
Let's talk about sexual harassment

An investigation on sexual harassment in the study environment at Copenhagen Business School

Executive Summary

The CBS BiS Platform for Diversity & Difference asked students at Copenhagen Business School about their perceptions of and experiences with sexual harassment in their study environment. 429 students replied to the survey, which consisted of both closed and open field questions.

The aim of the study was to understand what behavior students perceive and identify as sexual harassment as well as what behavior students regard as acceptable and normal in their study environment. Additionally, it investigated the experience of CBS students with sexual harassment at their university. The survey can be grouped in five blocks: **(1) what defines sexual harassment, (2) perceptions of boundary lines, (3) experiences of sexual harassment, (4) opinions on sexual harassment and (5) responding to sexual harassment.**

The survey shows that sexual harassment is a present and a considerable problem for the students. Moreover, it shows that it is difficult for individuals to interpret and evaluate their experiences of sexual harassment. The negotiation of what constitutes sexual harassment and what not, where to 'draw the line' and how to delineate grey zones is difficult and ongoing. The data further shows, that a great part of behavior, which is perceived as sexual harassment, is nonetheless deemed acceptable or normal behavior in the study environment. This leads to the suggestion that sexual harassment is normalized in the university context. This conclusion is supported by the fact that only a very low number of cases of sexual harassment are being reported.

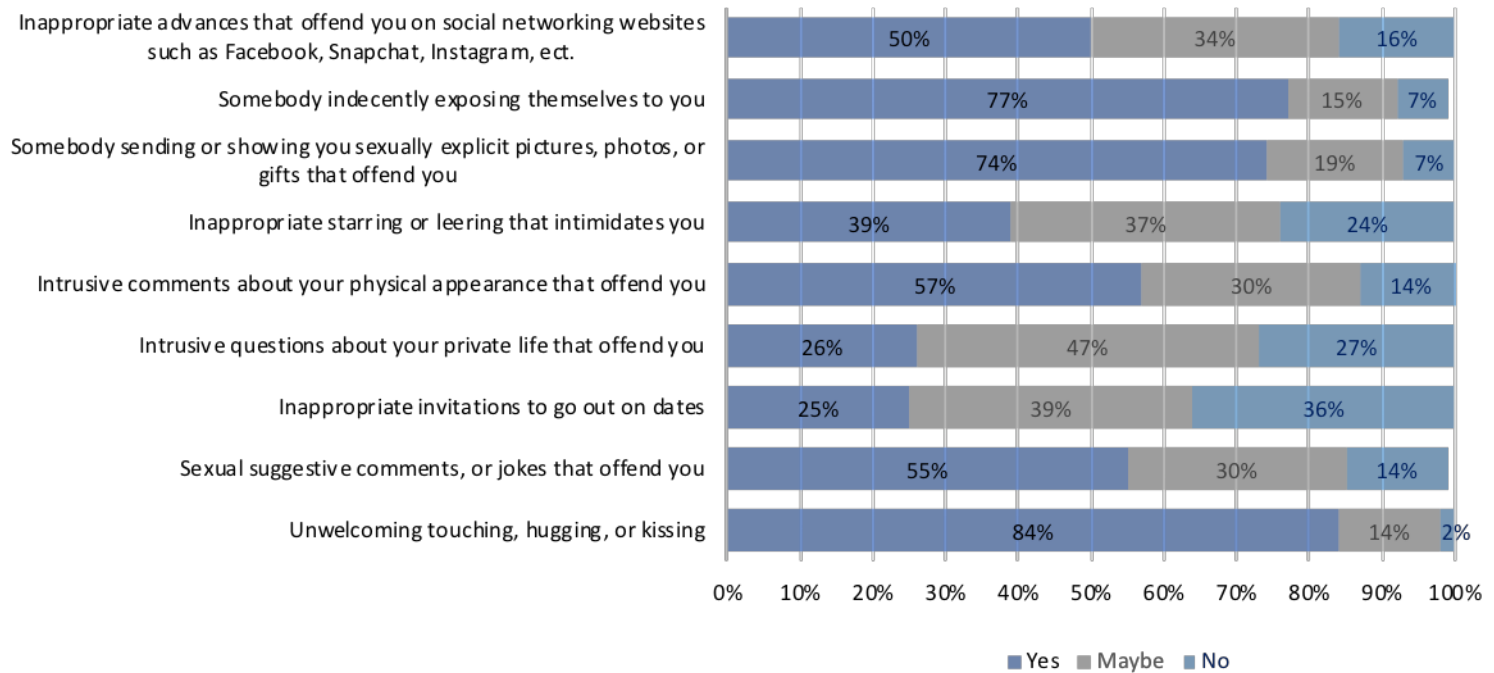
The results therefore call upon further action from all actors within Copenhagen Business School, including management, faculty, staff and students to raise awareness about the issue of sexual harassment and how to respond to it, investigate harassment cases and create better support structures for students who experience sexual harassment in their study environment.

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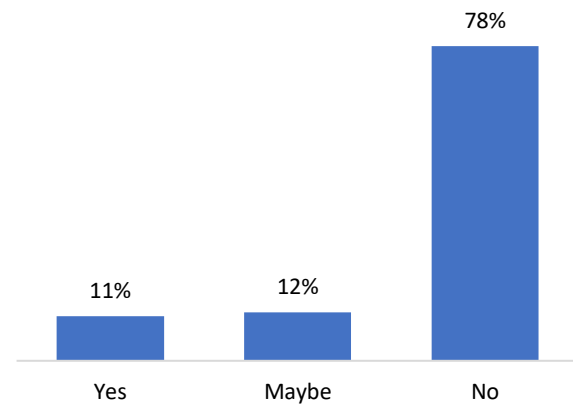
1. What Defines Sexual Harassment?

Figure 1. Are the following situations acts of sexual harassment?



There were differences in responses when determining whether a situation is indeed considered an act of sexual harassment. It was found that more physically-related acts were indeed considered sexual harassment (i.e. unwelcoming contact, exposing themselves, sexually explicit pictures). Instances such as intrusive questions about one’s private life, inappropriate staring, or inappropriate invitations to go out on dates were more ambiguous in whether or not they were considered sexual harassment. Students reported that despite experiencing situations where they felt uncomfortable, some were still unsure whether or not it was sexual harassment.

Figure 2. Have you ever experienced a situation at CBS in which you felt uncomfortable, but were not sure if it was an instance of sexual harassment or not?



Being asked in an open field question how they would define sexual harassment, many students referred to it as the crossing of individual boundaries, lines or limits. The following four student answers exemplify such focus on individual boundaries:

“When someone steps over your personal boundaries regarding sexual behavior.”

“Actions that for some reason go beyond a person’s limits, either physical or mentally with regards to intimacy, sexual orientation etc.”

“I would explain it as someone crossing my boundaries.”

“Sexual harassment is when you cross another person's boundaries either physically or verbally.”

Although the above answers do emphasize that the judgement of whether an action is considered to be sexual harassment lies with the harassed individual, some students explicitly mentioned that whether or not something is considered as sexual harassment should be defined by the harassed person:

“Any comments or acts related to your gender or sexuality that are unwanted or make you feel offended or degraded. It counts as sexual harassment if the victim feels intimidated/offended/degraded even if this was not the explicit intent of the harasser.”

“Depends what I find offensive, not what the person deems appropriate.”

“Sexual harassment for me is subjective and when you cross a line of another person’s boundaries. It is up to the individual, when it is sexual harassment and when it is just fun / flirting.”

However, there seems to be a disagreement in regards to whether the intent of the (potential) harasser plays a role in defining something as sexual harassment. While some believe that no matter the intent, acts are sexual harassment if they are perceived that way, others think that a person’s intention does matter and should be taken into account:

“Offending someone sexually. - (e.g. forced physical contact, referencing one’s body, insinuating sexual activity, etc.) - even if the offense was unintended.”

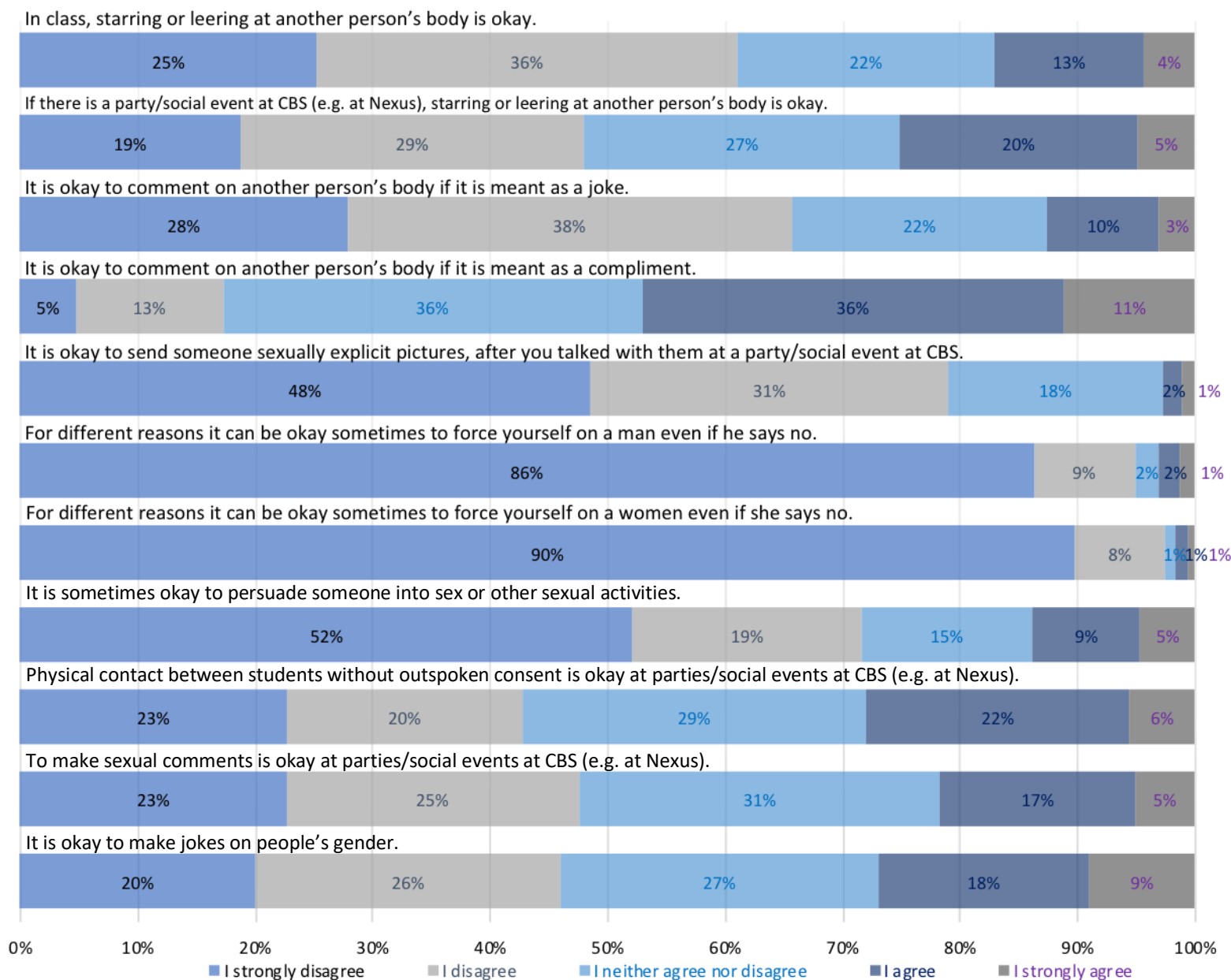
“I believe sexual harassment might be intended or unintended, but the key is how an interaction/ conversation is received and experienced by the receiving part.”

“What makes harassment sexual is the intent behind, that the one who exercises it feels sexually attracted to the target and expresses it in a way that fulfills the criteria of harassment.”

“Everyone can make a mistake and say something stupid, but if it's continuous and intentional, then it's harassment.”

2. Perceptions of Boundary Lines

Figure 3. Please indicate in how far you (dis)agree with the following statements:



Respondents mainly felt that the acts of sexual harassment listed were generally not okay. However, most participants seemed to be more okay with commenting on a person's body if it was meant as a compliment. An overwhelming majority of respondents felt that it was not okay for an individual to force themselves on either a man or woman if he or she said no. Students seemed to be more divided in whether such acts were okay in contexts involving a party or social event on campus.

Especially concerning jokes and comments on a person's gender or sexuality, students seem divided in regards to whether or not this should be defined as sexual harassment and if it is acceptable behavior in the university context:

"Jokes about women 'who should stay in the kitchen' or whatever is inappropriate. Students bashing other students' choice of clothing is also not okay. Degrading men and/or women, LGBTQ persons, etc. is never okay!"

"If you joke about my body or other characteristics of my gender that's harassment."

"It is very common for the guys to comment on the girls' bodies, clothing etc. It is often meant as jokes, but it makes it hard to be taken seriously."

"Jokes in-between lines are often intended to sound ridiculous, so no one thinks the person means it. But I often have a strong feeling they actually meant it."

"I agree that joking about gender is not okay if it is with ill intent and the person is trying to hurt other people with it. Otherwise I think it is totally fine, especially if you know the audience can appreciate the joke."

"People make jokes about everything and that's totally okay!"

"Mostly I perceive it not as sexual harassment but more as jokes."

"People make indecent jokes, advances, etc. all the time but pass it off as jokes, etc. You should be able to joke about anything, but the premise of your joke, etc. should not be from a place of sexism or racism."

Some students refer to social contexts, such as parties on the CBS campus, to give examples of situations in which acts of sexual harassment are deemed acceptable or normal:

"I think this is a quite normal experience for many females when attending parties. Especially when people are drinking alcohol, it is suddenly okay!"

"Usually the line for what is and isn't appropriate is blurred when alcohol is involved."

"Random smack in the bum at Nexus parties. This happens a lot in the Danish nightlife, so not specific for CBS."

3. Experiences of Sexual Harassment

Figure 4: At CBS, have you ever experienced any of the following?

Please indicate which one of these you have experienced yourself by ticking the corresponding box. The situation can relate to experiences in class, during breaks, in the canteen, at CBS social events (e.g. Nexus parties), on campus, etc.

Experiences of Sexual Harassment	Yes	No
Someone made negative remarks about me because of my gender or told jokes that ‘put down’ men/women/LGBTQI people.	25%	75%
Someone made a sexual remark about my clothing, body, or sexual activities.	25%	75%
Someone made unwanted physical contact with me.	20%	80%
Someone verbally propositioned me to participate in sexual activity.	14%	86%
Someone shared material with sexual content about me online without my consent (for example on Facebook, Snapchat or other social media).	2%	98%
Someone exposed themselves indecently to me (for example showing their genitalia).	2%	98%
Someone asked me for sexual favours in return for grades, letters of recommendation or similar.	0%	100%
Someone made explicit, unwanted sexual advances towards me.	13%	87%
Someone pressured me into having sex with them (for example sexual intercourse, oral sex, anal sex, or forced masturbation).	3%	97%
I experienced none of these at CBS	59%	41%

Figure 5: At CBS, have you ever witnessed any of the following?

Please indicate which one of these you have witnessed by ticking the corresponding box. The situation can relate to experiences in class, during breaks, in the canteen, at CBS social events (e.g. Nexus parties), on campus, etc.

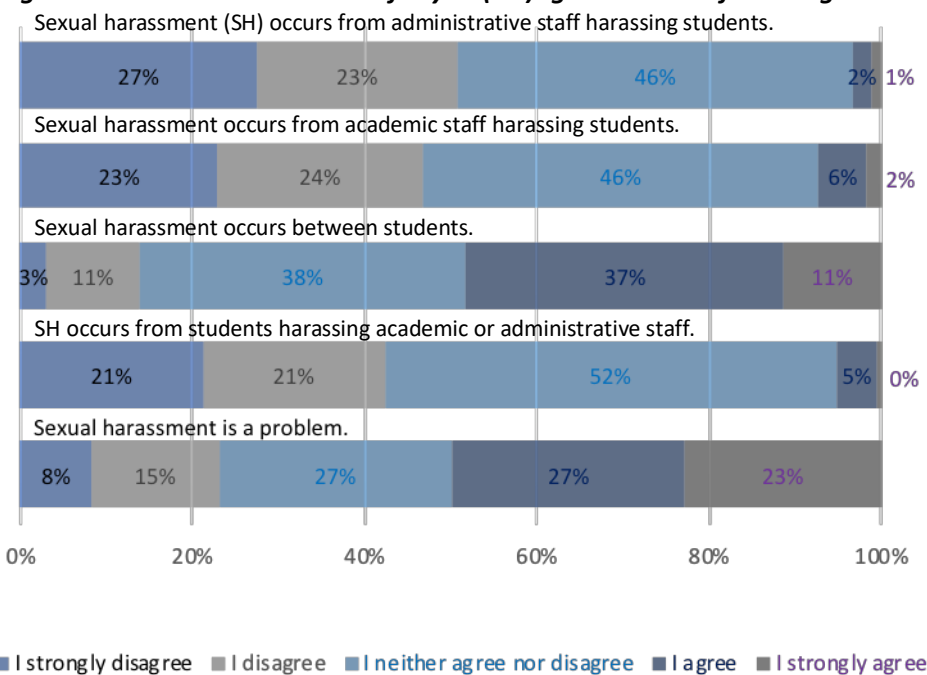
Witnessing Sexual Harassment	Yes	No
Someone made negative remarks about women as a group or told jokes that ‘put down’ women.	44%	56%
Someone made negative remarks about men as a group or told jokes that ‘put down’ men.	22%	78%
Someone made negative remarks about LGBTIQ people as a group or told jokes that ‘put down’ LGBTIQ people.	27%	73%
Someone made a sexual remark about a student’s clothing, body, or sexual activities.	34%	66%
Someone made physical contact with a student who did not want this contact.	20%	80%
Someone verbally propositioned a student to participate in sexual activity.	9%	91%
Someone shared material with sexual content about a student online without the student’s consent (for example on Facebook, Snapchat or other social media).	4%	96%
Someone exposed themselves indecently to a student (for example showing their genitalia).	3%	97%
Someone asked a student for sexual favours in return for grades, letters of recommendation or similar.	0%	100%
Someone made explicit, unwanted sexual advances towards a student.	14%	86%
I witnessed none of these at CBS	42%	58%

Overall, 41% of students indicated that they experienced some form of sexual harassment at CBS while 58% indicate having witnessed it. Of the sexual harassment acts experienced, most occurred in the form of sexual remarks in relation to one’s gender, sexuality, physical appearance, or sexual activities. Unwanted physical contact was also a more common form of sexual harassment for those who had experienced it. None of the participants experienced or witnessed someone asking for sexual favors in return for grades. It was also uncommon to experience someone pressuring an individual to perform sexual acts.

4. Opinions on Sexual Harassment

About half of the participants felt that sexual harassment was a problem at CBS. Additionally, the responses imply that sexual harassment occurs mainly between CBS students. However, the qualitative data shows that sexual harassment also occurs from both administrative and academic staff to students. Participants did not feel as though it was common for students to sexually harass administrative and academic staff.

Figure 6: Please indicate in how far you (dis)agree with the following statements.



5. Responding to Sexual Harassment

Figure 7. If you have experienced and/or witnessed any of the before-mentioned situations at CBS, how did you react?

Response to Sexual Harassment	Yes	No
I told family members, friends, or fellow students.	27%	73%
I talked to an employee at CBS (e.g. a professor, study guides, student guidance counsellors, student hub etc.)	3%	97%
I reported it to the police or other authorities external to CBS.	1%	99%
I did not speak about it with anyone.	20%	80%
Other	17%	83%
Prefer not to say	5%	95%

It was found that most respondents who had experienced sexual harassment at CBS did not report or tell others about the occurrence. Of those who did respond to the sexual harassment occurrence, most told their family, friends, or fellow students. Only 3% who had experienced sexual harassment on campus reported it to an employee at CBS and only 1% reported it to the authorities, such as the police.

Figure 8. Information about sexual harassment should be integrated into study curricula.

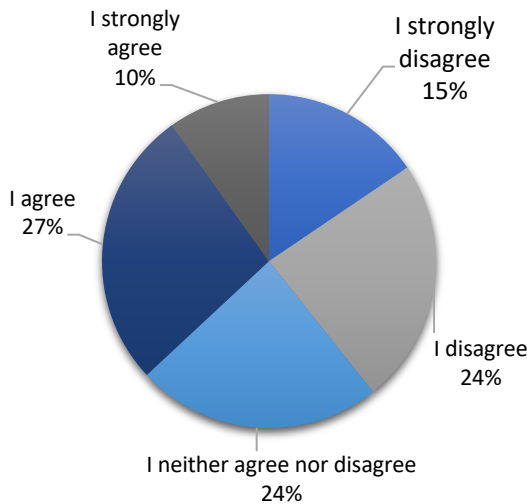


Figure 9. The yearly student evaluation should include a question regarding sexual harassment.

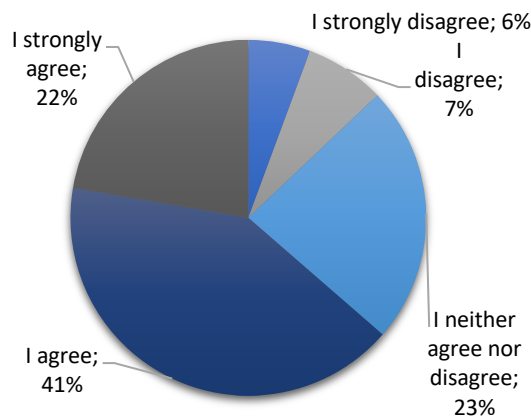
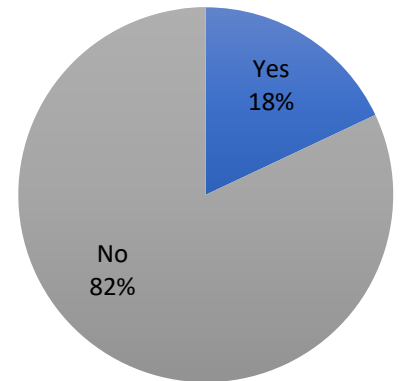


Figure 10. If you experienced sexual harassment at CBS, would you know where to get advice and help at CBS?



Even though the sexual harassment incidents happened in the study environment, a vast majority of the participants would not know where to seek help and advice. Moreover, many students believe that the yearly student evaluation should include a question regarding sexual harassment, while opinions are more split in regards to integrating information about sexual harassment into study curricula.

In terms of reactions to sexual harassment, it was also mentioned by students that they confronted the concerning person directly. As exemplified in the following statement:

“I told them to not do that and explained why it was inappropriate.”

Additionally, some students implied that the situations were not severe enough for them to react in any particular way:

“Personally, it's more of an annoyance than a traumatic experience. I feel like I can handle the situation quite well by myself and that it's best to leave it in the past and move on.”

“I checked the situation, the involved people and the context in which these actions happened, because it was always in a humorous way, I did not see the need to perform any of the above mentioned actions.”

Other students explicitly named the normalization of sexual harassment as stopping them from reporting it:

“Receiving comments like this is uncomfortable but unfortunately part of youth culture. I would either try to engage in a discussion or talk with my friends about it, but in the end, inappropriate comments feel inevitable so I did not do anything further.”

Conclusion

The main topics of interest of this survey were: (1) Which behavior do CBS students perceive as sexual harassment?; (2) Which behavior do CBS students perceive as normal and acceptable in their study environment?; (3) What experiences do CBS students make in regards to sexual harassment in their study environment, and how do they react to them? In addition to that, students were asked about their opinion on sexual harassment at CBS and about possible further steps of action.

The investigation shows that there are **many different perceptions of what constitutes sexual harassment** and what does not. While most physical acts are understood as sexual harassment by most respondents, students were more ambiguous in regards to defining verbal, non-verbal and digital acts as sexual harassment. Moreover, there seems to be disagreements in regards to whether the context, for example the location or the relationship between the people involved, of the situation should influence the interpretation of the behavior as sexual harassment.

Interestingly, the study also shows that some behavior, which is perceived as sexual harassment, is nonetheless deemed acceptable or normal behavior in the study environment. Especially acts of verbal harassment, such as sexually inappropriate jokes or derogatory comments on a person's gender or sexuality, seem to be classified as normal behavior by many students, even though many also explicitly label them as acts of sexual harassment. This leads to the suggestion that sexual harassment is normalized in the university context.

Regarding students' experiences of sexual harassment in their university context, the results show that **41% of the respondents have experienced some form of sexual harassment and 59% have witnessed it**. However, 20% of respondents never talked to anyone about their experiences and **only 3% contacted an employee at CBS**. Those numbers clearly point towards the need to investigate the problem at CBS further and to encourage students who experience harassment to seek help from the dedicated university staff, such as student guidance counselors and student coaches who are trained to help students who have been harassed.

In a first step, the report shows a need to **raise more awareness about the problem of sexual harassment**. Students need to gain a better understanding of the concept of sexual harassment, which includes learning to accept and acknowledge that each individual might draw the line of acceptable behavior slightly different. We therefore need to start talking about sexual harassment more openly. Furthermore, **support structures for students who experienced sexual harassment at CBS** need to be become more visible to students. Finally, we need to collectively work on **changing our university culture** to a less sexist, more open and tolerant one, to foster diversity and inclusion in our study environment – an effort that everyone from management, over faculty and staff to students needs to get involved in.

About the analysis

A total of 429 participants completed the survey online between June and September 2018. In terms of gender, 62.9% of respondents identified as female, 36.6% identified as male, and 0.5% identified as 'other'. 61% of respondents considered their main nationality as 'Danish'. 89% of participants were born between 1990 and 2000, with the median year of birth being 1994. 97% of respondents were full-time students at CBS. 42% of students were Bachelor students while 58% were Master students. 51% of Master students also pursued their Bachelor degree at the university.

Gender	Number	Percent
Female	270	62.9%
Male	157	36.6%
Other	2	0.5%
Total	429	100%

Nationality	Number	Percent
Danish	259	60.7%
Non-Danish	168	39.3%
Total	427	100%

Year of Birth	Number	Percent
1970-1979	2	0.5%
1980-1989	36	8.4%
1990-1999	387	90.2%
2000-2009	4	0.9%
Total	429	100%

Type of Student at CBS	Number	Percent
Full-time student	415	96.7%
Exchange student	8	1.9%
Other	6	1.4%
Total	429	100%

Level of Study at CBS	Number	Percent
Bachelor	182	42.4%
Master	247	57.6%
Total	429	100%

Did you do your Bachelor at CBS? (Masters students only)	Number	Percent
Yes	126	51.01%
No	121	48.99%
Total	247	100%