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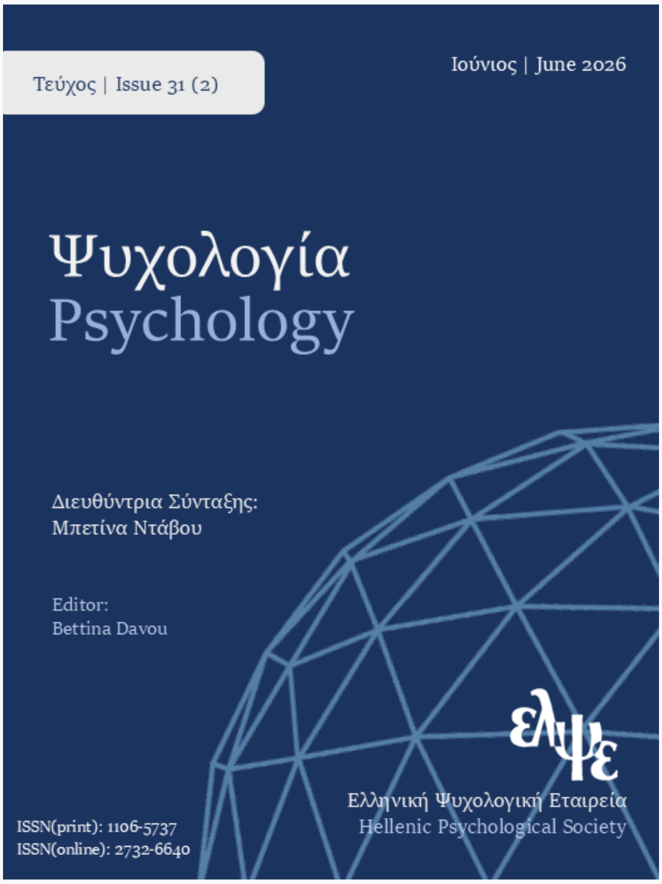

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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

Female students' experiences of sexual harassment in a Greek university: An interpretative phenomenological analysis

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of sexual harassment disproportionately affects young women and particularly female university students, with prevalence rates ranging from 20% to 50%. These figures are consistently reproduced within universities, where unequal power dynamics, gender-based inequalities and systemic discrimination persist, often due to absence of long-term preventive and responsive measures. The existing literature primarily focuses on the quantitative assessment of the phenomenon and its characteristics, while research focusing specifically on Greek universities remains scarce. Thus, this study aims to explore sexual harassment through the personal narratives of six university students who had directly experienced such incidents and voluntarily agreed to talk about it. Data were collected through individual, semi-structured interviews and were analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This study adhered strictly to ethical standards and received approval from a research ethics committee. Two key themes emerged from the analysis: (a) sexual harassment as a dynamic experience and (b) sexual harassment as a means of preserving gendered inequalities within the university. Among other insights, participants emphasized the role of gendered power imbalances in perpetuating the phenomenon, the broader impact on their personal and academic lives, internal processes of self-doubt, and the pressing need for institutional mechanisms to address the issue within academia. Furthermore, the research process itself was empowering, providing participants with a safe space to share their experiences and reflections. The findings offer valuable insights that may inform the development of targeted interventions and policies aimed at preventing sexual harassment and fostering a safer and more equitable university environment.

Sexual harassment (SH) constitutes an intense and multifaceted social phenomenon with global prevalence, as it encompasses a wide spectrum of behaviors, from intimidation and sexist language to sexual abuse and rape (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Dworkin et al., 2021). SH occurs in various contexts (e.g., workplace, sports, education, military) and is manifested in both physical and digital spaces, through behavioral and verbal forms (Burn, 2018; Gkantona et al., 2024). Consequently, the widely debated issue of defining SH remains a persistent challenge in literature, as it involves both actual and potential forms of violence (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Dworkin et al., 2021).

Despite the existence of multitude theoretical perspectives and explanatory models addressing the gendered dimension of SH (e.g., biological, structural and sex role spillover models), the present study adopts a socio-cultural framework (Kasdagli & Mourtzaki, 2020). According to Brewis and Linstead (2000), the sociocultural context contributes to the reproduction and reinforcement of unequal gender power relations, positioning SH as a consequence of sexism and the abuse of social power by men. This model frames SH not as a matter of individual behavior or a transactional quid pro quo, but rather as a form of violence and systemic oppression, including

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economic exploitation, embedded within patriarchal structures (Artinopoulou & Papatheodorou, 2004; Kasdagli & Mourtzaki, 2020; Tangri et al., 1982). As MacKinnon (1979) first stated, within these structures, cisgender heterosexual male dominance is maintained -among other means- through the SH of women. Therefore, SH is inherently linked to institutionalized gender inequality and societal tolerance of gender-based violence (GBV), rendering it a deeply political issue (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994; Luqiu & Liao, 2021).

As this model highlights, the normalization of harassing behaviors by the broader society positions SH as an often-invisible problem with tangible and visible consequences (McCarry & Jones, 2021; Tsiganou, 2021). This normalization is further reinforced by the prevailing culture of silence and dominant narratives that shift responsibility to women or explain the phenomenon through socially constructed stereotypes (Gkantona et al., 2024). Within this framework, traditional values and social norms rooted in patriarchal structures continue to subordinate women, both in terms of social perception and institutional treatment (Chroni & Kavoura, 2022; Tsiganou, 2021). Societies characterized by pronounced patriarchal structures typically exhibit higher rates of GBV than those with lower degrees of patriarchal organization (Ozaki & Otis, 2016). This dynamic is also evident in Greek society, which consistently ranks among the lowest on the Gender Equality Index (E.I.G.E., 2024; Kasdagli & Mourtzaki, 2020). However, the last decade has seen a shift in public discourse, largely driven by the #MeToo movement and growing academic and societal engagement with gender issues. This transformation has significantly contributed to the increased visibility and social recognition of SH, affecting how society addresses and manages the problem (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Chroni & Kavoura, 2022; Löfgren et al., 2024).

Visibility is also a result of individuals not disclosing SH incidents. The feeling of shame, risk of revictimization, and fear of potential retaliation are some key reasons why a person may choose not to report an incident (Gkantona et al., 2024; Karami et al., 2020). However, one of the most critical deterrents is the lack of information and awareness regarding available support mechanisms (Aina & Kulshrestha, 2017; Athanasiades et al., 2022; Löfgren et al., 2024). While these factors are important, they do not fully account for victims' decisions to remain silent; the broader patriarchal framework must also be considered, as it perpetuates a cycle of sustained GBV and silence (Chroni & Kavoura, 2022). The form and severity of SH not only influence reporting but also determine the extent of its impact on victims' lives (Johansson et al., 2024; Lorenz et al., 2019). Beyond its sociopolitical implications, SH has profound consequences for an individual's mental and physical health (Burn, 2018). SH is a significant predictor of reduced psychological well-being, as it is associated with elevated levels of anxiety, emotional distress and symptoms of depression, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress (Johansson et al., 2024; Klein & Martin, 2019). Victims may also engage in self-destructive behaviors (e.g., suicide attempts, alcohol abuse), experience diminished sexual desire and withdraw from social interactions (Aina & Kulshrestha, 2017). Among university students, SH has also been linked to negative perceptions of their academic institution, reduced academic satisfaction and commitment, and lower academic performance (Athanasiades et al., 2023; Cipriano et al., 2021; Lipinsky et al., 2022). Similarly, in the case of university staff, SH is associated with decreased professional productivity, diminished collegial interaction, lower job satisfaction, and even intentions to leave the workplace (Lipinsky et al., 2022).

Sexual harassment in higher education

As mentioned previously, the gendered dimension of SH is evident in the consistently higher rates reported by women compared to men. Indicatively, one in three women across 27 EU member states has experienced some form of violence or SH at least once in their lives (FRA et al., 2024). Numerous studies suggest that female identity (cisgender or transgender), young age, white race, disability and queer identity are associated with higher rates of SH compared to older individuals, cisgender heterosexual identities, and non-white racial groups (Agardh et al., 2022; Dawson et al., 2024; Lipinsky et al., 2022). These disparities are attributed to power relations between social groups, highlighting the concept of intersectionality and placing female students in a particularly vulnerable position (Lipinsky et al., 2022; Löfgren et al., 2024; Rudolfsson et al., 2022). For example, the prevalence of SH among female university students ranges between 20% and 50% (Agardh et al., 2020; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Cantor et al., 2024; Mennicke et al., 2021), while the corresponding rates for male students range from 6% to 11% (Agardh et al., 2020; Cantor et al., 2024; Sivertsen et al., 2019). Regarding perpetrator's identity, at the undergraduate level peers are the most common perpetrators, whereas postgraduate and doctoral students are more frequently harassed by professors or staff members (Klein & Martin, 2019; Wood et al., 2018), due to increased interaction with academic staff (Lorenz et al., 2019). In 90% of SH cases, the perpetrators were men (Karami et al., 2020). This pattern is also evident in the Greek context, where the prevalence of any form of SH within universities ranges from 4% to 30%, with 69-89% of the victims being female students and 91% of the perpetrators being men (Athanasiades et al., 2022; Athanasiades et al., 2023).

The most common forms of harassment in university settings include sexist remarks, non-consensual physical contact, and suggestive gestures, while a behavior is recognized as harassment primarily when physical contact is involved (Agardh et al., 2022; Clancy et al., 2020; Hagerlid et al., 2024). At the same time, male students appear less capable of identifying violative behaviors than their female peers, leading to an underestimation of the phenomenon's severity (He et al., 2024). Despite this, SH remains the second most widespread form of GBV within universities (31%), with psychological violence being the first (57%) (Lipinsky et al., 2022). As Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) argue, SH in higher education has reached epidemic proportions and it can no longer be understood as an individual deviation but rather as a structural and gendered issue (McCarry & Jones, 2021). This indicates the nature and dynamics of the SH difference between academic and non-academic contexts (Karami et al., 2020), while its gender dimension remains consistent across diverse cultural and institutional settings (Humbert et al., 2022; Löfgren et al., 2024). Unlike in occupational settings, the power asymmetry between students and professors does not mirror the employee-employer relationship. Faculty members hold institutional authority over assessment, knowledge dissemination, mentorship, and career opportunities, which when combined with professional permanence and institutional impunity, facilitates the occurrence of abusive behaviors (Karami et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2018). Simultaneously, concerns over institutional reputation and a prevailing culture of silence often protect perpetrators and result in the concealment of incidents (Aguilar & Baek, 2020; Hua et al., 2024).

Importantly, SH is not confined to formal institutional power structures but also occurs within peer relationships characterized by informal social power (Agardh et al., 2022). Many such incidents are perceived as "minor" and therefore go unreported (Hagerlid et al., 2024; Lipinsky et al., 2022; Mennicke et al., 2021). This pattern is also salient in Greece, where most female students refrain from formally reporting incidents mainly because they do not view them as a serious threat to their physical safety (Athanasiades et al., 2022). Non-reporting is further driven by a culture of silence, a sense of institutional neglect, and the desire to protect the university's reputation, collectively contributing to a broader tolerance of GBV. These trends within academia can be understood by considering the prevailing power dynamics and societal attitudes that normalize GBV (Lai et al., 2024; Löfgren et al., 2024; Östergren et al., 2025). As highlighted in the systematic review by Bondestam & Lundqvist (2020), institutional policies addressing SH tend to prioritize legal procedures and individual cases, often neglecting the structural factors that sustain the phenomenon. This narrow approach underscores the absence of a systemic perspective that acknowledges both perpetrators and the broader institutional environment as integral to the problem (Hagerlid et al., 2024). Such limitations perpetuate a dysfunctional academic culture rooted in rigid hierarchies, that fail to adequately support students or frame SH as both an ethical and institutional issue, rather than solely a legal one (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Tenbrunsel et al., 2019). In most Greek universities, the lack of institutional mechanisms, such as gender equality offices, further hinders victim support and effective SH case management. Addressing this institutional gap requires the full alignment of Greek higher education institutions with European directives and action plans for gender equality (General Secretariat for Equality and Human Rights, 2024).

The present study

As previously noted, the sharing and investigation of SH experiences have been encouraged by the increasing visibility of GBV, along with growing academic interest in gender issues. This shift is also reflected in initial institutional efforts to address the phenomenon at both societal and university levels (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Löfgren et al., 2024). However, there are still many unexplored "grey zones" regarding the experience of SH in academia (Hagerlid et al., 2024). For example, in Greek literature there are notable gaps in the exploration of GBV in higher education, focusing predominantly on attitudes and perceptions through quantitative methodologies (Athanasiades et al., 2022). The first attempt to systematically document the phenomenon was the study by Athanasiades et al. (2022), with the need for complementary qualitative research highlighted by its quantitative orientation. To the best of our knowledge, no comprehensive approach focusing exclusively on GBV within Greek universities and integrating both quantitative (Athanasiades et al., 2022) and qualitative data has been conducted. Given that Greece follows the global trend of consistently higher rates of harassment and GBV among young women than men (Athanasiades et al., 2022; Athanasiades et al., 2023; Karami et al., 2020; Lipinsky et al., 2022; Löfgren et al., 2024), focusing solely on female students is considered essential. The framework of a feminist qualitative research approach is also strengthened by the sensitivity of GBV experiences, the importance of deeply understanding women's perspectives, and the gendered nature of the phenomenon (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994). This approach facilitates the expression of women's voices, allowing them to articulate their experiences in their own terms beyond a predefined context (Eagly & Riger, 2014; Landman, 2006). Consequently, this research focuses on how women experience and interpret social reality, highlighting the epistemological value of personal experiences (Landman, 2006).

Therefore, the predominant aim of this study is to explore how female students experience and respond to incidents of SH perpetrated by members of the university community (students, faculty, administrative staff and other personnel) both within and beyond institutional settings. While the international qualitative research by Löfgren et al. (2024) and Hagerlid et al. (2024), provide valuable insights into required institutional measures, they are limited by the fact that most of the participants lacked direct experience of GBV and their focus remained on structural and cognitive gaps respectively, rather than lived experiences. As a result, the present research aims not only to document these experiences, but also to illuminate the meanings students assigned to them (Smith, 1996). In addition to its theoretical and methodological contributions, this study strives to inform the development and implementation of prevention and intervention measures for GBV in universities through participants' experiences.

Method

Participants

Seven women participated initially in this study, all of whom had experienced SH from university members, either on or off campus, during their studies at a large Greek public university. The selection criteria for participation in the study were: gender (exclusively female students), enrollment at the same university and any experience with SH within the university. Participants who were no longer enrolled as students at the time of data collection or for more than one year were excluded to ensure that the participants were close to their student identity and university community. As a result, one interview was excluded and data from six participants were finally analyzed. The choice of an exclusively female sample was based on the higher likelihood of women experiencing violative behaviors compared to men (Agardh et al., 2022; Athanasiades et al., 2022; Klein & Martin, 2019). Thus, based on the specified criteria, a purposive sampling method was employed (Willig, 2015).

Convenience sampling was used for participant recruitment. Specifically, participants were attracted through a posted announcement, which was shared via the social media accounts of the first two authors, as well as through a student association active in gender equality issues. The announcement outlined the aim and process of the research, along with researchers' contact information. Interested students could contact the research team directly on their own initiative. At the time of data collection, three participants were enrolled in undergraduate programs, one was a doctoral candidate and two were recent graduates. At the time the incidents of SH occurred four participants were undergraduates and two were postgraduate students. The participants represented diverse academic disciplines and were at different stages of their studies. Concerning the identity of perpetrators all were men; one was a fellow student, two were strangers to the participants and three were professors.

Data collection

Data for this study were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen to provide participants with the freedom to express their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in detail (Clarke & Braun, 2019; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). The interview guide focused on questions related to the definition of SH, the description and management of the experience, the impact on personal and academic life, and demographic information (e.g., age, faculty). All interview procedures (e.g., location, time, and method) were chosen by the participants. Two interviews were conducted online via Zoom at the request of the participants. The remaining interviews took place in public spaces, provided that the environment was quiet and safe for the participants. The decision to offer remote interviews was made to maximize participants' control over their involvement (Clarke & Braun, 2019). The interviews were conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. The mean time of the recorded interviews was approximately 30 minutes, while the total meeting time averaged one hour. This time frame was deemed to establish a friendly atmosphere and give participants space for reflection and self-discharge. All interviews were recorded using two mobile devices to facilitate the subsequent data analysis. These devices were easily accessible to the participants, allowing them to stop recording at any time. This practice offered participants additional control over the process, which is a key element of feminist research (Clarke & Braun, 2019). Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the influence of the interviewer's gender on data collection, the gender of the interviewer was carefully considered (Herod, 1993; Holmgren, 2011). All participants indicated that they had no gender preferences, and all interviews were conducted in the presence of the first two authors.

Before the interview began, participants were provided with information and consent forms outlining the details of the research, the researchers and their rights. The participants were asked to complete and sign a copy of both forms, ensuring that the research team and participants each had a copy. Since recalling and sharing experiences of SH may cause emotional distress (Rosoff, 2017), information on counseling and psychological support services was provided to all participants, regardless of whether they reported any discomfort (e.g., Center for Counseling and Psychological Support). In addition to written consent, the participants were orally informed that they could stop the interview at any time without needing to justify their choice. None of the participants requested to end the interview, nor did they express any form of discomfort during the process. However, the research team remained vigilant for signs of discomfort and was prepared to offer support if needed. As stated in the consent forms, participant anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by pseudonymizing data. Therefore, all names used are pseudonyms and do not correspond to real names. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Protocol No. 065/22-11-2022).

Data analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a method that combines phenomenology, hermeneutics and an idiographic approach to understand participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attribute to them (Smith, 1996). IPA allows for the exploration of how individuals make sense of their inner and outer worlds. This is achieved through a process of "double hermeneutics" where the participant attempts to make sense of their experience, and the researcher attempts to understand how the participant gives meaning to that experience. The foundation of this approach is respect for the uniqueness of each case, which is consistent with IPA's idiographic nature (Smith, 1996; Smith et al., 2009). Following Smith's (1996) framework, IPA was conducted in five stages: initial familiarization with the data, identification of themes, consolidation of themes, creation of a summary table and combining of cases.

In accordance with this framework, the interviews were transcribed verbatim followed by the creation of initial notes. These notes included descriptive, linguistic and interpretative comments that helped us to better understand and organize the data. Next, initial sub-themes were created, reflecting both individual excerpts and the overall interview content. The initial sub-themes were revised and organized into broader categories with greater conceptual coherence (themes). Finally, a table was created for each participant, which was used in the final stage of combining the cases. To ensure trustworthiness, the criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) were met. Specifically, the credibility of the findings was ensured through data triangulation between all the authors. Each of the two first authors created a table for each participant and then all together reflected with each other on the individual themes and sub-themes. This process allowed the authors to view the data from different perspectives, reassess the identified themes, and reach mutually agreed-upon conclusions (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1984; Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was ensured through a detailed description of the context in which the participants' experiences occurred, which is essential for the reader's understanding. The dependability and confirmability of the research were strengthened by a thorough description of the research process, while reflexivity was ensured through continuous reflection by the researchers, particularly during triangulation (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The authors acknowledge both the power they wielded during the interview process and the influence of their own gender identities, while also recognizing their positionality as members of the university community.

Findings

In the present study data from six interviews were analyzed, from which two key themes and seven sub-themes emerged. The main themes are "SH as a dynamic experience" and "SH as a means of preserving gendered inequalities within the university":

SH as a dynamic experience

In all interviews, there was a distinct dynamic in the way each participant made sense of SH as a personal experience. In this context the data were organized into four sub-themes: (a) spectrum of intense emotions, (b) need to validate a personally ambiguous experience, (c) ambiguity of responsibility and control and (d) (self-)protection as a priority.

Spectrum of intense emotions. For each participant, the experience of harassment involved a multitude of emotions that varied in intensity, duration and complexity. For example, the most intense feelings for Lydia emerged during the incident:

> "I think there... I lost time there... I didn't understand what was going on, nor do I remember it, let's say exactly. I think the switches just came off. I wasn't functioning. Because I didn't know how to leave... I was alone at the university and (.) my thesis was at stake..."

For Lydia, emotional numbness and a sense of helplessness were central. Her inability to seek or receive help from any source, combined with a feeling of depersonalization, rendered her unable to respond. As a result, she experienced intense loneliness and despair, which further amplified her discomfort. Like Lydia, Nefeli had to handle not only her behavioral responses but also the anxiety surrounding the potential consequences of the incident:

> "[...] I was seized by a bit of (.) terror. No terror (.) I felt anxiety, turmoil. I didn't know how (.) this might evolve. That (.) on the one hand I was thinking that this would cost me (.) on the other hand I was thinking that (.) what should I do now? [...] Uh so I felt that. Which was slowly escalating."

Nefeli's emotions were not limited to the immediate situation but extended to its possible escalation. The progression she observed gave rise to the fear that the behavior might intensify. In contrast, Anastasia experienced more intense emotions after the incidence. She became fully aware of the threat and the seriousness of the situation only once she was in a secure environment:

> "Hm, at first, I didn't understand what happened and I went back to class and sat down, I was over there, then I realized what had happened and I was a bit upset. Because I was saying that the situation could have been much worse."

Her need to maintain composure during the incident led to emotional disengagement, with cognitive and emotional processing occurring afterwards. Similarly, Anna realized the emotional impact that the experience had caused only later, when she recognized an intensely negative outlook on the future: "That was the starting point for everything to start feeling dark to me for, for over a month or so.". Although Anna initially felt unaffected, the loss of energy and interest in activities she previously enjoyed made her recognize these changes as consequences of harassment. Thus, across all participants, the initial emotions and reactions were primarily focused on surviving a threatening situation, followed by emotional self-regulation. Some were overwhelmed with intense emotions during the incident, while others allowed themselves to process and express their emotions only after reaching a sense of safety.

Need to validate a personally ambiguous experience. Beyond trying to make sense of their feelings, participants also expressed a need to validate their experience. For several of them, denial was the initial reaction, which later evolved into an attempt to confront a real threat. Lydia emphasized how her perception had been distorted: "They were ambiguous [the signs], you could never know if I misunderstood or if he meant something other than that.. It was all like that, that is, those messages.. you can't denounce him somewhere and say that..". Lydia struggled to find a concrete basis to support her interpretation of the experience. Doubt and confusion about what she was going through hindered her ability to process and response to the event. Similarly, Elpida sought validation from an external source:

> "When he sent me a message at two o'clock in the morning, I went and asked my brother, do you think it is normal that he sends me messages at two o'clock in the morning and he told me no (laughing) it is not.".

Although the timing of the message raised concerns for her, Elpida needed her brother's confirmation to recognize that she was experiencing harassing behavior. The contradiction between the sender's status (a professor) and the nature of his actions led her to question her own reality to avoid fully acknowledging the situation. Lydia's and Elpida's need to be believed is also reflected in Yvonne's account: "[...] I never replied to any of those messages, unfortunately I don't have them... If I had them, I would show them to you, I don't have a problem.". In recounting the incident, Yvonne proactively addressed potential doubt or skepticism from others. She understood that simply sharing her experience might not be enough to be believed, and so she introduced the idea of tangible evidence to validate her account. This approach was common among the participants. Many reported either saving harassing messages, or referring to formal and informal complaints, with some also citing the testimonies of relatives and friends. To enhance the credibility of their experience, they sought to anchor them in as indisputable as possible evidence.

Ambiguity of responsibility and control. Alongside the need for validation, participants were also seeking to identify the primary source of responsibility for what they had experienced. They were trying to determine whether they were in control of the situation and, consequently, whether they bore any responsibility for how events unfolded. Lydia, for instance, reflects on this balance of responsibility and control:

> “[...] I came in a stupid, difficult... A completely stupid, difficult position, I probably could have reacted, I didn't have time (.) Maybe it was because I thought I had it under control [...] and in the end I lost it.”

For Lydia, the progression of the harassing behavior was strongly linked to how she managed the situation. She placed most of the blame on herself, believing that her own responses could have prevented the violation. The perception of having -or lacking- control reinforced her sense of personal responsibility. In contrast, Nefeli was actively trying to distance herself from any possibility of self-blaming: “(.) He asked me what I am doing now, if it is to come to (.) his office where he had nothing to do. Of course, through all this I (.) was always very negative.” Nefeli maintained a clearly negative stance to avoid any interpretation of consent. She tried to assert control over the situation and to protect herself from both internal doubt and external judgement regarding her behavior. This need was also evident in Elpida’s narrative:

> “I'm the first to tell a girl who has been through something like this that obviously you haven't done anything wrong, but when it happens to you, you find yourself slipping into that mindset, questioning it. It is very likely you will fall into it.”

Although Elpida firmly stated that victims of harassment are not to blame, this is not a spontaneous belief when it came to her own experience. The fleeting self-blame she felt conflicted with her broader feminist stance, causing her discomfort and highlighting the internalized nature of victim-blaming culture. Therefore, for most participants there was a persistent ambiguity about responsibility and control over their own behavior, the perpetrator’s actions, and the situation in general.

(Self-)protection as a priority. In addition to the need to validate their experience and assign responsibilities, the need for protection emerged as a priority for the participants. This need concerned not only the safeguarding of their physical and mental well-being but also the protection of other members of the university community. For example, Anastasia emphasizes:

> “I was upset, I just tried not to think about it so much so that it wouldn't affect me and it didn't affect me too much [...] They told me to go tell the secretariat so that they could be careful.”

She attempted to limit the emotional impact of the experience by downplaying it. Her goal was to prevent the violative behavior from creating further distress, trying in every way to protect both herself and her fellow students. Her decision to communicate about the incident was primarily aimed at prevention and raising awareness within the university community, rather than punishing the perpetrator. The need for self-defense appears also in Anna’s narrative: “I say to myself 'I can't say anything' and then the next thought is 'okay you can't, you can't always say nothing.”. For her, both her reaction during the incident and her subsequent decision to report it functioned as a means of personal protection and an assertion of her rights. She sought to respond to the violative behavior not only for her own safety but also in accordance with her personal values. The need to protect the wider community through her own experience led her to officially report the incident. Yvonne, who was in a constant state of perceived threat, also filed an official complaint:

> “Uhm, and in general, I look at things that maybe others wouldn't look at, if someone is in a parked car, for example. I have this if someone. [...] Yes, which I didn't have at all before, it hadn't even crossed my mind, so intensely at least.”

For Yvonne, the harassment she experienced disrupted her sense of privacy and personal security. Her behavior changed significantly after the incident as she began to constantly evaluate whether the environment and the people around her were safe. Therefore, for the participants, the experience of harassment highlighted both their need to feel safe and their desire to protect other members of the university community through sharing their experience. However, these processes were not linear. The intense emotions they experienced co-existed with the need to validate the experience, the ambiguity around responsibility and control, and the need for safety and protection. These processes appeared to take on additional dimensions when harassment occurred within the university setting, further complicating the experience.

SH as a means of preserving gendered inequalities within the university

The role of SH in preserving gendered inequalities within the university setting emerged through the interplay of broader power relations, institutional inertia, and personal withdrawal. Specifically, for this theme, the data were organized into three sub-themes: (a) feeling of helplessness due to power relations and dependency, (b) restriction of university presence, and (c) the need for institutional protection.

Feeling of helplessness due to power relations and dependency. Participants expressed a strong sense of helplessness stemming from the unequal relationship with the perpetrator, emphasizing the insecurity regarding the potential consequences of resistance. This imbalance reinforced their inability to react and intensified fears about the possible repercussions of reporting the incident. Characteristically, Nefeli states: "I'm a student and he is a professor, so what can I possibly do...", highlighting the institutional gap between their roles and her inability to intervene. This comparison illustrates the dominance of the professor's position over the student, further reinforcing the power divide. Nefeli's experience reveals how institutional authority, and the unequal distribution of power can lead to psychological paralysis, undermining the individual's ability to express themselves and act. For Elpida as well, the unequal distribution of power within academic roles generates a constant fear of the consequences of any response: "This man was in a position of authority... and because I hadn't finished [my master's] yet... I was afraid he could do anything. He has a lot of power... to stop my thesis... and I might never finish". Power is experienced as ongoing psychological pressure, while silence and passivity once again function as survival mechanisms within a context that empowers the perpetrator and deprives victims of any sense of safety.

Additionally, Lydia describes a sense of helplessness caused by socio-economic barriers, such as the cost of legal aid and the difficulty of confronting authority: "Uhm (.) a kind of impotence, you know, a sense of helplessness in the sense that... what lawyers can you afford to pay, how can you pay them, and who are you going to go up against?" For her, these practical obstacles make any form of resistance seem pointless, exposing the multi-layered nature of inequality. Therefore, across participants there was a shared sense that, in the face of faculty authority, they lacked any meaningful means of resistance, even in a socioeconomic sense. Institutional and academic dependency further exacerbated the imbalance of power, resulting in a sense of helplessness that stemmed not only from the experience of SH itself but also from the unequal power dynamics that rendered female students particularly vulnerable.

Restriction of university presence. Beyond their interactions with male faculty members, the experience of SH impacted the participants' overall university life. The university, once a place of learning, was transformed into an environment marked by threat and anxiety. The restriction or withdrawal from academic life reflects a need to distance themselves from a space experienced as unsafe. For Nefeli, the university gradually becomes a space associated with feelings of aversion and fear. Although she attempted to continue her academic path, the loss of motivation was evident: "I tried later to apply for a postgraduate program here... I didn't get in... I believe that this is connected to how I experienced it too... maybe I didn't want it as much..." The failure to enter the postgraduate program is not merely attributed to external factors, but is interpreted by her as a consequence of the experience of SH. The frustration concerns not only her academic trajectory, but also reflects a deeper disconnection from herself, her goals, and her capacity for action. At the same time, for both Nefeli and Lydia, fear extends into their everyday interactions with male faculty members. Nefeli notes: "I felt that there was this fear... to approach male professors for anything... for an assignment or anything at all." For her, the traumatic experience appears to lead to an emotional detachment from her student identity and from the university as a safe space. Her hesitancy goes beyond the perpetrator and extends to all male faculty members, casting every interaction through a gendered lens and generating a pervasive sense of threat. Lydia shares a similar sentiment:

> "[...] I really love research, science, etc., this is the work I know how to do... but I tremble at the thought of who the next person I'll have to collaborate with will be. I mean, even now I have to send out CVs and... and contact professors I don't know [...] someone has to tell me beforehand that they know him and that he's okay as a person and... even then I won't trust him, but at least I'll dare to send a CV."

For Lydia, the suspension of her research activity is directly linked to a loss of trust in the academic environment. Fear shapes her choices, limiting her autonomy and her willingness to assert herself. The need to verify the reliability of each new collaboration through third parties highlights the enduring nature and severity of the trauma. Beyond insecurity in interpersonal relationships, for Anna the sense of danger extended to the university itself:

> "[...] for all the other courses I took, I always came and left with company. Uhm, usually in previous years I used to go to parties and so on, but I drastically reduced my activities within the university. Uhm, I would rarely attend campus events at night anymore."

For her, this sense of insecurity was not temporary, but a constant state that affected her everyday life as a student. The need to be accompanied even during ordinary activities reveals a state of ongoing vigilance, while her withdrawal from social events reflects a loss of trust in both the university and the broader social context. Gradually, this led to a detachment from the positive experiences typically associated with student life.

More broadly, for the participants, the experience of SH was not confined to a single traumatic incident but brought about a deeper rupture in their relationship with the university. Fear, loss of trust, and the need for distance profoundly affected their academic paths, their everyday choices, and their very identities as students.

The need for institutional protection. All participants emphasized the lack of institutional protection and the urgent need for interventions within the university. They pointed to the absence of reporting and support mechanisms, as well as the inaction of the responsible authorities. Their demand extends beyond the punishment of the perpetrator: it includes the creation of a culture of trust and safety for the entire academic community.

Specifically, Anna felt disappointed and abandoned by the university community, highlighting the institutional gap: "I can't say that I felt there was something organized that could make me feel safe.". She points out the lack of structures that offer a sense of protection, mainly due to the absence of a system that inspires trust. Similarly, Lydia states: "No one did anything and no one protected me, since they saw that I was going there. Because I didn't go immediately...I didn't go there in a week... I went over a period of two years, so....". The inaction of her fellow students intensified her feelings of vulnerability and isolation, as her expectation of timely intervention within the institution was left unfulfilled. The lack of response is interpreted as institutional indifference and complicity, deeply damaging her trust in the university environment. These narratives reveal not only personal disappointments but also a systemic lack of prevention, awareness, and accountability-highlighting the implementation of appropriate measures essential. Anastasia and Yvonne emphasized the need for an active, responsible, and visible stance from members of the university community, along with the establishment of effective protection mechanisms. For Anastasia, it is crucial that faculty members take the initiative when they know or suspect inappropriate behaviors by their colleagues. She highlights the importance of making such incidents visible and engaging the academic staff:

> "If [faculty members] know that a colleague is behaving inappropriately, they should stop them or report it somewhere. They shouldn't keep it to themselves [...] I mean, I'd like them to speak up and say, 'this is happening,' or to protect us in some way."

Similarly, Yvonne emphasizes the importance of having specialized support structures for those who report incidents, as well as raising awareness within the university community:

> "[...] we definitely need to turn to a specialist [...] someone definitely has to speak up—maybe first to the rest of the community, both for themselves and also to [...] raise awareness [...] to get people moving, to show that no one is alone."

For her, support is not only about individual coping but also takes on a collective dimension. Yvonne calls for institutional accountability that goes beyond personal initiative and individual management of trauma. As participants emphasized, the experience of SH requires a systemic response, as its absence places undue responsibility on the individual. The existence of appropriate structures provides not only support but also restores a sense of justice and trust in the university, while simultaneously empowering the entire community and fostering a culture of prevention.

Discussion

The present study focused on the narratives of six female university students who experienced SH during their studies, exploring both the experience itself and its impact on their relationship with the institution. The analysis revealed that SH is a dynamic and multifaceted experience that is not confined to the moment of the incident but extends into the emotional, social, and academic lives of participants. A key finding was the presence of a wide range of intense emotions -most notably fear, anger, shame, and disappointment- both during and after the experience of harassment. For many students, the need to recognize their experience as genuine and severe arose, either through external validation or through their own process of meaning-making. This desire for validation is a key prerequisite for restoring internal coherence and psychological resilience. At the same time, several faced ambivalence regarding the issue of responsibility and control, doubting their right to label the experience as harassment, to disclose it, or to hold the perpetrator accountable.

The need for self-protection pushed the participants towards strategies such as silence, social withdrawal and reduced engagement with university life, until a sense of safety could be re-established. The feeling of helplessness in such an environment was reinforced by hierarchical power relations and institutional dependency, which limited the ability to react. As a result, the university transformed from a space of safety and empowerment into an insecure environment that demanded constant vigilance. Consequently, the need for institutional protection emerged as a critical concern, as the absence of clear procedures, safe reporting channels, and supportive mechanisms exacerbated feelings of isolation and insecurity. Overall, the findings underscore the role of SH in preserving gendered inequalities in the university context, highlighting the need for a holistic and institutionally supportive approach to prevention and management.

The present study aligns with both international and Greek data. Specifically, it highlights the sense of helplessness arising from unequal power dynamics within universities, which discourages women from filing formal complaints, as similarly reported by Aguilar & Baek (2020) and Karami et al. (2020). Consistent with recent quantitative studies (Hua et al., 2024; Östergren et al., 2025), this research confirms the existence of structures that protect perpetrators and sustain a culture of silence. Beyond their interactions with male faculty, SH affected the broader university experience of the participants, triggering feelings of abandonment and exposure to abusive behaviors. This resonates with findings from qualitative data (Hagerlid et al., 2024; Löfgren et al., 2024), which highlighted institutional neglect, as well as from quantitative data (Cipriano et al., 2022; Lipinsky et al., 2022), which show that SH undermines students' academic and social engagement. Within the Greek context, Athanasiades et al. (2022) similarly documented a weakened student-university relationship following SH experiences.

The need for female students to have their experiences acknowledged as real, serious, and indisputable emerged as one of the most consistent findings in the present study. According to international literature, such validation functions as a key protective factor against the psychological consequences of SH, as it signifies recognition and respect for the traumatic experience within one's social environment (Ullman & Relyea, 2016). Equally crucial is the role of the university environment. Our findings are consistent with those of Dawson et al. (2024), who reported that victims of SH frequently perceive insufficient institutional support, which exacerbates their psychological distress and increases feelings of isolation. In the same vein, Bull and Shannon (2024) highlight that gendered inequalities and the ambiguous distribution of responsibilities within institutional reporting mechanisms deter victims from seeking help as they often anticipate inadequate support. Such dynamics perpetuate self-doubt, vulnerability, and silence within the university context. Ambiguity regarding responsibility and control also emerged as a crucial dimension of students' experiences. Many participants expressed internal doubts as to whether their experience constituted SH, accompanied by self-doubt, guilt, and difficulty in assigning responsibility to the perpetrator. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasizing that unclear attribution of responsibility intensifies victims' confusion and discourages help-seeking or reporting (Palmieri et al., 2025). Similarly to our participants experiences, Hagerlid et al. (2024) observed that many female students internalized blame and struggled to label an experience as harassment, a process that reinforced uncertainty and inhibited disclosure.

Based on these findings, the present study offers a multifaceted contribution to both theoretical understanding and practical management of SH in academia. It provides rich insights into how individuals emotionally and socially process their experiences, emphasizing both shared patterns and unique narratives. For many, this was the first in-depth revisiting of the incident, offering space for reflection and reinterpretation. Participants consistently described a sense of validation through their eventual personal processing, and the interview process itself. In addition to personal empowerment, the findings support the need for targeted prevention and intervention measures. Coordinated institutional and community-based initiatives (e.g., awareness-raising campaigns, experiential activities, faculty training) are crucial to enhancing visibility, promoting understanding and eventually transforming university culture. The establishment of specialized support offices, staffed by appropriately trained professionals who provide psychological and legal aid, is also deemed essential.

Regarding the study's limitations, although the sample size was sufficient to enable an in-depth analysis of this specific population (Bartholomew et al., 2021), the relatively small number of participants remains a limitation of the present study. A slightly larger sample could have provided more diverse experiences, revealing additional similarities and differences within a complex phenomenon such as SH. Moreover, the exclusive focus on gender and student status, without consideration of other intersecting social identities (e.g., socioeconomic status, sexual orientation), also constitutes a limitation (Sakka & Athanasiades, 2023). Future research could address these gaps by including individuals with diverse social identities (e.g., LGBTQIA+ persons), as well as institutional staff members (Löfgren et al., 2024). Expanding the scope to include participants from a broader range of Greek universities would further enrich our understanding of the phenomenon (Klein & Martin, 2019).

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interests.

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ΕΜΠΕΙΡΙΚΗ ΕΡΓΑΣΙΑ | RESEARCH PAPER

Οι εμπειρίες σεξουαλικής παρενόχλησης φοιτητριών σε ένα ελληνικό πανεπιστήμιο: Μια ερμηνευτική φαινομενολογική ανάλυση

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ABSTRACT IN GREEK

Το φαινόμενο της σεξουαλικής παρενόχλησης πλήττει δυσανάλογα τις νεαρές γυναίκες και ειδικότερα τις φοιτήτριες, με τα ποσοστά παρενόχλησης να κυμαίνονται από 20% έως 50%. Τα παραπάνω ποσοστά αναπαράγονται συστηματικά στα πανεπιστήμια, όπου επικρατούν άνισες σχέσεις ισχύος, έμφυλες ανισότητες και συστημικές διακρίσεις, ενώ ταυτόχρονα απουσιάζουν διαχρονικά μέτρα πρόληψης και αντιμετώπισης αντίστοιχων περιστατικών. Οι υπάρχουσες έρευνες επικεντρώνονται κυρίως σε ποσοτικές εκτιμήσεις του φαινομένου και των χαρακτηριστικών του, ενώ ελάχιστες έχουν διεξαχθεί σε ελληνικά πανεπιστήμια. Συνεπώς, στόχος της παρούσας έρευνας αποτελεί η μελέτη της σεξουαλικής παρενόχλησης μέσα από τις προσωπικές εμπειρίες έξι φοιτητριών τριτοβάθμιας εκπαίδευσης, που είχαν βιώσει περιστατικά παρενόχλησης και δέχθηκαν οικειοθελώς να μιλήσουν για αυτά. Τα δεδομένα συλλέχθηκαν μέσω ατομικών, ημιδομημένων συνεντεύξεων και αναλύθηκαν μέσω της ερμηνευτικής φαινομενολογικής ανάλυσης. Ακολουθήθηκαν πιστά όλες οι δεοντολογικές αρχές, ενώ έχει ληφθεί έγκριση από αρμόδια επιτροπή ερευνητικής δεοντολογίας. Από την ανάλυση αναδείχθηκαν δύο κύρια θέματα: (α) η σεξουαλική παρενόχληση ως μία δυναμική εμπειρία και (β) η σεξουαλική παρενόχληση ως μέσο διατήρησης έμφυλων ανισοτήτων εντός του πανεπιστημίου. Μεταξύ άλλων, οι συμμετέχουσες τόνισαν τις έμφυλες σχέσεις ανισότητας που διαιωνίζουν το φαινόμενο, τις γενικότερες επιπτώσεις του συμβάντος σε προσωπική και ακαδημαϊκή ζωή, τις εσωτερικές διεργασίες αμφισβήτησης, αλλά και την επείγουσα ανάγκη θεσμικής αντιμετώπισης του προβλήματος στον ακαδημαϊκό χώρο. Επιπλέον, η ίδια η ερευνητική διαδικασία υπήρξε ενδυναμωτική, παρέχοντας στις συμμετέχουσες ένα ασφαλές πλαίσιο να μοιραστούν εμπειρίες και σκέψεις. Τα παραπάνω ευρήματα μπορούν να προσφέρουν πολύτιμες πληροφορίες στην ανάπτυξη στοχευμένων παρεμβάσεων και πολιτικών αποβλέποντας στην πρόληψη της σεξουαλικής παρενόχλησης και στη δημιουργία ενός ασφαλέστερου και περισσότερο ισότιμου πανεπιστημιακού περιβάλλοντος.

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