, including doctors, section directors, and hospital directors. Employees on the list all have a good understanding of the possible reputation threats caused by workplace sexual harassment. To improve the study's trustworthiness, we performed stratified random sampling, and eligible employees were invited to participate in our interview. Of the 105 people we invited, 30 participated in this study (28.57%). 75 (71.43%) declined interview invitations with the reason that they were busy with pandemic-related work or didn't have time. Of the sample, 13 participants were female, and 17 were male. The mean age of the respondents was 46 years (33–58), with 14 years of experience in hospital work on average (SD = 4.28). Table 1 shows the hospital (N = 5) and participant characteristics (N = 30). As shown in Table 1, different locations and grades of hospitals and various position levels of participants are covered, and the sample distribution is representative.

3.3. Data Collection and trustworthiness

We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews during the initial phase, which we audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviews were conducted from December 2020 to June 2021, and each interview lasted 65 min on average. Subsequently, as our focus on the influence of rituals on prevention and management results became more apparent, we conducted more interviews to ask for more specific details. Initially, we were interested to discover during the COVID-19 epidemic, how these hospitals attempted to shape a "ritual-like" management practice in the face of the reputational threat from sexual harassment in the workplace. As one section director described, his hospital already had a ritual routine during the crisis, which he called "daily actions" involving moments of continuous interaction centered on "sharing". Moreover, the section director noted that the stakeholders' anger climate was not conducive to the prevention and management of sexual harassment, so a more focused strategy would be needed. This conversation tells us that rituals would be crucial strategies for hospitals to address reputational threats during the COVID-19 crisis, drawing our attention to how they work and developing this through other interviews. Next, we focused our interviews on the details of the rituals. We asked interviewees to elaborate on the context of these rituals and the ways in which rituals produced their effects. The questions we will be discussing in our interview include: "What ritual-like actions did hospitals take during the COVID-19 crisis?", "How did these actions produce results?", and "What kind of results did they produce?" As we gained more clarity about the process and effects of the rituals, we added an additional 6 interviews to identify them more specifically. All content was confirmed after 36 interviews.

We terminated the interview after reaching theoretical saturation when there was nothing new to be added from continuing the interview, and the content and codes were repeated. After the interview, the researchers corroborated each other's text content. Additionally, we collected information on various aspects of the interviewed hospitals through the internet, newspapers, magazines, hospital websites, and other means, cross-checking the content of the interviews concerning the activities undertaken by the medical organization and the reactions of the stakeholders to them. We make return visits by phone and email for any ambiguous content.

At the end of the data coding and analysis process, we provided a table containing categories, subcategories, and codes with citations to 12 participants. All 12 participants acknowledged that researchers correctly understood their experience. To obtain

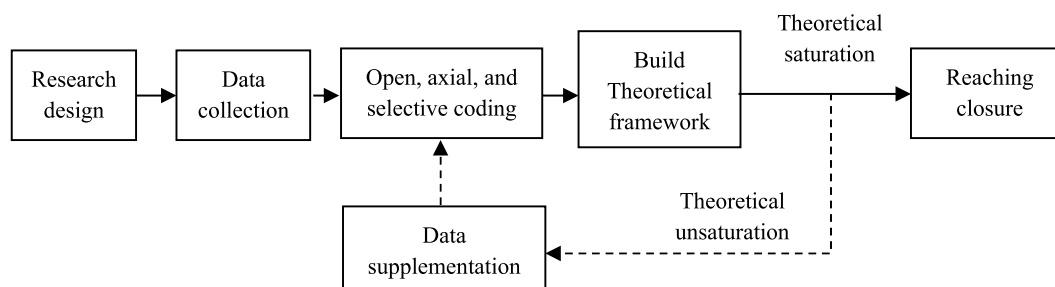


Fig. 2. Process and procedure of grounded theory approach.

Table 1
Sample frame.

Hospital characteristics (N = 5)		
Location (%)	Tier-1 cities	1 (20%)
	Tier-2 cities	1 (20%)
	Tier-3 cities	3 (60%)
Hospital grade (%)	Grade III Level A hospital	1 (20%)
	Grade II Level A hospital	1 (20%)
	Grade I Level A hospital	3 (60%)
Number of patients per month (unit: million) (%)	>20	1 (20%)
	10–20	1 (20%)
	<10	3 (60%)
Participant characteristics (N = 30)		
Gender (%)	Women	13 (43.33%)
	Men	17 (56.67%)
Age [Mean (Range)]		46 (33–58)
years of experience [Mean (SD)]		14 (4.28)
Position (%)	Hospital director	2 (6.67%)
	Section director	15 (50.00%)
	Doctor	13 (43.33%)
	Doctorate	21 (70.00%)
	Postgraduate	8 (26.67%)
Education level (%)	Undergraduate	1 (3.33%)
	State-owned	12 (40.00%)
	Private	18 (60.00%)
Hospital Ownership Type (%)		12 (40.00%)
Average interview length [Mean (Range)]		65 (60–75)

confirmability, the researchers sent the analyzed data and findings to three qualitative researchers and made the necessary changes based on their comments. To improve reliability, all participants were informed of the analysis and coding process, and modifications were made based on their comments. Finally, the definitions of categories and subcategories were finalized with the agreement of all authors.

3.4. Data analysis

The article's first, corresponding and second authors are responsible for the data analysis and coded the interviews. Using grounded theory approaches [52] and the inductive coding process [53], two bilingual authors analyzed the transcripts and moved back and forth between the emerging code and the data. These approaches allow us to consistently compare theoretical frameworks with qualitative information and thus develop a theoretical model of how rituals were used as prevention and management strategies for reputational threats of sexual harassment in the workplace. The coding process is divided into open, axial, and selective coding, which separately shapes primary codes, subcategories, and categories. Open coding is the coding, extraction, and tagging of the interviewees' own language to emerge primary codes. We obtained a total of 74 primary codes in the open coding process. Subsequently, the authors reviewed any themes or insights from the data and performed axial coding. After merging primary codes by eliminating invalid and duplicate concepts, 13 subcategories were identified from our data interpretation. Finally, the authors explored the relationships between these subcategories and clustered them into six categories relevant to our research questions (Fig. 3). Meanwhile, in Table 2, we provide examples from our data. We recursively draw on collected data, emerging findings, and extant literature to establish connections among the identified themes. We then integrated these findings and constructed a process model describing how organizations use rituals as workplace sexual harassment prevention and management strategies (Fig. 4).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

In adherence to the ethical tenets of the investigation, each participant was provided with comprehensive written consent, which explicitly conveyed their voluntary participation and absolute right to withdraw from the study at any point in time. Furthermore, a detailed orientation was furnished to the participants, elucidating the interview protocol, and underscoring the confidential nature of their personal information in the ensuing publication (Approved by the ethics committee of Guizhou University of Traditional Chinese Medicine in China and No. 2020–006).

4. Findings

4.1. Different Rituals in the prevention and management strategies

We used Fischer's [54] foundational work to initially categorize the rituals used in the prevention and management strategies, identifying "rites of solidarity" and "rites of reassurance" within the data. Based on this, we modified Fischer's [54] untested empirical framework with our own empirical exploration. Another category – "exemplars" – reduces stakeholders' perceptions of negative

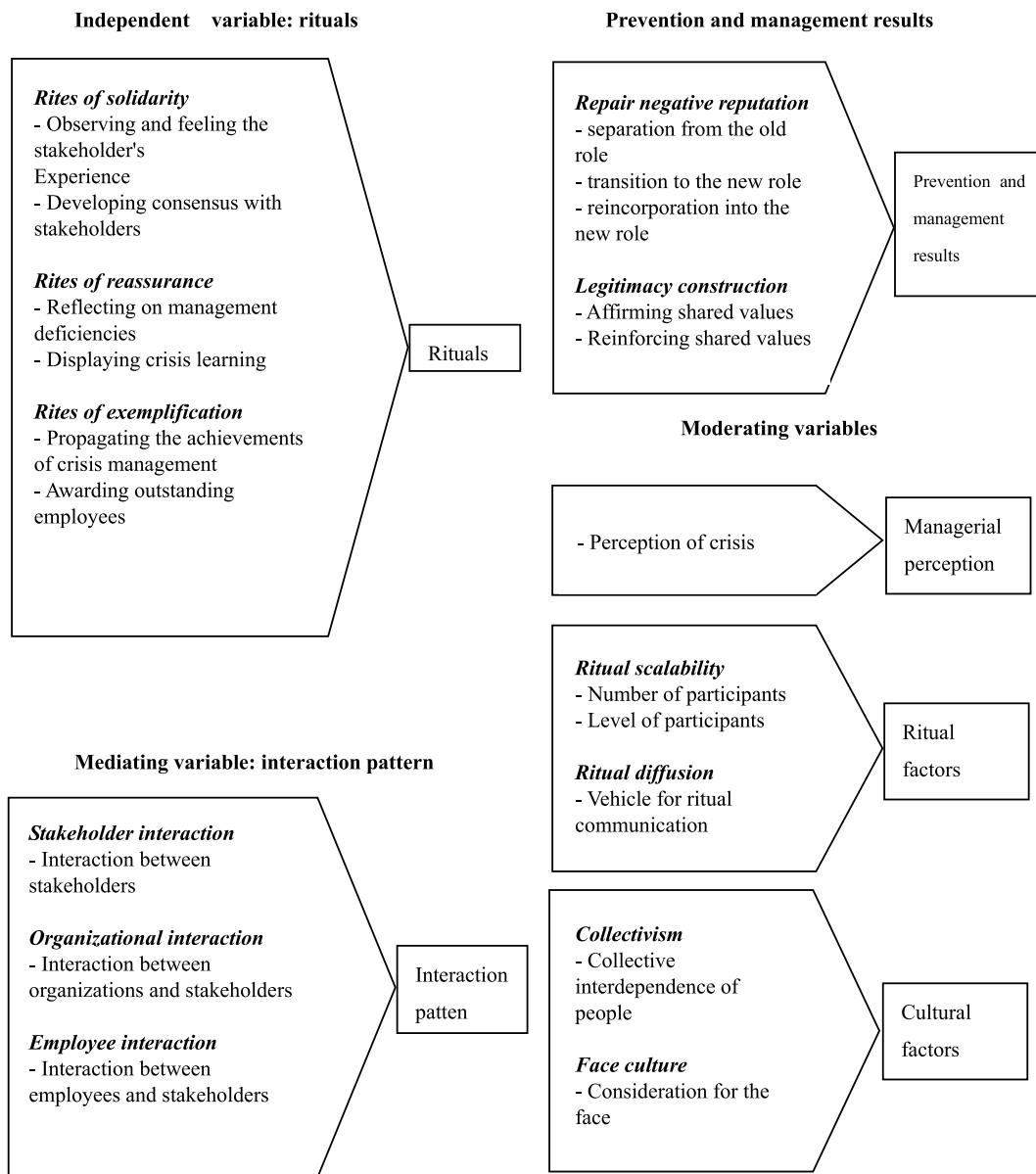


Fig. 3. Overview of data analysis.

reputations more specifically in our study. We label these as “rites of exemplification.”

Rites of solidarity. Rites of solidarity the hospital used were observing stakeholders’ feelings and developing consensus with them. Ignoring rites of solidarity is a severe underestimation of the emotional element of the crisis, which is sure to bring immediate and more reputational severe threats to the organizations. Referring to the hospital practice of solidarity, LXP (Section director) commented, “During the COVID-19 pandemic, to eliminate the negative effects of sexual harassment, one of our essential daily tasks was visiting and comforting the patients in the wards. We provide full protection and care to those who suffer. It is useful to maintain a balance of differences and establish similarities between hospitals and patients.” LXP’s description highlights that during the COVID-19 epidemic, hospitals widely adopted rites of solidarity. Organization leaders regularly visit and comfort patients physically and emotionally and express that they take patients’ feelings and evaluations seriously. This kind of ritual helped suppress the critical voices to the hospitals.

Rites of reassurance. Rites of reassurance were ways for hospitals to convey reassuring messages to stakeholders that calm their anger. Hospitals use the symbolism of “reflection and learning” to ensure that the mismanagement of sexual harassment will be used as a lesson to prevent similar occurrences. For instance, ZF (Hospital director) notes the efforts to identify the root of the problem, “We held regular meetings and invited experts and scholars to search for the reasons why sexual harassment occurs by full-scale investigation. In response to the deficiencies in the institutional and staff composition, we have studied how to fix it.” The cause-seeking model serves to reaffirm the belief in constructing a reasonable process to prevent and manage sexual harassment by emphasizing provocative terms

Table 2
Examples of the overarching theoretical dimensions.

Theoretical dimensions	Conceptual Sub-Groups	Illustrative Examples from Data
Rituals	Rites of solidarity	<i>During the COVID-19 pandemic, to eliminate the negative effects of sexual harassment, one of our essential daily tasks was visiting and comforting the patients in the wards. We provide full protection and care to those who suffer. It is useful to maintain a balance of differences and establish similarities between hospitals and patients. (LXP, Section director)</i> <i>We educate the public about epidemic prevention, help them distinguish between the common cold and the new crown pneumonia, and identify suspected patients to prevent the spread of the epidemic effectively. (LL, Doctor)</i> *****
	Rites of reassurance	<i>When communicating with the public, we should be careful to use positive language to encourage them, so they have confidence that we will defeat the virus. (QS, Section director)</i> <i>We held regular meetings and invited experts and scholars to search for the reasons why sexual harassment occurs through full-scale investigation. In response to the deficiencies in the institutional and staff composition, we have studied how to fix them. (ZF, Hospital director)</i> *****
	Rites of exemplification	<i>Our hospital held a series of activities for medical ethics building in the COVID-19 crisis, like sharing 14 doctors' rescue stories that greatly touched the public. (CYY, Section director)</i> <i>We were honored by our leaders. (CN, Doctor)</i> *****
Prevention and management results	Reputation repair	<i>These strategies can build an excellent image and make the public increasingly trust us. (ZXP, Section director)</i> *****
	Legitimacy construction	<i>Doctors fulfilled their mission with maximum effort and protected the public with love. This behavior affirmed the shared values between doctors and the public. (WFF, Doctor)</i> <i>Empathy for the victims of sexual harassment and focus on the collective emotions of the stakeholders can suppress the critical voices of the hospital. (QY, Section director)</i> *****
Interaction pattern	Organizational interaction	<i>We expressed our profound condolences to the people who died in the epidemic and sincere sympathy to their families. We also expressed our confidence that we could definitely win the battle against the coronavirus and protect the public. (ZF, Hospital director)</i> *****
	Employee interaction	<i>Some restaurant and supermarket operators even volunteered to send us food and daily necessities, saying that they appreciated everything we did for them, and we were also touched (LL, Doctor)</i> *****
	Stakeholder interaction	<i>When sexual harassment is reported, the public debates online what mistakes the hospital has made. (LL, doctor)</i> <i>During the COVID-19 epidemic, the public commented online that we were doing a good job. Occasionally, some comments would qualify our mismanagement of the sexual harassment incident, but others would refute them. (ZF, Hospital director)</i> *****
Managerial perception	Managerial perception	<i>The misdeed by managers may be the lack of awareness of the reputational threat posed by sexual harassment. Their inaction in the preliminary stages of the incident will negatively impact the prevention and management results. (ZF, Hospital director)</i> *****
Cultural factors	Collectivism	<i>After the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the spirit of collectivism has always inspired doctors and the public. Hospitals and the public were united, so the effects of sexual harassment were ignored. (ZF, Hospital director)</i> *****
	Face culture	<i>One patient was angry at first, saying we mismanaged many things that led to sexual harassment in the workplace, but others said he should have seen what the hospital had accomplished during the COVID-19 crisis. Then, he stopped saying anything. (LL, Doctor)</i>
Ritual factors	Ritual scalability	<i>The larger the scale and the higher level of the meeting, the more significant the publicity. (LX, Section director)</i> *****
	Ritual diffusion	<i>Today, self-media culture is prevalent, and people frequently read self-media news on their mobile phones. (SP, Section director)</i> *****

such as “full-scale investigation”.

Rites of exemplification. Rites of exemplification seek to reduce the negative perception of sexual harassment incidents on stakeholders through symbolic actions such as “exemplary” or “modeling”. These rites generally reinforce and remind stakeholders of the organization’s core values. For instance, in our interviews, hospitals constituted rites of exemplification by propagating the achievements of crisis management in the COVID-19 crisis and awarding outstanding employees, which were invoked to remind hospitals’ core value of “security guardian”:

Our hospital held a series of activities for medical ethics building in the COVID-19 crisis, like sharing 14 doctors' rescue stories that greatly touched the public. (CYY, Section director)

4.2. The Influence of Rituals on prevention and management Results

As noted above, rituals emerge around threats to organizational reputation arising from workplace sexual harassment, addressing

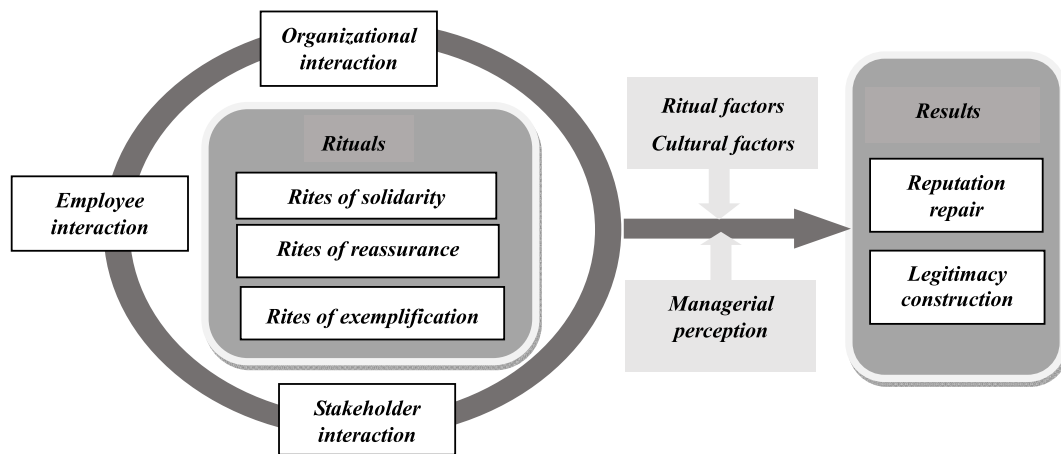


Fig. 4. A process model of rituals as workplace sexual harassment prevention and management strategies.

these threats differently. From the perspective of interaction with stakeholders, rituals can restore the relationship between organizations and stakeholders by meeting their expectations. Focusing on how rituals work in the prevention and management strategies, we identified two prevention and management outcomes resulting from the rituals: *reputation repair* and *legitimacy construction*.

Reputation repair. Hospitals can convey to stakeholders that their image has changed by resorting to rituals. Hospitals use rites of solidarity to express concern, appease emotions, and release stakeholders' anger. In rites of reassurance, it is symbolically significant that hospitals make every effort to get to the root of the problem and make efforts to eradicate sexual harassment. For stakeholders, once the root of the matter is found, it often means the solution is not far away. Addressing the root of sexual harassment appeases stakeholders' anger, which helps hospitals separate from their old roles without legitimacy. Through rites of exemplification, hospitals propose achievements from the COVID-19 crisis and demonstrate them to stakeholders. By doing so, they shape an excellent image of maintaining order and security. As ZXP (Section director) said: "These strategies can build an excellent image and make the public increasingly trust us." Therefore, applying all forms of rituals achieved positive interaction between hospitals and stakeholders, positively affecting organizational reputation repair.

Legitimacy construction. Rites of solidarity pre-empted any offsetting of stakeholder anger by emphasizing its alignment with emotions ("empathy"), where the moments of "empathy" were used to create a feeling of community and eliminate hostility. As QY (Section director) noted: "Empathy for the victims of sexual harassment and focus on the collective emotions of the stakeholders can suppress the critical voices to the hospital." Moreover, with rites of exemplification, hospitals convey their core value of security guardians to stakeholders. As WFF (Doctor) noted: "Doctors fulfilled their mission with maximum effort and protected the public with love. This behavior affirmed the shared values between doctors and the public." He highlighted that these rituals provide stakeholders with a sense that the organization's values are aligned with norms valued by society. It helps hospitals to construct legitimacy. When workplace sexual harassment happens again, the negative impact of reputational threats can be reduced.

4.3. The mediating Role of Interactive Pattern

We observed that *interactive pattern* mediates the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results. The interactive ritual chain theory indicates that a high degree of mutual subjectivity (i.e., interaction) and solid emotional connection - through the mutual synergy of the body and the neurological system that participants evoke - combine to affect the ritual [55]. In this perspective, rituals are multidimensional interactive behavior. Our study has similarly found that interaction pattern was identified into three categories: *Organizational interaction*, *Employee interaction*, and *Stakeholder interaction*.

Organizational interaction. Organizational interaction is a direct interaction between organizations and stakeholders. In this interaction process, the organization can fully meet stakeholders' expectations through relationship management and the delivery of values.

Employee interaction. Employee interaction occurs between employees and stakeholders. It is a symbolic behavior of the organizations to guide stakeholders' perception of their reputations through employees by satisfying stakeholders' emotional needs.

Stakeholder interaction. Stakeholder interaction is a repetitive, normative, and meaningful ritual interaction between stakeholders themselves on the internet and in reality. For example, LL's (Doctor) description noted its repetitive, normative, and meaningful characteristics: "When sexual harassment is reported, the public debates online what mistakes the hospital has made."

Different interaction patterns have heterogeneous mediating effects on the relationship between ritual and prevention and management results. For stakeholders, employee interaction is direct relationship management, while organizational interaction is indirect. By comparison, organizational interaction can only indirectly impact the prevention and management results through employees or other stakeholders. We have observed that employee interaction has a more substantial mediated effect than organizational interactions. In the context of stakeholder interaction, stakeholders have role congruence among themselves, so they tend to trust others

in their group more than employees representing the organization. As a result, stakeholder interaction also has a more powerful mediated effect than organizational interaction. As ZF (the hospital director) noted:

During the COVID-19 epidemic, the public commented online that we were doing a good job. Occasionally, some comments would qualify our mismanagement of the sexual harassment incident, but others would refute them.

Compared to organizational and stakeholder interaction, employee interaction emphasizes the emotionality of the interaction that occurs in rituals, evoking the emotional support of stakeholders. Stronger feelings can more effectively stimulate the impact of rituals on reputation repair and legitimacy construction (Collins, 2013). As LL (Doctor) noted:

In contrast to reports of sexual harassment in the workplace, when patients and other public members witness the hard work of doctors in managing the COVID-19 crisis, they will ignore the adverse effects of sexual harassment and instead praise our hospitals.

Therefore, regarding the mediated effect of these three types of interaction, employee interaction is the highest, followed by stakeholder interaction, and finally, organizational interaction.

4.4. The moderating Role of managerial perceptions, Cultural Factors, and Ritual Factors

In our interviews, we identified three variables moderating the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results: *managerial perceptions, cultural factors, and ritual factors.*

Managerial perception. After sexual harassment, whether to employ rituals often depends on the manager's judgment of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the environment. Poor perceptions can lead managers not to mitigate reputational threats timely. They may resort to rituals only after the organizational reputation damage exceeds a certain threshold. In this case, rituals hardly achieve positive results. As ZF (the hospital director) noted:

The misdeed by managers may be the lack of awareness of the reputational threat posed by sexual harassment. Their inaction in the preliminary stages of the incident will negatively impact the prevention and management results.

Cultural factors. Cultural factors we observed include *collectivism* and *face culture*. *Collectivism* emphasizes the collective interdependence of people, and its value is evaluated through the individual's social responsibility. The higher the evaluation of collectivism, the more susceptible individuals are to collective activities. Groups with stronger collectivism will have a higher ritual atmosphere than those with more robust individualism. We observed that collectivism increases stakeholders' motivation to participate in rituals, thus positively moderating the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results. As ZF (the hospital director) noted:

After the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the spirit of collectivism has always inspired doctors and the public. Hospitals and the public were united, so the effects of sexual harassment were ignored.

Face culture includes motivations to protect the face of oneself and considerations for the face of others [56]. In the context of face culture, stakeholders with negative opinions will not speak publicly when most of them have positive comments about the organization. Thus, face culture positively moderates the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results. As LL (Doctor) noted:

One patient was angry at first, saying we mismanaged many things that led to sexual harassment in the workplace, but others said he should have seen what the hospital had accomplished during the COVID-19 crisis. Then, he stopped saying anything.

Ritual factors. Ritual factors we observed include *ritual scalability* and *ritual diffusion*. The impact of rituals on prevention and management results will be more significant when *ritual scalability* is extensive and has high-level participants. As LX (Sector director) described:

Last month, our hospital held a meeting at the great hall to commend models fighting against the COVID-19 epidemic—the larger the meeting, the more positive the perception of the hospital, and the more likely the stigma of sexual harassment will be forgotten.

Ritual diffusion refers to the vehicle for communicating rituals that, if it has the quality of being widely used, would make it easier for stakeholders to participate in rituals and find their meaning. As SP (Sector director) noted:

Today, self-media culture is prevalent, and people frequently read self-media news on their mobile phones. Therefore, reports about the epidemic will be known very quickly. During the COVID-19 epidemic, people frequently follow the news of what measures hospitals have taken, which helps build a positive image of us.

4.5. The process model of Rituals as workplace sexual harassment prevention and management strategies

Following the above findings, we constructed a theoretical framework to describe how organizations use rituals to prevent and manage the reputational threats of workplace sexual harassment. In Fig. 4, we illustrate these relationships conceptually.

As illustrated in Fig. 4, rituals play an active role in preventing and managing the external consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace. Interactive pattern is the critical pathway from rituals to reputation repair and legitimacy construction, but the mediated

effects of different patterns are heterogeneous. Moreover, managerial perception, ritual factors, and social factors moderate the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results.

5. Discussion

Although prior workplace sexual harassment research has highlighted the prevention and management strategies for the consequence inside the organizations, we still know little about how organizations would prevent and manage the external consequence like reputational threats. Therefore, from the perspective of interactive ritual chain theory, this study reveals how rituals can serve as prevention and management strategies for dealing with the reputational threat posed by sexual harassment in the workplace. Our findings suggest that rituals contribute to reputation repairing and legitimacy construction by positively interacting with stakeholders and meeting their expectations. Moreover, interactive pattern mediates the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results. Regarding the mediating effects of three patterns of interaction, employee interaction is the highest, followed by stakeholder interaction and organizational interaction.

Furthermore, we find three variables moderate the relationship between rituals and prevention and management results. First, when managerial perception is low, it can result in a manager's failure to grasp the symbolic dimension and lead to adverse prevention and management results. Then, ritual factors, including ritual scalability and ritual diffusion, would make it easier for stakeholders to participate in rituals and find meaning actively. Finally, cultural factors, including collectivism and face culture, increase stakeholders' motivation to participate in rituals, repair the organizational reputation, and construct legitimacy.

5.1. Theoretical contributions

Theorizing the process of rituals as workplace sexual harassment prevention and management strategies has helped us develop three broad contributions to the literature.

First, given that extant literature on workplace sexual harassment focuses on the prevention and management of an organization's internal consequences instead of external consequences [16,45], our research extends the workplace sexual harassment literature by exploring the prevention and management strategies of external consequence-reputation threats. Our study was the pioneer in recognizing that the prevention and management of the external consequences of workplace sexual harassment are contingent upon the perceived value of reputation. In contrast to legitimate organizations, those with a history of poor treatment towards stakeholders are deemed to have greater responsibility for workplace sexual harassment and suffer more pronounced direct and indirect reputational harm. Therefore, such organizations should take proactive measures to prevent and manage workplace sexual harassment, safeguard their reputation and ensure its sustainable development. From the logic of reputation threat formation, the prevention and management strategies can only be effective if the organization positively interacts with its stakeholders and meets their expectations. Therefore, we propose that the objective of the prevention strategy should be legitimacy construction. This approach will minimize the threat the next time a similar incident occurs. Similarly, the objective of the management strategy should be to repair the organization's reputation through positive interaction with stakeholders. The anticipated outcome is that the organization will recover the benefits lost from reputational damage.

Second, our study contributes to the theoretical advancements of prevention and management strategies of workplace sexual harassment by presenting a process model to illustrate the role of ritual in the COVID-19 crisis. Our empirical evidence echoes literature on the interaction logic of Coombs [9], suggesting that if the organization has stakeholders view workplace sexual harassment less negatively, the harmful effects of sexual harassment are reduced. Our findings further elaborate on how organizations use rituals in another specific crisis to offset the negatives from workplace sexual harassment with current good works when sexual harassment has already happened and stakeholders have judged organizations negatively. Rituals' capabilities of presenting new, positive information about the organization and reminding stakeholders of current good works help the organization construct legitimacy and repair its reputation. Thus, our findings indicate that rituals are effective prevention and management strategies for reputation threats caused by workplace sexual harassment.

Third, our findings contribute to effective ritual functioning research by revealing the mediating and moderating factors. Unlike existing studies that view rituals as one-way communication, our study adopts the perspective of interactive ritual, focusing on rituals' interactions between organizations, employees, and stakeholders, pointing out that prevention and management results can be strengthened via interaction patterns. In addition, our findings show that three influence factors enable rituals to gain prevention and management results more effectively, namely: (1) managerial perceptions; (2) ritual factors including ritual scalability and ritual diffusion; (3) cultural factors including collectivism and face culture. These findings improved the theoretical framework of rituals and prevention and management results.

5.2. Practical Implications

The findings of this paper certainly contribute to a better understanding of the application of rituals in the prevention and management strategies of workplace sexual harassment. First, because sexual harassment in the workplace poses an organization's reputation threats, significantly when stakeholders have cut ties with the organization and evaluated it negatively, organizations need to use crisis rituals to restore interaction with stakeholders. On the one hand, the negative impact of workplace sexual harassment may be reduced by using rituals to increase stakeholder interpretation, understanding, and acceptance of organizational values and philosophies. On the other hand, since the utility of rituals is conveyed through interaction with stakeholders, organizations should view

rituals as an arena for interaction between the organizations, employees, and stakeholders. Especially, organizations should consciously use more employee and stakeholder interaction in their rituals. In fact, the use of rituals in another particular crisis can be applied not only as a prevention and control strategy for sexual harassment in the workplace, but also in other scenarios where reputation is threatened due to organizational scandals, such as financial fraud, environmental pollution, and bribery.

Second, the organization should design the rituals based on the influencing factors, including managerial perception, ritual factors, and cultural factors. The insufficient cognitive ability of managers may cause organizations to adopt inappropriate rituals or not to adopt rituals, missing the opportunity to address their reputational threats. In terms of cultural factors, the motivation of stakeholders to participate in crisis rituals should be enhanced in other ways in countries where collectivist values are weak. In terms of ritual factors, the core demands of stakeholders should be deeply considered, the appropriate scale of the ritual should be designed, and the medium commonly used by stakeholders should be used to disseminate the ritual. The organization should continue to mitigate the negative perception of stakeholders by continuously fulfilling the rituals and strengthening their effect to closely align stakeholders, creating an image of warmth, competence, and noble pursuit.

Third, for prevention and management strategies of sexual harassment in the workplace, rituals play an important role as “sedatives” and “painkillers” rather than “antidotes”. Rituals could create good external conditions to interact with stakeholders, but the final prevention and management strategies of sexual harassment require technical responses inside the organization, which cannot be neglected. Once there is an excessive contrast between rituals representing symbolic meaning and substantive prevention and management behavior can lead to further emotional confrontation and intensification of conflict, leading to future rituals that no longer work.

5.3. Current limitations and Future Research Directions

Despite the present contributions, it is clear that the current study has limitations that suggest the following research directions. From a methodological point of view, our interviews covered several types of rituals. A broad survey allows us to describe the solidarity, reassurance, and exemplification of rituals and provides a broad approach applicable to early theorizing around heterogeneous phenomena. However, in the context of detailed ethnographic descriptions, ritual studies exhibit deep descriptions and fine-grained understandings, and this rich empirical approach is recommended in future studies. Based on the above contributions, we can propose a future theoretical research agenda that promotes the study of ritual practice in crisis management. First, constrained by time urgency, different types of rituals may be used at different stages of urgency after a crisis has occurred. For example, an organization’s primary response after a crisis may be demonstrating empathy for the disaster through a solidarity ritual to control stakeholder emotions. In future research, how organizations would use rituals in response to time urgency deserves further exploration.

Second, in addition to exploring the mechanism of rituals’ role in the prevention and management of workplace sexual harassment from the perspective of stakeholder interaction, a more in-depth analysis of employees’ psychological, emotional, and cognitive changes following their participation in rituals can be conducted in the future. Accordingly, the study of rituals can be extended to questions such as the strategic changes its effects bring to the organization and how rituals affect the perceptions of employees who experience sexual harassment in the workplace.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we explore how rituals addressing external consequences caused by workplace sexual harassment as effective prevention and management strategy during the COVID-19 crisis. Previous studies have divided the consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace into internal and external consequences. One of the external consequences is the threat to an organization’s reputation. If the reputation changes from favorable to unfavorable, the benefits of a legitimate reputation may be lost. The rituals used as prevention and management strategies in terms of the external consequences caused by sexual harassment in the workplace reflect cognizance of the value of reputation. In this study, we identified prevention and management strategies during the COVID-19 crisis by highlighting the important but poorly understood role of rituals. Our work links the reputational threat posed by workplace sexual harassment, interactions with stakeholders, and strategies for prevention and management to illustrate how rituals can effectively construct legitimacy and repair reputations in the face of failure in order to interact positively with stakeholders. We classified rituals as rites of solidarity, reassurance, and exemplification, which help organizations relieve stakeholders’ anger, move beyond the absence of legitimacy, and shape positive images of maintaining order and security. Through these ritualized management strategies, organizations can communicate positively with stakeholders and repair their reputations. Similarly, as prevention strategies, organizations use all forms of rituals to create a feeling of community, demonstrate the determination to prevent similar incidents from happening again, and convey organizational core values to stakeholders. These strategies help organizations create legitimacy. If workplace sexual harassment happens again, the negative impact of reputational threats can be reduced. Specifically, we focus on how the interaction patterns between organizations and stakeholders mediate the relationship between rituals and the prevention and management results heterogeneously. Regarding the mediated effect of these three types of interactions, employee interaction is the highest, followed by stakeholder interaction, and finally, organizational interaction. Moreover, we illuminate the factors influencing rituals to achieve more effective prevention and management results. In the application of rituals, organizations must consider both the cognitive factors of managers and the cultural factors of rituals, as well as time, space, tools, and symbolic meanings behind the application of rituals, to maximize their effect. On the contrary, if these factors are biased, they may exacerbate the collapse of an organization’s reputation in a crisis. Therefore, applying rituals as prevention and management strategies is not arbitrary and aimless. Instead, it requires careful consideration in the context of the external environment and constraints of ritual norms. Additional

attention should be dedicated to selecting and developing factors that promote the favorable impact of rituals and achieving prevention and management effectiveness regarding the reputational threat posed by sexual harassment in the workplace. We hope our findings on employing rituals as an effective prevention and management strategy against workplace sexual harassment will serve as a valuable contribution to future investigations, facilitating a more profound exploration of this issue from temporal and psychological dimensions.

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Author contribution statement

Xiaoyu Liao: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Bei Lyu: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Jaffar Abbas: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

Data availability statement

Corresponding author can share the data, if requested.

Additional information

No additional information is available for this paper.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Bei Lyu reports financial support was provided by Huaibei Normal University. Bei Lyu reports a relationship with Huaibei Normal University that includes: employment.

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