

# Correlates of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment from an online survey among young Australians

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**Abstract.** *Background:* Technology-facilitated sexual harassment is an emerging phenomenon. This study investigates correlates of sexual harassment among young Australians. *Methods:* Participants aged 15–29 were recruited for an online survey. Participants reported how often in the past year they experienced sexual harassment in person, via phone, social media and dating apps. Correlates of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment were identified using logistic regression. *Results:* Of all participants ( $n=1272$ , 70% female), two-thirds reported sexual harassment in person, 34% through social media and 26% via phone. Of participants who used a dating app in the past year ( $n=535$ ), 57% experienced sexual harassment. Sexual harassment in person was correlated with being female (aOR=9.2, CI=6.9–12.2), trans and gender diverse (aOR=2.6, CI=1.2–5.7) and being aged 20–24 years (aOR=1.5, CI=1.1–2.1). Heterosexual identity reduced the odds of sexual harassment in person (aOR=0.7, CI=0.5–0.9). Technology-facilitated sexual harassment was correlated with female (aOR=3.5, CI=2.6–4.6) and trans and gender diverse identities (aOR=3.0, CI=1.4–6.5). Older age [25–29 years (aOR=0.5, CI=0.4–0.8)] and heterosexual identity (aOR=0.7, CI=0.5–0.9) significantly reduced the odds of technology-facilitated sexual harassment. *Conclusion:* Young people identifying as female, trans and gender diverse and non-heterosexual are at risk of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment. Service and technology providers, academics, and policy makers must respond with innovative strategies.

**Additional keywords:** Internet, sexual violence, youth.

Received 29 November 2017, accepted 23 February 2018, published online 1 June 2018

## Introduction

Sexual harassment (SH) refers to any unwanted or unwelcome sexual behaviour that makes a person feel offended, humiliated or intimidated,<sup>1</sup> including unwelcome touching, inappropriate staring and suggestive comments.<sup>2</sup> It is associated with self-harm, depression, anxiety, substance use and reduced workplace productivity.<sup>3–5</sup> Females are more likely to experience SH than males.<sup>6</sup> A survey in Australian universities (*Change the Course*) found that female and trans and gender diverse students were most at risk of experiencing inappropriate staring, sexually suggestive jokes and intrusive comments.<sup>2</sup> University-based SH was associated with younger age and identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and bisexual, gay, lesbian or homosexual.<sup>2</sup>

In Australia, 96% of 18- to 34-year-olds own smartphones.<sup>7</sup> Young people use technology to interact and seek information.<sup>8–10</sup>

However, community and legal groups have expressed concerns regarding technology-facilitated sexual harassment (TFSH).<sup>9,11</sup> The term TFSH describes behaviours where technology (including mobile phones, social media and dating applications) is used to make individuals feel offended, humiliated or intimidated. People can use technology to capture sexual activity, send sexually explicit material without consent and share discriminatory comments based on sexuality and gender.<sup>12–14</sup> Perpetrators of TFSH may remain anonymous by using fake or private accounts. For example, in 2016, male high-school students in Melbourne established a private Instagram account to share non-consensual sexualised photos of young females.<sup>15</sup> In an Australian survey, 46% of young participants reported ever ‘sexting’ (electronically sharing sexually explicit material).<sup>16</sup> Although participants were unlikely to share sexts from regular partners with

others, 29% reported they might share sexts from new partners.<sup>16</sup>

Technology-facilitated SH has received attention from police and the media; however, few studies have documented this phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Although there is a breadth of literature investigating online harassment among young people,<sup>17–19</sup> most studies have not focussed on TFSH. A survey of Australian adults found technology-facilitated sexual violence was common and influenced by gender and sexual identity.<sup>14</sup> A literature review reported further research on the nature, scope, prevalence and effect of technology-facilitated sexual violence is required.<sup>11</sup> We aimed to identify frequency and correlates of in-person and TFSH among a sample of young Australians.

## Methods

This study was nested within the Burnet Institute's *Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* survey, a repeat cross-sectional online survey with a convenience sample of Victorians.<sup>20</sup> The survey collects data on young people's health behaviours and technology use. In March 2017, we launched three Facebook advertisements targeting people aged 15–29 years in Victoria, Australia. We shared the survey on Burnet Institute's Facebook page (24 000 followers) and in three Victorian-based university student pages with large followings (e.g. Monash StalkerSpace has 68 000+ members). We emailed the survey to 600 individuals who completed the survey in previous years and agreed to be contacted for future research. Participants were directed to an external website with an explanatory statement. Those aged 15–29 years who provided informed consent were included. We collected and managed data using the secure web application Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN, USA) hosted at the Burnet Institute.<sup>21</sup> The questionnaire took 15–20 min and participants could enter the draw to win a \$250 supermarket voucher. Data were stored on a secure and password-protected network drive. The Alfred Hospital Human Research Ethics Committee approved the study (326/08).

## Measures

We provided text defining SH as 'any unwanted sexual attention/harassment including cat-calling, comments on appearance, getting 'hit on', touching, staring, receiving sexual pictures/texts, stalking or any other form of unwanted attention from strangers or people you know'. We asked participants how frequently they experienced SH in person (e.g. street, home, school, work), over the phone (e.g. texts, phone calls), social media (e.g. Facebook, Instagram) and dating applications (e.g. Tinder, Grindr) in the past year. Frequency options were 'not at all', 'a few times', 'monthly', 'weekly' or 'daily'. For analysis, these options were grouped as 'not at all', 'a few times' and 'monthly or more'. We created a binary variable indicating whether participants experienced SH in the past year ('yes' or 'not at all').

Participants reported their month and year of birth, if they were studying and whether they had used a dating application in the past year. We asked participants their current gender identity; they were able to choose from the following options: male, female, trans male, trans female, non-binary, indigenous

brotherboy, indigenous sistergirl and a free-text box for identities not listed. These categories were informed by previous research to improve data collection for gender.<sup>22,23</sup> For analysis, gender was coded as male, female and trans and gender diverse due to low participant numbers in subgroups. Participants selected their sexual identity from heterosexual, gay/homosexual/lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, questioning and my gender identity is not listed (please specify). Responses were coded as heterosexual or lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and all other identities (LGBQ+) for analysis.

## Data analysis

Data were analysed using Stata version 14.2 (StataCorp LLC, College Station, TX, USA). We used descriptive statistics to show frequency of SH in the past year. We used logistic regression to identify correlates of in-person and TFSH. Sociodemographic variables were included in univariable logistic regression if they had previously been associated with SH in the literature (gender, sexual identity, age, country of birth, education<sup>2,24</sup>). Variables significant at a univariable level were included in a multivariable model.

## Results

Overall, 2028 individuals provided informed consent. Of these, 1272 participants completed the survey (63%) and 70% were female. In the past year, two-thirds reported being sexually harassed in person, 34% through social media and 26% over the phone. Forty-two per cent of participants used a dating application in the past year and, of these, 57% reported SH on this platform (Table 1). Frequency of SH was higher among females and trans and gender diverse participants (Table 2).

### Correlates of reporting in-person sexual harassment

In-person SH was independently associated with female identity [adjusted odds ratio (aOR)=9.2, confidence interval (CI)=6.9–12.2], trans and gender diverse identities (aOR=2.6, CI=1.2–5.7) and being aged 20–24 years (aOR=1.5, CI=1.1–2.1). Heterosexual participants had lower odds of experiencing SH in person in the past year (aOR=0.7, CI=0.5–0.9) (Table 3).

### Correlates of reporting technology-facilitated sexual harassment

Technology-facilitated SH was independently correlated with female (aOR=3.5, CI=2.6–4.6) and trans and gender diverse identities (aOR=3.0, CI=1.4–6.5). Participants who were aged 20–24 years (aOR=0.7, CI=0.6–1.0), 25–29 years (aOR=0.5, CI=0.4–0.8) and heterosexual (aOR=0.7, CI=0.5–0.9) had lower odds of experiencing TFSH in the past year (Table 3).

## Discussion

In our study, a higher percentage of participants reported experiencing SH in person than through technology. Although we live in a rapidly developing technological society, efforts to prevent SH in person must increase. Our findings suggest that there are similar correlates for in-person and TFSH, including female, trans and gender diverse and

**Table 1. Key characteristics of participants**

Characteristic	Total ( <i>N</i> =1272); <i>N</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Males ( <i>n</i> =351); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Females ( <i>n</i> =888); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Trans and gender diverse ( <i>n</i> =33); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )
Mean age (years)	22.0	22.3	22.0	21.9
Born in Australia	1109 (88.0)	301 (86.3)	784 (89.2)	24 (75.0)
Heterosexual identity	952 (74.8)	289 (82.3)	657 (74.0)	6 (18.2)
Currently studying	939 (73.9)	242 (69.0)	669 (75.5)	28 (84.9)
Ever had sexual intercourse	973 (77.0)	264 (75.9)	687 (77.9)	22 (66.7)
Used a dating application in past year	536 (42.2)	162 (46.2)	357 (40.3)	17 (58.1)
Experienced sexual harassment in person in past year	834 (65.9)	105 (30.1)	710 (80.2)	19 (59.4)
Experienced sexual harassment over the phone in past year	329 (26.0)	47 (13.5)	270 (30.6)	12 (37.5)
Experienced sexual harassment through social media in past year	426 (33.7)	62 (17.8)	353 (40.0)	11 (34.4)
Experienced sexual harassment through dating apps in past year <sup>B</sup>	<i>N</i> =535 304 (56.8)	<i>n</i> =161 44 (27.3)	<i>n</i> =356 248 (69.7)	<i>n</i> =18 12 (66.7)

<sup>A</sup>Per cent of column total. <sup>B</sup>Among participants who reported using a dating app in the past 12 months (*n*=535).

Note: Participants who reported 'I don't wish to say' are not included.

**Table 2. Frequency of sexual harassment among participants by gender**

	Total ( <i>N</i> =1266); <i>N</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Males ( <i>n</i> =349); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Females ( <i>n</i> =885); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )	Trans and gender diverse ( <i>n</i> =32); <i>n</i> (% <sup>A</sup> )
In person				
Not at all	432 (34.1)	244 (69.9)	175 (19.8)	13 (40.6)
A few times	537 (42.4)	89 (25.5)	440 (49.7)	8 (25.0)
Monthly or more	297 (23.4)	16 (4.6)	270 (30.5)	11 (34.4)
Over the phone				
Not at all	934 (74.0)	302 (86.5)	612 (69.4)	20 (62.5)
A few times	241 (19.1)	33 (9.5)	198 (22.5)	10 (31.3)
Monthly or more	88 (6.9)	14 (4.0)	72 (8.2)	2 (6.3)
Social media				
Not at all	838 (66.3)	287 (82.2)	530 (60.0)	21 (65.6)
A few times	300 (23.7)	49 (14.0)	247 (28.0)	4 (12.5)
Monthly or more	126 (10.0)	13 (3.7)	106 (12.0)	7 (21.9)
Dating apps <sup>B</sup>	<i>N</i> =535	<i>n</i> =161	<i>n</i> =356	<i>n</i> =18
Not at all	231 (43.2)	117 (72.7)	108 (30.3)	6 (33.3)
A few times	179 (33.5)	28 (17.4)	147 (41.3)	4 (22.2)
Monthly or more	125 (23.4)	16 (9.9)	101 (28.4)	8 (44.4)

<sup>A</sup>Per cent of column total. <sup>B</sup>Among participants who reported using a dating app in the past 12 months (*N*=535).

Note: Participants who reported 'I don't wish to say' are not shown.

LGBQ+ identities. These findings align with existing literature suggesting these groups are more likely to experience SH.<sup>2,6,25</sup> Regardless of the environment, SH enables inequalities in gender and sexual identities to manifest. Young people who identify as gender and sexually diverse must be recognised as priority groups for preventing SH. The *Change the Course* report recommended initiatives to address university-based SH and acknowledged the importance of addressing needs from students with diverse identities.<sup>2</sup> Research with larger samples of gender and sexually diverse young people is required to inform appropriate strategies in other settings.

Our results suggest age may play a role in SH. Younger participants had higher odds of experiencing TFSH than older participants. However, this may be confounded by younger people spending more time using technology.<sup>14,26</sup> Participants aged 20–24 years had higher odds of experiencing SH in person than younger participants. One proposed explanation is that

those aged 20–24 years may spend more time in places where SH in person has been identified as a problem (e.g. universities,<sup>2</sup> workplaces,<sup>27</sup> venues where alcohol is served<sup>28</sup>). However, further research is required to understand this association.

Our findings show young people experience SH in person and through technological platforms. Sexual harassment occurred most frequently in person and on dating applications. The *Sex Discrimination Act* considers in-person or TFSH as unlawful when it occurs within employment, education, accommodation and during the provision of goods, services and facilities.<sup>27,29</sup> However, there is no legislation protecting individuals from TFSH outside these settings.<sup>30</sup> If someone is sexually harassed on a dating application (e.g. receives an unsolicited 'dick pic'), it is not considered unlawful.<sup>30</sup> Facebook and Tinder have guidelines that allow reporting of sexually exploitive material, which may result in the material or the perpetrator's account being deleted.<sup>31,32</sup> Technology

**Table 3. Correlates of reporting in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment**  
Ref, Reference category for logistic regression \* $P \leq 0.05$ . \*\* $P \leq 0.001$ .

	Experienced sexual harassment in person in past 12 months ( $n=834$ ); $n$ (%) <sup>A</sup>	Odds ratio (95% confidence interval)	Adjusted odds ratio (95% confidence interval)	Experienced sexual harassment through technology in past 12 months ( $n=600$ ) <sup>A</sup> $n$ (%)	Odds ratio (95% confidence interval)	Adjusted odds ratio (95% confidence interval)
<b>Gender</b>						
Males	105 (30.1)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)	90 (25.9)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)
Females	710 (80.2)	9.4 (7.1–12.5)**	9.2 (6.9–12.2)**	491 (55.7)	3.6 (2.7–4.7)**	3.5 (2.6–4.6)**
Trans and gender diverse	19 (59.4)	3.4 (1.6–7.1)*	2.6 (1.2–5.7)	19 (57.6)	3.9 (1.9–8.1)**	3.0 (1.4–6.5)*
<b>Born in Australia</b>						
No	90 (60.0)	1.0 (Ref)	–	74 (49.0)	1.0 (Ref)	–
Yes	743 (67.1)	1.4 (0.9–1.9)	–	525 (47.6)	0.9 (0.7–1.3)	–
<b>Age group (years)</b>						
15–19	252 (63.8)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)	212 (53.7)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)
20–24	433 (70.1)	1.3 (1.0–1.7)*	1.5 (1.1–2.1)*	288 (46.9)	0.8 (0.6–1.0)*	0.7 (0.6–1.0)*
25–29	149 (58.9)	0.8 (0.6–1.1)	1.1 (0.7–1.7)	100 (39.5)	0.6 (0.4–0.8)**	0.5 (0.4–0.8)**
<b>Currently studying</b>						
No	197 (59.7)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)	148 (45.0)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)
Yes	636 (68.1)	1.4 (1.1–1.9)*	1.4 (0.9–1.9)	450 (48.3)	1.1 (0.9–1.5)	0.8 (0.6–1.1)
<b>Sexual identity</b>						
LGBQ+ <sup>B</sup>	233 (73.3)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)	183 (57.7)	1.0 (Ref)	1.0 (Ref)
Heterosexual	601 (63.4)	0.6 (0.5–0.8)**	0.7 (0.5–0.9)*	417 (44.1)	0.6 (0.4–0.7)**	0.7 (0.5–0.9)*

<sup>A</sup>Per cent of row total. <sup>B</sup>LGBQ+ includes gay, homosexual, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, queer, questioning, don't label myself and other. Note: Participants who reported 'I don't wish to say' are not included. The multivariable logistic regression models adjusted for gender, age group, currently studying and sexual identity.

providers have a responsibility to implement innovative strategies and enforce guidelines.

### Limitations

This study has some limitations. Young people were conveniently sampled online and were not representative of the Australian population. The sample was skewed towards well-educated females; this is common in sexual health research;<sup>33</sup> however, we may have overestimated the frequency of SH. We recruited a small sample of trans and gender diverse participants, thus confidence intervals lack precision. We did not ask participants about perpetrators, severity or responses to SH; further research is needed. Data were self-reported, which may be limited by recall bias and social desirability. Our definition of SH may not account for all experiences young people consider SH; additional validation work is required.

### Conclusion

Young people experience in-person and TFSH; those who identify as female, trans and gender diverse and LGBQ+ are at highest risk. Prevention of in-person and TFSH requires a multi-sectoral response from service providers, policy-makers, academics and technology providers.

### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Goldschlager Family Charitable Foundation and the Burnet Institute, which receives support from the Victorian

Operational Infrastructure Support Program. Megan Lim is supported by the Jim and Margaret Beaver Foundation. The authors acknowledge Michelle Raggatt and Margaret Hellard for their contribution to project implementation. The authors gratefully acknowledge all participants for completing the *Sex, Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* survey.

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