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Gender and Relationship Dynamics in Target-Reported Nightlife Sexual Harassment: An Exploratory Study of Perpetrator Characteristics

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the perpetration of sexual harassment in nightlife settings. This exploratory study examined target-reported experiences of sexual harassment, focusing on the perceived gender of the perpetrator and the target–perpetrator relationship across three harassment types. An online survey was used to examine self-reported experiences of sexual harassment among Australian adults ($N = 958$, 61.3% female). Nearly half (48.7%) of participants reported experiencing nightlife sexual harassment within the past 12 months. Verbal sexual harassment was the most common type of harassment reported by women (43.5%) and gender diverse (57.5%) participants. Across all harassment types, perpetrators were most often male (79.0%–87.9%) and strangers (62.8%–88.7%). However, male targets reported a more even gender distribution of perpetrators, particularly for verbal sexual harassment (50.0% male, 44.4% female) and pressured sexual contact (49.0% female, 45.1% male). Men were more likely than women to know the perpetrator in incidents of physical ($\chi^2 = 7.54$, $p < .001$) and verbal sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 22.71$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that patterns of perpetration vary by harassment type and target gender. Insights into how harassment patterns differ can inform targeted interventions, particularly in policy design, staff training, and bystander engagement.

KEYWORDS

Sexual harassment;
perpetration; gender;
nightlife

Nightlife environments have been identified as high-risk settings for sexual harassment (Mellgren et al., 2018; Quigg et al., 2020). Sexual harassment refers to any unwelcome behavior or conduct of a sexual nature that could reasonably be expected to make the recipient feel intimidated, offended, or humiliated (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023). Sexual harassment can include unwanted physical contact (e.g., groping), unsolicited sexual comments or jokes, and repeated or coercive attempts to initiate sexual contact (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2023; Button, Coomber,

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De Andrade, et al., 2025). In Australia, 36–57% of women and 14–32% of men reported experiences of nightlife-related sexual harassment within the previous three months (Button, Taylor, et al., 2025; Miller et al., 2019). These experiences are associated with a range of emotional and behavioral consequences, including anxiety, discomfort, anger, and avoidance of certain venues or locations (Button, Coomber, De Andrade, et al., 2025; Graham et al., 2017). Literature in the area of nightlife sexual harassment is increasing, particularly around the individual risk factors associated with sexual harassment (e.g., alcohol consumption, age, and gender; Quigg et al., 2020). For instance, women tend to report higher rates of sexual harassment compared to men (Becker & Tinkler, 2015; Miller et al., 2019), and some studies suggest that younger age puts nightlife patrons, particularly women, at a higher risk of experiencing nightlife sexual harassment (Palamar & Griffin, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2019). However, one area that remains notably underexplored is the nature of perpetration in incidents of sexual harassment in nightlife settings (Quigg et al., 2020).

Sexual harassment perpetration

Much of what is known about sexual harassment perpetration comes from research conducted in college, workplace, and domestic settings (see reviews by Costa et al., 2015; Debnath et al., 2025; O’connor et al., 2021). In these settings, the individual who perpetrates sexual harassment is usually known to the target, often as a partner, work colleague, or peer (Gajmer, 2020; O’connell & Korabik, 2000; Stavrou et al., 2016). Ongoing interpersonal and power dynamics are often key contributors to sexual harassment within these contexts (Davis et al., 2023; O’connell & Korabik, 2000). Young adults are also particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment in contexts like the workplace (Rauscher et al., 2023), which may reflect perpetrators’ tendency to target individuals perceived as less likely to challenge or report inappropriate behavior. In settings like workplaces and the home, established social roles and power structures likely influence how, when, and by whom sexual harassment occurs.

Studies conducted within university settings have further demonstrated that perpetrators may target individuals on the basis of their gender (Budd et al., 2019; Mapayi et al., 2026; Martin-Storey et al., 2018). For example, a large Canadian survey of college students ($N = 4,264$) found that the majority (95%) of cisgender women who experienced sexual aggression reported an incident involving a male perpetrator. In contrast, among cisgender men, 63% identified a female perpetrator, and 73% reported at least one same-sex (male) perpetrator (Martin-Storey et al., 2018). While men may underreport female-perpetrated harassment due to stigma and gender norms (Smith et al., 2023), these patterns also likely reflect gender differences in perpetration dynamics. Similarly, the nature of sexual harassment may be influenced by the victim–perpetrator relationship (Stermac et al., 1998). A study of female sexual assault victims at a Toronto care center found that boyfriends and husbands were more likely than strangers or acquaintances to use verbal threats as a means of coercion (Stermac et al., 1998). When the target is known to the perpetrator, an assumption of consent may arise from the pre existing relationship, creating a perceived obligation to comply. Collectively, these findings highlight the importance of gender and victim–perpetrator relationship in influencing patterns of sexual harassment and assault.

Sexual harassment perpetration in nightlife settings

Much less is known about how these perpetrator dynamics operate in nightlife contexts, where researching perpetrators poses distinct practical challenges. Given the tendency of perpetrators in these settings to not recognize their behavior as harmful and the social risks associated with disclosure, empirical studies remain limited (Becker & Tinkler, 2021; Quigg et al., 2020). It should be noted that a tool for measuring perpetration of common sexual harassment and aggressive behaviours in drinking environments has been developed and validated (C-SHADE; Graham et al., 2023); however, it was only recently published and has not yet been widely adopted in nightlife research. Nonetheless, a Swedish study of women's experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces (including nightlife), found that in most cases (81%), the perpetrator was not known to the victim (Mellgren et al., 2018). Although this study did not distinguish between types of sexual harassment or specific settings (e.g., nightlife venues vs. public transport), its findings suggest that sexual harassment in public settings more often involves strangers, differing from patterns seen in workplace or domestic contexts (e.g., Gajmer, 2020). This implies that the established factors identified in other settings (e.g., interpersonal and power dynamics) may be less relevant for understanding sexual harassment in public settings such as nightlife precincts.

One Brazilian study employed entry and exit surveys and identified similar self-reported rates of sexual aggression perpetration (e.g., unwanted touching or kissing) among men (5%) and women (3%; Fung et al., 2021). In comparison, studies drawing on the perspectives of nightlife patrons (Becker & Tinkler, 2021), venue staff (Green, 2022) and observers (Button, Coomber, Taylor, et al., 2025; Graham et al., 2014) indicate that men are more frequently the primary instigators of sexual harassment in nightlife contexts. For example, an observational study of Canadian nightlife venues indicated that approximately 90% of sexual aggression incidents involve male initiators and female targets (Graham et al., 2014). The discrepancies between the self-reported perpetration rates and those identified through observational and interview-based research are likely attributable to differences in research design. Methods that rely on self-reports to measure sexual harassment perpetration, such as those used by Fung et al. (2021), are particularly vulnerable to underreporting due to social desirability bias, especially in face-to-face interviews (Cullen, 2020).

One particularly under-researched area is the perpetration of sexual harassment against gender diverse individuals. Despite evidence that this group experiences disproportionately high rates of sexual harassment (Canan et al., 2024; Martin-Storey et al., 2018), there is a notable lack of research focusing on their experiences in nightlife settings. A recent qualitative study involving interviews with over 60 nonbinary, genderqueer, and transgender individuals found that participants felt a more feminine presentation increased their risk of being targeted, while a more masculine presentation was seen as protective (Bogren et al., 2024). Many participants also described heightened vulnerability in interactions with cisgender men, who were often perceived as potential perpetrators in nightlife settings (Bogren et al., 2024).

The current study

Most research on sexual harassment perpetration has focused on workplace and university settings, where a pre existing relationship between the victim and perpetrator is common.

These settings also tend to have clear reporting mechanisms and legal frameworks that support accountability. In comparison, sexual harassment in public spaces such as nightlife settings is more often perpetrated by strangers (Mellgren et al., 2018). Unlike educational and workplace environments, nightlife settings are also distinct in that intoxication, drug use, and sexualized behavior are typically normalized (Fileborn, 2012). These conditions may not only increase the likelihood of sexual harassment and lead to low reporting rates in nightlife settings (Button, Guala, et al., 2025), but also influence who perpetrates harassment and how it occurs.

Although a small number of studies have examined gender differences in the perpetration of sexual aggression in nightlife contexts (e.g., Fung et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2014), they have not considered whether these patterns vary across different types of harassment (e.g., verbal, physical, or pressured sexual contact), or whether the relationship between target and perpetrator differs. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to provide a more detailed understanding of perpetrator characteristics as described by those who experience harassment. This exploratory study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How do targets' descriptions of their relationship to the perpetrator differ across types of sexual harassment and the gender of the target?
- (2) How does the gender of the perpetrator, as described by targets, differ across types of sexual harassment and the gender of the target?

Method

Procedure

Ethics approval was obtained from the Deakin University Human Research Ethics Committee (DUHREC #2022–284). Participants were initially recruited via social media using a snowball sampling approach. Eligibility criteria for participation required individuals to be aged 18 years or older and to have attended an Australian nightlife venue (e.g., pub, club, or bar) at least once in the previous 12 months. The research team distributed a flyer and survey link across Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, encouraging users to share the survey within their networks. To further extend reach, paid advertising via Meta platforms (\$500 AUD) was also employed. Individuals who clicked the survey link were redirected to Qualtrics, where they were presented with a plain language statement and were required to provide informed consent prior to commencing the 20-minute survey. On completion, participants could choose to enter a draw to win one of ten AU\$50 online gift cards. Social media recruitment occurred between January and September 2023. Of the 607 participants who accessed the survey via social media recruitment materials, 505 were included in the sample. There were 102 responses that were excluded; 2 did not consent, 14 consented but did not respond to any questions, 10 had not attended a nightlife venue in the prior 12 months, and 76 did not complete at least one of the key harassment items.

Due to the smaller than anticipated sample size and limited recruitment of male participants via social media ($n = 73$), additional participants were recruited through the Qualtrics panel provider service. In alignment with the broader project aims, the research team requested a sample of 300 males and 150 females to increase the representation of male participants in the overall sample. This decision was made to

support a better understanding of men's experiences of nightlife sexual harassment, which remain under-researched (Quigg et al., 2020). The Qualtrics team oversaw recruitment, data collection, and participant reimbursement. Panel recruitment took place between September and October 2023, yielding 460 responses at a cost of AU \$10.86 per participant. Seven participants were removed due to incomplete responses ($n = 453$).

Participants

In total, 958 participants recruited via social media or panel, who had responded to at least one of the three sexual harassment variables of interest (see below) were included in the final sample. The sample consisted of 592 females (61.3%), 325 males (33.7%), 25 non-binary individuals (2.6%), seven people who identified as transgender (0.7%), five people who preferred to self-describe (0.5%) and four people who preferred not to self-describe or specify (0.4%). Participants' ages ranged from 18–65 years ($Mdn = 25$ years, $IQR = 22, 30$ years).

Measures

The survey instrument used in the present study was developed as part of a broader project on sexual harm in Australian nightlife settings and comprised multiple sections. The items relevant to the current study are outlined below.

Demographics

Age was measured as a continuous variable and subsequently recoded into a categorical variable for the purpose of analysis (1 = 18–24 years, 2 = 25–30 years, 3 = >30 years). A total of 382 participants (42%) were aged 18–24 years, 340 (37.4%) were aged 25–30 years, and 188 (20.7%) were aged older than 30 years. Age data were missing for 48 participants due to an error in panel data collection. Given the small number of participants in each gender-diverse category (e.g., non-binary, transgender), gender was recoded as follows: 1 = male, 2 = female, 3 = gender diverse (encompassing all other gender identities; $n = 40, 4.2\%$). Although the authors acknowledge that the “gender diverse” category is not homogenous, this approach was necessary to allow inclusion of participants beyond the male–female binary that is typically the focus of nightlife research (Quigg et al., 2020)

Verbal sexual harassment

Participants were asked “While you were in a nightlife setting, or immediately after leaving a nightlife setting, have you been verbally harassed in the last 12 months?” Those who responded affirmatively were then asked, “Did you experience the verbal harassment in a sexual (e.g., inappropriate sexual jokes, unsolicited requests for sexual favours) or aggressive manner (e.g., sworn or yelled at)?” In this context, “aggressive” was used to denote non-sexual verbal aggression, rather than to suggest that sexual harassment cannot also be aggressive. For the purposes of this study, only data from participants who reported experiencing verbal harassment in a sexual manner were included in the analysis.

Physical sexual harassment

Participants were asked “While you were in a nightlife setting, or immediately after leaving a nightlife setting, have you been physically harassed in the last 12 months?” Those who responded affirmatively were subsequently asked, “Did you experience the physical harassment in a sexual (e.g., pinching of the bottom, groping, fondling, kissing) or aggressive manner (e.g., pushing, shoving, choking, slapping, punching)?” In this context, “aggressive” was used to denote non-sexual physical aggression, rather than to suggest that sexual harassment cannot also be aggressive. For the purposes of this study, only data from participants who reported experiencing physical harassment in a sexual manner were included in the analysis.

Pressured sexual contact

Participants were asked “In the past 12 months, have you experienced someone continually arguing or pressuring you into sexual contact in a nightlife setting or immediately after leaving a nightlife setting when you didn’t want to?” This is distinct from verbal sexual harassment (i.e., which may just be a once off remark), as pressured sexual contact involves persistent, back-and-forth harassment.

Perpetrator characteristics

For each type of sexual harassment, participants who responded affirmatively were asked two follow-up questions regarding the most recent incident. The first asked, “What was your relationship to the perpetrator?,” with response options presented in a dropdown list that included: stranger, acquaintance, date, casual sexual partner, close friend, ex-partner, partner and family member. A binary variable was created to indicate whether the perpetrator was known to the target (i.e., all categories except stranger) or not known (i.e., stranger). The second follow-up question asked participants to indicate the perceived gender of the perpetrator by responding to the question, “What was the presenting gender of the perpetrator?,” with options including male, female, and unsure, gender diverse.

Analytical plan

Given the exploratory and descriptive nature of the study, analyses focused on prevalence estimates and bivariate comparisons rather than multivariable modeling. Descriptive statistics were used to examine the prevalence of sexual harassment across age and gender. Chi-square tests of independence assessed group differences in harassment type, perpetrator gender, and perpetrator relationship. Where expected cell counts were below five, Fisher’s Exact Tests were used. Analyses focused on participants’ most recent incident of reported harassment. As this was an exploratory study aimed at identifying broad trends rather than testing specific hypotheses, Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons were not applied.

Results

Table 1 shows the proportion of participants who reported experiencing sexual harassment in the past 12 months across age and gender. Overall, just under half (48.7%) of participants had experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in or around a nightlife venue in the

Table 1. Experiences of nightlife sexual harassment in the past 12 months across gender and age.

		Gender					Age (years)				
	Total "yes"	Male	Female	Gender diverse	χ^2	Cramer's V	18–24	25–30	31+	χ^2	Cramer's V
Sexual harassment (any) n = 958	467 (48.7%)	107 (32.9%)	334 (56.3%)	26 (65%)	50.4***	.23	215 (56.3%)	159 (46.8%)	69 (36.7%)	20.1***	.15
Verbal sexual Harassment n = 958	334 (34.9%)	53 (16.3%)	258 (43.5%)	23 (57.5%)	77.8***	.29	152 (39.8%)	111 (32.6%)	50 (26.6%)	10.5**	.11
Physical sexual harassment n = 922	183 (19.8%)	29 (9.2%)	140 (24.7%)	14 (35.9%)	37.3***	.20	85 (23.5%)	58 (17.5%)	27 (14.7%)	7.2*	.09
Pressured sexual contact n = 906	243 (26.8%)	76 (24.2%)	154 (27.8%)	13 (33.3%)	2.24	.05	123 (34.6%)	78 (23.9%)	28 (15.5%)	24.6***	.17

Notes: Data are presented as $n = \text{yes}$ (column percentage). For example, 32.9% of males reported experiencing sexual harassment (any). * represents $p < .05$, ** represents $p < .01$, *** represents $p < .001$. A total of 55 participants did not specify their age; therefore, age-based comparisons were conducted with the following sample sizes: any sexual harassment ($n = 910$), verbal harassment ($n = 911$), physical harassment ($n = 877$), and pressured sexual contact ($n = 863$).

prior 12 months. Chi-square tests showed significant differences ($p < .001$) in the prevalence of verbal and physical sexual harassment, whereas pressured sexual contact did not significantly differ by gender ($p > .05$). A higher proportion of women and gender-diverse participants reported verbal and physical sexual harassment compared with men. Verbal harassment (e.g., unsolicited requests for sexual favors) was the most common form of sexual harassment experienced by women (43.5%) and gender diverse (57.5%) participants. For men, the most commonly reported form was pressured sexual contact (24.2%).

Chi square tests showed that the prevalence of each type of sexual harassment differed across age groups ($p < .05$). The highest proportions of sexual harassment were reported by participants aged 18–24 years, with more than half (56.3%) reporting at least one form of sexual harassment in the past 12 months. Examination of the standardized residuals indicated that these differences were driven by higher-than-expected rates among participants aged 18–24 years and lower-than-expected rates among those aged 31 years and older, while participants aged 25–30 years did not differ from expected rates.

Table 2 presents participants' reports of perpetrator gender for the most recent incident across each type of sexual harassment. In the majority of cases, participants identified the perpetrator as male, with this proportion being highest for verbal sexual harassment (87.9%) and lowest for pressured sexual contact (79.4%). However, when incidents were analyzed by the gender of the target, different patterns emerged. Chi-square tests examining associations between target gender and perpetrator gender were conducted using male and female categories only, due to small cell sizes in other groups. Chi-square tests indicated a significant association between target gender and perpetrator gender for verbal sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 67.1$, $p < .001$), physical sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 60.5$, Fisher's Exact Test $p < .001$) and pressured sexual contact ($\chi^2 = 54.2$, Fisher's Exact Test $p < .001$), indicating that the gender of the perpetrator differed significantly depending on whether the target was male or female. When the target was a woman, the perpetrator was identified as male in nearly all (>95%) cases across all types of sexual harassment. Similarly, for gender diverse targets, males were reported to be the perpetrator in the majority of cases for pressured

Table 2. Perceived gender of perpetrator by type of sexual harassment and gender of target, for most recent incident.

	All cases	Female targets	Male targets	Gender Diverse targets
Perceived gender of perpetrator				
<i>Verbal sexual harassment</i>				
n	232	181	36	15
Male	204 (87.9%)	174 (96.1%)	18 (50.0%)	12 (80.0%)
Female	22 (9.5%)	4 (2.2%)	16 (44.4%)	2 (13.3%)
Gender diverse	2 (0.9%)	1 (0.6%)	1 (2.8%)	1 (6.7%)
Unsure	4 (1.7%)	2 (1.1%)	1 (2.8%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Physical sexual harassment</i>				
n	132	101	21	10
Male	112 (84.8%)	98 (97.0%)	7 (33.3%)	7 (77.8%)
Female	17 (12.9%)	2 (2.0%)	13 (61.9%)	2 (22.2%)
Gender diverse	1 (0.8%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Unsure	2 (1.5%)	1 (1.0%)	1 (4.8%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Pressured sexual contact</i>				
n	175	115	51	9
Male	139 (79.4%)	110 (95.7%)	23 (45.1%)	6 (66.7%)
Female	31 (17.7%)	4 (3.5%)	25 (49.0%)	2 (22.2%)
Gender diverse	4 (2.3%)	1 (0.0%)	1 (2.0%)	1 (11.1%)
Unsure	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (3.9%)	0 (0%)

sexual contact (66.7%), physical (77.8%), and verbal (80.0%) sexual harassment. In contrast, for male targets, both male and female perpetrators were reported at similar rates for verbal harassment (50.0% and 44.4%, respectively) and pressured sexual contact (45.1% and 49.0%, respectively).

Table 3 presents the relationship between the target and the perpetrator, by type of sexual harassment and gender of the target for the most recent incident. Across all types of sexual harassment, the most commonly reported relationship was that of a stranger. Chi-square tests were conducted to examine whether there was a significant difference between male and female targets in terms of whether the perpetrator was someone known to them or a stranger. Men (66.7%) were less likely than women (91.9%) to report verbal sexual harassment perpetrated by a stranger ($\chi^2 = 22.71$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .28$). Similarly, men (46.2%) were less likely than women (53.8%) to report physical sexual harassment perpetrated by a stranger $\chi^2 = 7.54$, $p < .001$, Cramer's $V = .22$. No significant gender differences were found for pressured sexual contact, $\chi^2 = 2.1$, $p = .15$, Cramer's $V = .10$.

Supplementary analyses

Prior research using these data found significant differences in reported rates of sexual harassment across the female panel and social media recruitment samples (Button, Taylor, et al., 2025). Accordingly, supplementary chi-square analyses were conducted to examine whether perpetrator relationship (known vs. stranger) differed across recruitment source among women. No significant differences were found for perpetrator relationships categories for pressured sexual contact ($\chi^2 = 1.63$, $p = .20$), physical sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 2.38$, $p = .12$), or verbal sexual harassment ($\chi^2 = 4.07$, $p = .05$) across recruitment types. Equivalent analyses could not be conducted for men because of small cell sizes. However, the prior research did not identify differences in rates of sexual harassment across panel and social media recruitment samples among men (Button, Taylor, et al., 2025), suggesting recruitment-related differences may be less likely within this group.

Table 3. Relationship to perpetrator by type of sexual harassment and gender of target, for most recent incident.

	All cases	Female targets	Male targets	Gender diverse targets
Relationship to Perpetrator				
<i>Verbal sexual harassment</i>				
n	n = 302	n = 236	n = 45	n = 21
Stranger	268 (88.7%)	217 (91.9%)	30 (66.7%)	100%
Acquaintance	16 (5.3%)	11 (4.7%)	5 (11.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Date	5 (1.7%)	1 (0.4%)	4 (8.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Casual Sexual Partner	5 (1.7%)	1 (0.4%)	4 (8.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Partner	3 (1.0%)	2 (0.8%)	1 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Close Friend	3 (1.0%)	3 (1.3%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Ex-Partner	1 (.3%)	1 (0.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Family Member	1 (.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0.0%)
<i>Physical sexual harassment</i>				
n	n = 175	n = 135	n = 26	n = 14
Stranger	134 (76.6%)	107 (79.3%)	14 (53.8%)	13 (92.9%)
Acquaintance	24 (13.7%)	23 (17%)	1 (3.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Date	6 (3.4%)	0 (0.0%)	6 (23.1%)	0 (0.0%)
Casual Sexual Partner	3 (1.7%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (11.5%)	3 (1.7%)
Partner	3 (1.7%)	2 (1.5%)	1 (3.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Close Friend	1 (0.6%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (3.8%)	0 (0.0%)
Ex-Partner	4 (2.3%)	3 (2.2%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (7.1%)
<i>Pressured sexual contact</i>				
n	n = 222	n = 143	n = 66	n = 13
Stranger	139 (62.6%)	93 (65%)	36 (54.5%)	10 (76.9%)
Acquaintance	37 (16.7%)	29 (20.3%)	6 (9.1%)	2 (15.4%)
Date	15 (6.8%)	6 (4.2%)	9 (13.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Casual Sexual Partner	8 (3.6%)	2 (1.4%)	5 (7.6%)	1 (7.1%)
Partner	6 (2.7%)	4 (2.8%)	3 (4.5%)	0 (0.0%)
Close Friend	13 (5.9%)	8 (5.6%)	5 (7.6%)	0 (0.0%)
Ex-Partner	3 (1.4%)	1 (0.7%)	2 (3.0%)	0%

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore differences in the target-reported perpetrator–victim relationship and perceived gender of the perpetrator across three distinct types of nightlife sexual harassment. Approximately half of the respondents reported having experienced sexual harassment in a nightlife setting in the past 12 months. Among the various forms of sexual harassment examined, verbal harassment was reported most frequently, followed by pressured sexual contact and physical sexual harassment. Men and individuals not known to the victim were most commonly identified as perpetrators across all forms of sexual harassment; however, different patterns emerged when these characteristics were examined in relation to the gender of the target.

The findings of the current study indicate that rates of victimization are particularly high among younger adults aged 18–24, women, and gender diverse individuals, which is consistent with prior research (Bogren et al., 2024; Quigg et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2019). Verbal sexual harassment (e.g., sexualized comments and jokes) was the most common type of sexual harassment experienced overall, and by women and gender diverse individuals. This may reflect the normalization of sexualized comments in nightlife environments, where it is often minimized, framed as humor, or dismissed as harmless (Anitha et al., 2021; Fileborn, 2012; Yasmine & Gusnita, 2024). These responses reduce accountability for perpetrators and make the behavior more difficult to confront or challenge (Davis et al., 2023).

Moreover, men were considerably less likely to report experiencing physical and verbal sexual harassment compared to women. It is important to note that these findings reflect self-reported experiences, which are influenced not only by exposure but also by how individuals interpret and label behaviors as harassment. Prior research suggests that men are less likely than women to perceive or label certain behaviors as unwanted sexual attention, which may partly contribute to reported gender differences (Button et al., 2026; Prego-Meleiro et al., 2022). Additionally, social norms that associate men with physical strength and authoritativeness (Seem & Clark, 2006) may influence how overt forms of sexual harassment toward men are enacted, particularly if such behaviors are seen as carrying a greater risk of resistance or confrontation. This could also explain why pressured sexual contact was the most common form of harassment reported by men, as coercion may be seen as a less risky tactic in settings where sexual advances are more easily justified or excused (Fileborn, 2012). Furthermore, differences in perceived consequences may also play a role in influencing how incidents are interpreted and reported. Findings from the broader project (using the same dataset) indicate that men report fewer emotional and behavioral consequences following nightlife sexual harassment (Button, Coomber, De Andrade, et al., 2025). While further research is necessary, lower perceived consequences may reduce the salience of certain encounters, particularly ambiguous or stranger-initiated behaviors, potentially influencing which incidents are labeled as harassment by men.

Consistent with previous research (Mellgren et al., 2018), sexual harassment in nightlife settings is more often perpetrated by strangers, particularly in cases involving women and gender diverse individuals. This trend was less consistent for male targets in this study, who reported a wider range of perpetrator relationships. Notably, one-third of physical sexual harassment cases with male targets were attributed to a date or casual sexual partner. This finding is consistent with prior college research, which indicates that male targets are more likely to be known to the perpetrator compared to female targets (Budd et al., 2019; Zheng & Zhang, 2025). This may reflect underlying gendered expectations, wherein men feel compelled to tolerate or accept physical advances due to prior consensual contact or internalized social norms that discourage the refusal of sexual attention (Khera et al., 2022). However, it should be noted that women also experience internalized relationship norms that can create pressure to fulfill certain sexual roles or prioritize men's experiences (Greer et al., 2025). The observed gender differences could also reflect women's higher exposure to stranger-perpetrated harassment, making incidents involving known partners less prominent within their overall experiences.

Moreover, almost all cases of female targeted sexual harassment were perpetrated by men. This is consistent with the gendered dynamics of nightlife settings, where men are often encouraged through social norms, peer influence, and behavioral expectations to initiate sexual contact (Cowley, 2014; Graham et al., 2024; Green, 2022; Gunby et al., 2020). When men are encouraged to approach women, often in assertive or persistent ways, it increases the likelihood that some of these advances will be unwanted (Cowley, 2014; Graham et al., 2024). The majority of incidents reported by gender diverse individuals also involved male perpetrators. This may reflect the way gender diverse individuals are often perceived as transgressing traditional gender norms, which can provoke hostility or hyper-sexualization from cisgender men (Webster et al., 2025).

Pressured sexual contact demonstrated a somewhat different pattern of perpetration compared to physical and verbal sexual harassment. A slightly higher proportion of

perpetrators were women, and nearly 40% of incidents involved someone with a pre existing relationship to the victim. Physical and verbal sexual harassment may be more strongly associated with environmental characteristics (e.g., low lighting and crowding) that afford a degree of anonymity to perpetrators who are strangers to the victim (Button, Coomber, Taylor, et al., 2025; Macintyre & Homel, 1997). In contrast, pressured sexual contact may be more strongly influenced by interpersonal dynamics. In such cases, a prior relationship may serve as a significant facilitating factor, as the familiarity and existing social connection may lower resistance or create a sense of obligation for the target.

Implications

The findings of the current study highlight that patterns of perpetration in nightlife-related sexual harassment differ from those observed in other settings (Gajmer, 2020; O'connell & Korabik, 2000), and therefore warrant targeted research and intervention. This could include examining how factors such as venue culture, staff practices, and social norms contribute to different patterns of harassment, and considering how these factors might be disrupted through context-specific prevention efforts. Additionally, while women were most often targeted by strangers who were male presenting, male targets reported a broader range of perpetrator relationships and genders. Pressured sexual contact was particularly distinct, often involving known individuals and a higher proportion of female perpetrators. These findings show that nightlife sexual harassment does not follow a uniform pattern. Researchers, venue operators, and governments should take these differences into account when developing and trialing intervention and prevention strategies in nightlife settings. For example, awareness campaigns and staff bystander trainings could include training on recognizing sexual harassment, beyond stereotypical nightlife harassment that is easily observable (e.g., groping and grinding; Button, Coomber, Taylor, et al., 2025). This could include recognizing coercion in situations where patrons know each other and avoiding assumptions that all sexual interactions are consensual based on prior familiarity. Training could also involve identifying verbal sexual harassment, particularly when it is framed as humor.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this study contributes to the limited research on perpetrators of nightlife sexual harassment, several limitations must be acknowledged. The current study utilized a convenience sample and is therefore unlikely to be representative of the broader population of regular nightlife patrons. Given this was an exploratory study, the analyses were descriptive and relied on bivariate comparisons; therefore, the findings do not account for potential confounding variables. Future research should employ multivariable modeling, with larger samples to examine whether observed differences remain after adjusting for these factors, and to explore whether patterns of nightlife sexual harassment vary across age groups and gender. Additionally, only a small number of survey items focused on perpetrator characteristics, restricting the depth of analysis. Future research could incorporate additional factors such as perpetrator intoxication, drug use, and group dynamics, and should also seek to include data collected directly from individuals who engage in such behaviors.

While behavioral descriptors and examples were used to distinguish three forms of sexual harassment, the wording of the items remained somewhat broad and could have been more specific (e.g., clarifying whether pressured sexual contact involved verbal, physical, or combined behaviors). Future qualitative research could provide greater detail regarding the specific behaviors captured within each category and examine how these experiences may differ across genders and relational contexts. Although the study sought to include gender diverse participants, the sample size was small, limiting the generalizability of findings related to perpetrator gender and relationship dynamics for this group. A similar limitation applies to the number of male participants, particularly those who reported physical sexual harassment. Consequently, interpretations concerning perpetrator gender and victim–perpetrator relationship patterns for male and gender diverse participants should be made with caution. Finally, differences in recruitment methods (i.e., panel vs. social media) can influence sample characteristics (Belliveau et al., 2022; Button, Taylor, et al., 2025), which may have impacted the findings.

Conclusion

This study highlights that patterns of perpetration vary across different types of nightlife-related sexual harassment and differ according to the gender of the target. Women and gender diverse individuals most often experienced physical and verbal harassment from male strangers, while male targets reported experiences involving a broader range of perpetrator genders and relationships. Pressured sexual contact emerged as a particularly common form of harassment, especially among men, and may be influenced more by relational dynamics than opportunistic behavior. Future research is needed to further explore these perpetrator dynamics, particularly among male and gender diverse targets and to examine other factors associated with perpetration. Overall, these findings underscore the need for targeted, context-specific interventions that account for the diversity of perpetration patterns in nightlife settings.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Kira Button:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Dominique de Andrade:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Kerri Coomber:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Nicholas Taylor:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Zara Quigg:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Eric Koukounas:** Supervision, Writing – review & editing; **Peter Miller:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Data availability statement

The ethics approval for the current study does not permit the dataset to be made publicly available.

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