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WAL NUT

A BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE APPROACH TO

COMBATTING SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Is understanding the Bystander Effect the answer?

March 2023 I walnutunlimited.com

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WHO WE ARE

Walnut Unlimited is more than a market research agency, we are the human understanding agency. We uncover human insights that help bring global brands closer to understanding people for better business decisions. Through innovative thinking, we use no-nonsense science, drawing on specialisms in neuroscience and behavioural psychology and economics. We work across retail and customer experience, technology, financial, FMCG, brand and communications. Information about us at Walnut Unlimited can be found here: www.walnutunlimited.com

Andreea Tarasescu I Research Director – Behavioural Science Lead

With degrees in both Psychology and Economics, followed by an MSc in Behavioural Science, Andreea was made for a career in market research. She has a strong passion for behavioural economics and for understanding how to influence behaviour.

Andreea conducts complex studies tackling various behaviour change challenges across several markets. She also acts as a consultant, having worked with hundreds of clients to translate insight into commercial strategies, including working on behavioural change interventions and developing or optimising marketing campaigns. She has presented insights to large audiences at key strategic meetings and conferences, as well led workshops with world leaders in various categories - from financial services to governmental work.

Hannah Kilshaw I Research Director

As a social researcher, Hannah is driven to explore the more complex and challenging issues in society. She is particularly interested in delivering insight that can inform behaviour change, having worked with numerous government departments, third sector and private organisations to develop effective intervention and communication strategies

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INTRODUCTION

What would you do if you saw someone being sexually harassed in public? Intervene? Offer support? Or do nothing?

Many of us like to feel that we would not be passive bystanders but, our research shows, not only is it not always clear when someone is being sexually harassed, but also there is a hidden barrier – known as the bystander effect - that stops people from intervening and supporting victims.

According to research from the Government Equalities Office, conducted in 2020, nearly three-quarters (72%) of the UK population have experienced at least one form of sexual harassment in their lifetime, while two-in-five (43%) had experienced at least one sexual harassment behaviour in the last 12 months[1].

New legislation is planned that will make cat-calling and public harassment a separate offense, punishable by up to two years in prison; we contend that this will do little to help people who are being harassed, as it is happening.

Through exploring wider attitudes towards sexual harassment, our research shows that tailoring communications is key. It is easy to assume that all people from the same perspective, but our segmentation highlights the nuanced picture of understanding and propensity to intervene among the population. This gives us a starting point to start a conversation about how to create communities in which all individuals are willing and able to intervene in situations of transgressive behaviour in a public place.

Because this is a complex and nuanced issue, we've conducted an extensive research project to start to understand what can be done. We started with an in-depth Behavioural Science audit which comprised a literature review and a review of communications campaigns to understand the biases and heuristics at play. Using this insight, and maintaining a Behavioural Science approach throughout, we designed a programme of primary research: we conducted qualitative research in the form of in-depth interviews and two quantitative surveys (see detailed methodology on page 17).

WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Our research showed that there is little consensus amongst the public on what constitutes sexual harassment. For some, sexual harassment starts at a non-physical level through violating someone's dignity (teasing, brushing past, inappropriate language, intimidation) whereas for others, sexual harassment is the more obvious physical act of violating someone's person (rape, physical assault or touching).

> Sexual harassment is a huge issue all over. Some people are not even aware that they are doing it.
>
> Female, aged 25-30

1 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002873/2021-07-12_Sexual_Harassment_Report_FINAL.pdf

We showed survey participants the following list of 11 behaviours, classified as sexual harassment according to research from the Government Equalities Office[1], and asked if they would recognise them as such:

1. Displays of pornographic or **sexually offensive materials** which make people feel uncomfortable
2. **Unwelcome jokes** or comments of a sexual nature which make people feel uncomfortable
3. **Unwelcome comments** of a sexual nature about someone's body and/or clothes
4. Unwelcome cat calls, **wolf whistling** or other provocative sounds
5. **Unwelcome staring** or looks which make people feel uncomfortable
6. **Flashing** (e.g., the deliberate exposure of someone's intimate parts)
7. Someone physically **following someone** without their permission in a way that made them feel sexually threatened
8. Someone intentionally **brushing up against someone**, or invading their personal space in an unwelcome, sexual way
9. **Unwanted touching** (e.g., placing hand on lower back or knee)
10. **Receiving unwanted messages** with material of a sexual nature over phone / social media
11. Unwanted, **overt sexual touching** (e.g., touching of the breasts, buttocks, or genitals, attempts to kiss)

People, on average, thought that 9 of the 11 behaviours counted as sexual harassment, which suggests that awareness is generally good. However, a more detailed analysis reveals a more complex picture. Most people thought the most overt behaviours such as flashing were harassment (87%), but the more subtle behaviours were harder to recognise; only 59% thought staring was sexual harassment. From our work in this space, we know how intimidating staring can be and how distressing it can be for women to be subjected to this behaviour.

Women were significantly more likely to recognise behaviours as sexual harassment than men: 91% of women recognised flashing as sexual harassment compared to 81% of men, and 63% of women recognised staring as sexual harassment versus 54% of men.

Of the 11 behaviours, people feel that the least harmful is cat calling, which scored an average of 6.57 out of a possible 10 for perceived harm, and unwanted staring, which scored 7.02. People perceive unwanted sexual touching as the most harmful, scoring 8.84. Women perceive all

the behaviours as more harmful than men – women scored unwanted touching 9.23 out of 10 for perceived harm.

WHO ARE THE VICTIMS?

People tend to think of the victim of sexual harassment as being a girl or young woman and of the perpetrator as an older man but, although women are statistically more likely to experience sexual harassment[2], there have been cases of women intimidating other women, men harassing other men or women harassing men.

Our research showed that the public places where people expect sexual harassment is most likely to occur include pubs, clubs, bars and restaurants – venues where alcohol (and often drugs) are widely consumed – as well as when returning from such places on public transport or on badly-lit roads, parks and alley ways. However, the reality is that all types of sexual harassment – and especially the more subtle versions – can happen anywhere; the cover of darkness or disinhibition caused by alcohol are not necessary conditions for sexual harassment.

It's drunk men... I hate to put it so simply.

Female, aged 29

Unless I'm with cis gender male friends, on a night out somebody in my group will get sexually harassed in some way.

Female, aged 24

BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION

As we have seen, one of the key barriers to intervention is lack of awareness and lack of clarity about whether what people are witnessing actually counts as sexual harassment. But, on the assumption that people do recognise sexual harassment, are they likely to intervene? Our in-depth interview participants told us that there are other barriers, primarily a combination of not knowing what to do and fear of putting themselves at risk. The survey research backed this up:

A third of people (34%) agree they would feel embarrassed or afraid to do something if they witnessed sexual harassment

Less than half of people (48%) say they would feel confident to do something

Other barriers that people we interviewed suggested include fear of being known or recognised and becoming a target at a later stage or putting friends and family at risk, lack of knowledge about whose job it is to intervene, lack of confidence or fear in the moment, and a tendency to judge the victim rather than empathise.

Nearly a quarter (24%) of people agree that some people are to blame for the sexual attention they get because of the way they act or the clothes they wear.

The survey showed that fear was the primary barrier, followed by social embarrassment. Fear about personal safety is a legitimate response and we do not advise anyone to take action if it puts them in danger. Bystanders must feel confident that any intervention that they make is

I'm not proud of this but when I was younger, I saw a group of men teasing a woman on the bus. I just looked away. I thought she had brought it on herself because of what she was wearing. I feel bad about it now but then I didn't.

Female, aged 32

2 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1002873/2021-07-12_Sexual_Harassment_Report_FINAL.pdf

safe and appropriate to the situation.

Figure 1: Which of the following do you think stops people from taking any action when they see an instance of sexual harassment towards someone they don't know in a public place? Source: Walnut omnibus survey. N=2,000.

THE BYSTANDER EFFECT

As well as the barriers that research participants are able to articulate, we know from Behavioural Science that there is also a hidden barrier – the Bystander Effect.

The term 'Bystander Effect' refers to the phenomenon (part of social psychological theory) in which the greater the number of people present, the less likely people are to help a person in distress. In an emergency, observers are more likely to act if there are few or no other witnesses. Being part of a large crowd means no single person feels they have to take responsibility for an action (or inaction). People may feel that someone else will help, or that as no one else is reacting that there really isn't a problem.

Some of the psychological mechanisms that drive the Bystander Effect include the following:

- 'Social Influence' may indicate to a bystander that there cannot be a problem because no one else is intervening.
- 'Audience Inhibition' is a fear of embarrassing oneself in front of others.
- 'Diffusion of Responsibility' pertains to the assumption that another will intervene.
- 'Pluralistic Ignorance' occurs when individuals do not understand, or misperceive, the desire of others to intervene which leads them to wrongly believe that their own desire to intervene must be misplaced.

AND WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO ACT?

Our research showed that people are motivated by altruism – feeling that it is the right thing to do, and that it will help the victim. Reciprocity is also a key factor – hoping that others would do the same for you. A personal connection, knowing the victim, and knowing what to do were also key drivers.

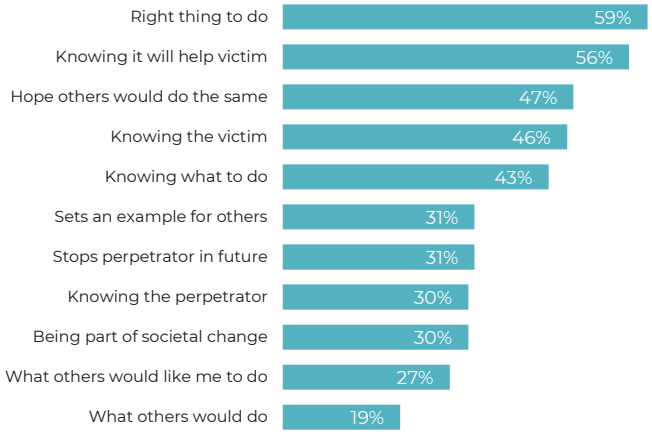


Figure 2: Which of the following do you think makes people do something when they see an instance of sexual harassment directed towards someone they don't know in a public place? Source: Walnut omnibus survey. N=2,000

WHAT TYPE OF BYSTANDER ARE YOU?

Our Bystander Segmentation reveals four different types of people: the Engaged act-ers, the Informed reluctants, the Uninformed excusers, and the Aware but apathetics.

None of us really know how we would behave were we to witness sexual harassment. This segmentation is particularly powerful as, instead of relying on what people think they might do, it incorporates people's implicit beliefs (by using Reaction Time testing – see page 16 for more details). This technique enables us to go beyond face value to get a truer picture of how people might actually think, feel, and behave as a bystander.

By raising awareness of the impact of the Bystander Effect, and helping people to understand the different ways that they might react, we can start to tackle the issue of sexual harassment.

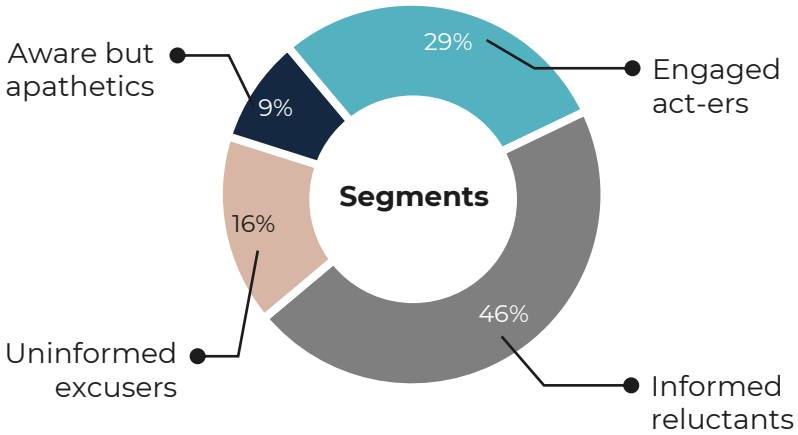


Figure 3: Bystander segments

Engaged act-ers I 29%

Engaged act-ers have the best understanding of sexual harassment, typically recognising all 11 behaviours shown above, and are driven by a sense of responsibility to act. More than three quarters (77%) agree that 'I know what sexual harassment is' and 82% say 'It's my responsibility to act if I see someone being sexually harassed' whereas only 5% agree that 'If I witnessed sexual harassment I would be embarrassed to intervene.'

This is the group most likely to step in: nearly all of those (97%) who have actually witnessed sexual harassment reported they have done something – typically asking the victim if they were OK. More than half (52%) say they would report an incident to the authorities, 40% would respond directly to the perpetrator, and 37% would approach and distract the victim. This group gave the highest scores for how harmful they feel sexual harassment can be and they are also the most likely to have taken action in the past.

If sexual harassment does occur, it would be beneficial to have an Engaged act-ers nearby, as if they stepped in they could encourage others to do the same. However, this group is only 29% of the population. Additionally, the Bystander Effect means that an individual's response to witnessing sexual harassment isn't fixed – it will change depending on the situation. So even the most Engaged individuals are susceptible to these biases and, depending on context, to looking the other way when someone is being sexually harassed in public.

Informed reluctants I 46%

Like the Engaged act-ers, people who are Informed reluctants also have a good understanding of sexual harassment (75% say they know what it

is) but they differ in that they are uncertain about how to act. If they do act, they are driven by a sense of responsibility and worry about feeling guilty if they do nothing.

Even though they are uncertain, 91% of those who have witnessed sexual harassment say they have taken action, mainly asking the victim if they were OK. This group, who make up 46% of the population, would benefit from learning more about safe and appropriate interventions to give them the confidence to step up. Uncertainty does mean that maybe this group would be susceptible to the Bystander Effect – if nobody else reacts then the Informed reluctants segment may conclude there is nothing to feel guilty about.

Uninformed excusers I 16%

This segment shows a clear lack of knowledge and understanding of sexual harassment with only 43% saying they know what it is. On average, they only recognise four behaviours as sexual harassment out of the 11 given. They also score all types of harassment as being less harmful than Engaged act-ers and Informed reluctants.

Uninformed excusers don't feel it's their responsibility to do anything to stop sexual harassment – they think it is other people's responsibility, so can't be relied on to step in and offer help or support either. Only 34% think it is the individual's responsibility to tackle sexual harassment in public places, compared to 71% of Engaged act-ers.

The Bystander Effect can easily come into play for people in this group – if there are others around and nobody is doing anything, this group are unlikely to go against the social norm and intervene.

Aware but apathetics I 9%

People in this segment understand what sexual harassment is, they just don't really care. They recognise nine of the behaviours as being sexual harassment – much more than the Uninformed Excusers who only recognise four – but they are the segment that report they are least likely to take any action. They don't perceive sexual harassment as nearly as harmful as the other segments, giving an average of 6.0 out of a possible 10 for harm. They also don't believe it is their responsibility: only 41% say it is their responsibility to act, compared to 82% of the Engaged act-ers.

This group is also happy to embrace the Bystander Effect – they already don't think it is their responsibility to act and if nobody else is doing so, that will just reinforce their belief.

> Yeah, I've questioned myself on this quite a lot. I can't lie. I always like to think I'd be confident enough to say something amid it happening. But I don't know if I'm 100% there yet. I think maybe I would if I knew that other people were there, like another man or another group of people. But I think I'm fearful of the repercussions.
>
> Male, aged 18

HOW DO WE CHANGE BEHAVIOUR?

This research uncovers the many and varied ways in which people think, feel, and act relating to sexual harassment in public and shows us how we might start to change social norms and influence behaviour. The good news is that there is much we can do, both as members of the general public and as policy makers, communicators, and campaigners.

O N E

What can the general public do?

All of us are susceptible to the Bystander Effect. However much you would like to think that you would intervene, each situation is different and the barriers around perceived risk are legitimate.

We would not encourage anyone to intervene if it is unsafe to do so. However, we would like to change societal norms and empower bystanders to act by becoming more aware of what constitutes sexual harassment and looking out for it in all different types of places and spaces.

By being aware of the type of bystander you are, you can also educate yourself to bolster your readiness and ability to act appropriately. The 'Five Ds' are a widely accepted set of guidelines for what to do as a bystander, and are as follows[3]:

- **Distract** – take an indirect approach to de-escalate the situation
- **Delegate** – get help from someone else
- **Document** – if possible, it can be helpful for the target to have a video of the incident
- **Delay** – after the incident check in with the individual who has been harassed
- **Direct** – assess your safety first, then speak up about harassment

T W O

What can policy makers, communicators, and campaigners do

This is an important topic and there are many ways for you, your organisation, or your clients to engage. We recommend that any work in this space be based on a Behavioural Science approach to ensure you have fully captured the complexity of the issues surrounding sexual harassment and the Bystander Effect.

Primarily, we need to build people's capability around what constitutes sexual harassment. In doing so, we can increase awareness and knowledge of the harms involved and of potential actions. From this we

> ... when you're younger you're unaware of it. I feel like when you're educated on something, there's less chance of you doing it. But when you're younger, you're always going to be less educated - like me two years ago. I didn't even know what would be sexualized behaviour. Now I do. I didn't know any sexual harassment stories and then people I knew came out with them. So, when you're educated, you handle things differently.
>
> Male, aged 47

3 https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/

can shift attitudes and motivations, which will increase willingness to intervene. Over time, once capability and motivation have been built, social norms will start to shift. Education is key.

Messaging to engage the public with this issue will be most effective if it is tailored to fit the mindset of the audience. The Bystander Segmentation shows that different people will respond to different approaches.

Engaged act-ers are most likely to have intervened in the past, primarily by checking that the victim was OK, so tapping into the value of such an intervention could work for this audience. Messaging that emphasises Autonomy – the feeling of having control or influence over our environment – will be important for this group and help to combat any fear or embarrassment.

As they feel uncertain about how to act, **Informed reluctants** need information about safe and appropriate actions to take when witnessing sexual harassment. Showing how interventions can lead to positive outcomes for victims will set up a Feedback Loop which will reassure them that intervention is the right thing to do and motivate them to act. Applying the Affect Heuristic – using our emotions to influence our judgement and decisions – can also be a successful tactic, but it needs to be done sensitively or else it could backfire. Similarly, Social Proof – the comfort we feel when copying how other people act - can remove inhibitions for this group, but it needs to be applied correctly so as to not trigger Negative Social Proof and reinforce undesirable behaviour.

Uninformed excusers don't understand how harmful sexual harassment can be and don't think it is their responsibility to do anything – they believe it's up to other people to act. Education around the harm of sexual harassment even in its most subtle form will be needed for this group. They will also need help overcoming the Status Quo Bias, which makes us prefer to keep things as they are. The context in which they hear or see messaging will also be key to ensuring it is relevant and combat the Diffusion of Responsibility.

Aware but apathetics knows what sexual harassment is, but they don't think it is particularly harmful, nor do they feel any responsibility to get involved. This group is similar to the Excusers in that they need to have an increased awareness of the harm to victims, but more than the Excusers, they need to be shaken out of their complacency. This audience needs a message that will create Cognitive Dissonance – the tension that results when there is a mismatch between beliefs and actions.

3 https://righttobe.org/guides/bystander-intervention-training/

WHAT **NEXT?**

Understanding

- Do you want to know more about sexual harassment and the Bystander Effect?
- Do you need to conduct meaningful research into similar sensitive topics?
- Are you looking to create a market segmentation that goes beyond the obvious?

Activation

- Could learning how to combat biases such as the Status Quo Bias or the Social Desirability Bias help you achieve more impactful results?
- Are you interested in how our Behavioural Science approach can inform your research and campaigns?
- Do you want your campaigns to cut through and create lasting behaviour change?

If so, and if this has piqued your interest, we would love to speak with you.

Andreea and Hannah at Walnut can help you to uncover real human understanding through research, insight and behavioural science understanding.

HOW BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE HAS INFORMED THIS RESEARCH

Human understanding

Modern neuroscience has proven that most decision making takes place below the level of conscious thought. These thought processes combine the complex web of memories, emotions, motivations, and contextual factors that shape our behaviours. We build neuro- and behavioural science thinking into all aspects of our approach; our research design, our techniques, and our analysis. For this research, this meant that we were able to delve below the surface of what people say to understand the true drivers of human behaviour, measuring and analysing in detail each of the emotional, motivational, and contextual factors that can be leveraged to help them act.

Behavioural science audit

Before embarking on the qualitative research and quantitative segmentation stages of this research (see below for detailed methodology), we conducted a behavioural science audit. We first conducted an academic and commercial review of literature and studies from across the globe on interventions to tackle sexual harassment in public places. Our Behavioural Science experts identified insights on leveraging the power of community to enable bystander interventions. This enabled us to understand not only the behavioural theories behind why bystanders often struggle to intervene, but also how to motivate people to respond in an appropriate way.

We then conducted an audit of campaigns (from North America and Europe) aimed at directing bystander interventions in public spaces to reduce sexual harassment. This analysis fed into the subsequent stages of research enabling us to delve into all the aspects that could drive or hinder action and not just what might be top-of-mind or easy for participants to talk about. Furthermore, applying a Behavioural Science lens enabled us to elevate the research design.

For example, we set out to mitigate the Social Desirability bias, which shows that sometimes people act in accordance with what they think is expected of them by others, even if they don't believe in it. As humans are highly social, being accepted by the group is important. Therefore, people will say or do things that aren't necessarily authentic, to fit in with the group norms and ideals.

This is especially common in research relating to socially contentious issues such as sexual harassment. Sometimes people make a conscious

effort to fit in, but sometimes it is an automatic behaviour and people aren't aware of it. To avoid Social Desirability bias, we employed Behavioural Science techniques in the way we introduced and framed the research to our respondents and in the way we asked the questions. Additionally, Reaction Time (RT) testing (see below) enabled us to measure participants' truer implicit reactions.

The Behavioural Science audit alongside the primary research findings meant we could create actionable guidelines for future campaign creative development that are grounded in science and human insight.

Reaction Time testing[4]

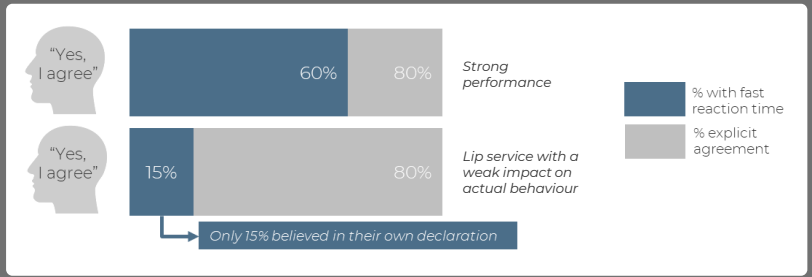
Our attitudes exist as a collection of memories represented in the brain by a network of associations: emotions, colours, shapes, images and sounds constructed, and reinforced or eroded, by exposure to advertise stronger the link between these associations the faster we can access them. But people are not good at articulating their attitudes, so understanding the strength of mental associations is vital.

Our approach is based on the attitude accessibility paradigm[5] which shows the stronger an attitude is, the more accessible it is from memory and the more likely it is to guide behaviour.

When we ask respondents whether they agree with a statement, we can distinguish between those who are just paying lip service to the idea and those who are truly convinced by comparing reaction times. If there is a small gap between those who explicitly agree (all answering 'yes') and those who implicitly agree (those who do so with a fast reaction time) we can conclude that the statement is performing well – there is a high degree of conviction around the agreement, as in the top bar in Figure A. In contrast, if there is a large gap, as in the lower bar, we know that the majority of people are just paying lip service to the idea and the statement is not likely to represent how people will actually behave.

In this study, RT testing was particularly important in the segmentation as it enabled us to see differences between the 'Excuser' and 'Apathetic' segments which would not have been apparent without RT.

Figure A.



4 https://www.walnutunlimited.com/how-we-do-it/neuroscience-research/
5 Fazio & William, 1986; Dovidio & Fazio, 1991; Fazio, 2001

PRIMARY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We conducted qualitative research, in the form of in-depth interviews, and two quantitative research surveys.

Qualitative research: eight one-hour in-depth interviews with members of the public on the topic of sexual harassment and bystander intervention. The interviews focused on whether people have witnessed sexual harassment and intervened or not. Across the depth interviews, Walnut have spoken to a variety of people from different backgrounds:

- Men
- Women
- Non-Binary
- Representatives from the LGBTQ+ community
- Different heritages (Black, Caucasian and Asian)
- Locations (urban, suburban and rural)
- Ages (18+)

Quantitative survey: Two N=2,000 omnibus surveys with a nationally representative sample of GB population, including a Reaction Time Test to understand implicit responses around awareness, understanding, and attitudes towards sexual harassment.

The first survey was used as part of the Behavioural Science audit to quantify the current drivers and barriers and inform the design of the subsequent research stages. The second survey was used to design the Bystander Segmentation that features in this report. The fieldwork was conducted between 9th - 11th February and 30th March – 1st April 2022.

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