

# *Sex and the City: Exploring Young Women's Perceptions and Experiences of Unwanted Sexual Attention in Licensed Venues*

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## ***Abstract***

Recent research has highlighted the need to explore how specific social contexts influence the occurrence of sexual violence and sexually harassing behaviours. This article considers the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention towards young women within the social context of licensed venues in Melbourne, Victoria. Using focus group data from a small qualitative study, three 'characteristics' of unwanted sexual attention are considered: the forms this behaviour takes and how it impacts young women; the nature of the relationship between victim and perpetrator; and the role of venue culture in facilitating this behaviour. It is argued throughout this article that an intersection of broader social norms and the specific social norms and cultural mores of licensed venues creates a social environment that can facilitate the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention, and that restrains the ways in which young women are able to respond to these experiences.

## **Introduction**

*A woman sits in a booth in a small, intimate bar with a group of friends. She is talking with a man she has just met, who is a friend of another friend. Throughout the evening she begins to sense that he is interested in hooking up with her. He asks whether she has a boyfriend, and sits a little closer than she feels comfortable. Yet, he is not overtly sexual, and does not make any inappropriate physical contact. She tries to avoid making eye contact with him, and does not engage him in lengthy conversation. While she feels she has made her lack of interest clear, he continues trying to engage her in conversation. Eventually, she makes an excuse and leaves the bar.*

*Another woman walks through a crowded nightclub. The music is pumping loudly, and it is impossible to move without brushing against the bodies of other patrons. The women in the venue are attired in short dresses, impossibly high heels, and heavy make-up. The atmosphere is decisively sexual. As the woman passes through the venue, someone gropes her on her backside. She turns around, but is unable to identify who was responsible. Annoyed, but unable to respond, she moves on.*

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What is the nature of these experiences? Do they constitute sexual violence or harassment? How do they impact young women? How should they be responded to, and by whom — venue staff, police, or the individual on the receiving end of the behaviour? Why do they occur in licensed venues? Are there factors within licensed venues that facilitate the occurrence of these experiences (that is, by either providing the opportunity for them to occur, or by excusing or ignoring the behaviour of the perpetrators), or are they symptomatic only of broader gender inequalities that allow sexual violence to occur in *any* social setting? It is likely that many would debate whether the first scenario constitutes sexual violence, though it may more readily be identified as sexual harassment. Yet, women in this study found this precise situation to be threatening, sometimes more so than being randomly groped. While the second scenario may be more readily labelled as sexual violence, it is difficult to know how to respond or react to such an experience when the perpetrator cannot be identified. What avenue of recourse does the woman in this situation have? Is there anything that could be done to prevent such experiences from occurring?

The occurrence of such experiences, which I am referring to in this article as ‘unwanted sexual attention’, within the social environment of licensed venues remains largely unexamined in an Australian context. While recent research (Briscoe and Donnelly 2001; Homel, Tomsen and Thommeny 1992; Homel et al 2004; Palk, Davey and Freeman 2010) and media discourse (for example, Houston 2007a, 2007b; Johnston and Houston 2008; Xuereb 2008) has located licensed venues, and the night-time economy more broadly, as a key site of male-on-male physical violence, the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention in these sites has been largely omitted from such discussions, as have women’s experiences in licensed venues more generally (Buddie and Parks 2003; Watson 2000). We know very little about what young women are experiencing in licensed venues, how they understand and react to these experiences, and what factors in the broader social, physical, and cultural environments of licensed venues may contribute to the occurrence of these experiences (and, of course, why some men choose to engage in such behaviour).

Recent research (Clark and Quadara 2010) has highlighted the importance of exploring the role of specific social contexts — and the prevalent behavioural and attitudinal norms within them — in understanding how and why sexual violence and unwanted sexual attention occurs. Clark and Quadara (2010:30), in their study of sexual assault victim/survivors’ knowledge of offending tactics, found that social norms around gender roles, sex, and seduction were a key factor in facilitating sexual offending.<sup>1</sup> However, social norms are not static, but are rather ‘context dependent, and may change over time, space and culture. Thus, the social norms guiding sexual interaction in a nightclub may vary from those guiding sexual activity within a relationship’ (Clark and Quadara 2010:30). This indicates that identification and understanding of the accepted attitudinal and behavioural norms within a specific social environment is key to identifying how and why sexual violence occurs, and provides a starting point for preventative action.

Broadly speaking, licensed venues can play a pivotal role in the social lives of young people, as well as providing a space for young people to experiment in terms of constructing their desired adult identity(s) (Northcote 2006; Hunt, Moloney and Evans 2010:21). Northcote (2006:6) views nightclubs as a space where ‘the roles of adulthood can be enacted in a socially sanctioned manner’, and that in this respect such venues can be seen as a social space that allows young adults to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Licensed venues also have a unique culture(s), and behavioural and attitudinal norms, which differ

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<sup>1</sup> Social norms refer to the ‘rules that guide how we behave in any given social situation’ (Clark and Quadara 2010:30).

from those of the city at day and from other social contexts (Anderson, Daly and Rapp 2009; Hobbs et al 2003:14). Indeed, not only does a temporal cultural divide exist between city spaces, cultural variations exist between different genres of licensed venues (Lindsay 2006). These unique contextual and cultural differences, according to Anderson, Daly and Rapp (2009:303), 'define norms, shape identity, and *invite novel behaviour* across divergent demographic groups' (my emphasis). Licensed venues can therefore be considered a unique social site, worthy of investigation in regards to young women's experiences and perceptions of unwanted sexual attention. This article aims to begin addressing this nascent issue in sexual violence research. The terms 'licensed venues' and 'pubs and clubs' will be used interchangeably throughout this article. They refer broadly to all types of licensed venues. More specific terminology (eg 'nightclub') will be used when referring to a specific type of venue.

This article discusses findings from an exploratory, qualitative pilot study that aimed to investigate young women's perceptions and understandings of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues in the Melbourne central business district (CBD). There were a range of complex themes and issues related to the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues identified in this research. For example, factors such as the environmental and physical design of venues, the culture of venues, the responses and attitudes of venue staff and security, and broader norms around gender roles and sexual interaction all played a role in unwanted sexual attention taking place. It is likely that it is a complex interplay between these various factors that creates a social environment that is conducive to unwanted sexual attention occurring. However, this article is only able to consider a selection of these themes.

This article will firstly address definitional and semantic issues relating to unwanted sexual attention and sexual violence. It provides an overview of literature on sexual violence and unwanted attention in licensed venues, and briefly considers existing research on the culture of licensed venues, particularly that relating to sexual interaction. This article will draw upon primary data from a small pilot study. Specifically, it will document three key 'characteristics' of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues arising from the data: the types of unwanted sexual attention experienced and the impact of these experiences; who perpetrates this behaviour and the nature of the relationship between the victim and perpetrator; and the 'types' of venues in which unwanted sexual attention occurred. The article considers what young women reported experiencing and what they perceived to be happening in venues, as well as how they understood and negotiated these experiences in licensed venue space.

I will argue throughout this article that licensed venues represent a unique social site and that while there is clear overlap between experiences of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues and that occurring in other social contexts, there are factors specific to this social space that may be conducive to unwanted sexual attention occurring. The intersection of licensed venue norms and broader social norms appear to facilitate the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention, and limit the ways in which women are able to respond to unwanted attention.

A range of theoretical approaches has informed this research. Radical feminist approaches to sexual violence were initially utilised as the theoretical framework underpinning this work (such as Brownmiller 1975; Kelly 1988). However, these theoretical approaches have been adapted to offer a more inclusive account of sexual violence, particularly one that is also able to account for sexual violence within gay and lesbian relationships (drawing largely on the work of authors such as Girschick 2002; hooks 1984;

Ristock 2002). As the research progressed it also became apparent that a range of other theoretical and conceptual approaches were applicable here, such as literature on social scripts, and social and cultural geography. These bodies of literature have been drawn on throughout this analysis and discussion.

## What is ‘unwanted sexual attention’?

Before developing this discussion further, it is necessary to define what ‘unwanted sexual attention’ is, and the scope of experiences and behaviours included in this study. In conceptualising the range of behaviours that form unwanted sexual attention, Kelly’s (1988) continuum of sexual violence was drawn on as a useful descriptive tool. Kelly (1988:41) views the continuum of sexual violence as including:

*any physical, visual, verbal or sexual act that is experienced by the woman or girl, at the time or later, as a threat, invasion or assault, that has the effect of hurting her or degrading her and/or takes away her ability to control intimate contact.* (emphasis in original)

Conceptualising ‘what counts’ as sexual violence in this manner ensures that experiences excluded from the limited ‘official’ definitions or understandings of sexual violence (such as legal definitions) are recognised, providing a language to express and label these harms that was previously unavailable to women (Kelly 1988; Kelly and Radford 1990). For the purposes of this study, ‘unwanted sexual attention’ refers to any unwanted advances or behaviour that participants interpreted as being sexual in nature or intent. Participants were not provided with any limitations or restrictions in terms of ‘what counted’ as unwanted sexual attention. As this study sought, in part, to interrogate what participants thought unwanted sexual attention is, the definition of unwanted sexual attention was intentionally broad and loosely defined. Participants were informed that they did not have to discuss more severe forms of sexual violence, such as rape and sexual assault, if they did not feel comfortable doing so. As a result of this, the participants’ discussions tended to focus on what might be considered more ‘minor’ forms of unwanted sexual attention. However, what constitutes ‘minor’ and ‘severe’ types of unwanted sexual attention is not easily defined or compartmentalised, and this study is also concerned with problematising the notion that these forms of unwanted sexual attention or sexual violence can be easily distinguished.

The term ‘unwanted sexual attention’ was used instead of sexual violence, as it was felt that the phrase ‘sexual violence’ might be viewed or interpreted by participants as referring to a limited range of behaviours and experiences, as the term ‘violence’ tends to conjure images of more extreme violent acts. It may be difficult to consider some of the experiences and observations of unwanted sexual attention discussed by participants as being ‘violent’ in nature. For instance, having men persistently try and engage them in conversation (that was not abusive or overtly sexual in nature) was perceived as threatening by several participants in this study, yet this behaviour is not obviously violent in nature. As such, the use of ‘unwanted sexual attention’ lent itself to a broader and more inclusive account of participants’ experiences of sexual violence and other harmful acts of a sexual nature or intent.

It should also be acknowledged here that members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/sexual, intersex and queer (GLBTIQ) communities also face significant levels of sexual violence (Fileborn 2012; Leonard et al 2008; Pitts et al 2006). Exposure to unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues is also likely to be an issue for members of these communities. As this study was intended as a small-scale, initial exploration into a nascent research topic, GLBTIQ-identified people were not included, in order to keep the

scope of the project small. However, the experiences and perceptions of GLBTIQ people are being explored in a larger follow-up study.

## Sexual violence in licensed venues

Official statistics indicate that a relatively small number of recorded sexual offences and rapes occur in licensed premises in Victoria. Victorian crime statistics for the 2008/09 period recorded 19 rapes and 44 other sexual offences (eg indecent assault, wilful exposure) taking place in licensed venues out of a total of 6451 recorded sexual offences (Victoria Police 2009:14). These statistics seem to suggest that licensed premises are not a primary site of sexual offending. However, given that sexual offences are, by and large, under-reported (Lievore 2003; ABS 2004:13), it would be unwise to take these statistics at face value. A small number of studies have also indicated that women do experience rape and sexual assault in these venues (Watson 2000; Parks et al 1998); however, it is not clear that these experiences are prevalent in licensed venues. While licensed venues may not necessarily be a primary site of more severe or legally recognised sexual offending, the small body of research that has been conducted on unwanted sexual attention and sexually harassing behaviours in licensed premises indicates that such behaviour is likely to be widespread, and a common experience for women patronising licensed spaces (Parks et al 1998; Snow, Robinson and McCall 1991; Watson 2000).

The 'Right to Party Safely' project represents one of the few studies to explore young women's experiences and perceptions of sexual assault, and broader safety concerns, in licensed venues in Victoria (Watson 2000). The findings of the report indicated that women encounter a range of unwanted attention in licensed space — from seemingly 'minor' incidents such as excessive staring, groping, or unwanted verbal comments, to more violent assaults and rape (Watson 2000; see also Parks et al 1998) — and that *all* of these behaviours are capable of causing harm to women and impeding their equal access to, and usage of, public (licensed) spaces. As one participant in Watson's study explained 'it affects the way I interact or socialise with other people' (Watson 2000:25).

International research has also documented women experiencing more severe forms of sexual violence in licensed venues. Parks et al (1998) examined women's reasons for drinking in bars, as well as their experiences of victimisation in bar space. Sexual violence was identified as one such experience of victimisation, with 33% of the 52 participants having 'experienced attempted or completed rape in bars' (Parks et al 1998:709). The women in the Parks et al study also experienced a range of unwanted, harassing, and sexually violent behaviours consistent with Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence. Further, the culture of some venues may, according to Grazian (2009:912), function to 'emphasize gender differences among patrons while providing an inviting space for the harassment and degradation of women'. This suggests that the occurrence of sexually harassing behaviour may be actively, though perhaps inadvertently, encouraged and promoted by some venues, contributing to the prevalence of such experiences.

A number of international studies looking more broadly at the night-time economy have also indicated that young women are routinely sexually harassed in licensed venue spaces. Snow, Robinson and McCall (1991) found that women engage in a wide array of 'cooling out' tactics to deflect, reject and avoid men's unwanted sexual advances in pubs and clubs. Brooks (2011) also documents young women engaging in a variety of protective strategies to avoid sexual violence in pubs, clubs and bars, though her participants also rejected and

challenged some forms of safety advice on the grounds of being impractical, or for targeting only the behaviour of women.

Given that women have learnt and are adept at successfully employing these protective or avoidance strategies, this suggests that encountering unwanted sexual advances is likely to be common in licensed venue spaces. However, as Brooks (2011:637) reminds us, the use of these protective strategies must also be considered through a feminist lens as constituting a form of social control against women, as limiting and restraining women's actions and movements in public space, and as obscuring the choices and actions of men who perpetrate sexual violence. Women are often socialised from a young age to be mindful of their safety in public spaces (Brooks 2011; Day 2001; Stanko 1990). It is to some extent unclear whether the frequency with which women use these protective strategies reflects the frequency of first-hand encounters with men who are sexually violent in public spaces. This is particularly so given that women are most at risk of sexual violence in their home and other private spaces (Day 2001; Hollander 2001; Valentine 1989). However, experiences of sexually harassing behaviours may be far more common in public spaces (Pain 1991). It may also be the case that the use of these strategies gives the perception of risk avoidance and control, 'render[ing] potentially hostile spaces at least marginally more predictable' (Mehta and Bondi 1999:75) and enhancing women's perceptions of safety. Considering that there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that women are routinely harassed in licensed venues, in this specific social location the use of protective strategies is perhaps a result of both exposure to sexually harassing and violent behaviour, as well as an attempt to maintain a sense of control in an otherwise unpredictable environment.

Together, these studies suggest that the occurrence of sexual violence and unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues appears to be a significant issue impacting on young women and deserves further exploration. This article will go some way to elucidating young women's perceptions, understandings, and experiences of these unwanted sexual experiences in licensed venues.

## **Licensed venues, sexual interaction and young adults**

Clubs and pubs typically represent a highly sexualised space (Snow, Robinson and McCall 1991; Lindsay 2006; Grazian 2007; Anderson, Daly and Rapp 2009). Not only are public displays of sexuality, sexual interaction and casual sexual encounters possible and normal within this space, they may even be actively encouraged by nightclub management who can often rely on the 'promise of eroticised interaction to recruit customers' (Grazian 2007: 221). Thus, standards of dress, choice of music, décor, and the appearance and behaviour of staff may all be strategically employed to create a hyper-sexualised environment.

As Grazian (2007:221) notes, nightclubs are often utilised as '*direct sexual marketplaces*' (emphasis in original), also referred to as 'meat markets', by young patrons. That is, nightclubs are spaces that young people may attend for the purpose, and with the expectation, of engaging in sexual liaisons (Lindsay 2006; Northcote 2006; Grazian 2007). It is an opportunity for sexual interaction that is, generally speaking, not provided in other public social spaces, or, at the very least, is not a typical occurrence in other public spaces. For instance, generally speaking it is unlikely that people would go to the movies or a restaurant with the expectation that they would be able to engage in a random sexual encounter with a stranger.

However, the notion that licensed venues function as a sexual marketplace, or 'meat market', has been variably contested and resisted by young adults (particularly young women) in different types of club space (Hutton 2006:8). Within an Australian context, Lindsay's (2006) study of Melbourne commercial and niche/underground venues highlights the striking difference in sexual behavioural norms between the two venue types.<sup>2</sup> Heterosexual sexual interaction was found to be much more prevalent in commercial venues, with these venues specifically providing physical spaces 'for sexualised dancing and overt sexual approaches between men and women' (Lindsay 2006:51). In contrast, in niche venues 'patrons tend to socialise in mixed gender groups, heterosexual interactions are relatively subtle' (Lindsay 2006:49) and socialising outside of one's friendship group can be considered transgressive behaviour as it breaches the unspoken rules of venue etiquette. If, as these findings suggest, consensual/non-consensual sexual interaction occurs only in certain licensed venue spaces, it must also be questioned what it is about these spaces that facilitates or normalises these attitudes and behaviours. That is, what are the behavioural, cultural and attitudinal norms residing within certain social spaces (and the interaction of these site-specific norms with broader social norms around sexual interaction and courtship) that promote unwanted sexual attention occurring?

## Methodology

Focus groups were used in this study to explore young women's perceptions of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues.<sup>3</sup> Given the dearth of research conducted on this issue, a method was required that allowed an in-depth exploration of the topic with participants. Focus groups are a particularly useful method in this respect as they allow participants to guide the direction and content of the discussion, allowing for the exploration of issues pertinent to them (Frith 2000; Kitzinger 1994). Focus groups have also been advocated as an appropriate method for exploring what might be deemed sensitive research topics, such as those relating to sex and sexuality, as the group dynamics can promote 'open conversation about embarrassing subjects ... that might be left underdeveloped in an interview' (Kitzinger 2004:271). However, there were aspects of the focus group discussions in this study that proved 'too sensitive' for a focus group context. In particular, participants were hesitant to discuss the issue of unwanted sexual attention from partners in any detail and, unfortunately, this important theme was not explored in depth.

Participants were initially identified through personal contacts, and a snowballing method was used to recruit further participants. Potential participants were asked to complete a short demographic questionnaire to ensure they met the requirements for participation, and to allow the individual to indicate whether they were interested in taking part in a focus group. Recruitment for this study was targeted towards women aged 18–30, who attended licensed venues in the Melbourne CBD (there was no minimum attendance rate set).

The questionnaire was also used as a mechanism to screen out participants who had experienced sexual assault and felt that participation may have been potentially

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<sup>2</sup> Lindsay (2006:43) characterises commercial venues as aiming 'to attract a mainstream clientele and ... more varied crowds'. In contrast, niche venues 'aim for either a stylish, artistic, or alternative aesthetic' and include a wide range of venue types, such as 'inner city bars and lounges' (Lindsay 2006:40). Commercial venues were more likely to adhere to 'traditional' gender norms with 'an aesthetic of emphasised femininity for the women ... and a clean-cut version of hegemonic masculinity for the men' (Lindsay 2006:51).

<sup>3</sup> Full ethics clearance for this project was received from the Melbourne University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) on 4 June 2008.

re-traumatising for them (by indicating ‘no’ when asked if interested in participating in a focus group). Contact details for counselling services were also provided to ensure any such individuals were not left unsupported. All individuals who completed the questionnaire went on to participate in a focus group. Two focus groups were held in total, with 6 and 4 young women taking part respectively. An overview of participant demographics is provided in Table 1 below. The focus groups were held in 2008. As the research was conducted as a pilot project, the number of participants recruited was intentionally small as the study was ‘testing the waters’, so to speak, and investigating whether there appeared to be issues related to this topic that required further exploration. It is acknowledged that the small sample size and method of recruitment have implications for ability to generalise the implications of this data. The findings of this research are currently being followed up and expanded on in a larger study.

**Table 1:** Participant age and frequency of attendance at licensed venues.

	Number of participants	
	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
<b>Age range (years)</b>		
18–21	2	0
22–25	4	3
26–30	0	1
<b>Frequency of attendance at licensed venues</b>		
Once a month or less	1	2
2–3 times a month	3	1
4+ times a month	2	1

The themes raised in the focus groups investigated whether or not young women perceive unwanted sexual attention in nightclubs to be problematic, what forms this unwanted sexual attention takes, and how the culture and environmental design of clubs impacted upon perceived risk of exposure to unwanted sexual behaviour. Although participants were asked to discuss their *perceptions* of unwanted sexual attention, many also drew on their first-hand experiences throughout the group discussions. A semi-structured approach was taken, allowing participants to raise any issues that may be important to them that were overlooked (or unknown) by the researcher in designing the focus group questions.

Data was analysed thematically, with the broader themes of the focus groups used as initial codes. However, additional codes were developed throughout the analysis process in order to take into account the unique issues raised by participants.

## Results and discussion

### *Is unwanted sexual attention harmful?*

It is worthwhile establishing the types of unwanted behaviours that women encountered (or perceived to be problematic) in licensed venues, and how this unwanted attention affected them, particularly given the limited research conducted on this issue. This section will focus on two of the impacts that were apparent in participant discussions: use of protective strategies, and the internalisation of blame for these experiences.

Certainly, there was not universal agreement in terms of what types of behaviour constituted unwanted sexual attention, or were *harmful* forms of unwanted attention. Participants viewed experiencing unwanted sexual attention as being common for young women when attending licensed venues. This included a range of behaviours such as staring, verbal comments, unwanted touching by men when dancing, and being ‘accidentally’ groped by someone when walking in a crowded bar. Although unwanted sexual attention was deemed to be unacceptable, the perceived level of harm caused varied according to the circumstances of the unwanted attention. For some participants, behaviour such as continually talking to a woman, while unwanted, was viewed as being annoying as opposed to harmful. Behaviour that involved physical touching was viewed as crossing a line:

**Gretchin:**<sup>4</sup> It also depends on what sort of behaviour it invokes. Like if they’re just talking to you a lot all night, it might be annoying but I don’t think that’s unacceptable. But if they’re grabbing you, ... it really depends on the level of behaviour, escalation. I think touching is a big deal. I don’t like to be touched by people.

However, perceptions of harm were not invariable among participants. For others, verbal threats and comments were viewed as being more threatening than inappropriate touching (particularly one-off physical acts from an unknown club patron):

**Hannah:** My experience is that I’m more afraid and more intimidated by verbal comments and verbal advancements than someone who walks past and slaps you on the butt.

**Alicia:** Cos’ often you don’t even know who it was, so it’s like, ok that was a bit not on or whatever, but I don’t know who it was ... I’m not really going to feel that threatened by it.

Such comments point to the relatively subjective and context-dependent nature of unwanted sexual attention. Whether unwanted attention is felt to be threatening or particularly harmful to the individual woman appears to be dependent upon a range of factors including the nature of the unwanted sexual attention, who is committing the unwanted behaviour and whether they can be identified, where and when the unwanted attention takes place, and so forth. Young women are not homogenous, and do not experience or react to unwanted sexual attention in the same way. These findings also point to the need to avoid conceptualising unwanted sexual attention in a strictly linear manner, as such a model is unlikely to reflect or encapsulate the different ways that women experience unwanted sexual attention. According to these findings, it would not make sense to label verbal comments as

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<sup>4</sup> All participants are referred to by a pseudonym.

automatically less harmful than groping or physical touching, as how participants experienced these actions was variable. Such findings suggest the need to conceptualise the harm of unwanted sexual attention in a fluid and non-hierarchical manner that takes into account the broader *context* in which the behaviour occurs, and not just the physical behaviour in isolation.

It is also worth noting that unwanted sexual attention that was perceived to be ‘not a big deal’ was not spoken of in positive (or even neutral) terms either. Indeed, there appears to be some tension in the comments made by Gretchin and Alicia above, in that the unwanted sexual behaviours mentioned were simultaneously perceived as not threatening as well as ‘annoying’ and ‘a bit not on’. This suggests that young women are still accommodating or accepting of a certain level of unwanted sexual attention in pubs and clubs. This downplaying of unwanted experiences also reinforces Kelly and Radford’s (1990) finding that women re-interpret their experiences of sexual harm as ‘nothing’.

That the threat or occurrence of unwanted sexual attention impacted negatively on young women was clearly reflected by the fact that participants altered their behaviour in licensed venues, and used strategies to deal with unwanted sexual attention. Indeed, comments made by participants indicate that young women have developed a repertoire of strategies enabling them to deflect, avoid and directly challenge unwanted sexual attention. These strategies included using elaborate signals to indicate to their friends when they need to be ‘rescued’ from a persistent man, pretending to be a lesbian (which was often unsuccessful and exacerbated the situation for one participant), watching their drinks and so forth. This echoes the findings of several other studies in this field (for further examples of these protective strategies in licensed venues and other social settings, see, for example, Armstrong, Thunstrom and Davey 2011; Brooks 2011; Snow, Robinson and McCall 1991; Stanko 1990; Watson 2000). The use of these protective strategies often resulted in restricting young women’s movements and actions in licensed venue spaces, and the types of licensed venue spaces participants chose to inhabit. For instance, participants were reluctant to sit on their own in pubs and clubs, as this was seen as ‘inviting’ unwanted attention, while avoiding venues notorious for unwanted sexual advances was another key strategy used.

Unwanted sexual attention also had the potential to impact young women’s self-confidence, causing them to question their social responses and behaviour. Participants in one focus group discussed a process of self-blame and questioning of self that can occur when women experience unwanted attention:

**Hannah:** Sometimes you can question your own behaviour and your own personality, and you can become very insecure and lack confidence ... As a victim, they’re sort of victimising themselves further and saying “Oh, is it my fault that this has happened?”... it might affect people deep down inside.

**Alicia:** You become less good at making friends because you become worried about the people you’re talking to, like, doing things unwanted. So it’s like, well, I won’t talk to anyone.

**Nicole:** You’re made to think was I asking for it? Was it the way I was dressed, or the way I was confident with myself? ...

**Hannah:** And even some women think, they’ve been taking on this attitude now that she was asking for it. I think it’s really worrying as well that people can be judged by the way they’re dressed. It’s worrying that a person could be in genuine danger ... but people are going “oh my god”.

This excerpt demonstrates that even seemingly ‘minor’ forms of unwanted sexual attention can have a significant, negative impact on young women — although, Hannah’s reference to ‘genuine danger’ also hints at the potential for more severe forms of unwanted sexual attention to eventuate. An internalisation of victim-blaming attitudes appears to have occurred for some young women, both in relation to their own experiences and those of other women. This internalisation of victim-blaming norms appears to encourage young women to engage in a reflexive process where they assign blame to themselves and their own actions. Though, Hannah also recognises the role of the responses of bystanders in facilitating unwanted sexual attention or other ‘dangerous’ behaviour occurring. Her comments indicate how the tendency to judge or blame women for acting ‘inappropriately’ (‘people are going “oh my god”...’) occludes the harm that is being caused to them (‘a person could be in genuine danger’). Hannah’s comments suggest that young women do also recognise the role of broader social norms, and the actions of others in facilitating unwanted sexual attention or other forms of social harm. Nonetheless, it is deeply concerning that young women are exposed to behaviour (or the threat of unwanted attention) that, according to the participants’ accounts, limits their ability to freely occupy licensed venue space, to socialise with others, to feel assured and confident in their roles as social actors. It is also possible that participants experienced more serious forms of harm than they have articulated here. This is particularly so given that, as Kelly and Radford (1990:39) argue, ‘women are systematically encouraged to minimise the violence that we experience’, and this may also extend to the harm this violence gives rise to.

### *Friends of friends: Social norms and unwanted sexual attention*

Thus far I have established the forms of unwanted sexual attention that the women in my study reported experiencing, or believed happens, in licensed venues, and have considered the manner in which these experiences impacted them. But who was perpetrating these behaviours? Broader research on sexual violence indicates that a partner, friend or acquaintance, are most likely to perpetrate sexual violence against a woman (ABS 2005). Does this pattern hold true for unwanted sexual attention occurring in licensed venues? The nature of this relationship also appeared to impact the ability of women to identify and respond to unwanted sexual attention, and this will also be explored in the following section.

Unwanted sexual attention was perceived by participants to be committed primarily by strangers, an acquaintance, or a ‘friend of a friend’. Women were perceived to receive a greater level of sexual attention from their partners in clubs, especially if other men were making sexual advances towards them. However, this sexual attention was not deemed to be problematic, primarily due to the belief that consent to sexual acts already exists (to some extent) between partners:

**Researcher:** Would you consider that to be unwanted, or is it different if it’s your partner that’s doing it?

**Isobel:** I think if you like your partner, then ...

**Melissa:** There’s that level of prior consent when it’s your partner as well.

Based on this discussion, unwanted sexual attention from partners did not appear to be a significant issue for young women in a licensed venue setting. However, sexual attention from male partners was also seen as being used to ‘protect the territory’, rather than constituting a mutual display of affection. Melissa’s comment in particular hints at young women accepting that their partners have a ‘right’ to access their bodies sexually, as ‘prior consent’ appears to be assumed. It is possible that given the group setting, participants were

unwilling to fully examine or discuss the nature of the sexual attention they receive from partners in clubs and pubs.

Several participants disputed the commonly held view that strangers are primarily the perpetrators of unwanted sexual attention, suggesting that friends, friends of friends and acquaintances were more likely to be responsible for unwanted sexual attention. It was seen as particularly difficult to deal with unwanted attention from friends of friends in a socially appropriate way:

**Hannah:** It seems like the general perception is oh, it's the scary bogeyman in the corner of the nightclub ... He's the one who's going to be harassing you. But it seems to me, nine times out of ten, it's friends of friends ... and I know that there's times when I feel obliged to, like, not make that person feel uncomfortable, and I think that's really, really dangerous as well.

It is apparent in Hannah's comment that the intersecting norms of licensed venue culture (that it is acceptable for men to initiate sexual interaction or to sexually harass) and the 'everyday' rules of social interaction, which require women to be 'gentle' and indirect in rejecting men's advances (see, for example, Clark and Quadara 2010:32; Powell 2010:87), reduce her ability to openly address unwanted sexual attention from an acquaintance in an effort to not make that individual feel 'uncomfortable'. Simultaneously, Hannah challenges these norms by asserting that they are 'dangerous' for her, indicating that it is not acceptable for women to be subjected to these experiences. Thus, while women may face difficulty in challenging unwanted sexual advances, they are not the passive recipients of men's advances (or passive adherents to normative social behaviour). However, while participants did challenge the behaviour of their friends of friends, it was clear that it was still a difficult task to 'deal with' this unwanted sexual attention in a direct and straightforward manner:

**Nicole:** I think I made it obvious enough without saying "go away", cos he was, he grew up with my friend and I'd just met him. Like without saying "go away", I was like oh, I'm quite tired I'm gonna go home and stuff like that".

Nicole's comments illustrate the decidedly delicate task that women face in having to employ indirect tactics to evade unwanted sexual attention, without being upfront or 'offensive'. Of course, in saying this it is not my intention to suggest that it is the role of women to manage or gatekeep the sexual behaviour and advances of men. Nonetheless, it is far from ideal that participants felt unable to clearly and directly express their interest or lack thereof in relation to these men's sexual advances. However, as Kitzinger and Frith (1999) note, sexual (and other) refusals are in fact very rarely direct in manner. Sexual refusals are generally not communicated by 'just saying no'. Instead, more indirect modes of communication are used, and this is in keeping with socially acceptable ways of 'doing' refusal (Beres 2010; Kitzinger and Frith 1999; O'Byrne, Rapley and Hansen 2006). With this in mind, Nicole's comments could be re-read not as reflecting her inability to adequately communicate her disinterest, but rather as highlighting the choice of her friend's friend to wilfully ignore her rejection of his advances (Beres 2010; Kitzinger and Frith 1999; O'Byrne, Rapley and Hansen 2006). Even so, it was clear that participants felt additionally restrained in rejecting advances made by someone within their friendship group. Participants clearly wanted to maintain peace among their friendship group and, as Hannah's comments indicate, this may occur at the expense of their own wellbeing and safety. This places women in a particularly tentative situation, where they face either tolerating unwanted sexual advances (to a certain extent), or potentially causing tension (or being on the receiving end of victim-blaming attitudes) if they openly speak out about inappropriate and threatening behaviour. A delicate balance appears to exist between maintaining peace among the friendship group (in both the immediate/short term, and for

the ongoing future of the friendship group) and managing the threat of the unwanted advances. Spending time with friends was cited by participants in this study as a key reason for going out to pubs and clubs. According to Northcote (2006:10), the clubbing experience functions as a means to 'reaffirm the peer group in the face of competing forces'. Further, being with friends promoted overall feelings of safety for women in this and other studies (Armstrong, Thunstrom and Davey 2011). With such a high emphasis placed on the importance of the friendship group, and nurturing the various relationships within these groups, this may make young women increasingly reluctant to 'cause trouble' or to fragment social ties.

The difficulty in dealing with unwanted attention from a 'friend of a friend' was further exacerbated when the mutual friend (of the woman and harasser) was either unaware or defensive of their friends' problematic behaviour. This created situations where the woman's experience was not seen as credible, or where there was a 'playing off' of the woman against the friend, as the following exchange highlights:

**Alicia:** If it's a friend of a friend, especially if you're at a party or a bar, if you're in the same group of people it's a lot harder to retreat from the situation.

**Nicole:** Or when they keep saying how he's really awesome, or great guy, and they keep saying how great he is, and you're like, well, he's actually not that great.

**Everyone:** Yeah.

**Chloe:** You kind of twist it. You turn around and go, oh I kind of disagree, but you don't want to tell them.

**Hannah:** And you worry about what would happen if you said, oh he actually harassed me on the weekend. They might be like, oh what's wrong with her. You know, she's a bit weird. He's not like that.

Clearly, women run a fine line between stopping or removing themselves from situations where they are encountering unwanted attention, and avoiding victim-blaming attitudes from their friendship group — particularly when their experience is at odds with their friend's perceptions of the perpetrator as a 'nice guy'. However, it wasn't only male friends who engaged in these victim-blaming attitudes. Indeed, participants recounted situations where they felt female friends had responded to unwanted sexual attention 'inappropriately'. As Hannah recounts:

I've often been in situations where friends have reacted really poorly to unwanted attention and created an issue just by their reaction. So, like, an example would be someone, a male, giving someone unwanted attention and the friend sort of being drunk, yelling or saying "get lost" and swearing. And they're making the guy angry at them and it becomes aggressive as opposed to unwanted attention.

Women who dealt with unwanted advances in a direct or aggressive manner were seen by participants as escalating the situation further, suggesting that women who challenged social norms were, in some circumstances, viewed negatively for doing so. Hannah's comments are also consistent with existing research on women's adherence to rape myths.<sup>5</sup> It is evident here that Hannah views her friends as having in some way contributed to their victimisation by reacting 'really poorly' to unwanted attention, despite also recognising earlier that such

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<sup>5</sup> As do the earlier comments made by participants in discussing the process of self-blame they engage in after receiving unwanted sexual attention.

negative responses from bystanders may contribute to women's victimisation. Such comments reflect a 'belief in a just world' schema, whereby women are victimised because they have acted 'inappropriately', and are getting 'what they deserve' (Kleinke and Meyer 1990). Adherence to this belief renders women with a sense of control, as they feel they can avoid being subjected to unwanted attention if they restrain from engaging in these 'inappropriate' behaviours (Bohner et al 2009; Peterson and Muehlenhard 2004; Ryan 2011). The potential for such a negative reaction from one's peers is also likely to further restrain women from openly rejecting or speaking up about unwanted sexual attention. Further, these comments place blame on the woman for 'escalating' the situation. Yet, the choice of the man in becoming 'angry' and acting 'aggressively' (and, indeed, in enacting unwanted sexual attention in the first place), is ignored and obscured.

The viewpoint that unwanted sexual attention is perpetrated primarily by people known to the women challenges common conceptions of 'real' sexual violence being that committed by a stranger. Certainly, it is promising that my participants were able to identify and speak up about these experiences. However, the intersection of the broader social norms and 'rules' around social interaction (that women should be 'nice' and obliging towards men), as well as those specific to licensed venues (that it is appropriate to make sexual advances on women), make it particularly difficult for women to challenge the behaviour of friends, friends of friends or acquaintances. There was a perception that there were different standards of acceptable behaviour in nightclubs that were removed from social expectations in other realms of social life, which may increase the likelihood that a friend or acquaintance engages in unwanted sexual behaviour:

**Melissa:** Sometimes friends too, because it's a different environment to be in so they think they can ...

Thus, friends, friends of friends, and acquaintances may feel less inhibited in initiating sexual contact with a friend than they would in other social situations. Interestingly, while Melissa suggests that men were seen as being free from having to conform to 'normal' social etiquette (as the unique social environment of licensed venues allowed them to make sexual advances towards friends), it is evident that women were still seen to be bound by broader social rules, for instance by having to placate their friend's unwanted advances so as not to cause a scene or cause offence, as discussed in detail earlier.

These findings suggest a need to reconsider the popular depiction of licensed venues as purely hedonistic spaces, free from the constraints of 'ordinary' social life (Northcote 2006; Parks et al 1998). It would seem that the ability to take advantage of this 'free' environment is influenced by gender (and, undoubtedly, other factors), with young women less able to enjoy this temporary escape from society (see also Chatterton and Hollands 2003:148; Grazian 2009) — though it should be noted here that licensed venues are, in fact, heavily regulated and controlled spaces, with both young men and women subjected to a range of social controls such as dress codes, CCTV, enforcement of responsible service of alcohol laws, as well as the informal and 'unspoken' social rules of venues (May and Chaplin 2008; Chatterton and Hollands 2002; Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Hadfield 2006). Young women, however, appear to face something of a double bind whereby they must adhere to the rules of both 'normal' social situations and licensed venue culture. If the social norms of licensed venues allow for different 'standards' of behaviour in comparison to other social settings, it must be questioned whether all licensed venue cultures contribute to unwanted sexual attention occurring or not, which the proceeding section aims to address.

### *Here, there, everywhere? Where does unwanted sexual attention happen?*

Provisional findings from this small-scale study suggest that certain ‘types’ of venues appear to be the sites of unwanted sexual attention occurring. This section aims to tentatively explore which venue ‘types’ they were, some of the cultural and behavioural mores of these venues, and the manner in which they may contribute to unwanted sexual attention occurring. In discussing this, it is my aim to draw attention to the finding that the likelihood, or risk, of encountering unwanted sexual attention does not appear to be evenly distributed across all types of licensed venues. In particular, I wish to avoid painting a picture of *all* licensed venues as inherently risky or problematic social spaces. This is especially the case given the tendency for moral panics to arise around the social activities of young people (particularly where alcohol is involved), often leading to the over-regulation of these spaces (Collins and Kearns 2001; Szmigin et al 2008).

While unwanted sexual attention was perceived as being a common occurrence, there was also a perception that the likelihood of being exposed to this behaviour varied depending on the type of club. That is, cultural variations exist between clubs, with certain venues viewed as having cultures that seemed to promote unwanted sexual attention occurring. The role of club culture in facilitating unwanted sexual attention was apparent in comments by participants indicating that they avoided certain places as a strategy for minimising exposure to unwanted sexual advances:

**Alicia:** Most of what I would have done personally is just not go to certain places ... it’s probably not right that I have, that people have to withdraw from socialising in certain ways in order to feel safe, and I mean it’s not just because of safety things, but still ...

If participants were able to avoid unwanted sexual attention by not going to certain venues, this suggests that there is something within those venues that is playing a role in unwanted sexual attention occurring. In particular, the sexually charged atmosphere in nightclubs and bars was viewed as facilitating an environment in which the sexual objectification and harassment of women becomes more acceptable. Participants in both focus groups raised the issue of the sexualised environment of (some) venues without prompting, indicating that it may be a particularly pertinent issue for young women when attending pubs and clubs.

Participants stated that women were more likely to experience unwanted attention in venues with a highly sexual culture — that is, places that patrons go to in order to ‘pick up’ or engage in sexual interaction. Occasionally, these venues were specifically identified as nightclubs and bars — though in other references to highly sexual venues, the venue type was unclear. Participants felt that male patrons in venues with a sexual culture tend to assume that the female patrons are there to engage in sexual interaction, or as Alicia put it, ‘they’re in a predatory sort of frame of mind’. However, several participants saw inappropriate behaviour as being more strongly linked to the consumption of drugs and alcohol than the particular venue setting. Nonetheless, formal and informal venue cultures that promote and allow explicit sexual interaction, and in which sexual interaction is normative behaviour may present an opportunity for some men to engage in unwanted sexual attention, by exploiting the fact that *some* women may be in a venue for the purpose of sexual interaction and using this as an excuse to force sexual advances upon *any* woman in the venue. As one focus group participant observed:

**Alicia:** Yeah, and just the perception that people go to clubs to pick up and to be picked up and so, you know, even if not all the women there are looking for it, some of them are, so I may as well hit on as many as I can and try my luck, that sort of, the whole “this place is a meat market” sort of mentality.

The participants also asserted their right to go out and engage in sexual interaction without having to 'put up' with unwanted sexual advances. Participants emphasised that there was nothing wrong with wanting to 'pick up' in licensed venues, but did not feel that it was overly difficult to know if someone was interested in a sexual advance or not. Indeed, one participant saw men who engaged in unwanted sexual attention as being well-rehearsed and intentional in their choice to sexually harass women, as Chloe asserts:

Like males that are setting out to harass women seem to have a pretty good idea of how to do it properly.

As well as taking advantage of the cultural norms of specific venues, such as sexual interaction or a hypersexual environment, participants identified instances where men drew on broader social norms and rules of social interaction as a means to engage in unwanted sexual interaction. For instance, similarly to the sexual offending strategies documented by Clark and Quadara (2010), establishing trust and rapport was employed by some men as part of their strategy to sexually harass women:

**Chloe:** I think making someone feel comfortable at first is quite common, to be friendly and smile and make a joke ... it's when you start to want to move away that they notice you're not interested, and they can become quite aggressive and rude.

These two comments from Chloe indicate that some of the men who perpetrate unwanted sexual attention appear to be well rehearsed, and have specific, practised techniques to use against women (see, again, Clark and Quadara 2010). Broader offending techniques such as gaining trust and building rapport with women may be used in conjunction with the specific social and cultural norms of licensed venues, such as sexual interaction being normative behaviour, to engage in unwanted sexual attention. It would seem that, in this instance at least, perpetrators of what are often considered 'minor' forms of sexual violence appear to be using offending tactics or modus operandi that are similar to perpetrators of more severe forms of sexual violence. By responding with anger when Chloe attempts to refuse their advances, the perpetrator(s) seem to be playing on the social norm that women will be passive and try to appease men. Not only do social norms around sexual interaction restrict women's ability to openly respond to unwanted advances, they may be actively played upon by perpetrators of unwanted sexual attention in an attempt to manipulate women into submission.

## Conclusion

This article set out to explore and document young women's experiences and perceptions of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues in the Melbourne CBD. In considering these conclusions and implications, it should, of course, be kept in mind that due to the small sample size of this study these findings are not able to be generalised. Nonetheless, the findings of this study provide some key insights into the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venue settings, and the ways in which these behaviours are understood and experienced by the young women in this study. Unwanted sexual attention was seen to be a common occurrence by participants in this study, although there was not universal agreement about what forms of this behaviour were harmful. Unwanted sexual attention had a clear, adverse impact on young women in this study when using licensed venue spaces. While this was demonstrated through examples of protective strategies and the internalisation of blame, it is likely that young women are affected in other myriad ways by these experiences. Such findings speak to the need to take steps to reduce or eliminate the occurrence of this behaviour.

Throughout this article, I have argued that broader social norms around sexual violence and sexual and social interaction intersect with the specific cultural, behavioural and attitudinal norms of licensed venues. This intersection of norms functioned to facilitate the occurrence of unwanted sexual attention, for instance by being taken advantage of by perpetrators of this behaviour. The ways in which women were able to respond to these experiences was also constrained by these intersecting social rules, as challenging or refusing unwanted advances had the potential to lead to negative social consequences. Nonetheless, participants were at times also able to challenge these norms, and to identify them as problematic.

There are several implications of these findings for future research, some of which are currently being explored in a larger-scale follow-up study. The present study reinforces the need to further explore how sexual violence occurs in specific social contexts. In relation to licensed venue settings, it may be worthwhile establishing more firmly why certain subsets of venues appeared to be more likely to have unwanted sexual attention occurring. Identifying the unique factors within these venues that promote unwanted sexual attention occurring is likely to have important implications for preventative action. Further, research investigating young men's use of licensed venues, their motivations for engaging in sexual interaction, and their understandings of unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues is vital, and will allow us to begin to move away from a focus on the behaviours and experiences of women onto the beliefs and behaviours of those (mostly) perpetrating unwanted sexual attention.

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