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# Between agency and uncertainty – Young women and men constructing citizenship through stories of sexual harassment

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## Abstract

In this article, we examine young people's narratives on sexual harassment on how it is endured, objected, observed, and negotiated in diverse everyday life environments. The article is based on an analysis of thematic interviews with 36 young people aged 15–19 living in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland. Altogether 23 young women and 13 young men participated in the interviews which were conducted at educational institutions as individual, paired or group interviews. We analyze young people's narratives on sexual harassment as stories of everyday citizenship and, and more precisely, as acts of citizenship. We have also applied the concept of respectability to study how young women and men construct respectable sexual citizenship. We found out that whereas female respectability suggests that young women should be able to protect their sexual integrity effectively, male respectability expects young men to effectively balance between different positions of masculinity. While young people widely condemn sexual harassment and recognize it as discrimination, the gendered ways of constructing respectability, however, maintain the moral double standard by which

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young women remain the gatekeepers of sexual consent and young men test its boundaries.

## INTRODUCTION

Young people's experiences of sexual harassment raise concerns and cause moral panic in the adult generation (Crofts et al., 2015; Lunde & Joleby, 2021). Digital technology has become an integral part of young people's everyday lives and has expanded worried discussions within the last few decades to include digital and social media environments, where young people are alleged to be vulnerable to victimization in new and heightened ways (Priebe et al., 2013; Ringrose et al., 2021). Although these discussions focus on young people, they often exclude or overlook their voices, expertise, and agency. Furthermore, these discussions commonly position young people in simplistic and homogenous ways as innocent victims or ignorant perpetrators, depending on their gender, race, age, and class.

In this article, we examine young people's narratives on how they endure, contest, observe, practice, and negotiate sexual harassment in physical and digital environments in their everyday lives. We conceptualize sexual harassment as the unwanted attention or the invasion of privacy related to gender or sexuality that occurs in semi-public places, such as educational institutions, workplaces, digital spaces, and public places, such as mass transit systems (Honkatukia & Svyrenko, 2018). The primary forms of harassment, including acts of sexual intimacy without the consent of the targeted person, challenge the notion of intimate conduct as separate from public activities (Roth, 1999). Society privatizes sexual citizenship by limiting sexual expression in public (Berlant & Warner, 1998), but especially for young women, sexual harassment has continued to exist as a common everyday life experience in various semi-public and public spheres (e.g. Aaltonen, 2017; Ikonen & Halme, 2018).

We study young people's narratives of sexual harassment, interpreting their negotiation of this issue as agency through which they form their sexual citizenship. We consider young people's stories of harassment as one of their means to construct their relationships with society and express their views of diverse forms of sexual conduct in general. Thus, we acknowledge individuals and society as inherently sexual and contest the narrow perspectives that only connect sexuality to private and intimate spheres (Aggleton et al., 2019, p. 5). Instead, we understand young people's discussions of sexual harassment as acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008; Lister, 2007), that is, as their pursuits for active membership in their everyday communities and society. Through these discussions, young people collectively produce, negotiate, claim, and recognize their own sexual citizenship and make judgments of that of others.

For the purposes of the analysis of the empirical data, we elaborate this idea with the concept of respectability (Skeggs, 1997) to understand young people's representations of themselves as competent, morally righteous sexual actors in their discussions of sexual harassment. By presenting themselves as respectable, young people construct hierarchical positions in the landscape of sexual citizenship; they identify the people who have rights and recognition as legitimate citizens and those who do not (Talburt, 2019, p. 292).

Earlier studies have examined victimization experiences of young women and their meanings in different contexts, including schools (Aaltonen, 2017; Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Lahelma, 2002, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021), consequences of harassment (Ringrose et al., 2021), coping strategies (Leaper et al., 2013; Priebe et al., 2013), male harassers (Robinson, 2005), and art-based

methodologies in the articulation of harassment (Huuki et al., 2021). To complement this literature and to provide a new perspective to sexual harassment we utilize the citizenship framework to highlight and examine young people's agency and societal positions formed in relation to the phenomenon of sexual harassment. The concept of sexual citizenship has thus far been utilised in studies on sexual practices, pleasure and consent, and studies on LGBTQ rights (Plummer, 2003; Aggleton et al., 2019); however, as far as we know, our article is among the first attempts to apply it in relation to sexual harassment.

Empirically, the article is based on interviews and focus group discussions with young people aged 15–19, which were conducted in a research project that focuses on the meanings and experiences of sexual consent in the everyday lives of young people and their positions in public discussions regarding this topic.<sup>1</sup> We first explain the theoretical foundation of our article. After presenting the methodological underpinnings of our inquiry, the data, and its analysis, we report the key findings and highlight the gendered constructions of respectability and sexual citizenship. We conclude by summarizing our findings and discussing sexual harassment as a mundane phenomenon that entangles with young people's claims, negotiations and struggles to be recognized as respectable sexual citizens. Furthermore, we consider the policy implications relevant to our findings, especially from the perspective of sex education.

## Theoretical framework and concepts

Since the 1970s, sexual harassment has transformed from a hidden phenomenon and private trouble to a public issue. Legislation has increasingly recognized sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, most notably in work and educational settings but also in other public places (e.g., Koss, 1990; Kurth et al., 2000; MacKinnon, 1979). Sexual harassment involves power differentials that define an individual's right to privacy, and gender is a key element in these power differentials. It has been consistently found out in studies that young women experience more sexual harassment than young men (Attila et al., 2017; Clear et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2018), and that especially for females, youth is a risk factor for harassment (Ollus et al., 2019). In Finland, which is the site of the current study, one-third of girls aged 15 to 16 and 1 in 10 boys of the same age report that they have experienced harassment during the past year (Ikonen & Halme, 2018). Surveys indicate that the prevalence rate of sexual harassment has increased especially among young women in recent years (Ikonen & Halme, 2018). Sexual harassment is also an intersectional phenomenon, and young people with a working-class background or belonging to sexual or gender minority groups face specific vulnerabilities in terms of sexual harassment (e.g., Li et al., *in prep./this issue*; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ollus et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2018). Mundane forms of harassment, such as gestures or stares, make young women especially conscious of their visibility and vulnerability, so they learn to view themselves as self-evident objects of harassment. This process can be conceptualized as a form of symbolic violence (Honkatukia & Svyarenko, 2018).

In contrast, many young men seem to harm themselves and others when trying to measure up to gendered expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which pressures young men to present themselves as sexual subjects who are always active, assertive, potent, and virile and who always pursue sex (Allen, 2003, p. 225; Holland et al., 1998). However, this unidimensional “macho” representation of young men's sexual subjectivity is

<sup>1</sup>The name of the project is “Contested Consent: Social and Digital Borders and Orders of Intimacy in Young People's Romantic Engagements (CoCo)” and it is funded by the Academy of Finland (decision number 324094).

problematized in analyzes of the hybridity and complexity of masculinities. The association between hegemonic masculinity and sexual prowess continues to have relevance to the acts of young men in proving their masculinity in ways that reinforce the hierarchy between men and women. However, young men also increasingly value consensuality, mutuality, and respect in their intimate heterosexual relationships and dating practices both in their virtual world (Ravn et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021) and real life (Allen, 2007; Gottzen, 2019). The sexual repression and harassment of women and girls have not disappeared, but overt sexism, vulgarism, and macho behavior is more likely to be condemned than before (Johansson, 2007, p. 74).

In this article, we consider the gendered phenomenon of sexual harassment through the framework of citizenship. We conceptualize citizenship to signify young people's relationships with their communities and the broader society. These relationships assume concrete forms in the everyday lives of young people and manifest themselves in their stories of sexual harassment. We follow critical citizenship scholars (e.g., Isin, 2008; Kallio et al., 2020; Lister, 2007; Moensted, 2021; Plummer, 2003), who have broadened the traditional conceptualization of citizenship by showing that citizenship is acknowledged in comprehensive and mundane ways, and not only as rights, statuses or responsibilities provided by a formal membership in a nation state. Accordingly, we understand the formation of citizenship as taking place in everyday spatial and relational interactions in local communities, peer cultures, and institutions, and do not consider only formal citizenship status, age of majority or citizenship practices such as voting or running for election (Wood, 2013).

We are interested in the lived or everyday citizenship which refers to the ways individuals in their everyday lives place themselves in their communities. Stated differently, this type of citizenship refers to the non-formal means that people experience and express their place in society (Moensted, 2021, p. 246). We regard negotiations, contests, and actions in everyday life as acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008). In addition to agency, these acts involve emotions and power differentials, and they highlight the impact of the intersectional social categories of gender, race, age, and class on the possibilities of individuals to belong in communities (e.g., Wood, 2013). Even if we concentrate on the mundane aspects of lived citizenship in relation to sexual harassment, we acknowledge that everyday life is also entangled in complex ways with institutional arrangements as well as people's formal statuses (Bowman, 2019, p. 300).

The discussions of sexual harassment indicate that the citizenship of young people is inherently gendered, and the acts of citizenship are also acts of gendered performances, that is, the routine accomplishments embedded in everyday interaction through which individuals define themselves and others as gendered members of society (West & Zimmerman, 1987). While sexual harassment is a gendered phenomenon in terms of prevalence, meanings, and consequences, young people are not cultural dupes, passive targets, or observers of sexual harassment, who blindly practice masculine or feminine ideals of sexual conduct. Earlier research has indicated that young women actively engage in safety routines to monitor their interactions and avoid risky situations and places, and they use precautionary measures in the public sphere to effectively protect their sexual and bodily integrity (Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). They also monitor the behavior of the other young women, young men, and adults who are around them, and criticize and resist gendered practices they identify unequal or unfair. Young men, for their part, choose various strategies to legitimize their masculinity. In specific situations, they may either align with practices that enable sexual harassment to continue, or they may challenge these practices and position themselves as protectors of female physical integrity (Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019). These decisions are active choices, and therefore, acts of citizenship (Isin, 2008). At the same time these acts are influenced by the social environment, including the normative gendered orders. This is

a central starting point of this article as we seek to understand how actions and positions related to sexual harassment construct the sexual citizenship of young women and men. In other words, we seek to understand how young people construct their own position and the position of others as citizens in areas that are considered sexual.

The citizenship of young people is often not recognized as full or mature, and the typical public discussions of sexual harassment assume gendered positions for them that overlook their experiences and agency (e.g. innocent victim, perpetrator). Therefore, we argue that it is important for young people to be able to represent themselves as having the competence to address sexual harassment and the morally “right” attitude toward the phenomenon—a combination that we refer to as “respectability.” According to Skeggs (1997), respectability relates to people’s attempts to claim value for themselves, especially when their value gets questioned by expectations based, for example, on gender, sexuality, or social class. Skeggs (1997) specifically examined the ways that working-class young women pursued respectability in relation to their (hetero)sexuality and intimate relationships. However, the concept has since been used to analyze various social positions, including the efforts of young men to distance themselves from sexual violence and sexism (Gottzen, 2019).

With the concept of respectability, we seek to understand how young people construct youthful sexual citizenship that consists of knowledge, skills, and the attitudes required to make thoughtful choices and safeguard their well-being and physical integrity. To this end, young people wish to construct themselves as well-behaved and trustworthy individuals who know and respect their physical and mental borders as well as the borders of others. Respectability is also constructed through the evaluation and valuation of others who are deemed less respectable because they are considered to have violated gendered sexual norms (Skeggs, 1997). Therefore, we understand young people’s attempts to construct themselves as respectable not only as a tool for claiming their own competent sexual citizenship, but also as a means to reproduce the moral valuations on who is a legitimate member of their community and wider society and who falls outside of this boundary.

Generally, the data provides us with young people’s interpretations of the landscape where they live, act, and contest sexual citizenship in everyday virtual and physical environments as a part of growing up.

## METHODS AND ANALYSIS

### Participants and data

The study participants were 36 young people aged 15–19, who live in the metropolitan area of Helsinki and who study in comprehensive school (9th grade students aged 15–16), vocational school, or general upper secondary school. A total of 23 young women and 13 young men participated in the interviews and focus groups. Complying with the participants’ preferences, we conducted the interviews individually (4), in pairs (3), and in groups of four or five young people (6). One of the groups was mixed-gender and consisted of two young men and two young women. The other groups and pairs were either all-male or all-female. The participants who preferred individual interviews were all young women.<sup>2</sup> Of the participants, 26 had two white Finnish

<sup>2</sup>The Ethics Committee of the Tampere University reviewed the research plan, interview guideline, consent procedure, and other relevant documents before we began the data collection.

parents and 10 had at least one parent born outside of Finland. All but one interview were conducted in the school premises and were tied to the schools' schedules; they lasted approximately an hour or a bit more, at the maximum 1.5 hours.

Three of the authors—one male and two females—conducted the interviews, but the genders of the interviewers and the interviewees were not matched in all interviews. In addition to gender, the interviewers and interviewees differed in their academic position and in their age, and consequently, the interviews provided intergenerational interaction. The loosely structured interviews and focus groups included themes related to the young people's views of conduct that is appropriate, common, desired, or distressing in their sexual, intimate, or social relationships in their everyday lives. During the interviews, we provided background information and guided the discussions thematically, but we respected the young people's expertise and learned from them.

Considering the sensitive topic of the interviews, we thought it was ethically important to maintain the discussions at a general level and focus on what the interviewees knew and thought about various issues. Some of the participants shared some of their private experiences, but we explicitly explained that we did not expect them to do so. The participants were often very open and talkative and indicated a reflexive interest in the subject matter, some of them even explaining that discussing the issue was easy because they talked about the topic with their friends otherwise, too. This indicates that sexuality is an integral part of young people's everyday lives and that adults may sometimes be overly cautious in discussing the topic with young people because they regard the issue to be too sensitive or private.

## Analysis

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In analyzing the data, we applied a theory-driven thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to capture the responses related to sexual harassment and to identify patterns in the data. We initially reviewed the data and searched for descriptions and narratives that referred to sexual harassment in a broad sense, including comments regarding bodies and appearances in social media and in the public space, gossip about sexual contacts and relations, sexual reputations and contacts with people via social media and face to face. We found narratives of sexual harassment in all the interviews, and this information comprised 240 pages of text. To protect the interviewees' anonymity, we created pseudonyms for them when providing excerpts from the data.

We formed our analytical themes in a dialogical process between the data and the theoretical frame related to the gendered nature of sexual harassment, everyday acts of citizenship, and respectability. We analyzed the young people's narratives as constructions of their sexual citizenship by considering the narratives as inherent acts of citizenship where the participants constructed themselves as respectable (Skeggs, 1997) and formulated their views on themselves and others as legitimate sexual citizens, who possess rights and recognition as appreciated members of their communities; and also formed valuations on those who they thought remained outside of these markers (Talbert, 2019, p. 292). The talk on sexual harassment hence informed us how young people claim rights and responsibilities for themselves and others, how respectability and youthful sexual citizenship are formed, and how they relate to other, competing claims of sexual citizenship.

In the data, the young people discussed sexual harassment as a phenomenon that affects girls' and young women's everyday lives first and foremost. Consequently, the young women's constructions of respectability differed in many ways from those of young men. Therefore,

we report the analysis separately for the young women and young men. Only the female participants discussed their personal experiences of sexual harassment, especially when named as such. We categorized the young women's accounts on these experiences and their agency into broader themes, reflecting the different spatial and social context of sexual harassment: the digital sphere, a semi-public space, and a public space, and in terms of whether the perpetrator is unknown or known. Then we further explored the influence of these different spatial and social contexts in the formation female respectability in the interview accounts.

Thereafter, we illustrate how young men constructed male respectability in relation to sexual harassment. The young men did not discuss harassment as a personal experience, and they did not position themselves as (potential) victims. Instead, their talk revolved around their need to balance between different positions of masculinity in order to exhibit the appropriate kind of heterosexual activity but not appear as harassers. Considering this theme, we report in the article three sub-categories we identified in the formation of male respectability: the need of smoothness in making sexual advances, meanings of humor in discussing harassment, and the ambivalence of the male victimization for young men.

## RESULTS

### Young women's spatial and relational negotiations of respectability

The young women discussed sexual harassment as their personal and everyday experiences, both in virtual and real-life environments. Examples of these experiences included receiving "dick pics," sex offers, "weird" invitations, links to porn sites, or odd comments in social media (see also Salerno-Ferraro et al., 2021). Their accounts aligned with the assertion of Ringrose et al. (2021, p. 559) that dick pics and other forms of unsolicited sexual advances have become normalized in the social media ecosystems of young people (Berndtsson & Odenbring, 2021; Lunde & Joleby, 2021). In the public and semi-public spheres, the young women had been approached with sexual suggestions by men, had heard their appearance commented in sexually suggesting ways and had been touched without their consent (see also Aaltonen, 2017; Honkatukia & Svnarenko, 2018; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Some young women had encountered these issues more than others, but all of them were familiar with this phenomenon. While the positions in relation to sexual harassment were highly different according to gender, the participants' narratives converged across the gender divide in that the young men, too, discussed sexual harassment as perpetrated by (other) boys and men and encountered and suffered by young women.

Generally speaking, the interviewees adopted a critical position towards harassment. Neither the young women nor the young men accepted sexual harassment as a normal interaction that must be endured as earlier studies have indicated (e.g. Aaltonen, 2017; Amudsen, 2021; Honkatukia & Svnarenko, 2018). In the interviews, the #MeToo movement was discussed as a welcome movement to help to reveal experiences of harassment which had previously remained hidden and to make the harassers responsible for their actions. Hence, the data indicate a significant shift in young women's sexual citizenship, presenting them now as citizens who are without questioning entitled to protection from adverse sexual experiences. This assertion calls for appropriate acknowledgement also in the institutional contexts, such as in the criminal justice system (Dunn et al., 2017; Holmström et al., 2020, p. 346). At the same time, as we show in the



following, the meanings young women gave to their experiences of harassment also varied according to spatial and relational contexts.

## **A competent young female citizen in the digital sphere**

The abovementioned accounts – the depiction of harassment as a gendered, common and mundane, yet condemnable phenomenon – were present especially when the young women discussed social media as a context for their experiences, and when the harasser was depicted unknown. Instead of merely surviving (e.g. Priebe et al., 2013), the young women commonly highlighted their own resourcefulness and knowledge in understanding the phenomenon as well as their skills in managing unwanted approaches. They frequently presented themselves as confident in safeguarding their sexual integrity and exhibited competence through a number of ways.

For example, the blocking functions of applications provided tools for the young women to firmly draw the line. One interviewee summarized this as follows: “You just push a button few times, and he cannot send you any messages, ever” (C1, four young women). They also told how they used other strategies, including blocking unknown followers altogether, making informed decisions regarding their own public and private accounts, monitoring the comments, and deleting strange comments. They frequently described the social media platforms as a space for young people, and claimed that they have a better expertise than their parents or other adults regarding the codes of conduct and the tools to respond to potentially adverse incidents. According to the young women, their parents often unnecessarily “panicked” or restrained and controlled the young women’s activities. Therefore, many said that they refrained from disclosing the everyday occurrence of harassment in digital spheres to their parents, as is shown in the following excerpt from a discussion between Nea and Pihla regarding their parents:

Nea: But then if I tell my mom, like yeah, that’s so normal, then she’s totally panicking and stuff. Like I understand that it shouldn’t be normal, but it doesn’t affect me in any way.

Pihla: And then, at least I feel like my parents would just worry about it for no reason because they can’t really help with this matter in any way if I’m already like, it doesn’t bother me anymore and so (C1, four young women).

It can be concluded that in the digital sphere, the young women presented themselves as competent sexual citizens who cleverly negotiate safe and comfortable spaces for themselves in an environment where their sexual integrity is constantly questioned (Albury & Byron, 2019, p. 169; Ringrose et al., 2021). We did not encounter signs of the kind of counter-discipline cultures found in some studies in which men’s hypersexual toxic masculine performances get challenged and controlled by women through digital circulation and outward display of unacceptable (sexual) performances (Hess & Flores, 2018). The absence of this kind of talk in our data may relate to many issues, such as the relatively young age of the study participants, to how the school as an interview context may appear for young people as too formal environment to discuss potentially suspicious practices (such as spreading pictures in social media) or to the type of interaction between us and the young participants. Nevertheless, the above described hegemonic construction of female respectability in the interviews may prevent the use of some forms of resistance – as it may also hinder discussion on young women’s uncertainties in sexual harassment situations in the digital sphere.

## Ambivalences with unwanted advances from known males

Even if social media was often commented upon as an entity of its own, the border between digital and physical space is not clear-cut but oftentimes porous and blurry. Digital technologies intertwine with many aspects of young people's everyday lives, and this entanglement also influenced the young women's construction of respectability. This became visible in the young women's discussions of receiving dick pics or other unwelcome sexual advances from young men they personally knew. This actual or possible experience created a more difficult dynamic for the young women to handle compared to harassment that only occurred through social media and was perpetrated by previously unknown men (also Ringrose et al., 2021, p. 559). In the following excerpt, Nea reveals that she has received unwanted pictures or sexualized messages from a young man whom she knows. She weighs the question from the perpetrator's point of view and adopts ideas of the so-called ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) in her judgment of the act and in deciding how to deal with it:

Nea: Well, I could tell . . . my friends that I received something weird, but I wouldn't spread that message directly, especially not to any social media because if it's someone I know, and especially if I'm friends with him, so maybe he has had something wrong in his life, a crisis or something, if he starts to act like that. After all, it's also a personal matter for that other person (C1, four young women).

The young women seemed not have a similar, shared strategy for relating to and managing unwanted advances from known men as they did when discussing harassment done by unknown men in the social media. Instead, the discussions showed how the young women considered different options. While some young women's were ready to reveal the identity of the harasser to others despite the possible adverse consequences to the boy's reputation, the following excerpt from an interview with Saana and Julia highlights a more ambivalent take on this issue:

Interviewer: Well, what if it came from someone you know?

Saana: I've received [it] from an acquaintance.

Julia: What? Really?

Saana: Yeah, it was a bit like, what? Do I need to reply to that, or what should I do? You feel a bit awkward or so. Like, why did you send me this? [laughing] Well, then I've often just left it unanswered, but then it becomes a bit awkward if he's someone you know cause if you see him somewhere, then you're like OK nice. [laughing]

Julia: Yeah, you wonder whether to delete him from Snap or what are you supposed to do.

Interviewer: Yeah. Do you usually share or tell your friends if you receive those kind[s] of photos, or is it a private thing?

Saana: Well, it depends like, if it's someone we know, like someone we all know, it feels wrong to tell. But like, if it's someone we all know, then I'd be like, 'Oh no, why did he send me this?' But we don't usually [talk] about it cause what would others do with that information. Then, we would just be wondering together like, 'Why did he send this? Why [has this] happened?' (C12, two young women).

Saana's confession of having received unsolicited pictures seemed to surprise Julia even if Saana implied having received these photos on several occasions, which suggests that these experiences

are not necessarily commonly shared among friends. Moreover, Saana's laughter throughout her comments and her notions on the awkwardness of the situation indicate her uncertainty, especially when thinking about the possibility of meeting the person in real life. The discussion did not result in a clear conclusion, hence emphasizing the young women's puzzlement in managing unwanted advances from men they knew.

## Uncertainty and coping in the public sphere

Public spaces proved to be yet another and different context for the construction of female respectability in the data. In this sphere, young women were explicit about their difficulties in adhering to the expectations of respectability. The participants described the perpetrators as unknown boys of a similar age, or adult men, and explained that the advances of adult men were particularly agonizing and off-putting. With disgust, one young woman stated, "It could have been my dad" (C3, two young women). The female interviewees indicated that evenings and weekends were risky times for encountering harassment in the public sphere, particularly when using public transportation. The adverse experiences generate feelings of insecurity if not fear, as Aada explained: "[T]here is a hellish amount of crowd[s], and they are all adults, so it is not nice to be there by yourself. . . I'm not scared, but it does not feel good either" (C3, two young women).

The narratives reflected the young women's uncertainty and concern regarding the best method to effectively draw the line, and the perceptions of others. Consequently, their sense of having active and competent sexual citizenship and possibilities to fulfill conditions of respectability were compromised. This became apparent from a focus group with five young women. The participants shared their experiences of sexual harassment while travelling on a commuter train. Emma's account provides an example of the insecurity and the unpleasantness as well as uncertainty of what to do. These kinds of depictions were absent in the discussions on harassment through social media.

Emma: I don't know, like somehow maybe on the train, there's a lot of those [people] who come like really close, like it's distressing when I think about the current corona situation. And so, I was on a train maybe a month ago. Like there was a lot of space on that train, but still there was someone who came to sit in front of me, and he was maybe 20 to 30 years old. And then he just started to touch my knee, and I found it very disturbing, but I stayed silent and was very anxious there because I didn't dare to say anything (C7, five young women).

In addition to that the young women discussed the public spaces as ambivalent and occasionally threatening spaces, they claimed that they could not depend on the protection of bystanders. Other travellers can be immersed in their own gadgets and the unofficial norms often limit communication between strangers and promote non-interference in other people's affairs, especially in settings involving public transportation (Honkatukia & Svyrenko, 2018). However, the young women also described their own agency and highlighted the idea of showing competent and skillful female respectability by using digital technology. For example, one young woman explained that while travelling on the train, "I'm just on my phone." Another interviewee commented, "Usually I even pretend to be on the phone talking. 'Hi, Dad, I'm just on my way home'" (C3, two young women).

Sometimes the young women discussed using physical expressions as possible tools in protecting one's sexual integrity. In these discussions, we identified strategies that are similar to what Swedish researchers Odenbring and Johansson (2019) have documented as the attempts of ethnic minority girls to sustain female respectability in the harsh school context. For the girls in their study, being respectable meant exhibiting a "tough attitude," which constituted collective resistance against sexual harassment by fighting back and sticking together to form a sense of sisterhood and opposition to the boys (Odenbring & Johansson, 2019, pp. 267–268). We also identified a version of the idea of tough femininity in the interviews. For example, Venla explained that unlike her friends, she had not experienced harassment at all probably because of her facial expression of "a strong resting bitch face," which makes her look angry while navigating public places and departs from normative, sociable, and friendly femininity. Initially, Venla explained that this facial expression is not conscious, but later in the interview, she reluctantly admitted that she had become more conscious of her looks and that she occasionally used her facial expression knowingly as a safety routine (Stanko, 1990; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Venla: If I have a certain feeling, and I can't like stand anyone or anything, like even someone looking at me or anything, so then I like do it on purpose—that 'everyone get the fuck out of my way' expression. [laughing]

Interviewer: Okay, so, if like somewhere on public transportation, someone might have looked at you too long or something, is it like you give them a bad eye?

Venla: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you say something to them, like what are you looking at?

Venla: I don't usually say anything because I don't dare to. [laughing] But usually, I just look at them really angrily and usually they just look away. [laughing] (C13, one young woman)

The practice that Venla described challenges the dichotomous understanding of passivity and activity, and it constitutes small agency (Honkasalo, 2009, p. 62) because it is a minor, almost invisible act of resistance (facial expression with no words). However, these minor acts are not insignificant. Through reflection and observation, Venla became conscious of the power of using this small agency as a coping strategy, whether to make herself more confident or to drive away unwanted intruders.

## **Young men's negotiations of respectability: Balancing between masculine norms and avoiding harassment**

For young men, achieving the status as a "proper man" is typically related to the appropriate demonstration of heterosexual desire and sexual prowess (Allen, 2003; Flood, 2008; Holland et al., 1993; Pascoe, 2005; Wight, 1994). When appropriately exhibiting manhood, young men are expected to present themselves as active sexual subjects who are proactive in their relationships with young women and who show interest in attractive girls and pursue sex with them, to seek strategies to attract girls and "get them." Through these displays of masculinity, the lines between consensual and coercive sexual activity may be blurred or ignored, and men's socially constructed entitlement to women's bodies considered paramount to women's rights to physical integrity (Hearn, 1998; Holland et al., 1998 cited by Fahlberg & Pepper, 2016, p. 676). The young men in this study largely relied on this gendered narrative of an active male when discussing their encounters with young women in various social contexts. However, it was also important

for the young men to represent themselves as knowledgeable sexual citizens who recognized the gendered nature of sexual harassment and distanced themselves from the position of a harasser. Thus, respectable masculinity required balancing between these opposing demands. In the following paragraphs, we first analyze this balancing act in the young men's encounters with girls or women as situational smoothness. Second, we consider how the young men utilize humor in their balancing work, and third, we examine how they focus on the victimization of girls and women and minimize or erase their own potential vulnerabilities or victimization experiences.

## Situational smoothness

The young men explained that girls and women generally receive various suggestions and compliments from boys and men, and that they believed these comments influenced females' interpretations of their interaction with boys. Thus, the young men were careful in identifying and defining the (in)appropriate ways of behaving in different situations to avoid being seen as potential harassers in their encounters with girls and women. The young men thought different acts were suitable in different social contexts. For example, a young man explained that when seeing women on a beach, "it is obvious you have to watch them a bit." However, approaching a young woman at the gym is inappropriate because "asking contact information from a girl while training might sound very odd from the point of view of girls" (C6, two young men). The following excerpt from an interview with two young men illustrates their challenge of striving for the celebrated position of an active heterosexual man while simultaneously distancing themselves from the negative aspects of hegemonic masculinity, such as overt aggressiveness or going "too far too early" (see also Roberts et al., 2021).

Interviewer: Let's say that you see a good-looking woman on the metro. Is it okay or appropriate [to say] that you are a good-looking or something like that?

Daniel: Well, if you do it smoothly, then it is okay.

Michael: It just depends on how she receives it. And for some, it may be a really distressing experience . . . Then it also depends on yourself, how you will perform it . . . Women hear and receive that kind of comments [sic] much more [than men]. So, it can be a little bit distressing and irritating from their [women's] perspective.

Interviewer: How can you be sure whether a comment is a positive compliment and when it turns more oppressive? Can you explain?

Michael: One has to be assertive, that's for sure. But if you are a little bit too macho, then it may turn to oppressive . . . you constantly have to interpret the signs and gestures of girls. But sometimes it can be really tricky (C6, two young men).

The young men knew that commenting on the appearance of girls in public places may be risky because the girls may perceive them as obtrusive, but they did not consider such comments as categorically forbidden or inappropriate. Instead, they attempted to adjust their behavior according to the responses of the girls or according to what they considered appropriate in the situation based on her viewpoint. Such balancing acts or situational "smoothness" can be interpreted as a response to the heightened awareness of gender inequality and the complex demands of contemporary hybrid masculinities (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014) that require young men to live up to gendered heteronormative expectations of an active sexual male citizen, but where behavior that is too assertive can cause reputational damage and question the decency of a man's sexual citi-



zanship. Thus, these balancing acts are a way of constructing masculine respectability in relation to sexual harassment and are necessary components of the young men's attempts to live up to the doubly binding norms of respectable heteromascularity. In other words, a young man must behave as an active heterosexual man but also distance himself from the position of a "toxic man" (cf. Liong & Chan, 2020, p. 231) or "creepy guy" (Ravn et al., 2021, p. 10), who lacks the appropriate skills to control his sexuality.

## **Humor as a masculine resource**

While the young men acknowledged sexual harassment as a gendered phenomenon and actively distanced themselves from it, many norms associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) dominated their homosocial interactions. These norms included the assumption that boys and men are naturally interested in and always ready for heterosexual sex and, the gender roles that associated boys with activity and fun, but relegate girls, at least implicitly, to objects of male activity. While the young men critiqued masculine behavior that was too macho and ignorant of others, the unchanged assumptions regarding masculinity and gender roles made it hard for them to seriously oppose the masculine roles. We found that the young men used humor as a solution to balance these situations. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from an interview conducted with two men in which the young men explain to the interviewer the type of young men who gain fame in social media.

Michael: Well, just the kind of messing about, for example, at least one [guy] who is famous, [he] always shoots something, when he's boozing or does, tries doing everything that is fun, like, basically everything stupid that would look fun . . . At least one night, one time he shot himself shagging with someone, like that, and then he has videos on himself going about somewhere naked.

Interviewer: Oh, ok.

Michael: So, I don't know how come like any broad would warm up to that sort of a guy, but like, everybody [has] their own way.

Interviewer: So, he then shares this sort of things?

Michael: Yeah, all [those] stupid things which get him like that, instant fame . . . Some people think he's a total clown. Then some are really like his friends, and then, some think that 'fuck, this is a funny guy' . . . I have, like actually met him, talked a bit with him, so he is like, like the sort of a good guy in the real life (C6, two young men).

Michael described a young man who is popular in social media because his videos show him doing many kinds of stupid things. In this discussion, the young men did not discuss sexual harassment in its most common form, but the "stupid" activities of the young men under discussion included objectifying women and ignoring their sentiments and interests to a degree that meets the definition of a crime. The comment "how come like any broad would warm up to that sort of a guy" implies that even though the young man from social media has not followed the norms of male respectability as previously described, the interviewees perceive that his entertaining performance works for both female and male audiences. Michael distances himself from such actions rather than approves of them, but he perceives the woman who "warms up to that sort of a guy" as at least partly responsible for accepting this behavior. Further, framing the entire situation as

a humorous performance in the virtual world minimizes the young man's responsibility for his sexual acts. In fact, Michael comments that the young man is "a good guy" in real life.

Humor and jokes are central aspects of masculine sociality, and for boys, humor is a way to pass time, build friendships, and establish masculine hierarchies (e.g. Barnes, 2012; Kehily & Nayak, 1997). It is also normative to understand the joke (Peltola & Phoenix, 2022, p. 98). Humor works in this narrative as a masculine resource that carries more weight than the unacceptable behavior toward girls and women. Thus, Michael's critique of such behavior is half-hearted and actually validates the behavior. Although this kind of abusive behavior may violate the norms of respectable male citizenship, it does not unquestionably undermine the respectability of the men because humor serves as a legitimate way to sustain affinity among men at the expense of women. When men are criticized, they can excuse their conduct by explaining that it is just humor. Thus, humor is a way to avoid serious discussions about sexual harassment and its relationship to gender norms, which aligns with the arguments of several masculinity scholars (e.g. Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Masculinities may change to include feminine or marginal elements, which may manifest in critiques of more traditional or hegemonic masculinity. However, this does not undermine or unravel the existing power relations but blurs them, makes them harder to recognize, and thus, reinforces them.

## **Ambivalent male victimization**

The third point to highlight from the young men's narratives regards what remains unspoken related to sexual harassment and respectability. In the young men's narratives, the victims of sexual harassment were almost always girls or women, and very seldom men, let alone the speakers themselves. This aligns with the observation on the domination of masculine norms and gender roles that define boys and men as active agents and girls and women as objects of harassment and of protection. The young men's narratives also align with the studies that have explained the incompatibility of masculinity and victimhood (Allen-Collinson, 2009; Venäläinen, 2020). While there were some cases in which the young men positioned themselves as targets of the initiatives and sexual acts of women (e.g. "a girl came to talk to me at the party," C2, five young men), the young men did not describe these acts as potentially disturbing or abusive. The young men referred to themselves as potential or actual victims only in situations involving physical violence without sexual undertones. However, studies show that young men are also victims of sexual harassment and abuse (e.g. Hartill, 2009). The following exchange during an interview was rare because the four young men discussed a situation where they received unsolicited nude photos from a young woman. The interviewer had asked earlier if young people send unsolicited nude photos to each other, and the young men responded that there are some "brain-dead" girls who share photos of "their melons."

Interviewer: Well, how do you take it if you get a photo like that, all of a sudden, showing boobs? Is it like, 'what the hell?', or like, 'Yes!', or do you think its perv or weird?

Amir: If the chick is like, ok, we just keep the thing between the two of us. If the chick is, like, it [makes you feel] a bit anxious, then you can tell her to stop . . . If chicks send [photos] when boozed, you can tell them, for instance, that 'you are boozed, like, go to sleep and don't send anything' . . . But some, when a chick is boozed, some boys start to flirt like this since the chick doesn't know what she's doing . . . But when she is sober, she can do whatever she wants because she supposedly knows what she's doing.



Interviewer: Is it like, I mean, that you should not take advantage or something?

Amir: Yes. It's like to get someone intoxicated . . . and then ask her to do this and that . . . You should not behave like that (C4, four young men).

The excerpt reveals that young men can also be potential victims, and it also highlights the gendered dynamics and complexities in youthful sexual citizenship. In contrast to the perception that heterosexual boys and men are always interested in things related to (hetero)sex (Allen, 2003; Holland et al., 1993; Wight, 1994), the young man in this interview constructed respectable male citizenship by establishing limits to sexual actions and exposure. Initially, the young man implied that the photo of a girl's "melons" would not be shared with his male friends, but earlier studies have suggested that this type of activity provides considerable value for boys in homosocial relations and affirms their masculine status (Ravn et al., 2021; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). However, the young man not only rejected such gendered benefit from the situation, but also indicated the obtrusiveness of the situation when he explained that if the situation causes anxiety, then he can ask the girl to stop. This exchange was the closest the young men came to assuming the position of a victim during the discussions. Amir confidently maintained his agency by explaining how he controls his exposure to such sexual acts. The comment regarding the girl's intoxication ended the discussion of the young man's potential role as victim, and instead, the girl's position changed from a potential harasser to a target of moral control and protection. Amir implied that when the girl is sober, she may legitimately express her sexuality, but he did not mention if this unrestricted sexual behavior of a woman may be disturbing to young men. Instead, Amir concentrated on defining respectable sexual citizenship and its borders for both young women and young men by judging the young men who take advantage of the woman's vulnerable position. The actual or potential victimization of young men received extremely limited coverage in the discussions.

## DISCUSSION

The study reported in this article highlights young people's expertise in understanding sexual harassment as part of their everyday lives. We have scrutinized their accounts as acts of citizenship or as negotiations through which the youth constantly form sexual citizenship (Albury & Byron, 2019). More specifically, we have analyzed how young people construct respectability (Skeggs, 1997) while discussing sexual harassment, or stated differently, how young people seek to appear as respectable and valuable members in their everyday communities and society. Young people also form respectability by evaluating the conduct of other people and its moral appropriateness. The picture that emerges from the analysis is thoroughly gendered.

The young women's narratives of respectability were based on their actual or possible experiences of sexual harassment. Accordingly, three main conclusions can be drawn. First, respectability is commonly built around the capabilities and competences of the young women in understanding harassment and its key features and elements in different contexts. The young women were knowledgeable citizens regarding sexual harassment as a phenomenon, and they distanced themselves from public discussions that are often replete with worry and that position young women as passive and naïve victims because of their young age (Crofts et al., 2015; Rasmussen, 2021).

Second, in addition to knowledge about sexual harassment, another significant theme from the young women's stories is their effective management of sexual harassment. Particularly in social media, the young women represented themselves as more competent in managing harassment



than their parents or other adults, who were depicted as generally too emotional and unaware of the nature of social media interactions. The parents were described to worry too much when learning about the young women's harassment experiences, which they themselves regarded as quite mundane and harmless. These narratives again emphasize the competence of young women, but they provide little opportunity for young women to express feelings of vulnerability or uncertainty in this context.

Third, the young women's accounts reveal the impact of diverse spatial and relational contexts and the complex entanglements that affect their ability to achieve the idealized female respectability. Compared to online harassment from unknown perpetrators, in public and semi-public spaces, or when the harassers are known, the young women's sexual citizenship appeared more insecure and challenged. Thus, to a certain extent, these situations seem to compromise the ability of the young women to effectively defend their sexual integrity. However, recognizing the harmfulness of the situation enabled the young women to explain the discriminatory nature of the course of events and to highlight the need for more effective intervention from (adult) bystanders in these situations.

Based on the young men's stories, it can be argued that the masculine norms are changing but not unraveling the gender-based differences in the power and gender roles that allow sexual harassment to continue. First, for the young men, appearing as respectable (hetero)sexual male citizens requires them to distance themselves from sexual harassment. The heightened awareness of sexual harassment in the media and elsewhere paves the way for how young men today feel they should position themselves in relation to sexuality and how they are able to present themselves as respectable (hetero)sexual subjects and citizens. This requires a balancing act so that the young men do not appear as perpetrators of harassment or forego the requirement of (hetero)sexually active masculinity.

Second, the young men's ways of constructing their respectable sexual citizenship illuminates the situational ambivalence in positions that are offered to boys and young men today. On the one hand, young men are expected to show sensitivity toward gendered power issues and act accordingly. On the other hand, it remains socially acceptable to cherish masculine groupism, humor, and jokes in certain environments, where relationships, friendships, and boyhood are built on practices that harm girls and young women.

Third, there seems to be very little room for a respectable (hetero)sexual male citizen to be positioned as a victim, although research suggests that young men experience a range of unwanted sexual attention (see also Erentzen et al., [this issue](#)). Consequently, there was a marked silence regarding the young men's experiences of sexual harassment or abuse or even the possibility of such experiences. Therefore, the same gendered norms or double standards that offer more hegemonic positions to men than to women also restrict the opportunities for men to express their sexual citizenship by silencing their experiences of sexual victimization.

To conclude, our study identified significant differences between young women's and young men's narratives of respectable sexual citizenship in their talk about sexual harassment. Whereas female respectability suggests that young women should be able to protect their sexual integrity effectively, male respectability expects young men to effectively balance between different positions of masculinity. Moreover, contradictory discourses exist in young people's understanding of sexual harassment. Young people widely condemn sexual harassment and recognize it as discrimination, but the gendered ways of constructing respectability maintain the moral double standard by which young women remain the gatekeepers of sexual consent and young men test its boundaries.

## Limitations

We recruited the participants from comprehensive schools, general upper secondary schools, and vocational schools to provide a variety of contexts and participants. If we had collaborated with youth workers or young people from other contexts, then we may have further increased the diversity of the study sample. Additionally, it is possible that the young people actively interested in the theme of the study agreed to participate, and therefore, the study has likely eliminated the views of those individuals who do not consider sexual consent to be important. We did not ask participants about their sexual orientation and therefore assume nothing concerning their sexualities; however, the collectively produced narratives were generally heteronormative.

Furthermore, the study and the data did not focus solely on sexual harassment but more broadly addressed the meaning of sexual consent in young people's everyday lives. Focusing solely on sexual harassment probably would have provided a more in-depth examination of young people's negotiations of respectability and citizenship. For example, in the absence of specific questions about school in our interview guide, sexual harassment at school and the role of educational institutions as the context of harassment or its prevention remained scarcely touched upon and discussed in the data.

However, the nature of the possible bias attributed to these choices is unclear, and as explained, the study included young people from various backgrounds. Also, the atmosphere in most of the interviews was open and comfortable, and the discussions were lively with some exceptions in the young men's groups. The sources of discomfort in some of the young men's interviews are difficult to identify, but perhaps meeting with the groups twice in venues of their own choice would have provided a more relaxed atmosphere for the young men as well to share their views.

The participants represented diverse social class and racial backgrounds, but because the sample is relatively small, we did not find a logical way to analyze the intersectional aspects of harassment. Perhaps this was because the nature of group interviews encourages discussions of issues that are easy to share with others, so more sensitive themes are easily overlooked. Moreover, the group context may lead to uniformity of the responses (Ringrose et al., 2021) or the polarization of views (Morgan, 1997). We observed both of these tendencies. Nevertheless, we thought the content of the discussions was multifaceted and correlated well to the task of the study, which was to study the construction of respectability in relation to sexual harassment as an inherently collective process.

## Implications

Seriously considering the expertise of young people in sex education and in other intergenerational encounters where sexual harassment can be discussed is a welcome challenge to the current adult-centered understandings. The narrow positions that young people occupy in adult-centered approaches to sexual harassment do not leverage their self-understanding and are disconnected from their everyday realities. Young people's own expertise regarding sexual harassment is a more promising starting point for effective sex education. As our field work indicates, young people willingly share their views and appreciate when others are genuinely interested in their opinions.

As this article makes visible, the conceptualizations of young people are at times problematic and incorporate features that contribute to the reproduction of unequal gendered power relations. This likely occurs because the young people grow up amid discourses of sexuality embedded in the

long history of gendered oppression, and they utilize these discourses in understanding their own experiences. There is a need to create space and tools for young people to critically reflect upon the problematic visions involved in, for example, competent femininity or hegemonic masculinity and in identifying, understanding, and expressing vulnerability or insecurity as key elements of human existence and citizenship.

Joint intergenerational reflections on the prevailing understandings of sexuality and its borders help adults and young people alike to identify problematic views of sexual harassment, safeguard the sexual integrity of individuals, and evaluate the appropriateness of their conduct. Such self-reflection is most productive when organized and facilitated in youth-centered ways and when it is meaningful and relevant from the perspective of young people (Huuki et al., 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021, p. 574). Moreover, appropriate understanding the meaning and processes of the doing of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) is crucial for educators. Such grounded reflexive discussions provide young people with an appropriate awareness of gender inequalities and the increased ability to identify oppressive practices. In addition, these discussions support young people's sense of citizenship in formulating the conditions for safe and respectful sexual interaction.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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