

WHO SEES WHAT? A STUDY OF THE PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN SWITZERLAND

QUI VOIT QUOI? UNE ÉTUDE DE LA PERCEPTION DU HARCÈLEMENT SEXUEL PARMI LES ÉTUDIANT·ES EN SUISSE

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment at universities represents a significant challenge with wide-ranging consequences for affected students (Smith & Freyd, 2014). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual advances, requests, or conduct that creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment, disrupts work, or imposes conditions on employment (WHO, 2024). According to a recent survey conducted by the student organization “Clash Zürich”, over one-third of the more than 600 medical students from the University of Zurich (UZH) and the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zürich (ETHZ) have experienced or observed sexual harassment or discrimination (MEDINSIDE, 2023). Sexual harassment affects not only the immediate students’ psychological and physical safety but can also have far-reaching impacts on students’ academic performances, mental health, and overall university experiences (Fitzgerald et al., 1995). Recent research studies indicate that students affected by sexual harassment are at a higher risk of experiencing heightened levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and a diminished feeling of safety on campus (Banyard et al., 2020). Moreover, these effects can result in academic difficulties, increased dropout rates, and reduced participation in campus life (Tashkandi et al., 2023). Another significant consequence of sexual harassment at universities is the weakening of the institution’s reputation, which involves undermining trust between students and faculty and can contribute to a tense campus culture (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

The perception of sexual harassment is inherently subjective and profoundly influenced by several interpersonal and contextual factors. Behaviors perceived as sexual harassment by one person may be interpreted differently by another. The subjective variations can lead to significant misunderstandings and conflicts, as actions perceived as benign by some individuals might be seen as severe harassment by others (Rothgerber et al., 2021).

Among personal factors, gender plays a key role in shaping these perceptions. Studies indicate that women generally recognize a broader range of behaviors as harassment than men (Rothgerber et al., 2021). Women are more likely to be sensitive to behaviors such as sexual advances and physical contact, often categorizing these actions as harassment, while men tend to regard these same behaviors as less problematic (Rothgerber et al., 2021). This difference is especially evident in scenarios where men are the aggressors and women are the victims (Baier, 2019).

Contextual factors, such as circumstances in which sexual harassment occurs and the influence of cultural and societal norms, further shape perceptions. These factors affect not only how harassment is perceived but also how individuals respond to it (Carlucci & Golom, 2016). Additionally, perceptions may vary significantly depending on the specific definition of sexual harassment provided. For instance, Rothgerber et al. (2021) found that different definitions, such as a concrete legal standard or a more abstract concept, can substantially influence individuals’ judgments about what qualifies as sexual harassment, underscoring that varying definitions can meaningfully alter perceptions.

USING CASE VIGNETTES TO ASSESS SEXUAL HARASSMENT PERCEPTIONS

Different methods can be employed to explore perceptions of sexual harassment, such as anonymous surveys, interviews, focus groups, or case vignettes, each offering different perspectives. Case vignettes are a research method where short, detailed descriptions of hypothetical scenarios are used to explore participants' reactions, perceptions, or decision-making processes (McLaughlin & Weimer, 2018). This method allows researchers to examine complex issues in a controlled and focused manner, often revealing insights into how individuals might respond in real-life contexts (McLaughlin & Weimer, 2018). Unlike surveys or interviews that rely on general responses to abstract questions, case vignettes offer a detailed, scenario-based approach that captures how participants react to realistic situations in controlled settings.

Nevertheless, a critical issue with case vignettes is their inherent simplification and lack of interactivity. These reduced representations are insufficient for capturing the intricate realities and dynamics of harassment scenarios (McLaughlin & Weimer, 2018). As a result, there is a risk that the perception of harassment may be misrepresented, as these case vignettes often overlook the recurring or prolonged nature of harassment experienced in real-world situations.

EXAMINING UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Given the variability in how sexual harassment is perceived, our study aims to examine students' views on sexual harassment at Swiss universities, using case vignettes, focusing on the variations in perception among different genders. While it is known that perceptions differ by gender, our study is unique in systematically varying the gender of both participants and the characters in the vignettes. This allows us to explore not just general gender differences but also how perceptions change when gender roles within the vignettes are reversed. From this, we expect that the data collected will reveal significant differences in perceptions based on these configurations, offering insights into how gender dynamics and cultural norms specifically influence the perception of harassment.

The study we will conduct follows the Guidelines for Ethics Applications to the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Science at the University of Zurich; anonymity is ensured through voluntary participation and informed consent. A convenience sample of students from universities in Zurich (e.g., UZH, ETHZ) will be asked to participate, ensuring diverse perspectives are captured through broad outreach methods, including our networks, social media, university group chats, and targeted outreach via mailing lists at the respective universities and student associations.

We will collect the data in the fall of 2024 through an online survey based on the case vignettes developed by Rothgerber et al. (2021), which include nine categories representing workplace interactions modified to fit the university context. A 4-point Likert scale will be employed, ranging from 1 (definitely not sexual harassment) to 4 (definitely sexual harassment), with participants being asked to evaluate case vignettes in both male and female versions to capture gender differences in perception. There will not be a definition of sexual harassment provided either before showing the

vignette or after the questionnaire, as we aim to assess participants' natural understanding and perception of sexual harassment without priming them with a formal definition.

When we developed the case vignettes, we were particularly mindful of the current Swiss German context. The scenarios reflect cultural norms and sensitivities in Switzerland, where discussions around gender roles and equality have evolved (Bühler & Jurt, 2020). Each vignette mimics real-life situations that students may encounter in a university setting, which is essential as universities often serve as microcosms of broader societal issues, including sexual harassment.

One of the case vignettes we created for this study is as follows in both male and female versions:

- Female version: "During a casual seminar discussion, a fellow male student leans over to Lisa and says with a smile, 'The dress you're wearing really suits you. It highlights your figure in a lovely way.' Lisa is briefly taken aback and smiles awkwardly before refocusing on the conversation."
- Male version: "As part of a university festival, there is a soccer tournament for students. During a short break, fellow student Anna throws a towel to the sweaty Lukas and says with a smile, 'You look really good in sportswear; it really shows off your muscles.' Lukas shyly thanks her."

The survey will include one demographic section (e.g., gender, age, field of study) and the case vignettes. Data analysis will involve descriptive statistics and inferential methods such as t-tests and ANOVA to identify gender-based differences in perception.

Drawing on our experiences as students, we approach this study with a deep awareness of the diverse challenges students may encounter regarding harassment and its impacts on university life. This perspective will enable us to critically explore how subjective perceptions—shaped by individual experiences and broader social contexts—influence students' views of harassment and, ultimately, the campus culture. By examining how differences in perceptions can lead to 'invisible' experiences of harassment, we hope that our findings will support universities in developing prevention initiatives that meet students' diverse needs to foster a safer and more supportive environment, promoting the well-being and dignity of all students.

In conclusion, tackling sexual harassment within higher education institutions requires a multifaceted approach that considers students' diverse and complex perceptions. Only through a comprehensive understanding of these varying perspectives can we hope to create a safer educational environment that truly supports everyone's dignity.

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