Student Perceptions of Peer Sexual Harassment:
The “Where” and the “How” Matter More than the “Who”

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Abstract: When bystanders interpret sexual harassment, they rely on contextual factors to help them determine the severity of the incident. Using a vignette survey of 192 students at a mid-sized university, this study examines how various contextual factors - the social status of the harasser (athlete/student), the location of the harassment (classroom/bar), and the type of harassment (verbal/verbal and physical) - influence bystander perceptions. Results regarding athlete status are inconclusive, suggesting that it is a complex factor that can affect perceptions in opposite directions. The effects of location of the harassment and the type of harassment are more straightforward, with harassment that occurs in a social setting and harassment that is only verbal seen less negatively. The article closes with the implications of these findings and directions for future research.

Popular culture provides examples that illustrate how contextual factors like social status influence bystander responses to harassment. If the harasser is believed to have a high social status, such as that of a popular actor or athlete, society may interpret the harassment as being more welcomed or complimentary than the victim felt that it was. Consider, for example, the sexual harassment allegations brought against NFL quarterback Brett Favre in 2010.¹ The host of a New York Jets television program, Jenn Sterger, reported to team management that Favre had left inappropriate text messages and voicemails on her cell phone during the 2008 season (McCarthy 2011). Despite the physical evidence of Favre’s harassing behavior, camps of supporters ran to his defense, vocally proclaiming that Sterger relished Favre’s advances and only reported his actions to gain fame and monetary compensation. According to public opinion, the athlete Favre was the victim, not the culprit.

If we were looking only at that case, we might assume that society believes that those with high social status possess some quality that makes them less culpable of behaving unlawfully. It is also possible that other contextual factors, such as where the harassment
occurred or the nature of the harassment, dictated public perception of Favre’s behavior more than the social status of the accused.

This ambiguity surrounding sexual harassment infiltrates the academia and the corporate world on a daily basis. When a sexual harassment case goes to trial, judges and jurors who deliberate cases of sexual harassment must decide: 1) if they believe that the incident reports reflect a factual event or series of events and 2) if those incidents were offensive enough to be defined as “harassment” and perpetrators convicted. Bystanders often raise questions about the context of the harassment as a tool to help them gauge the guilt of the perpetrator or even assign some or all of the blame to the victim – what is the social status of the harasser; where did the harassment occur; did the harasser touch the victim inappropriately, or was the harassment only verbal? Thus, the question becomes: while all of these factors may influence bystander perceptions of harassment, do some of them have a stronger affect than others and which specific attitudes regarding harassment do they influence?

Using both a vignette and survey, the research presented here assesses how social status – specifically the social status of athletes at the college level – influences perceptions of sexual harassment. In the sections that follow, I discuss the nature and perception of harassment, highlighting specifically how power theory and the halo effect may influence this perception in opposing ways: power theory leading to more negative views of harassment, and the halo effect resulting in less negative views. I then test hypotheses to determine which theory better accounts for how participants respond to harassment by either an athlete or by a student who is not identified as an athlete. I also manipulate the location (bar or classroom) and the nature of the harassment (verbal or physical and verbal) to explore the influence of other contextual factors. Additionally, I assess characteristics of the participants in this experiment—specifically their
gender and participation in varsity athletics at the college level – to determine how these affect perceptions of harassment in the vignette.

**Sexual Harassment**

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission defines sexual harassment in relation to the victim’s *interpretation* of its frequency, welcomeness, and coerciveness (Faley 1982; Pryor, 1985; Katz et al. 1996; Golden et al. 2011). The importance placed on the victim’s personal interpretation of an incident puts sexual harassment in the eye of the beholder (Gutek 1995). This ambiguity also makes salient the context or circumstances in which a comment or act occurs in determining whether it is perceived as harassment or as dismissible behavior (ex: Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham 2010; Bursik and Gefter 2011; Fairchild 2010). For example, research has found that an act is more likely to be viewed as harassment when the perpetrator is unattractive than when he is attractive (Fairchild 2010), when the two subjects have not interacted socially in the past (Dougherty et al. 1996), and when the harassment is *quid pro quo* (translated as ‘this for that,’ where the victim’s cooperation is tied to a benefit such as a promotion) as opposed to harassment that creates a hostile environment (Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham 2010). These studies demonstrate how the “eye of the beholder” might see an act differently based solely on the context in which the harassment takes place.

Sexual harassment is also remarkably *pervasive* in all types of social settings. The pervasiveness of harassment creates uncertainty that the leers and fondling that women are subjected to by both strangers and acquaintances qualify as sexual harassment. A majority of women have been targeted by at least one incident of sexual harassment during their lives, and many women face some type of harassment on a daily basis. In the book *Sexual Harassment:*
Women Speak Out (Sumerall and Taylor 1992), Anna Strulo Taylor, a seventeen year-old college student, provides examples of what “everyday harassment” can look like:

I have been sexually harassed so many times in my life already, and I’m only seventeen. By the time I was eleven I knew what it was like to stand on the sidewalk and be asked by a man in a luring voice if my name was Peaches and Honey. At the age of twelve I knew what it was like to be followed in and out of shops and to be asked by a forty-year-old man if I wanted to go to bed with him. At fifteen I knew what it was like to walk down the street and be asked if I was wearing a bra by a man in passing. (270)

Taylor credits her feminist upbringing with empowering her to label these events as sexual harassment. However, research has found that few women label these daily incidents as harassment until they are prompted with direct questions regarding their experiences as a target of sexualized comments or catcalls (Magley and Shupe 2005).

Sexual harassment is also ambiguous because messages regarding sexual harassment from the media and educational initiatives are frequently at odds with one another. The media distorts the public’s understanding of sexual harassment through movies and television sitcoms that suggest incidents of inappropriate remarks or fondling in the office place are acceptable behavior (Strouse, Goodwin, and Roscoe 1994). Characters that object to the harassment are portrayed as being over-sensitive or a whistle-blower. Such a depiction is evident in an episode of the popular sitcom Friends, where a minor character remarks that his female subordinates “keep throwing these sexual harassment cases at me and I keep knocking them out of the park!” These media portrayals depict sexual harassment as humorous, reports of such behavior as fruitless, and women who report harassment as over-dramatic.

Online groups and training programs have attempted to counter these media messages with more accurate information on sexual harassment. Online groups such as “Stop Street Harassment” and “HollabackNYC” encourage women to post their experiences with harassment
and share advice on how to deal with persistent harassers. While their notoriety is growing, these groups have yet to create a dominant presence online. Employers also have an opportunity to send an empowering message on sexual harassment through diversity training courses. These initiatives have a bad reputation as existing only to prevent lawsuits; the training is “viewed as obligatory rather than meaningful” (Bursik and Gefter 2011: 345). As a result, there is some question as to how important employees, and even upper-level management, consider sexual harassment training to be. While it is important that the media message is contradicted, the lack of a comprehensive, successful, and far-reaching educational initiatives focusing on the combatting the media influence on perceptions of harassment creates a glut of incomplete definitions and understandings of sexual harassment.

The Halo Effect and Sexual Harassment

Having established that there is no common understanding of harassment, I now explore some of the factors that may influence whether a person interprets an incident as harassment. A popular theory developed by Thorndike (1920), known as the halo effect, might explain why harassment by people with desirable characteristics might be perceived as welcomed – and not harassment – by bystanders.

The halo effect is a cognitive bias by which possession of one desirable trait is said to influence other traits about a person in positive ways. Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) studied how physically attractive people benefit from the halo effect. Through survey research, they were able to conclude that attractive people were rated higher than unattractive people on each of twenty-seven desirability traits, including being more altruistic, kind, sophisticated, and sincere. Those considered to be more attractive were also rated as more likely to have successful marriages and careers than their unattractive counterparts (Dion, Berschied, and Walster 1972).
More recent research has found that attractive people are more likely to be viewed as good, smart, cheerful, likeable, and socially skilled than those who are less attractive (Rhode 2010).

Fairchild (2010) found that when an attractive man and an unattractive man were linked to the same harassing behavior, 20.3% of respondents reported that they would be afraid of the unattractive man, while only 1.9% said that they would fear the attractive man. Additionally, 27.1% said that they would actually enjoy the harassment doled out by the attractive man, compared to 0.2% of respondents enjoying the unattractive man’s remarks (Fairchild 2010). Although this research focused on physically attractive characteristics of harassers, it is possible that harassers with intangibly attractive qualities – such as a high social status – would benefit from the halo effect as well.

**What Makes an Athlete Attractive?**

The attractiveness of an athlete may be linked to physical characteristics. Evolutionary biology suggests that women are attracted to male athletes because possession of the traits needed for athletics make them more fit to survive and thrive in society. Involvement in sports reflects a possession of desirable physical characteristics: good visual-spatial judgment, speed, strength, fitness, and endurance (Manning and Taylor 2001).

Given the range of physical appearances of athletes, however, it is more likely that the attractiveness attributed to athletes is a result of their displays of social status and masculinity (Faurie, Pontier, and Raymond 2004). Participation in athletics is often accompanied by a high status in society (Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone, 2009); in the academic setting, athletes are often seen as “famous” campus celebrities (Caron, Halteman, and Stacy 1997). Because of this fame, an athlete’s attention is in high demand; those with whom he spends his time will likely feel increasingly desirable and special. Women who seek a high status for themselves may be
attracted to the reciprocal status that they will receive by being romantically or sexually involved with an athlete.

Research has found that men who exemplify hegemonic masculine traits, like athletics, are considered more attractive (Buss and Shackelford 2008). Within the world of sports, masculinity is played out through competition. The language and discourse of sports reinforce the idea that to be successful in athletics, one has to be more masculine than his competitors. Researchers who observed a soccer team in England noted that the players referred to themselves as “warriors” and the game as “war” or “a battle.” Phrases like “Cut their balls off!” and “Rape them!” were commonly yelled by the coaches during the games. In one case, when a player was playing poorly, he was mockingly informed that there was a women’s team that he could join (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010). To be considered masculine, an athlete must establish himself as a solid athletic performer.

College athletes report that they have more sex than their peers, particularly when the athlete participates in a revenue-generating sport (Faurie, Pontier, and Raymond 2004). According to the research by Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone (2009), students believe that no woman is “off limits” to an athlete, and that athletes frequently are sought out by sexually aggressive women who are attracted to the social status attributed to athletics. The status of an athlete, coupled with their emphasized masculinity and physicality, demonstrates why athletes are seen as an attractive subpopulation of the student body.

Of course, not all sex is consensual. In a study of Division I schools with major sports programs, Crosset, Benedict, and McDonald (1995) found that 5.5% of all reported sexual assaults on college campuses involve athletes, which is disproportionate to their population of 3.8% of total male undergraduates. “However, despite the evidence that athletes are
disproportionately arrested and indicted for crimes, their rates of conviction are far below the national average (Benedict and Klein 1997). This is in line with research by Mazzella and Feingold (2006) who found that participants in a jury simulation assigned a less severe punishment to an attractive defendant than to an unattractive defendant. The halo effect may translate the attractiveness associated with athletics into a general assumption that misbehavior by an athlete is less unlawful than the same act perpetuated by a non-athlete.

Based on the halo effect and the above research, I expect to find that undergraduates will rate harassment by an athlete less negatively than the same action perpetrated by a student who has not been labeled as an athlete. I define the term “less negatively” to mean that respondents will rate this behavior as less harassing, more complimentary, and less insulting for the victim. The rater will also be less likely to recommend the incident be reported and suggest more lenient punishment.

**Hypothesis 1a:** Drawing from the halo effect research, potentially sexually harassing behavior will be perceived less negatively when the perpetrator is described as an athlete compared to when the perpetrator is described as simply a male student.

**The Interaction between Power and Harassment**

Because sexual harassment is ultimately about power (MacKinnon 1979), it is importantly to consider how power, and not just the attractiveness that might come from status, influences the way that a harassing situation is interpreted. Research has found that when a power imbalance is evident between the harasser and the victim, bystanders are more likely to label the act as harassment (Dougherty et al. 1996).
Using Lukes’s (1986) three-dimensional model of power as a framework, Wilson and Thompson (2001) argue that in all cases of sexual harassment, the harasser necessarily acts on power gained from some combination of three sources. These sources are: (1) a legitimate position of power, such as a boss over a subordinate; (2) an organization that is permissive toward sexual harassment and sexist attitudes; and (3) a peer relationship in which social norms dictate power differences. This third source of power explains why men most often perpetuate harassment over women. Harassment by men against women both creates and relies upon the imbalance of power between the two genders. Men use sexual harassment as a way to achieve a higher status as an individual while also elevating the greater social condition of male dominance (Langelan 1993). Although power derived from gender may seem less threatening than legitimate power (boss/subordinate), it is no less influential than the other sources of power. High rates of sexual assault on college campuses by male students against female students demonstrate how damaging a gendered power imbalance can be (Mosher and Anderson 1986).

Sexual harassment of peers is one of the ways that coming-of-age boys can claim power. It both asserts their masculinity and creates a sense of identity (Robinson 2005). “Groups of boys engage in these practices, not because they are driven to it by raging hormones, but in order to acquire or defend privilege, to mark difference and to gain pleasure” (Connell 1996: 220). For boys, sexual harassment oppresses their female counterparts, while also portraying the harassers as more masculine than other boys and therefore more in control of the power structure of the peer group (Burke 2011). This type of behavior is not limited to elementary-aged children; it can be seen among groups of boys and men in any stage in life.
College Athletes and Power

A college athlete lacks an explicit position of power over the student body. However, athletes establish power by working through a set of extant social norms and expectations (Lukes 1986). Even before a student athlete attends his first practice for his college team, he has been granted special privileges in exchange for his athletic talent (Caron, Halteman, and Stacy 1997). Such benefits include having lenient standards in the admissions process (Espenshade, Chung, and Walling 2004) and receiving “special favors” from teachers and other students (Caron, Halteman, and Stacy 1997; Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone 2009). The effect of preferential treatment is more pronounced among athletes in revenue-generating sports, who often receive additional benefits given their economic importance to the school (Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone 2009).

The exclusivity of sport teams likely perpetuates feelings of superiority and power among athletes. Many sport teams see themselves as belonging to an exclusive group that is off-limits to a “regular” student. Male athletic teams, in particular, consider themselves to be part of a members-only group for the toughest, fittest, most masculine students (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010). These feelings of superiority are reflected in the behavior of athletes. Research shows that athletes engage in more criminal and hostile behavior than non-athletes and are arrested and indicted for crimes at rates that exceed the national average (Benedict and Klein 1997). Student athletes report more criminal behavior (Young 1990) and sexually aggressive acts than their non-athlete peers (Caron, Halteman, and Stacy 1997; Humphrey and Kahn 2000). Non-athlete college students perceive the group dynamic, deviant behavior, and preferential treatment of athletes as indicative of an unequal power balance between the student body at-large and their athlete counterparts (Lawrence, Harrison, and Stone 2009).
If athletes are seen as abusing power rather than attractive, I expect that participants will have a different perception of harassment and potentially harassing behavior committed by athletes will be perceived more negatively than the same behavior committed by a student who is not identified as an athlete. This more negative view will be marked by more agreement that the act is harassing and insulting to the female and less agreement that the act is complimentary. Respondents will recommend a harsher punishment for the athlete than the regular student and will agree that the harassment should be reported.

**Hypothesis 1b:** Drawing from Lukes’s power theory, potentially sexually harassing behavior will be perceived more negatively when the perpetrator is described as an athlete compared to when the perpetrator is described as simply a male student.

**Other Factors**

Beyond athlete status, other characteristics may affect perceptions of sexual harassment. Therefore, I examine other variables to determine their influence over the opinions of the respondents.

**Location**

Sexual harassment, by an athlete or a non-athlete, may be interpreted in different ways depending on the location of the harassment. Colleges, in particular, have established organizational norms that discourage harassment (Bursik and Gefter 2011) which may influence how harassment on campus is perceived. In reference to Lukes’s (1986) second source of power, organizations act as a power source by creating a culture in which behavior, including sexual harassment, is seen by members as either acceptable or unacceptable based on both formal and informal rules and policies (Wilson and Thompson 2001).
As an institution, colleges are expected to uphold state and federal laws and therefore have established formal policies aimed at eradicating sexual harassment on their campuses (Saguy 2003). These policies often state that sexual harassment is inconsistent with the values and objectives of the school by inhibiting the academic mission of the institution. Under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972, colleges are required to assign ombudspersons to handle all student-on-student sexual harassment and publish policies to educate students on recognizing and reporting sexual harassment (Bursik and Gefter 2011). Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham (2010) found that in ambiguous sexually harassing scenarios, those that occurred in a workplace that proactively enforced non-discrimination policies were rated by bystanders as more harassing than identical scenarios in organizations that were permissive toward harassing behavior.

When given a hypothetical story of sexual harassment, respondents believed that the act was most enjoyable and least fearful for the victim when the harassment occurred at a bar compared to the other settings, including on the street, in a store, on public transportation, and at a public park (Fairchild 2010). Professional settings are also linked to the perception of more controlling behavior on the part of the harasser, meaning that harassment in the work place is seen as more offensive than harassment in a social setting (Dougherty et al. 1996).

Harassment between students may be viewed differently based on the perceived norms of gendered behavior in academic settings and in social/party settings. A New York Times article by Lisa Belkin (2011) discussed the significant gap between women’s expectations of fair treatment in the classroom versus at a party on the weekend. After returning to Princeton, her alma mater, to teach, Belkin noticed that inequality that she experienced as a female student still reigned in the collegiate social realm.
The women I met were outspoken, self-confident and unapologetic about running rings around their male cohorts in the classroom…What stunned me was what was happening outside class, where women seemed not to have budged in decades. In social settings and in relationships, men set the pace, made the rules and acted as they had in the days when women were still “less than.”

The difference in women’s behaviors between the classroom and social settings that Belkin describes may produce a different perception of what is acceptable and what is harassment in the two contexts. I hypothesize that respondents will rate the perpetrator’s behavior more negatively when the incident occurs in an academic setting (the classroom) than when it occurs in a social setting (the bar).

**Hypothesis 2:** Potentially sexually harassing behavior will be perceived more negatively when the setting is academic compared to social.

*Nature of the Harassment*

The study by Bursik and Gefter (2011) examines how the nature of the harassment can influence how it is perceived by respondents. An open-ended response to a vignette in which a male professor leered at a female student in an elevator demonstrates the distinctions made between types of harassing behavior.

In response to Vignette 3, a male respondent said that the male character’s behavior was not appropriate: “He shouldn’t be eyeing her like she is an item on the shelf.” But he then indicated that it was not an example of sexual harassment because “he didn’t make any aggressive verbal or physical move towards her.” (345)

While that research demonstrated that either verbal or physical actions may be seen as harassment, other research has found that for many people, physical contact is necessary in order for them to label an act as harassment. A survey of personnel directors found that while 100% of respondents believed that unwanted physical contact constituted sexual harassment, only 74% believed that suggestive remarks did so, as well (Wilson and Thompson 2001). Based on these
finds, I expect that harassment which is physical and verbal will be rated more negatively than harassment which is only verbal.

**Hypothesis 3:** Both verbal and physical harassment will be perceived more negatively than verbal harassment alone.

*Varsity Athletic Participation and Gender of the Participant*

The way in which an individual comes to define and understand harassment is also influenced by their gender. Women label a wider range of behaviors as harassment (Rotundo, Nguyen, and Sackett 2001). Men rate hypothetical situations (Gutek, Morasch, and Cohen 1983) and social-sexual behaviors (Gutek et al. 1980) as less harassing than women do, even when a man is the target of the harassment. Compared to women, men are also more likely to agree that the amount of sexual harassment in the workplace is exaggerated (Collins and Blodgett 1981), and support more lenient policies for dealing with those found guilty of harassment in a work setting (Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham 2010). Although the overall report rate of sexual harassment is quite low (Knapp et al. 1997), men are less likely than women to file a report (U.S. Merit Systems of Protection Board 1981).

These differences between the attitudes of men and women toward sexual harassment are a result of the disproportionate rate of men who harass women in the workplace, academic contexts, and in public spaces (Wilson and Thompson 2001). Since men are more often the harassers, they may sympathize more with the accused or believe that the woman welcomed the behavior. Studies that use Pryor’s Likelihood to Sexually Harass measure – a tool that uses a battery of questions to determine an individual’s propensity to commit sexually harassing behavior – have found that men score higher on the measure than women do, indicating that they are more likely to engage in sexually harassing behavior (Perry, Schmidtke, and Kulik
The National Association of Working Women reports that 90% of sexual harassment cases involve a man sexually harassing a woman, 9% involve same-sex harassment, and only 1% of all reported cases involve a woman harassing a man. Given the findings from past research, I expect to find that women perceive the harassment more negatively than men.

**Hypothesis 4:** Women will perceive potentially sexually harassing behavior more negatively than men.

Finally, I consider the varsity athletic participation of the respondent and its effect on perceptions of sexual harassment involving an athlete. There is a significant amount of camaraderie within sports teams (Adams, Anderson, and McCormack 2010) which may extend to include a symbolic relationship among all athletes in a certain social sphere. If this is the case, then I expect that varsity athletes will rate the sexually harassing behavior of an athlete less negatively than the behavior of the non-athlete.

**Hypothesis 5:** Athletes will perceive potentially sexually harassing behavior by an athlete harasser less negatively than by a non-athlete harasser.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants in the study were undergraduate students at a predominantly white, midsized, private university in the Midwest where football is the prominent revenue-generating sport. A total of 192 participants completed the vignette survey, however the data from two participants were excluded because they responses identified them as outliers. Of the 190 participants whose responses were used in the data, 110 females and 80 males. Twenty-one were varsity athletes at the university. Participants voluntarily completed the survey during one of three introductory social science courses. As a result of the introductory nature of these courses,
a majority of the participants were in their first year of college, although students from all levels – freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors – were included in the survey research.\textsuperscript{7}

\textbf{Vignettes}

Three independent variables were manipulated in a vignette describing an interaction between a male student (John) and female student (Katie). I chose vignettes because of their prevalence in research on perceptions of sexual harassment (e.g.: Bursik and Gefter 2011; Doughtery et al. 1996; etc.). The technique is seen as an effective method for measuring judgments about a scenario without need for a classical experiment design (Atzmuller and Steiner 2010).

The first variable manipulated was the male’s \textit{athletic participation} at the school. In one condition, the male was identified as a football player; in the other condition he was identified as a male student. The specific label of “football player” was selected because football was the primary revenue-generating sport at the school in which the research was conducted, therefore making it most likely that participants would see the football player as “powerful” or “attractive” in comparison to a typical male student or an athlete of a non-revenue-generating sport.

The second manipulated variable was the \textit{location} of the interaction. In one condition, the male and the female were situated outside of a classroom; in the second condition, the male and the female were at a local bar.

The third variable which was manipulated in the vignette was the \textit{nature} of the contact between the male and the female. In one condition, the male verbally harassed the female by stating, “Want to come over to my place for some drinks? You look like you know your way around the bedroom and I know that tight body of yours will look great in bed next to mine.” In the second condition, the harassment was both verbal and physical. In addition to the above
statement made about the female’s body and sexual permissiveness, the male also grabbed the butt of the female.⁸

Participants were randomly assigned to complete one of eight versions of the vignette, as dictated by the 2x2x2 design. An example vignette:

*Katie is at a local bar (her classroom) when John, a male student (football player), walks in. John comes over and stands very close to Katie. John says to her “Want to come over to my place for some drinks? You look like you know your way around the bedroom and I know that tight body of yours will look great in bed next to mine.” (“Want to come over to my place for some drinks? You look like you know your way around the bedroom and I know that tight body of yours will look great in bed next to mine” and grabs her butt.)*

**Surveys**

After reading the vignette, participants completed a brief survey. From these I gather information on participants’ gender (male or female) and participants’ current varsity athletic participation at the school.

Data on gender and participant’s athletic participation was gathered to determine if members of the subpopulations within these groups have different responses to the scenarios presented in the vignette. In order to obtain data on athletic participation without influencing participant responses to questions that assessed the dependent variables, all participants were asked to indicate their involvement in a variety of extracurricular activities. These included clubs and organizations that could be classified as (1) academic/professional; (2) arts and music; (3) community service/social concerns; (4) cultural/international; (5) intramural sports; (6) political; (7) religious; (8) special interest groups; (9) varsity athletics; or (10) other. For each participant, only the response to their involvement in varsity athletics was analyzed and all other data obtained from this question was discarded.
**Dependent measures**

In order to measure attitudes on sexual harassment, the post-vignette surveys also included questions about the actions of the characters in the vignette. All questions used 7-point likert-type scales to gauge attitude. Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed that the vignette described an act of sexual harassment, that the female should feel complimented, and that the female should feel insulted (1 = entirely disagree; 7 = entirely agree). Participants were also asked if the female should report the incident to the school (1 = definitely should not; 7 = definitely should), and how harsh the punishment should be for the male if the female chooses to report his behavior. The scale for punishments included the following familiar disciplinary actions: 1 = no punishment; 2 = documentation of the complaint to be kept in the harasser’s file; 3 = verbal warning issued; 4 = meeting to discuss the issue/counseling; 5 = mandatory community service; 6 = one semester suspension from school; 7 = expulsion.

**Results**

To test the majority of the hypotheses put forth in this study, I compared the mean scores on each dependent variable using a one-way ANOVA test. The dependent variables were agreement or disagreement that the vignette described sexual harassment, agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented, agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended, agreement or disagreement that the female should report the incident to school officials, and a recommendation on the punishment that should be imposed on the perpetrator. A one-way ANOVA test was conducted for each independent variable: athlete status of the harasser, location of the harassment, nature of the harassment, and the gender of the participant.
Table 1 – Mean comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athlete Status</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Participant Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Ath.</td>
<td>Ath.</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>5.66</td>
<td>.3634</td>
<td>5.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offended</td>
<td>5.86</td>
<td>5.68</td>
<td>.577</td>
<td>5.46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Complimented</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.739</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>3.82</td>
<td>.072</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punish</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>3.25</td>
<td>6.398</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

**Athletic Participation:** In hypothesis 1-A, drawing from the halo effect framework, I predicted that potentially sexually harassing behavior would be perceived less negatively\(^9\) when the perpetrator is an athlete compared to when the perpetrator is described as simply a male student. Conversely, I drew from power theory in hypothesis 1-B, predicting that potentially sexually harassing behavior would be perceived more negatively when the perpetrator is an athlete compared to when the perpetrator is a student (the terms “more negatively” and “less negatively” are used to simplify the expected effect that the independent variable has on all of the dependent variables). As seen in Table 1, neither prediction was fully supported by the data. There were no significant differences between athletes and non-athlete students on measures of agreement or disagreement that the incident described harassment (F[1,188] = 0.363, p = 0.474), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended (F[1,188] = 0.577, p = 0.388), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented (F[1,188] = 0.739, p = 0.303), and opinion on whether or not the female should report the incident to school officials (F[1,188] = 0.072, p = 0.622). The data showed a significant difference between athletes and non-
athletes regarding opinions on what the perpetrator’s punishment should (F [1,188] = 6.398, p ≤ .005).

**Location:** In hypothesis 2, I predicted that location would influence perceptions of sexual harassment, with harassment outside of a classroom being perceived more negatively than harassment at a local bar. Analysis confirmed that some of the dependent variables were significantly influenced by the location of the harassment, while others did not demonstrate significant differences, partially supporting hypothesis 2. As seen in Table 1, there were no significant differences between the vignettes that described harassment outside of a classroom and those that described harassment at a bar on measures of agreement or disagreement that the incident described harassment (F [1,188] = .622, p = .433) and agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented (F [1,188] = 2.533, p = .116). Agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended was somewhat significant (F [1,188] = 7.192, p = .008) with respondents agreeing more often that the female should feel offended by the classroom harassment than by the harassment at the bar. Respondents were significantly more likely to agree that the female should report the incident to the school when it occurred in the classroom (F [1,188] = 15.153, p = .000) and recommended significantly harsher punishments in response to the harassment in the classroom than in the bar (F [1,188] = 16.268, p = .000).

**Nature of the Harassment:** Hypothesis 3, which predicted how the nature of the harassment would influence participant perceptions, was not supported. I predicted physical and verbal harassment would be perceived more negatively than cases that only described verbal harassment. No significant differences were found regarding the nature of the harassment on measures of agreement or disagreement that the incident described harassment (F [1,188] = 2.728, p = .079), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended (F [1,188] =
1.616, \( p = .250 \), and agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented (F [1,188] = .002, \( p = .891 \)).

However, physical and verbal harassment was more likely to be punished and reported than verbal harassment. The nature of the harassment had a significant effect on perceptions of how the male should be punished (F [1,188] = 7.313, \( p = .002 \)), with harsher punishments recommended for the harassment that was both physical and verbal. The nature of the harassment also had a somewhat significant effect on whether or not the female should report the incident to the school (F [1,188] = 5.346, \( p = .012 \)), with greater agreement that the incident should be reported when both physical and verbal harassment were involved.

**Gender of the Participant:** In hypothesis 4, I predicted that women would perceive the potentially sexually harassing behavior described in the vignette more negatively than men would perceives these acts. No significant differences were found between male and female respondents on any of the dependent variables; hypothesis 4 was not supported by the data. The results show that there is more variation within each gender than between them, as no significant differences were found between men and women on measures of agreement or disagreement that the incident described harassment (F [1,188] = .269, \( p = .619 \)), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended (F [1,188] = 2.085, \( p = .157 \)), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented (F [1,188] = 2.329, \( p = .139 \)), opinion on whether or not the female should report the incident to school officials (F [1,188] = .063, \( p = .810 \)) and what the punishment for the perpetrator should be (F [1,188] = 2.377, \( p = .160 \)).

**Athlete Status of the Participant:** In hypothesis 5, I predicted that there would be a significant interaction effect between the athlete status of the participant, the athletic participation of the harasser, and perceptions of sexual harassment, with athlete participants
perceiving the harassment by the athlete less negatively than the harassment by the non-athlete student. I used an ANCOVA univariate test to study this interaction, the results of which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2 – Mean responses from athlete participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Athlete Harasser</th>
<th>Non-Athlete Harasser</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Harassment</td>
<td>4.4545</td>
<td>5.1000</td>
<td>.473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offend</td>
<td>5.4545</td>
<td>5.8000</td>
<td>1.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compliment</td>
<td>3.8182</td>
<td>3.6000</td>
<td>.072</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Report</td>
<td>3.6000</td>
<td>3.7000</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punish</td>
<td>3.7000</td>
<td>2.000</td>
<td>8.867**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

As Table 2 shows, only one of the five dependent variables was significantly affected by the athlete status of the participant when the vignette described harassment by an athlete. No significant differences existed on measures of agreement or disagreement that the incident described harassment (F [1,19] = .473, p = .500), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel offended (F [1,19] = .197, p = .662), agreement or disagreement that the female should feel complimented (F [1,19] = .072, p = .792), opinion on whether or not the female should report the incident to school officials (F [1,19] = .021, p = .888). There was a significant difference regarding the punishment for the perpetrator, with athlete respondents recommending significantly harsher punishments for the athlete harasser than for the harasser who was not identified as an athlete (F [1,19] = 8.867, p = .008).

Discussion

In this study, I set out to examine how students perceive athletes who commit sexual harassment in order to gain a better understanding of the role that social status plays on
interpretations of incidents of harassment. However, a majority of measures showed that students do not hold athletes to a different standard when it comes to misconduct. The participants did not find the behavior by the athlete as being any more or less harassing than that by the student, and overwhelmingly agreed that the female should feel offended regardless of the athlete status of the perpetrator. Although social status was not a significant indicator of participant response to sexual harassment, the results of the study tell an interesting story about the other contextual factors that play a role in how harassment is interpreted.

The recommended punishment was the only measure in which there were significant differences between the athlete and the non-athlete student, once outliers were withdrawn from the data. Respondents were twice as likely to recommend the two most lenient punishments presented in the question – no punishment or documentation put in the male’s file – for the non-identified student than they were for the football player. These results affirm the power model, which theorizes that an athlete engaging in harassment will be seen as an abuse of power and judged harshly by outsiders.

Although the dependent variable of recommended punishment gave evidence to support the power theory framework, the lack of support from the other measures prevents a clear conclusion to be drawn regarding student perceptions of their athlete peers. The data also provided some evidence for the halo effect. Although not significant, respondents did believe that the female should feel more complimented by the incident involving an athlete than by that involving a male student. These results suggest that there is a complicated relationship between power and status/attractiveness. As an element of this complexity, athletes are perceived through a dual lens in which both power theory and the halo effect serve to influence the way in which others judge their behavior. In cases of sexually harassing remarks and actions, no conclusive
evidence points us to a single framework through which we can understand student attitudes toward athletes.

Although participants did not differ on their opinions of the harassing nature of the incident, a majority of those respondents whose vignette described harassment in the classroom responded that the female should report the incident, while most responding to the incident at the bar felt that she should not make the incident known to school officials. This significant finding is particularly interesting since the university at which this research was conducted has a policy that allows off campus incidents to be reported to school officials. School policy states that the rules in the student handbook are enforceable throughout the duration of that student’s time at the university either on or off-campus. Although a student can be punished on campus for something that happens off campus, the participants in this study demonstrate either a lack of understanding of this policy or an opinion that harassing incidents which occur at the bar – while still seen harassment as according to the responses – are less problematic than those which occur in the academic space.

The results from the manipulation of the nature of the harassment shed some light on general opinions that students have regarding sexual harassment. Students recognized both of the scenarios as constituting sexual harassment: 87% of respondents whose vignette described physical and verbal harassment agreed that the incident constituted sexual harassment, while 84% of the responders to verbal harassment agreed as well. Participants also did not believe that the nature of the harassment would be indicative of the female’s reaction to the incident.

As with the location variable, the differences in opinions regarding reporting and punishment that emerged when the nature of the harassment was manipulated demonstrate that the context of the harassment plays a large role in determining the appropriate response to such
behavior. The data demonstrates that all harassment is not treated equally. Contextual factors, such as where the harassment occurred and the invasiveness of the harassment, do not influence whether or not the behavior is harassing, but do allow bystanders to differentiate between harassment that should be reported and punished and that which should not.

Perhaps the most promising finding from this research is that students may be more adept at recognizing sexual harassment than they were in the past. Past research reviewed in this paper (e.g., Benavides-Espinoza and Cunningham 2010; Fairchild 2010; Wilson and Thompson 2001) demonstrated the lack of a clear understanding of the scope of the definition of sexual harassment. However, I found no significant differences in participants’ evaluation of the scenarios as being sexually harassing. Across all vignettes, 41% of respondents “entirely agreed” that the scenario described sexual harassment, and only 15% chose “entirely disagree,” “mostly disagree” “somewhat disagree” or “neither agree nor disagree.” The confidence with which students identified the incident as harassment may be indicative of an improvement on the part of the education system to inform students about behavior that constitutes sexual harassment.

Post Hoc Analyses

After testing the hypotheses that I presented in this paper, I examined some of the interaction effects among the manipulated variables using cross tabulation and one-way ANOVA tests. I can only offer speculative explanations for some of the effects seen; additional research is necessary to understand the interaction between the different scenarios.

Location alone is not important, but also who the harasser is within that location. Although the bar setting and athlete status tended to make students less likely to define something as sexual harassment (F [1,188] = 1.46, p = .071), students were more likely to see the episode with athletes in bars as sexual harassment (F [1,188] = 1.46, p = .079). While the athlete
in the bar was not considered to be more offensive than the non-athlete in the bar, students did find it to be less complimentary (F [1,188] = 2.62, p = .063).

The results seem to indicate that there are certain areas where athlete and student engagement in harassment is more permissible and those where it is less acceptable, and that these locations differ for the two populations. Athletes may be seen as having a certain role of prestige on campus which allows them to act with less consequence compared to the normal student. Yet if the athlete acts this way when he is no longer in campus – the sphere in which he holds his special role – he is seen as pompous, arrogant, and abusive of the laxity that he is awarded when he is on school grounds. For the student harasser, it is possible that he is seen as an academic peer on campus – parallel to a coworker in a corporate setting – making his harassing acts more likely to be judged negatively. At the bar, he is able to shed this “coworker” label, resulting in any harassment being judged less negatively. Further research is necessary to study why these two groups are held to different standards in different locations.

I used a one-way ANOVA test to examine the differences between the athlete participants and the non-athlete participants regardless of the athlete status of the harasser. Of the 21 student athletes who completed the survey, eleven of them responded to a vignette that described harassment by a football player, and ten of them responded to a vignette that described harassment by a male student. Compared to their non-athlete peers, athlete participants found the incident described in the vignettes to be significantly less harassing (F [1,188] = 9.798, p < .005). Student athletes were also significantly more likely to agree that the female should feel complimented (F [1,188] = 4.968, p < .05). Responses on the punishment recommended for the perpetrator approached significance, with student athletes recommending more lenient punishment for the perpetrator than the other participants (F [1,188] = 4.513, p = .057).
The significant differences between the athlete participant responses and those of non-athlete participants are important because they indicate the possibility that sport teams or experiences in athletics foster permissive attitudes toward sexual harassment. As noted earlier in the paper, athletics is an arena in which sexual harassment occurs frequently in the form of competitive taunting. It is possible that, because student athletes are not only exposed to the harassment that occurs in academic and social settings but to that which occurs in sports as well, student athletes found the scenario in the vignette to be less out of the ordinary and therefore less harassing compared to those respondents who do not participate in athletics. Further research is necessary to explore the causes of this effect.

**Study Limitations**

Although steps were taken to reduce limitations wherever possible, there are several areas which would require attention if future research were to be conducted on this topic.

One possible limitation of the survey is its generalizability. The university at which the study was conducted is similar to other schools in which there is a main revenue-generating sport and, to some extent, may even be comparable to a context in which there exists one predominantly popular sport team, such as in a major city with one or more professional sport teams. The religious affiliation of the university may reduce generalizability. Recent incidents involving student-athlete conduct at the university might also have influenced the way that respondents interpreted the vignette. In order to increase the generalizability and reduce the effect of school-nuanced responses, the study should be repeated to include several other universities which have revenue generating sports.

Another possible limitation of the survey involves the participant population, which was mainly comprised of freshmen students. Over three-fourths of the survey participants were
f freshmen, primarily as a result of the classes in which I was given access to distribute the vignettes. This provided for a greater range of majors and other demographics in my research. Compared to other students, freshmen likely have less experience at bars, and therefore may have misconceptions about social behavior in that setting. Additionally, freshmen had participated in sexual harassment training as part of freshmen orientation earlier in the year and therefore may be more attune to harassment compared to those students who received such information years earlier. These differences do not appear to have influenced the results of this particular study; a chi square test revealed no significant differences between responses gathered from freshman and upperclassman class sections. However, such differences should be taken into account in future research.

The scenario presented in the vignette presents another possible limitation of the study. A very large majority of participants in the study classified the vignette as a case of sexual harassment, regardless of the condition. This finding is somewhat surprising given past research which found more variation among participant opinions regarding the harassing nature of a scenario. It is possible that the participants in this study are more conscious of sexual harassment, a possible effect of heightened effort on the behalf of the university, an increased amount of attention on sexual harassment in the media, or another contextual effect that has influenced their understanding of sexual harassment. However, it is also possible that the vignette in the study was too strong - in other words, it provided an example of sexual harassment that was so obvious that even those with a poor understanding of sexual harassment were able to recognize the scenario as such. Further research is necessary to understand if the vignette or other contextual factors influenced the responses.
The reputations of the main revenue-generating team are not considered in this study, which is a limitation of the research. It is possible that, at a particular school, members of this team may have a reputation for being particularly sexually aggressive and inappropriate toward women which may result in their actions being seen more negatively. At another school, this team may have the reputation of being very respectful, which may result in their actions being seen less negatively. In many ways, this possibility is itself a form of the halo effect. Athletic team reputations, which vary from school to school, may have a large influence on the perceptions of sexual harassment by a member of that team.

Conclusion

Sexual harassment is a ubiquitous problem in our society. In fact, harassment is so common that it can be sometimes difficult to recognize such behavior as inappropriate and offensive. Individuals that do recognize harassment and attempt to stop it are frequently met with roadblocks that prevent them from drawing attention to the serious issue. Much of this is a result of the influence that outside factors can have over perceptions of harassment.

The goal of this study was to examine the contextual effects which may influence the way in which a bystander interprets the actions and reactions of individuals engaged in a possibly sexually harassing encounter. Through the use of a vignette survey, attitudes on sexual harassment were examined when the athlete status of the harasser, the location of the harassment, and the nature of the harassment are manipulated. Significant differences were found on attitudes toward reporting and punishment among the different vignette scenarios, although no significant differences emerged regarding the way in which athlete status influences perceptions of sexual harassment. Returning to the example that I began with, based on these results, we can conclude
that the public response to the harassment by Brett Favre might have been motivated more by the other contextual factors of the case than by his position as a prominent athlete.

Although the athlete status of the harasser was not found to yield many significant differences among participant responses, the examination of this variable is an important step in gaining a better understanding of the problem of fame and accountability in our society. Athletes – and other prominent public figures – have influence in society, often stretching far beyond the realm in which they originally gained notoriety. Although society may benefit from the entertainment value of the athlete or other figure with high social status, it certainly does not benefit when these people are given the freedom to act in ways that harm others and are not held accountable for such behavior. Although this study only focused on a small fraction of the world of notoriety – that of college sports – it critically examined the ways in which conduct by those with a high social status may be judged by outsiders.

This study also was important in its aim to further the scholarship on how contextual elements of a harassing incident can influence the way in which it is perceived by others. Although many elements of the context of harassment have been examined previously, there remain many ways in which this topic can be explored in order to gain a better understanding of why sexual harassment can be seen as acceptable in some contexts but unacceptable in others. As the post hoc analysis of this study demonstrates, a possible next step in this research is to not only examine the variables alone, but to look at how and why perceptions of harassment maybe influenced by the interaction of variables.

This research has pointed to several opportunities for future research which further examine how additional characteristics of the participants influence perceptions of sexual harassment. In addition to varsity athlete status of the participant, variables such as intramural
participation or high school athletic participation could be included to see how these influenced perceptions, and if any differences existed between these different levels of athletic participation and their views on sexual harassment by a varsity athlete. Similarly, data could be analyzed on respondent membership in social concerns or human rights groups, since members of these groups may be more attune to sexualized crime and its many forms.

One way to learn more about the strength of the variable “athlete status” would be to examine both revenue- and non-revenue-generating sports at various universities to determine if location or sport played influences the effect. Similarly, using a vignette or related approach to study how professional athletes are perceived would be an interesting next step for this research, particularly to determine if any differences exist between the levels of power or attractiveness associated to professional and collegiate athletes. Manipulating the gender of the athlete and victim to see how perceptions of sexual harassment differ when the athlete is identified as a female engaging in harassment of a male would be another interesting next step for this study.

Gaining a better understanding of how perceptions of sexual harassment are influenced can help schools, workplaces, and other institutions create a better system for dealing with the educational, reporting, and disciplinary aspects of sexual harassment. It is important that some of the patterns that emerged in this study – such as the belief that off-campus harassment should not be reported or punished the same as that which occurs off campus – are addressed so that all students, workers, and members of the community know their rights when it comes to harassment. It is also important that we focus on educating these groups about the definition of harassment, which remains static regardless of the context of the harassment or the role of the harasser. Addressing the biases that exist will allow for a better system to be developed in which sexual harassment is recognized for what it is, regardless of the status of the harasser, its context,
or its nature. Understanding perceptions will ultimately allow us, as a society, to critically consider why doubt is readily associated with sexual harassment accusations, perhaps reducing our propensity to revert to “he said, she said” rhetoric and instead acknowledge the reality of harassment.

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1 Favre was not held accountable for misconduct but was fined $50,000 by the NFL for failing to cooperate with the investigation. Following that incident, Favre received more negative press when two massage therapists who worked for the New York Jets filed suit against Favre in early 2011 for sexual harassment. The massage therapists both claim that Favre sent inappropriate text messages to them while he was the starting quarterback for the football team.

2 Recognizing that there are different types of interaction in which harassment can occur, my study will focus on harassment that involves a male as the perpetrator and a female as the target.

3 The definition of sexual harassment by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission explains harassment as “unwelcomed sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature.”

4 This occurs in a 2001 episode of Friends, entitled “The One with the Creepy Holiday Card.” The character whose quote appears in this paper is Chandler Bing’s boss. In other episodes, the same character tries to get Chandler to go to a strip club with him and uses a slap on the butt to commend employees for good work.

5 Both of these are internet social forums where women are encouraged to anonymously submit their stories of stranger harassment. Women are encouraged to “talk back” to harassers in an act of empowerment. Those stories which include these assertive endings are held up as a model for all women facing harassment.

6 “Less negatively” refers to findings that the scenario is rated as less harassing, that there will be more agreement that the female should feel complimented, that there will be less agreement that the female should feel insulted, that there will be less agreement that the incident should be reported, and that lenient penalties will be recommended for the perpetrator. Conversely, “more negatively” has the opposite expectation.

7 Research suggested no significant differences existed between the freshman participants and the other students.

8 The statements and actions which constituted the sexually harassing behavior in the vignette were chosen from among the posts on “ihollaback.org,” a website where women discuss experiences of sexual harassment and how they responded to the perpetrators of the harassment.
By using this website, the statements and actions were ensured to be believable, if not commonplace, for the respondents.

References


