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What does my appearance have to do with my job? Vocational students on the sexual harassment from guests in the hospitality industry

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Abstract

Sexual harassment by guests is part of the vocational culture in many workplaces within the hospitality industry. In this study, we investigate vocational students' descriptions of sexual harassment by guests in the hospitality industry and how these instances can be understood in terms of objectification. The empirical material consists of focus group interviews with upper secondary school students who are training to work in the hospitality industry. The students describe four categories of sexual harassment: appearance comments, private and intrusive questions, leering, and physical contact. In the descriptions, men are sexually harassing female students or employees. The types of objectification in the descriptions are reduction to appearance, reduction to body, instrumental approach, denial of autonomy, denial of bodily integrity, and denial of subjectivity. Regardless of the type of objectification involved, a dilemma arises for the girls who have been taught that being courteous to guests is part of the professional role, while the guests are treating them as sexual objects.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, Objectification, Vocational culture, Masculinity, Femininity

In this study we investigate vocational students' learning about a specific aspect of the vocational culture within the hospitality industry, namely sexual harassment, and how they describe sexual harassment by guests. The empirical material consists of focus group interviews with upper secondary school students. A frequently used definition of sexual harassment is that it is an action of a sexual nature that violates someone's dignity. Sexual harassment is a widespread problem that occurs around the world. It is mainly girls and women who are subjected, and in most of the cases it is boys and men who subject them (Eurofond 2012; Henry 2017; Latcheva 2017; Plan International 2020). Furthermore, it is well known that women who work in the hospitality industry have to endure sexual harassment to a particularly high degree (Bråten 2020). In the industry, the harassment of staff by customers and guests is part of the vocational culture in many workplaces (LaLopa and Gong 2020; Ram 2018). Research has increasingly paid

attention to sexual harassment at work in recent years. Research has also pointed out the role that vocational education and training can and should play when it comes to prepare future employees to handle sexual harassments in occupations where sexual harassment is likely to occur (Wood and Moylan 2017). However, few studies have investigated vocational students' perspective on sexual harassment and the hospitality industry is an area where sexual harassment by guests is very common. It therefore seems important to direct focus towards vocational students who train for occupations in the hospitality industry and their descriptions of the sexual harassment by guests that occurs in hotels and restaurants. To interpret the descriptions, we draw on gender theory and objectification theory. The theories help us see how the descriptions can be understood as an expression of an unequal gender order in society.

Below, we first present a background, and then we give an account of the theoretical starting points, purpose and methods. Thereafter we present the results, and finally we discuss the results.

Background

For many employees in the hospitality industry, sexual harassment by guests is part of the job and scholars have therefore emphasised the importance of highlighting the role the guests play (Kensbock et al. 2015; Kerfoot and Korczynski 2005). The harassment can be both verbal and physical. For example, female staff often have their appearance commented on by male guests. Offensive comments and allusions to sex are not uncommon, and it also occurs that guests subject the employees to violations in the form of unwelcome and intimate physical touch (Mulinari 2007; Bergold and Vedin 2015; Svensson 2020). Despite the fact that sexual harassment is common, less serious sexual harassment also leads to negative consequences such as reduced perceived safety and reduced well-being (Mellgren et al. 2018).

One aspect of good service is meeting the customer's wishes, which can contribute to both staff and employers overlooking violations. Research also shows that personnel in the service industry are expected to approve of sexualized jokes and interactions (Adkins 1995; Petersson 2003). Male guests subjecting female service staff to sexual harassment is so common that in many workplaces it is considered normal. Staff turnover, however, is high in the hospitality industry. Also, it is not uncommon for young people who train for a occupation in the industry, to leave it for jobs in other industries. Several factors contribute to the hospitality industry's staff turnover (Schmidt et al. 2022) and sexual harassment can be one of them (Svensson 2020).

The restaurant industry, and especially waiting on tables, is an area where staff are particularly exposed. The work environment within the industry has been described as characterised by a fast pace and a harsh climate (Holm et al. 2015; Zampoukos et al. 2020). At the same time, the staff is expected to be courteous to customers and guests. In many workplaces, staff can expect guests to treat them in a disrespectful manner. The employees are expected to learn to handle the violations on their own with increased experience (Mulinari 2007). The sexual harassment is often treated as an individual issue and not as an organizational problem. (Fisk and Neville 2011; Kensbock et al. 2015).

The motto "the customer is always right" (Yagil 2008), "the customer is king" (Gettman and Gelfand 2007), and the myth of customer sovereignty (Korczynski and Ott 2004)

underlines the customer's superior position vis-à-vis the service worker. The staff in the hospitality branch and other service industries are expected to focus on the customers who pay for their services, even when the customers act disrespectful and offensive (Korczynski and Evans 2013; Yassour-Borochowitz 2020). Studies have highlighted that the service staff's subordinate position, i.e. that the staff's role is to meet the customer's wishes, contributes to the fact that service staff often have difficulty assessing whether a customer's actions should count as sexual harassment. Researchers speak of a "gray area" that makes the customer's actions difficult to interpret (Bråten and Øistad 2018; Good and Cooper 2016; Guerrier and Adib 2000).

Factors that play a role in the risk of being exposed are gender, age and type of employment. Young women in precarious employment are particularly vulnerable (Bergold and Vedin 2015; Good and Cooper 2016). Sexual harassment mainly occurs in unequal relationships. It is not uncommon that perpetrator targets someone of lower status, whose subordinate position makes it difficult to act. The harassment can thus be used as a means to strengthen a superior position (Deery et al. 2011; Good and Cooper 2014). Lack of experience and low status contribute to young practicum students in the hospitality industry being in the risk zone for sexual harassments by guests and customers (Bergold 2018; Nilsson 2019).

When men sexually harass women, they connect to traditional gender norms that dictate that women should stand back, that women should understand men and give them priority in a way that is not reciprocal. Sexual harassment can be a powerful tool for men to express their male identity in accordance with traditional gender norms and to strengthen their position in the gender order (Robinson 2005). Previous research has found that it has been difficult for Vocational Education and Training to challenge the traditional gender norms in society, even when this is a stated goal (Lappalainen et al. 2012; Ümarik and Aavik 2020).

In this study, we highlight how vocational students training for jobs in the hospitality industry describe sexual harassment by guests and customers. Research has emphasised the role that education and training can play to prepare future employees to handle sexual harassment (Wood and Moylan 2017), but there is a lack of research focusing the students who are training to work in the hospitality industry (Lopa and Gong 2020). While most studies have been interested in employees' perspective, we extend the literature of sexual harassment in the hospitality industry by exploring VET students' perspective. Furthermore, especially when it comes to issues such as vocational culture and the working conditions of different jobs, students can be particularly suitable as informants. The students who train for jobs are about to be socialized into the industry. As students, they have good insight into the conditions of their future occupations while at the same time they are able to observe the vocational culture from the outside, they are not yet part of it (Guerrier and Adib 2000).

Theory

The study draws on a social constructionist perspective on gender. In contrast to an essentialist perspective, in which masculine and feminine are understood as innate inner characteristics, we have a constructionist perspective. Our starting point is that the contents of the terms feminine and masculine are created and negotiated in social processes

(Sabbe and Aelterman 2007). According to this gender-theoretical point of departure, gender is a fundamental principle for both ascribing meaning and organizing social life (Connell 2021).

According to Connell's (2021) gender theory, gender refers to collective beliefs about gender and sexuality that are maintained in social relations. With gendering, Connell refers to characteristics, tasks, professions, colors, garments etc. being categorized as feminine or masculine. The consequence is that society is characterized by an overarching pattern, a gender order. In this gender order, men and masculinity have a higher status than women and femininity.

The pattern is obvious within the labor market in the form of horizontal and vertical segregation. The former refers to the fact that women and men are largely concentrated in different occupations and sectors. The latter refers to the fact that men often hold the higher positions. The gender order is also illustrated when men subject women to sexual harassment.

The division into feminine and masculine is a very strong categorization based on dualistic thinking, i.e. women and men are often described as each other's opposites. For example, women and femininity are associated with being emotional, relationship-oriented and prioritizing the needs of others, while men and masculinity are associated with being rational, action-oriented and prioritizing one's own needs (cf. Lappalainen et al. 2012). The division, which means that women are associated with certain ideas and men with others, is a prerequisite for maintaining men's superior position within the overall gender order.

The hospitality industry is a gendered field, not only because most of the employees who work in the field are women, but above all because service work such as the work in hotels and restaurants is associated with being approachable and relationship-oriented, characteristics that are associated with femininity.

Several studies have shown that expectations of displaying qualities associated with women and femininity, such as being understanding and unassuming can make it very difficult to raise the issue of sexual harassment by customers as a work environment problem in the workplace (Deery et al. 2011; Bergold and Vedin 2015; Svensson 2020; Chang et al. 2020). Also, since sexual harassment usually takes place in unequal relationships, the opportunity to act for someone being subjected is often limited and the sexual harassment can be used by men as a means to maintain or reinforce a superior position vis-à-vis women. Based on gender studies starting points, the harassment can be understood as a way of consolidating the prevailing gender order (Folgerø and Fjeldstad 1995; Borchorst and Agustin 2017; Bråten 2020; Connell 2021).

Sexual harassment can be regarded as a form of objectification (Bartky 1990; Nussbaum 1999). Feminist researchers, such as Catharine MacKinnon (1999) have described how the objectification of women permeates culture and much of everyday life. Instead of being considered as thinking and acting subjects with a variety of characteristics, women are often treated in a one-sided manner. Objectification occurs, for example, when a woman's appearance, regardless of whether it is in positive or negative terms, is highlighted as central in situations where competence or other characteristics should be in focus (MacKinnon 1999; Nussbaum 1999). This type of objectification is called reduction to appearance. A similar variant that can be

experienced as particularly intrusive and violating privacy is reduction to body (Langton 2009; Smart 1999). The objectification has been described as a dehumanisation of women. Objectification also has consequences for women's self-image. Because the objectification of women is widespread as a cultural phenomenon, women often internalise an objectifying view of themselves as well as of other women (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997; Nussbaum 1999).

In addition to reduction to appearance and to body, objectification can also be about treating a person as a thing, without the value and qualities that characterise human beings. However, Nussbaum (1999) points out that the context in which the objectification takes place must be taken into account, because what is harmful in one context and in one type of relationship, need not be so in other contexts. For example, parents can deny their children the right to autonomy in many matters without adversely affecting the children. Nussbaum (1999) highlights seven different ways of treating a human being as a thing, ie. to objectify another person. The seven types of objectification are describes as instrumental approach, denial of autonomy, denial of agency, treatment as interchangeable, denial of bodily integrity, treatment as property, and denial of subjectivity.

An instrumental approach means that a person is regarded as a tool or means for other purposes. Denial of autonomy can be explained as not recognising another human being's autonomy and self-determination. Correspondingly, denial of agency means that persons' ability to act themselves is not recognised. Interchangeability is a type of objectification where someone is viewed and treated as if she has no value of her own and can thus be replaced without hindrance. Denial of bodily integrity means that a person's bodily boundaries are not respected and that physical inviolability is thereby violated. Treatment as property represents the person who is objectified being treated as something that others have full ownership and control over. Denial of subjectivity refers to the objectifier treating a person as someone whose experiences, opinions, and feelings need not be considered.

Purpose

Based on the above background, we investigate vocational students' learning about a specific aspect of the vocational culture within the hospitality industry, namely sexual harassment. The purpose is to contribute knowledge which can help us understand the gendered conditions that characterize the hospitality industry and society. By interpreting the students' descriptions of sexual harassment in terms of objectification, it is made clear that the sexual harassment that occurs is not a matter of isolated events, but that it is about something that is a normalized element in many women's lives. By considering the sexual harassment and objectification as an expression of unequal conditions, they are thus placed in a larger context. Furthermore, the different types of objectification clarify what actually happens when a person is exposed, e.g. that the person is denied the right to autonomy.

The research questions that have guided the study are the following:

How do the students describe the sexual harassment from guests that occurs in hotels and restaurants?

What different types of objectification are expressed in the students' descriptions?

Method

In Sweden, the upper secondary school offers the students either university preparatory programmes or vocational programmes. The vocational programmes train for specific vocations or industries and they include at least 15 weeks of practicum. The empirical material in this study consists of focus group interviews with upper secondary school students who are training to work in the hospitality industry. The interviews took place in ten different municipalities in southern Sweden. Twenty-two focus group interviews were conducted, and 2–8 students participated in each group. Focus groups are a data collection method where the researcher has a slightly different and more passive role compared to traditional group interviews. The intention is to get richer data by encouraging interaction between the informants in the focus group. The participants are given the opportunity to gain multiple perspectives by hearing other participants' ideas, and by interacting with each other they are given the opportunity to reflect, develop their reasoning and thus articulate thoughts that may be difficult to elicit in other types of interviews (Caldeborg 2018; Wibeck 2010). To clarify the themes of the conversation and to focus on the participants' perceptions of these themes and how they can be understood, photo-elicitation was used (Meo 2010). Presenting images in this way has been shown to contribute to creating common starting points and good relationships, between researchers and participants as well as between the participants in the group (Caldeborg 2018). The purpose of the pictures was also to focus on the phenomenon of sexual harassment in the hospitality industry. The images were taken from the internet and were of the nature published in connection with "metoo". In addition to the focus group interviews, two individual interviews were also conducted.

The interviews were conducted in the spring semester 2021, a time marked by pandemic restrictions. The restrictions were local, regional and national, and they changed over time depending on the changing pandemic situation. Most European countries closed their schools, but not Sweden. Many Swedish schools however were restrictive when it came to external visitors, which meant that the implementation of the study had to be adapted to the prevailing circumstances. This meant that since not all schools allowed visitors approximately half of the interviews were conducted in various upper secondary schools, and half were conducted in cafés or other premises near the schools.

The participants attended either the Hotel and Tourism Programme or the Restaurant Management and Food Programme. A total of 69 students were interviewed. Of them, 35 attended the Hotel and Tourism programme and 34 attended the Restaurant Management and Food programme. They were in the third and final year of their education. Their ages ranged between 18 and 20 years. The students were thus of legal age, and in addition to the practicum included in the education programmes, most of them had employment in the form of temporary jobs in the hospitality industry. In the study, we do not compare the two programs because many of the students who attended the Hotel and Tourism programme also had experience waiting on tables, since many hotels have some type of food service and many of the young people training for work in hotels also take on another job in the restaurant branch. Of the participants, 52 were women and 17 were men. None of them defined themselves in any other way.

The questions raised were mainly about how the students viewed the occurrence of sexual harassment that may come from guests in the job they are training for and to what extent, and if so in what way, this type of issue had been addressed within their education. In this study, we focus on the sexual harassment that the students describe.

The interviews took 1–2 h and were recorded with the consent of the participants. The interviews were conducted in Swedish. The quotes presented in the results section have been translated into English for this paper.

As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006), the material was transcribed as soon as possible after the interviews had been conducted, which meant that the interviews were recalled from memory, which in turn elicited analytical impressions and ideas. The processing of the empirical material was carried out in accordance with thematic analysis, meaning that the empirical material was examined with the intention of finding patterns in the material. In this study, this meant that all transcribed interviews were read through repeatedly so that we could get a good overview of the material. In the next step, we distinguished the parts of the transcripts that were relevant in relation to the research question, *How do the students describe the sexual harassment from guests that occurs in hotels and restaurants?* The descriptions were arranged and grouped based on the type of sexual harassment described. The categories created were given the headings: appearance comments, private and intrusive questions, leering, and physical contact. We then turned to the research question, *What different types of objectification are expressed in the students' descriptions?* The question was answered by relating the students' descriptions of sexual harassment to the different types of objectification.

Ethics considerations and consent to publish

The project follows the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines on data use, confidentiality and consent in all phases of the project. Before the students agreed to participate, they received both oral and written information about the purpose and design of the study. It was emphasised that participation was voluntary, and that each participant would also be free to cancel participation without explanation and without consequences. The participants have given their consent to the data material being published. To preserve anonymity, details that could reveal the identity of the participants have been omitted or changed, and participants have been given fictitious names.

Sexual harassment from guests in hotels and restaurants

According to the students, sexual harassment is common in the hotel and restaurant industry. When Felicia was asked about her thoughts about sexual harassment, she said that she herself had been a victim several times. What she had been through is not something that is unusual in the industry. She explained:

Felicia: It's extremely common; all the girls I know who work in the industry have been sexually harassed. (Felicia, Restaurant Management and Food Programme)

The participants in the study described four different categories of sexual harassment: appearance comments, private and intrusive questions, leering, and physical contact. Below we describe the different categories and how they are expressed in the material.

Appearance comments

When students do their practicum at the workplace, it is part of the education programme. This means that the learners' actions and vocational competence are reviewed, both by the special supervisor who acts as their teacher at the workplace, and by the workplace's other staff. The learners are well aware that their vocational competence is assessed by the environment, and they are keen to be perceived as skillful and competent professionals. The young women repeatedly highlighted how male guests and customers comment on their appearance, something they considered irrelevant since they were in the workplace to perform and learn a job. Elin expressed a frustration with guests who let her appearance take center stage instead of her achievements and professional knowledge:

Elin: You can hear comments like, "You're so pretty, you can't have a hard time". But that has nothing to do with the matter. What does my appearance have to do with my job? (Elin, Hotel and Tourism programme).

According to the informants, it is common for male guests and customers to make statements about the appearance of female learners and employees. For example, the men tell the women that they are beautiful, stylish, or attractive. The women can also be called "pretty". The women are thus exposed to the type of objectification that means being reduced to their appearance (Langton 2009). Many informants describing objectifying judgments emphasised at the same time that the comments must be accepted. Sometimes the girls explained that although the comments often make them feel uncomfortable, they are expressed in positive terms, are meant to be compliments, and that they are not malicious. The girls often say 'thank you' for the comments even though they feel ill at ease. In their training, they have learned that a professional approach means that they must act courteously and greet the guests in a good mood. The girls learn that they should "keep a smile on their face all the time", as Linnea explained. Telling the guests that the comments make them uncomfortable would therefore mean that the girls would violate the professional behaviour they have been taught. That the comments must be accepted is also something that is communicated in the workplace. In cases where the girls tell the staff that the guests' comments affect them badly, they may be met with a shrug or the advice to just ignore what the guests are saying.

However, the informants made distinctions among the objectifying judgments that guests make. Some are worse than others, although the boundaries are hard to define. The girls talked about "sleazy comments", those that make them extra uncomfortable and ill at ease. Tess explained that comments about appearance that are more general in nature, such as looking good and being attractive, one must put up with. She distinguished between those types of appearance comments and the comments she called "sleazy". Guests targeting her body and calling her "sexy" cross the line. Such a statement is too intrusive. Tess angrily declared that those kinds of comments are not acceptable:

Interviewer: Tess, what do you think about this thing about the limit and what you cannot put up with?

Tess: It's when they make sleazy comments.

Interviewer: Okay, a sleazy comment, what's that?

Tess: You can get a comment that you're good-looking or pretty and that can be okay, but if someone says "damn, you're sexy", then it's over the line. You don't say that! (Tess, Restaurant Management and Food Programme).

A guest calling a woman working in the hotel and restaurant industry "sexy" reduces her to a sexualised body in a way so obvious and undeniable that it's hard to ignore. Smart (1999) speaks of women being "made into bodies". Tess in the quote above says that she tolerates being objectified in the way that male guests assess her appearance in positive terms with words like "good-looking" and "pretty", but being reduced to a body, according to her, falls outside the limit of what one should have to put up with.

Private and intrusive questions

Another type of sexual harassment described by the informants is private and intrusive questions. This, too, is about being objectified by being reduced to a sexual object rather than treated as a professional person. Kajsa, who is training to be a chef, described that the kitchen at her practicum is open to the dining room, which means that the guests have a view of the kitchen and the work that takes place there. In the open kitchen, she can neither withdraw from the guests' gazes nor escape comments and questions. Kajsa described how male guests stand and look at her when she is working in the kitchen, and at the same time they ask questions that may initially be work-related but then quickly turn into private matters:

Kajsa: *Since it's an open kitchen, they can stand and watch as long as they want, sort of. So then they can stand there and try to have a conversation. They say, "How long have you worked here? How old are you? Are you single?" (Kajsa, Restaurant Management and Food Programme).*

Kajsa described how she is reduced to her appearance when the men stand and look at her. The first question asked in the quote above is indeed work-related, but at the same time it seems to be asked more as an entry to get into private matters, and not so much out of interest in her competence and professional experience. The question "Are you single?" clearly signals that the questioner is positioning Kajsa as a possible prospective partner. Barkty (1990) describes how sexual objectification can be seen as a threat to all women's autonomy and position, because it risks reducing a woman to how feminine, attractive and sexually available she is judged to be. In this way, each woman's authority and professional position risks being undermined.

All of the sexual harassment from guests and customers described by the students in this study involved men subjecting female learners and employees to some type of unwelcome attention or unwelcome advances. Most of the depictions described a single man acting, but there were also cases of men acting in groups. Susanne told about how four male guests harassed her with questions and nagging. The situation stressed her, and she could not think clearly. She said they forced her to give out her phone number:

Susanne: *There were four men sitting at a table, and they forced me to write down my phone number. They asked a lot, and then they pestered me for my phone number. "Give me your number! Can I have your number? Kiss, kiss!" They kept it up! I felt I had no choice. Afterwards I realised that I could have written a*

different number! But I didn't think that in that situation! (Susanne, Restaurant Management and Food Programme).

Denial of subjectivity is one of the different varieties of objectification that Nussbaum (1999) describes. Denying a person their subjectivity means that the person's experiences are not taken into account. This kind of objectification is expressed in the quote above. According to the description given in the quote, the men did not consider it necessary to take Susanne's experience and will into account. When the men begged, they showed that they were well aware that Susanne did not want to write down her phone number, but they did not give her the right to decide about this herself. Like Susanne, many other informants described how they were surprised and could feel taken aback, when men misbehaved and subjected them to various types of sexual harassment and such unwelcome attention. The students said they were not used to adult, often middle-aged, men behaving in that way, and their education had not prepared them.

When the sexual harassment is carried out by men in a group, it can also be interpreted as a way of constituting masculinity in front of other men. By appearing as "he-men", the men show off in front of each other, while simultaneously constituting themselves as masculine. According to Kimmel (2008), masculinity is largely a homosocial experience. Masculinity is something that is displayed to, and assessed by, other men. It is the assessment and recognition of other men that count. Being recognised by women does not have the same status at all, says Kimmel. Men can also use women as a means to strengthen their community. By distancing themselves from women, objectifying them together, or making condescending comments about them, a masculine cohesion is marked. The basis of this community is then an "us" that is better than "them" (cf. Bird 1996). The objectification that Susanne was exposed to when the men together pestered her for her phone number can be interpreted as a way for the men to use Susanne in their group activity where they constituted both masculinity and community. It is thus an instrumental approach that was expressed when Susanne was objectified.

Stefansen et al. (2014) speak of double violation when someone is subjected to sexual harassment which is witnessed by others who silently watch it happen. Sexual harassment in itself is a violation of what the researchers call "sexual freedom", but if this violation is also witnessed by people who do not intervene but, on the contrary, seem to accept what is happening, the victim is doubly violated. In the quote above, Susanne described a situation where she was sexually harassed by four men, which means that the men both exposed her and were witnesses to each other's actions. Using Stefansen et al. (2014) terminology, she was thus doubly violated.

Direct sexual advances also occurred. Bianca, who was doing her practicum at a hotel, said that male guests who eat in the hotel's restaurant can ask her to come up to their room:

Bianca: It happens very often that they say, "I am staying at this room number, are you coming to my room later?" "You are so welcome." (Bianca, Hotel and Tourism programme).

The sexual advance is an objectification that reduces Bianca to appearance and body. Smart's (1999) concept of being made into a body becomes especially clear when the

guest positions the female person doing her job, as someone who would be willing to come to the guest's hotel room for a sexual encounter.

Leering

The students described sexual harassment that was expressed in looks from male guests. It was not about ordinary looking, but that the men looked at them in a particular way that the girls found uncomfortable. Certain body parts may be scrutinised:

Julia: I haven't been pawed at, but you always get the looks. They leer, and they look at your butt and stuff. It makes you very uncomfortable. (Julia, Restaurant Management and Food Programme).

Also Lina talked about male guests who look "very closely at you, up and down". Every weekend, Lina works in a restaurant where the waitresses wear a uniform in the form of masculine coded garments such as a shirt, waistcoat, and tie. The clothes are tight, and the body is exposed very clearly, even though not much skin is shown. The tight clothing contributes to the objectification of the waitresses. Lina explained how the staff's uniforms affect the guests' actions:

Lina: We have very tight waistcoats and ties and shirts, so you get a lot of looks. They leer a lot. (Lina, Hotel and Tourism Programme).

When Alexandra was asked about her spontaneous thoughts regarding sexual harassment in the industry, the unpleasant leering was the first thing that came to her mind. Alexandra associated the leering with guests who drink alcohol:

Alexandra: There are leers! It's mostly in the bar when people drink. In the pub where I worked, the customers are as old as my dad, 40 plus! That is not very fun! Once a customer sat like this [licks her mouth]. And I just uhh! [grimaces and shows distaste]. (Alexandra, Restaurant Management and Food Programme).

The leers mean that the girls are objectified and reduced to appearance and body, sometimes without anything being said between them and the male guest. In a similar way to how the girls talked about sleazy comments, they talked about the 'sleazy look,' and words like 'disgusting' and 'sleazy' were often used to describe the experience of disgust. Sometimes the girls showed in their descriptions, just like Alexandra above, with facial expressions, grimaces, and various sounds that they experienced the situation as unpleasant.

Something that can contribute to the discomfort students experience is that it can often be impossible to defend oneself. Per had not been subjected to sexual harassment himself, but he had many female friends who had talked about their experiences. He believed that the leers are particularly difficult to deal with because they are easy to deny:

Per: But you probably can't do anything about leering. It's easier to respond to comments or if they touch you or go very close, but leering is more difficult. They may say, "I was just looking straight ahead". (Per, Restaurant Management and Food Programme)

As Per pointed out in the quote above, it can be perceived as impossible to respond to unpleasant looks. Even though the informants described that comments from the guests are often downplayed by the staff at the practicums, what is said is still more tangible. When it comes to leering, the guest can more easily deny and claim that the person being exposed is imagining things or is mistaken.

Physical contact

The informants also described that sexual harassment in the form of physical touching occurs. It is not unusual for male guests to touch the female staff, for example, on the back, shoulder, or arm, in the context of standing close in a natural situation, for example, when the female staff is helping hotel guests to find a way or place on a map. Guests can also put their arms around women's waists when it's crowded and they want to pass by. The touch is not appreciated, but in cases like these it is often allowed to pass. When Anna tried to define where the line is between acceptable and unacceptable physical touch, it came down to how much touch she was exposed to and how intimate the touch was. It was also a matter of how the guest reacted if she spoke up. Anna believed that it is not acceptable to have guests who continue or become unpleasant after a rebuke. She explained:

Anna: Yes, you have to tolerate some of it, like that they take you around the waist even if you try to avoid it. But if it becomes a lot or intimate, or if they become unpleasant when you protest, then that's enough. If they don't listen to you when you speak up, it's enough. (Anna, Hotel and Tourism programme).

The physical touching, especially in cases where the guest continues after the woman has spoken up or clearly indicated that she does not want him to touch her body, can be said to illustrate four types of objectification: that which involves reduction to body, the one about one's experiences not needing consideration (denial of subjectivity), the one that refers to the disregard of the right to self-determination (denial of autonomy), and the one which means that bodily integrity is denied. Felicia also described how she had been objectified in these four ways when two male guests harassed her for an entire evening, by giving her unwelcome attention, both by commenting on her appearance and by filming her. Felicia said that the restaurant owner allowed the guests' actions, because they spent a lot of money during the evening. The owner and the rest of the staff acted as if what happened was normal. As the men were leaving the restaurant, they tried to hug and kiss her, something that a colleague, however, prevented. Before that, the men had grabbed her while she was working at the bar, which she found very uncomfortable. Felicia described what happened in terms of abuse:

Felicia: They approached me at the bar where I was and grabbed my arm. It was both physical, like abuse, and that they filmed me when I was serving. In the evening when they were going to leave the restaurant, they came up and tried to give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. (Felicia, Restaurant Management and Food Programme)

In addition to the fact that Felicia was subjected to several different types of objectification, the sexual harassment she told about can also be classified as a double violation

(Stefansen et al. 2014) since what she was subjected to was witnessed by both guests and staff. The fact that the men also filmed her can be considered a further violation, because she does not know who will witness what she was subjected to afterwards. It was not until after an entire evening of sexual harassment that Felicia's colleague put an end to the guests' actions as they were about to leave.

Discussion

This study contributes knowledge on students learning about a specific aspect of the vocational culture within the hospitality industry, namely sexual harassment. The students described four categories of sexual harassment: appearance comments, private and intrusive questions, leering, and physical contact. In the situations that the students described, girls were exposed to actions from guests that are in many cases normalised within the industry (cf. Brunner and Dever 2014). The girls who were exposed, however, described that they feel uncomfortable and ill-at-ease. They were still in training to learn a job in the industry, and they had not accepted the sexual harassment as part of the working life. Sometimes situations could be really unpleasant, like when Felicia was subjected by two male guests for hours without the restaurant owner or any of the staff intervening.

The different types of objectification expressed in the descriptions are reduction to appearance, reduction to body, instrumental approach, denial of autonomy, denial of bodily integrity, and denial of subjectivity. Regardless of the type of objectification involved, a dilemma arises for the girls who have been taught in their education that it is part of the professional role to be courteous to customers and guests, while at the same time the guests do not treat them as working persons but as sexual objects. Scholars have described the ever-present objectification of women as dehumanization (MacKinnon 1997; Nussbaum 1999; Gothreau et al. 2023). In the examples that the informants described in this study, there is reason to speak of a clear de-professionalisation. When waitresses and other women in the hotel and restaurant industry are repeatedly treated as bodies rather than as personnel doing their job, the position of the entire occupation is undermined. Both the vocational programmes and the industry have a very big responsibility not to normalize the dehumanization and the de-professionalisation.

The fact that sexual harassment and objectification of women is common both in society and in the hospitality industry makes it difficult for the girls to act on their own. The acceptance of the violations is apparent in the descriptions of how staff and managers/employers reacted. The informants also described how employees downplay the sexual harassment, which means that learners are left to deal with the problem without help and support from the workplace that is part of their training. In this way, the workplace takes part in the objectification by denying the learners' subjectivity. Furthermore, in the informants descriptions, there were restaurant owners who did not take action against guests who spent a lot of money and also employers who contributed to the violations by giving their staff work clothes that exposed their bodies extra clearly. In these cases, restaurant owners and employers can be said both to have an instrumental approach and to turn the girls into bodies in order to make money. Wait staff dressed in tight clothing can also be seen as an illustration of

sexualized labour. Just as Warhurst and Nicksom (2009) point out, the line between selling a service and selling sexuality is sometimes very thin.

When staff and managers do not listen and take the sexually harassed girl's side, it means that she risks standing alone with a sense of guilt and shame (cf. Kelly 1988). The tendency to impose guilt and shame on women based on unjust grounds is called a master suppression technique [härskarteknik] by the Norwegian social psychologist Berit Ås, and the consequences are that the gender order and women's subordination are reinforced (Ås 2004; Bohlin & Berg 2017).

Among young people, there is also a widespread norm that one should appear relaxed and confident, as a cool person who does not make a big deal of unpleasant things that happen to you (Nordberg 2008; Cf. Ambjörnsson 2003). In addition, the neoliberal view that each individual is free and independent, in an equal and egalitarian society where previous hierarchical structures and misogynistic notions have played out their role, is widespread among young people (Ambjörnsson 2003; Ringrose 2007). However, as Kelly (1988) points out, sexual harassment is a form of gender-based violence that is important to define and name. Education has a very important role to play here.

It is not easy for the students to challenge the vocational culture and the gendered narratives at the workplaces (cf. Nielsen 2008). However, the Swedish vocational education that the students in this study attend has an opportunity—and indeed an obligation—to challenge misogynistic assumptions. According to the Swedish school's national policy, students must, for example, develop "the ability to critically examine how norms, values and structures can limit the power of women and men to shape society as well as their own lives" (Skolverket 2022).

Our conclusion is therefore that what is needed is not a change in education policy. What is required instead is that those who teach, within both the school-based and the workplace-based part of the education programme (the practicum), receive the continuing education that is necessary to challenge the objectification that many of them have likely come to take for granted. Together with the students who are not yet socialised in their occupations, but can look at the vocational culture with the eyes of newcomers, teachers and practicum supervisors have great opportunities to examine critically the norms that characterise the students' future vocational field.

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Author contributions

The study was jointly conducted by the authors, and both have contributed equally to the data collection, the analysis and the writing of this article. Both authors have read the final version and approved.

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Availability of data and materials

The data sets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available because the participants have not given consent to share the data.

Declarations**Ethics approval and consent to participate**

The project follows the Swedish Research Council's ethical guidelines on data use, confidentiality and consent in all phases of the project.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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