

Master Thesis

STREET HARASSMENT IN COLOGNE

Women's Intersectional Experiences,
Coping Strategies, and Visions for
Safer Public Spaces

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Street Harassment in Cologne: Women's Intersectional Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Visions for Safer Public Spaces

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Abstract

Street harassment has gained increasing attention as a form of gendered violence in public space, yet it remains under-researched in the German-speaking context, particularly from an intersectional perspective. This thesis addresses this gap by examining how women in Cologne experience street harassment through the lens of intersecting identities and by exploring the coping mechanisms they employ to navigate or mitigate these experiences. Building on feminist urban studies and intersectionality, the study investigates the extent to which age, migration background, descent, visible markers including religion, appearance, and socio-economic status shape both the forms of harassment and the strategies of resistance. Using a qualitative design, the research is based on sixteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with women living in Cologne. The analysis identified harassment as verbal, non-verbal, and physical, with experiences deeply conditioned by spatial and temporal dynamics. While all participants reported catcalling, staring, or invasive proximity, women with visible racial or religious markers described additional layers of racialized or Islamophobic abuse. Such encounters produced immediate emotional responses of discomfort, fear, anger, or insecurity, as well as longer-term psychological effects, including stress, anxiety, and heightened vigilance in everyday mobility. To cope with these experiences, participants employed preventive strategies such as avoiding specific spaces, or adjusting clothing, alongside reactive measures including verbal confrontation or the use of protective tools. Passive strategies such as ignoring incidents were also common but often reinforced internalized blame. Beyond individual tactics, women articulated clear demands for broader change, ranging from gender-sensitive education and public awareness campaigns to safer urban design, inclusive transport policies, and policing approaches informed by intersectionality. By foregrounding these voices, this thesis demonstrates the importance of understanding street harassment not as isolated incidents but as manifestations of structural inequality. The findings highlight the dual role of intersectional identities in shaping vulnerability and resilience, while emphasizing the need for cultural and structural interventions to create safer and more inclusive urban environments.

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1. Introduction

On New Year's Eve 2015/2016, Cologne became the center of global attention when hundreds of women reported experiencing sexual assaults, harassment, and intimidation in the area around the central train station and the adjoining cathedral square. These events not only shocked the public but also fundamentally reshaped debates about gendered violence, migration, and safety in urban spaces (Frey, 2020). Overnight, Cologne was transformed into a symbol of women's vulnerability in public space (Boulila and Carri, 2017). The images and testimonies from that night left a lasting imprint on collective memory, triggering political responses such as heightened police presence and intensified surveillance (Billaud, 2023). Yet beyond the headlines and controversies, what became strikingly clear was how fragile women's sense of safety in public space can be, and how urgent it is to confront the structural conditions that make harassment and violence possible (Garraio, 2021; Sailer, 2003; Schuster, 2021).

Motivation and relevance of the topic

This thesis is driven by a deep conviction that street harassment is not a trivial nuisance but a pressing social problem that affects women's fundamental right to move freely and safely in their cities. The New Year's Eve incident did not create this problem: it exposed it (Hofer, 2018). Street harassment is part of women's everyday lives, shaping how they walk, where they go, and how they feel in spaces that should belong to everyone equally. It is a phenomenon that undermines gender equality, restricts access to urban life, and imposes an invisible burden of "safety work" that men rarely have to consider (Vera-Gray and Kelly). At the same time, street harassment is not experienced uniformly. Women's social positions, shaped by race, religion, sexuality, age, and class, intersect to produce distinct forms of vulnerability and resilience (Roenius, 2015). For example, women of color or visibly Muslim women often face harassment that is not only sexualized but also racialized or Islamophobic. This makes it all the more urgent to study street harassment from an intersectional perspective, in order to reveal the multiple layers of exclusion and violence at play (Fairchild, 2023).

The relevance of this topic lies not only in its academic value but also in its political and societal significance. By addressing how street harassment operates in Cologne, a city marked by sharp social contrasts and symbolic urban spaces, this thesis seeks to contribute to broader debates on gender justice, urban safety, and the right to the city (Fairchild, 2023). I approach this topic with the conviction that research can shed light on hidden structures of inequality and, in doing so, help empower those whose voices are often marginalized in public discourse.

Research gap and aims of the study

Although the topic of street harassment has gained increasing attention in recent years, much of the existing research has approached it in a generalized manner, often treating women as a homogeneous group (Fairchild, 2023; Gilbert, 1997). Studies have primarily focused on the prevalence of harassment, its impact on mobility, or its role as a form of gendered violence. While these contributions are important, they tend to overlook how harassment is shaped by the multiple and intersecting identities women carry with them into public space. Questions of race, religion, migration background, class, sexuality, and age are often mentioned only in passing or treated as secondary variables rather than being placed at the center of analysis. As a result, the particular vulnerabilities and strategies of women who navigate public life from marginalized positions remain insufficiently explored.

This gap is particularly pronounced in the German-speaking context. While there is a growing body of literature on gendered violence and urban safety internationally, systematic research on street harassment in German cities remains scarce (Hofer, 2018). Existing studies tend to rely on Anglo-American frameworks, leaving a lack of localized analysis that accounts for the specific social and spatial dynamics of cities like Cologne. Addressing this absence is crucial not only for academic knowledge production but also for developing meaningful policy responses in Germany.

This research aims to address these gaps by adopting an explicitly intersectional perspective on women's experiences with street harassment in Cologne. By focusing not only on the frequency and typologies of harassment but also on how different social positions influence these experiences, the study seeks to reveal the layered and unequal ways in which women encounter and respond to violence in public spaces. Equally important, this thesis examines the coping mechanisms women employ, ranging from avoidance and self-regulation to confrontation and the use of protective tools, and how these are shaped by available resources, identity markers, and structural conditions.

The overall aim of this study is therefore twofold. First, it seeks to enrich scholarly understanding of street harassment by embedding it within the wider framework of intersectionality. Second, it aims to contribute empirically to debates on gendered urban safety by grounding analysis in the specific case of Cologne, a city marked by pronounced social contrasts and symbolic events such as the New Year's Eve assaults (Frey, 2020). In doing so, the thesis not only highlights the everyday realities of women in Cologne but also points to broader implications for urban justice and equality.

Research Questions and Methodology

In light of this background, the central research question guiding this thesis is:

How do intersectional identities shape women's experiences with street harassment in Cologne, and what coping mechanisms do they employ to navigate or mitigate these experiences?

To explore this overarching question in greater depth, the thesis addresses the following sub-questions:

1. In what ways do women with different identity markers such as age, migration background, visible religious or racial markers, and socioeconomic status experience street harassment in Cologne, and how do these intersections influence the forms and intensity of harassment?
2. What coping mechanisms do women employ to navigate or mitigate these experiences, and how are their strategies shaped by resources, self-perception, and social positioning?
3. What kinds of measures do women themselves identify as necessary to reduce street harassment and to create safer and more inclusive public spaces in Cologne?

To investigate these questions, this study employs a qualitative research design that centers on women's lived experiences. Sixteen in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with women living in Cologne who represented diverse age groups, migration backgrounds, and social positions. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences of street

harassment in their own words while providing space to capture the nuances of intersectional identity markers.

The data were analyzed through thematic coding, combining deductive categories derived from existing literature with inductive codes that emerged from the interviews. This ensured that both theoretical perspectives and the voices of participants were reflected in the analysis. The emphasis on qualitative depth rather than quantitative breadth enables a detailed understanding of how street harassment is shaped by overlapping forms of inequality and how women actively navigate urban space in response.

The thesis is organized into seven chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 develops the theoretical and conceptual framework, situating street harassment within debates on gendered violence, urban space, and intersectionality. Chapter 3 provides the contextual background of Cologne, highlighting its social contrasts, spatial dynamics, and the significance of the New Year's Eve 2015/2016 assaults as a symbolic reference point. Chapter 4 outlines the methodological approach, including the research design, data collection, and analytical procedures. Chapter 5 presents the empirical findings, structured around the typologies of harassment, the spatial and temporal dynamics of women's experiences, the emotional and psychological impacts, the coping mechanisms employed, as well as the measures suggested by participants to enhance safety. Chapter 6 discusses these findings in relation to existing literature, with particular attention to how intersectional identities shape vulnerabilities and strategies. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the study by summarizing the main insights, answering the research questions, highlighting practical implications, and suggesting directions for further research.

2. Theory

2.1 Terminology, Definitions, and Theoretical Framework of Street Harassment

Although the term street harassment does not yet have a universally accepted definition, certain core features can be identified. Street harassment refers to boundary violations in public spaces between strangers, directed at perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression (Kearl, 2014). The phenomenon is also linked to racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, and other discriminatory violence (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023). Such interactions may be verbal, nonverbal, or physical and always occur without the consent of the targeted person (Arndt, 2018; Kearl, 2010). A 2014 study with 2,000 participants found that around 65% of women had experienced this form of harassment at some point in their lives (Kearl, 2014). As both an expression and reinforcement of social inequality, street harassment has increasingly become a subject of academic debate across disciplines (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023). Yet, despite its widespread use in activist, political, and scholarly contexts, the precise acts encompassed by the term remain ambiguous (Arndt, 2018; Logan, 2015). Definitions vary across perspectives, time periods, and social contexts, with legal approaches often emphasizing different aspects than sociological, psychological, or activist ones. Furthermore, a range of terms has emerged over time to describe similar phenomena, each highlighting distinct dimensions. To establish a solid conceptual basis, the term "street harassment" will therefore first be examined etymologically and terminologically, then contextualized and distinguished from related

concepts. This will be followed by a theoretical positioning that traces central contributions in the development of research over time.

2.1.1 Etymological and Terminological Contextualization of the Term Street Harassment

The term street harassment combines two components with distinct linguistic roots. "Street" derives from the Latin *strata*, meaning a paved road, and entered modern European languages such as the German "Straße" and the English "street" via various Germanic forms (Oxford University Press, 2023c). Complementing this, the noun "harassment" originates from the Old French "harasser", meaning to torment or exhaust, and entered the English language in the 17th century, later evolving in the 20th century to include persistent or intimidating behavior (Oxford University Press, 2023a). Although the compound term street harassment is not currently listed as an entry in major English dictionaries, the related concept of sexual harassment has been documented since 1971 (Mores, 2020). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it typically refers to unwanted sexual advances or remarks in social or professional contexts, often involving a gendered power imbalance (Oxford University Press, 2023b). While the two terms share certain features, important differences remain. These will be outlined in the following section, which situates the concept conceptually and explores its definitional boundaries in relation to related notions.

Conceptual Differentiation

The term street harassment is widely used in both academic and activist discourse, yet its exact boundaries remain contested. Closely related terms such as sexual harassment or catcalling are frequently used interchangeably, although each highlights different dimensions of the phenomenon, including context, intent, form and underlying power structures (Arndt, 2018; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Vera-Gray, 2016b).

The concept of street harassment was first introduced by Micaela di Leonardo in 1981 to describe unsolicited interactions in public settings, typically involving strangers. These encounters often target women based on their gender, appearance, or perceived sexuality (Di Leonardo, 1981; Hofer, 2018; Laniya, 2005). The range of behaviors associated with street harassment is broad, spanning from seemingly minor verbal remarks to more severe forms such as stalking or public masturbation (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Roenius, 2015). Some scholars even argue that this continuum can extend to acts of sexual violence, including assault or femicide (Bowman, 1993; Thompson, 1994). In order to systematize the wide range of behaviors that fall under the label of street harassment, Table 1 summarizes key typologies and exemplary behaviors as identified in the literature. Additionally, definitions of street harassment vary significantly depending on disciplinary perspective. While legal approaches tend to focus on explicitly sexual acts, feminist and sociological frameworks emphasize the broader power dynamics and gendered social norms that underlie such behavior (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023). The absence of a consistent legal definition complicates both the regulation and enforcement of relevant policies (Arndt, 2018; Bowman, 1993; Roenius, 2015). Moreover, some scholars have even proposed alternative terms to better capture the power dynamics involved in these interactions. One such suggestion, which shifts the focus from perception to agency, will be discussed in detail later (Vera-Gray, 2014).

Table 1: Typology of Harassment: Exemplary Behaviors Reported in the Literature (Author's own compilation based on literature review)

Type of Harassment	Exemplary Behaviors	References
Verbal	Seemingly innocent unsolicited greeting	(DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Sexist comments / remarks (on the appearance)	(Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Bowman, 1993; DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fairchild, 2010, 2023; Gardner, 1980; Heben, 1994; Kearl, 2010, 2014; Kissling, 1991; Moreno et al., 2022; Thompson, 1994; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Sexually explicit comments / references	(Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Heben, 1994; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Mores, 2020; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Aggressive badgering	(DelGreco and Christensen, 2020)
	Catcalls	(Arndt, 2018; Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Chaudoir and Quinn, 2010; DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1980; Kissling, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Logan, 2015; Mores, 2020; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Whistling/ Wolf-whistling	(Arndt, 2018; Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1980; Heben, 1994; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Logan, 2015; Moreno et al., 2022; Thompson, 1994; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Grunting	(Moreno et al., 2022)
	Honking (with the car)	(Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Moreno et al., 2022; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Attacking a person's sexual attributes	(Ervinda et al., 2021)
	Making kiss noises	(Ervinda et al., 2021; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023)
	Threatening or demeaning words	(Bowman, 1993; Boyer, 2022; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Balantly insulting comments	(Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Name-calling	(Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Propositioning	(Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Unwelcome comments	(Arndt, 2018; Davis, 1994; Roenius, 2015; Thompson, 1994)
	Commanding (e.g. to "Smile")	(Davis, 1994; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Unwanted Conversations	(Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023)
	Indiscreet questions about privacy	(Moreno et al., 2022)
	Vulgarity	(Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Hofer, 2018; Logan, 2015; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Sexual innuendoes	(Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Gardner, 1980; Heben, 1994; Logan, 2015)
	Seductive remarks	(Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008)
	Insulting	(Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Racial, ethnic or homophobic slurs	(Heben, 1994; Kearl, 2010)

Type of Harassment	Exemplary Behaviors	References
Non-Verbal	Gestures / Vulgar gestures	(Arndt, 2018; Boyer, 2022; DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Di Leonardo, 1981; Fairchild, 2010, 2023; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Gardner, 1980; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Laniya, 2005; Logan, 2015; Roenius, 2015; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Staring/ Leering / Ogling	(Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Bowman, 1993; Boyer, 2022; Davis, 1994; Di Leonardo, 1981; Ervinda et al., 2021; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Heben, 1994; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Kissling, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Logan, 2015; Moreno et al., 2022; Roenius, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2014; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Winks	(Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Thompson, 1994; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Using signs to rate physical appearance	(Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
	Waving	(Arndt, 2018)
	Groping / forceful fondling or grabbing	(DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Roenius, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2014)(Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1980; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010, 2014; Logan, 2015; Thompson, 1994; Walton and Pedersen, 2022)
Physical	Stalking / Following	(DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Gardner, 1980; Heben, 1994; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Logan, 2015; Moreno et al., 2022; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Public masturbation	(Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Moreno et al., 2022; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Indecent exposure / Flashing	(DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Moreno et al., 2022; Vera-Gray, 2014)(Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015)
	Physical abuse	(Armstrong, 2016; Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn, 2013; Gardner, 1980; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015)
	Sexual Assault	(Armstrong, 2016; Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn, 2013; Gardner, 1980; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015)
	Rape	(Armstrong, 2016; Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn, 2013; Gardner, 1980; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Violence	(Armstrong, 2016; Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn, 2013; Gardner, 1980; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015)
	Frottage	(Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023)(Arndt, 2018)
	Molestation	(Hofer, 2018; Logan, 2015)
	Unwanted touching/ Poking	(Campos et al., 2017; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Heben, 1994; Vera-Gray, 2014)
	Pinching	(Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Heben, 1994; Thompson, 1994)
	Slapping / Hitting	(Gardner, 1980; Logan, 2015)
	Blocking one's path	(Vera-Gray, 2014)(Kearl, 2010)
	Throwing things	(Heben, 1994)

Street Harassment vs. Sexual Harassment

While street harassment and sexual harassment can involve similar behaviors, the concepts differ significantly in their context, legal status, and underlying social dynamics. One of the most important distinctions lies in the relational setting. Street harassment typically occurs in public spaces between strangers, whereas sexual harassment more often takes place in environments where a pre-existing relationship or social context exists (Fileborn, 2013). Furthermore, sexual harassment is more clearly defined in legal and institutional frameworks. It includes unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, non-verbal or physical acts of a sexual nature. Such acts often take place in structured settings such as workplaces or educational institutions, where unequal power relations may exist, for example between superiors and subordinates or professors and students (Boyer, 2022; Fileborn, 2013; Numhauser-Henning and Laulom, 2012).

However, it is important to note that sexual harassment is not limited to formal institutions. Rather, it also occurs in semi-public and social spaces such as bars, clubs or parties, where interactions are often embedded in social relationships (Boyer, 2022). This stands in contrast to street harassment, which is specifically characterized by the anonymity of the encounter in fully public environments (Roenius, 2015). The broader contextual scope of sexual harassment underscores that it is not confined to institutional spaces, but can appear across various social and spatial settings (Boyer, 2022). This diversity of contexts has been vividly brought to public attention by civil society movements such as #MeToo, which have emphasized the systemic nature of harassment and the structural power relations that sustain it (Clair et al., 2019).

From a legal standpoint, the terms harassment and sexual harassment have been clearly defined in the EU Directive 2002/73/EC and transposed into national laws in many European countries, including Germany. The directive defines harassment as a situation where "an unwanted conduct related to the sex of a person occurs with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment" (Numhauser-Henning and Laulom, 2012)p.289). Sexual harassment is described more specifically as "any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature" that creates the same kind of harmful environment (Numhauser-Henning and Laulom, 2012)p.289).

In conclusion, while both phenomena fall within the broader continuum of gender-based violence, they differ in several key respects: the nature of the relationship between the individuals involved, the spatial context in which the behavior occurs, the form of power that is exercised, and the extent to which the behavior is formally regulated by law. An overview of these distinctions is presented in Table 2.

Street Harassment vs. Catcalling

Catcalling is one of the most commonly used terms in everyday discourse when referring to sexual harassment in public. In fact, it has become more established in public vocabulary than the broader term street harassment. Catcalling refers specifically to verbal and non-verbal behaviors by strangers in public spaces, such as whistling, unsolicited comments or phrases like "Hey beautiful" or "Smile for me" (Hofer, 2018; Kolysh, 2021). Moreover, these behaviors may also involve obscene language, gestures, prolonged staring, or winking, all aimed at gaining the attention of the targeted person (Goede et al., 2022; Hoffmann, 2025; Pendl and Steiner, 2023; Vietz, 2021).

Although catcalling is sometimes misinterpreted as a form of flirtation, it in fact constitutes an intrusive and asymmetrical interaction that typically occurs without consent and in the absence of any social relationship (Davis, 1994; Roenius, 2015; Thompson, 1994; Walton and Pedersen, 2022). Importantly, such acts reproduce gender-based power hierarchies through seemingly minor but repeated microaggressions, which affect not only women but also other marginalized groups (Kolysh, 2021). In addition, researchers have pointed out that the term catcalling can trivialize the aggressive nature of these actions by excluding physically invasive behaviors such as obscene gestures, persistent gazing, or close bodily proximity (Hoven et al., 2022). While individual experiences may differ, it is notable that the majority of those affected describe such encounters as uncomfortable, intrusive, or even threatening (Ervinda et al., 2021; Hoffmann, 2025; Hoven et al., 2022; Siggemann, 2022; Walton and Pedersen, 2022). In addition, expressions like catcalling or wolf-whistling tend to downplay the seriousness of such actions. Due to their humorous or playful connotation, they obscure the embedded power dynamics and violence, encouraging a framing of these interactions as harmless flirtation or mere social awkwardness rather than as violations of personal boundaries (Vera-Gray, 2014).

Table 2: Comparison of Sexual Harassment and Street Harassment (Including Catcalling) (Author's own compilation based on literature review)

Dimension	Sexual Harassment	Street Harassment (including Catcalling)
Relational and Spatial Context	Relational or institutional across public, semi-public, and private spaces (Fileborn, 2013)	Anonymous public encounters (Vera-Gray, 2014)
Frequency and Visibility	Frequent but often concealed within closed contexts (Boyer, 2022)	Highly frequent and highly visible in everyday life, often trivialized (catcalling is one of its most common forms) (Kearl, 2010)
Perpetrator-Victim relation	Known individuals (Boyer, 2022)	Strangers (Bowman, 1993)
Form of Boundary Violation	Verbal, non-verbal, physical (Boyer, 2022)	Verbal, non-verbal, physical (with catcalling involving only verbal and non-verbal acts) (Kearl, 2010)
Motivation of Perpetrators	Gender-based discrimination, abuse of authority, or sexual intent (Boyer, 2022)	Gender-based discrimination, sexual intent, and intersecting biases (e.g. racism, homophobia) (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023)
Underlying Dynamics	Gendered, Relational or hierarchical assertions of power (Boyer, 2022; Buchanan et al., 2018)	Opportunistic displays of power in public interactions (Kissling and Kramarae, 1991)
Legal Recognition	Formally defined in law (e.g. in EU Directive 2002/73/EC) (Numhauser-Henning and Laulom, 2012)	Laws exist in a few countries (e.g. Belgium, UK, Peru); mostly unregulated, severe cases may be prosecuted under sexual harassment or insult (Arndt, 2018)

Conceptual Variants and Expansions of Street Harassment

Beyond catcalling, further culturally specific or semantically broader terms have emerged to capture the diversity of public harassment experiences. One notable example is eve teasing, a term predominantly used in the Indian context to describe forms of street harassment. Despite its seemingly harmless tone, it refers to routine forms of harassment in public space such as suggestive remarks or unwanted physical proximity (Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2010; Misri, 2017). The phrase has been criticized for minimizing harm and reinforcing victim-blaming, as it often implies that women's behavior or appearance provoked the harassment (Kearl, 2010).

In response to the limitations of existing terminology, Fiona Vera-Gray (2016a) has proposed the more precise expression "men's stranger intrusion on women in public" (p. 13). This formulation aims to foreground both the gendered nature and the spatial violation involved in such interactions. While it provides a more analytically accurate lens, its complexity and unfamiliarity have hindered broader uptake in academic and public discourse (Vera-Gray, 2016a).

Additionally, other terms like street remarks, public incivilities or hassling are more semantically broad but risk downplaying the gendered nature of the experiences they describe (Gardner, 1980; Kissling and Kramarae, 1991; Laniya, 2005; Vera-Gray, 2016b). In many cases, they reduce acts of harassment to mere social discomfort or annoyance, rather than acknowledging their oppressive or threatening character. Even broader concepts like everyday sexism or sexual terrorism aim to situate street harassment within systemic patterns of gender-based violence (Sheffield, 1987; Vera-Gray, 2014, 2016b). These concepts aim to contextualize street harassment not as isolated behavior but as part of a larger social structure that normalizes male dominance in public space (Sheffield, 1987; Vera-Gray, 2014, 2016b). However, it is important to note that while these overarching concepts reveal structural patterns of inequality, they may sometimes detract from the specificity of individual experiences. As such, a careful balance is required between capturing systemic dimensions and retaining analytical precision in everyday contexts.

Challenges of Terminological Diversity

As previously outlined, a wide variety of terms exists to describe harassment in public spaces, including street harassment, catcalling, and culturally specific labels like eve teasing. While this richness reflects attempts to capture the complexity of gender-based violence in public, it also brings significant challenges.

First and foremost, the lack of consistent terminology affects the visibility of the problem. As Kearl (2010, p. 5) notes, "problems without names tend to stay hidden and inadequately addressed." When behaviors go unnamed or are described in inconsistent ways, it becomes more difficult for affected individuals to articulate their experiences and for society to recognize these experiences as forms of violence (Fairchild, 2023; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Kearl, 2010; Roenius, 2015). In addition, the absence of clear definitions makes it harder to conduct systematic research. Diverging terms lead to inconsistencies in how data is collected and interpreted, which limits the comparability of studies and weakens the overall knowledge base (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Vera-Gray, 2014, 2016b). Moreover, legal responses are often inconsistent or inadequate. Without a legally robust definition of street harassment, it becomes difficult to draft laws, prosecute harmful behavior, or establish clear thresholds of severity (Bowman, 1993; Hartmann and Rahner, 2023). This legal ambiguity can result in both under- and over-criminalization, leaving perpetrators and victims alike in a state of uncertainty (Arndt, 2018; Bowman, 1993). Importantly, many affected individuals remain caught in a double bind. On one hand, their experiences may not be taken seriously due to the absence of recognized terminology. As a result, some may not report these incidents or may not even view them as significant enough to mention (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Kearl, 2014; Kolysh, 2021; Vera-Gray, 2014). On the other hand, existing legal systems in many countries still fail to offer sufficient protection or actionable recourse (Bowman, 1993; Hoven et al., 2022; Vera-Gray, 2016b). Additionally, some widely used terms remain rooted in heteronormative assumptions. They often present harassment as a male-on-female dynamic and overlook the experiences of queer

individuals or those affected by intersecting forms of discrimination such as racism, classism, or ableism (Arndt, 2018; Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Kearl, 2010; Kolysh, 2021).

To sum up, terminology is not merely a linguistic issue but plays a crucial role in shaping social and legal responses to public harassment. The choice of words influences whether certain behaviors are recognized, taken seriously, or acted upon. Although this thesis uses the term street harassment due to its prevalence in current academic literature, it remains important to reflect critically on its limitations. Alternatives such as "men's stranger intrusions on women in public" highlight the power dynamics and gendered nature of these interactions more explicitly and can serve as useful conceptual tools in advancing more precise and justice-oriented understandings (Vera-Gray, 2016b).

2.1.2 Definitional Approaches and the Theoretical Positioning of Street Harassment

Building on the previous etymological and conceptual clarifications, this section outlines the main theoretical approaches used to define and understand street harassment within academic research. Drawing on insights from sociology, law, gender studies, and psychology, it traces key developments in the discourse, highlighting how the phenomenon has been framed across disciplines and over time.

Early Feminist and Sociological Perspectives (1980s)

One of the earliest contributions comes from Mary Gardner (1980), who analyzed street remarks as violations of Goffman's (1963) norm of civil inattention, the social expectation of minimal, non-intrusive engagement in public spaces. She emphasized how unsolicited comments, whistles, or gestures force women into unwanted interactions, breaking this social norm and reinforcing gendered asymmetry (Gardner, 1980; Goffman, 1963).

Around the same time, Micaela di Leonardo (1981) conceptualized street harassment as a mechanism of male dominance in public space. Her definition highlighted how men assert power over women through unsolicited attention, framing such acts not as isolated incidents but as systemic tools of patriarchal control. Di Leonardo emphasized that these everyday interactions produce long-term psychosocial harm, eroding women's autonomy in public life (Di Leonardo, 1981).

Legal Feminism and Intersectional Critique (1990s)

The 1990s marked a shift toward legal and intersectional approaches. Cynthia Grant Bowman (1993) coined the term informal ghettoization, arguing that repeated harassment effectively excludes women from certain public spaces. She criticized the legal system's failure to protect victims, calling for expanded definitions of sexual harassment that recognize public, gendered power dynamics. Bowman offers the following definition:

„Street harassment occurs when one or more unfamiliar men accost one or more women in a public place, on one or more occasions, and intrude or attempt to intrude upon the woman's attention in a manner that is unwelcome to the woman, with language or action that is explicitly or implicitly sexual. Such language includes, but is not limited to, references to male or female genitalia or to female body parts or to sexual activities,

solicitation of sex, or reference by word or action to the target of the harassment as the object of sexual desire, or similar words that by their very utterance inflict injury or naturally tend to provoke violent resentment, even if the woman did not herself react with violence" (Bowman, 1993, p.559).

Around the same time, Elizabeth Arveda Kissling (1991) framed street harassment within the broader context of sexual terrorism as defined by Sheffield (1987), a system where fear of male violence constrains women's movement. Kissling also challenged traditional communication models, advocating instead for a contextual and power-sensitive understanding of harassment as a form of gendered domination.

Intersectional voices emerged during this period as well. Tiffanie Heben (1994) and Deidre Davis (1994) critiqued the white, heteronormative framing of harassment discourses, highlighting how race, class, and sexuality shape women's experiences. Davis, for example, called for legal frameworks that better address the interplay between race and gender, particularly in the lives of Black women (Davis, 1994; Heben, 1994).

Expansion of the Discourse and Activist Perspectives (2000s to Present)

From the early 2000s onward, the literature diversified further. Psychological research explored the effects of street harassment on mental health, including self-objectification, anxiety, and depression (Davidson et al., 2015; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). These findings underscore how early experiences with harassment, often beginning in adolescence, shape women's spatial behavior and sense of safety (Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015). Building on this, Farmer and Smock Jordan (2017) introduced a four-phase model consisting of preparation, experience, response, and coping, which provides a framework for understanding how individuals anticipate, endure, and process incidents of street harassment in everyday life.

Simultaneously, scholars began framing street harassment as part of a broader continuum of violence, normalized by patriarchal cultural scripts (Logan, 2015). In addition, Kondo's escalation model demonstrates that even seemingly minor incidents are interpreted within a broader context of potential violence (Hofer, 2018). Furthermore, Intersectionality has since become a central analytical lens in both research and activism. Studies show that LGBTQIA+ individuals, women of color, and other marginalized groups are disproportionately targeted by street harassment (Kearl, 2014). Activist platforms such as "Stop Street Harassment" and "Right to Be" (formerly known as Hollaback!) have played a crucial role in raising awareness by leveraging social media, GPS mapping, and digital storytelling. A similar initiative exists in Cologne through the Instagram account "CatcallsofCologne", which documents and maps local experiences of catcalling in public spaces. Beyond raising awareness, international organizations have also sought to provide concrete tools for action. The US-based nonprofit "Right to Be" promotes practical intervention strategies such as the 5Ds model (distract, delegate, delay, direct, document), designed to empower both victims and bystanders of street harassment (Hoven et al., 2022). Finally, recent contributions emphasize transformative justice approaches over punitive solutions. Fileborn and Vera-Gray (2017) argue that lasting change requires shifting harmful gender norms through education and awareness, rather than relying solely on legal mechanisms.

In sum, contemporary research understands street harassment not only as an act of individual misconduct but as a structural phenomenon rooted in gendered power relations. Its framing has

evolved from early feminist critiques to more complex, intersectional, and praxis-oriented approaches which are crucial for informing effective prevention and policy.

2.1.3 Effects of Street Harassment on Targeted Individuals

Street harassment has multifaceted and far-reaching effects on those targeted. Victims report not only immediate emotional reactions, but also long-term behavioral changes, psychological distress, and a shifting sense of safety and belonging in public space. Despite its frequent trivialization in public discourse, a growing body of empirical research confirms the seriousness and prevalence of these impacts (DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023).

Emotional and Psychological Effects of Street Harassment

Numerous studies indicate a wide range of emotional responses experienced by those targeted by street harassment. These include fear, anger, shame, frustration, and helplessness, with many individuals reporting that such emotions persist well beyond the initial incident (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Heben, 1994; Vera-Gray, 2014). In some cases, women describe experiencing anxiety or stress symptoms even years after a particular encounter (Kissling, 1991; Vera-Gray, 2014). A key concept in this context is rape anxiety, referring to the specific fear that harassment could escalate into sexual violence (Mores, 2020; Thompson, 1994). According to a national US survey, 68 percent of women worry that verbal harassment might lead to physical assault (Kearl, 2014). In addition, psychosomatic symptoms such as insomnia, depressive moods, and elevated stress levels are well documented. These reactions are particularly common among individuals with prior traumatic experiences, for whom even minor incidents of street harassment can act as powerful triggers (DelGreco and Christensen, 2020; Mores, 2020; Roenius, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2014). Another important phenomenon is self-objectification, in which women begin to internalize an external gaze and perceive themselves as objects to be watched. This can lead to a long-term decline in self-worth and personal agency (Bowman, 1993; Kissling, 1991). Victims frequently report that their autonomy in public space is significantly compromised.

Behavioral Changes and Restricted Mobility

Street harassment often has a direct impact on how individuals navigate public space. To avoid perceived risks, many adopt preventive strategies such as avoiding specific locations or times of day, altering their walking and mobility routes, modifying their clothing, or even withdrawing from public life altogether (Bowman, 1993; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Roenius, 2015; Thompson, 1994). While some of these actions are deliberate, others become routine through socialization or accumulated experience over time. To navigate hostile environments, women also engage in heightened environmental scanning and internal risk assessments. Seemingly minor everyday decisions such as what to wear or which expression to show are shaped by continuous self-monitoring and fear of potential harm (Kissling, 1991; Right To Be, n.d.). These efforts demand significant emotional and cognitive energy and can contribute to a state of chronic stress or psychological fatigue. Fiona Vera-Gray and Liz Kelly (2020) conceptualizes these anticipatory measures as "safety work". "Safety work" is a form of invisible labor that women perform to manage risk in public space. Such practices often begin in adolescence and become ingrained elements of daily life (Vera-Gray and Liz Kelly, 2020).

Additionally, some individuals rely on passive coping strategies such as ignoring incidents or reframing them as compliments in order to maintain control in the moment (Gardner, 1980; Heben, 1994; Kearl, 2010). However, these tactics often reinforce feelings of self-blame and may be especially harmful for individuals with prior trauma or low self-esteem (Heben, 1994).

Impacts on Social Participation

Street harassment significantly affects the ability of those targeted to participate fully in public life. Many individuals report avoiding public spaces altogether or drastically limiting the amount of time they spend outside (Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2010; Massey, 2002). As a result, the public sphere becomes not only physically but also symbolically restricted. Harassment functions as a form of social exclusion by implying that women, especially those who are alone, do not rightfully belong in public space. This exclusion is rooted in structural power relations that code the public sphere as masculine and position female presence within it as deviant or out of place (Fenster, 2005; Gilbert, 1997). This dynamic reflects what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) conceptualizes as hegemonic masculinity: a dominant cultural ideal that legitimizes male authority in public and private spaces, reinforcing the marginalization of those who do not conform. In this way, street harassment contributes to a gradual erosion of public participation, with far-reaching social consequences (Bowman, 1993).

These effects are even more pronounced for individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, such as women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities. For them, the barriers to occupying public space safely and freely are compounded by multiple layers of discrimination (Crenshaw, 1992; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006).

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that street harassment is not solely interpersonal but constitutes a spatial and structural form of gendered exclusion that determines whose presence in public space is legitimized and whose is systematically curtailed (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023).

2.1.4 Intersectionality and the Differentiated Experience of Street Harassment

Intersectionality offers a crucial framework to understand the differentiated experiences of street harassment. It emphasizes how various social categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and disability intersect to shape individuals' vulnerability in public space (Carastathis, 2014; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Logan, 2015). Street harassment is not a singular or uniform experience but is profoundly shaped by social positioning. For instance, Black and Latina women frequently report being subjected to harassment that is simultaneously racialized and sexualized. These interactions reflect entrenched historical patterns of hypersexualization and social exclusion (Davis, 1994; Kearl, 2010, 2014). Similarly, Muslim women, especially those who wear the hijab, are targeted through a combination of religious, sexist, and racialized prejudice. Whereas Asian women are frequently objectified through racialized and sexualized stereotypes that portray them as submissive or exotic (Buchanan et al., 2018; Kearl, 2010). In addition, LGBTQIA+ individuals are regularly subjected to harassment that not only sexualizes but also punishes deviations from cisnormative and heteronormative expectations (Kolysh, 2021). Their visibility in public space often challenges binary gender norms, exposing them to heightened scrutiny and aggression (Hofer, 2018; Kearl, 2010; Kolysh, 2021). People with

disabilities may likewise experience forms of harassment that infantilize, desexualize, or objectify their bodies, while structural barriers often limit their capacity to escape or report such encounters. Social class further exacerbates vulnerability. Women in precarious employment or homelessness often lack resources to protect themselves from street harassment (Kearl, 2010). Crucially, Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins have argued that experiences of oppression must be understood in their interlocking dimensions rather than in isolation. Applied to street harassment, this means that individuals with multiple marginalized identities often encounter forms of violence that are qualitatively distinct from those experienced by more socially privileged groups (Bowman, 1993; Davis, 1994; Logan, 2015). Nevertheless, many prevention efforts and public narratives continue to center the experiences of white, cisgender, heterosexual women. As Fileborn and O'Neill (2023) emphasize, inclusive responses must be rooted in intersectional analysis that reflects the full diversity of those affected. Intersectionality should therefore not only be treated as a theoretical framework but also as a normative and political commitment to equity, visibility, and justice in public space (Carastathis, 2014; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Phoenix and Pattynama, 2006).

2.2 Public Space and its Gendered Dimension

Public space is more than a physical environment. It serves as a key site for social interaction, political participation and cultural expression (Kromberg and Rau, 2021). However, public space is not a neutral domain. It is shaped by power relations, exclusion mechanisms and symbolic meanings that often reflect and reproduce gendered hierarchies (Franck and Paxson, 1989; Pereira and Rebelo, 2024). Although, streets, parks, squares and transit areas are meant to foster accessibility and inclusivity, yet their design and governance often determine who feels safe and who is marginalized (Pereira and Rebelo, 2024).

Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space introduced a relational understanding of spatiality. He argued that space is socially produced through practices, representations and power dynamics. Modern space, in his view, reflects the interests of dominant groups and functions as an instrument of control and regulation (Lefebvre, 1991). Publicness is therefore not only a question of access but also of the diversity and equality of use among different social groups (Franck and Paxson, 1989). When public spaces exclude certain users or uses, they fail to fulfill their democratic potential (Franck and Paxson, 1989). Historically, urban spaces have not been inclusive. City planning in the 19th and 20th centuries reflected patriarchal ideals, structuring space around the traditional nuclear family and reinforcing a gendered division between public and private life (Franck and Paxson, 1989; Pereira and Rebelo, 2024). As a result, men were positioned as active users of public space while women were relegated to the private sphere. These patterns continue to affect urban mobility and access today. Research shows that women tend to have more fragmented and complex travel routes, often shaped by caregiving responsibilities, part-time work and limited access to private transportation (Levy, 2013; Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021; Ortiz et al., 2004; Whitzman et al., 2013). Women also report higher levels of fear regarding public safety, particularly in relation to sexual harassment and violence (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021; Valentine, 1989). These concerns develop early in life. Girls are socialized to be more cautious and are more likely than boys to remain close to home or to interact passively with their surroundings (Franck and Paxson, 1989). As adults, these early habits translate into safety strategies such as choosing specific routes, avoiding unlit

streets or wearing headphones to deter unwanted interaction (Vera-Gray, 2014; Vera-Gray and Kelly). Feminist geography conceptualizes public space as an embodied and contested site in which structural inequalities are made visible and lived (Bondi, 2005; Duncan, 1996). The body becomes a target of surveillance, regulation and resistance within spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991). Within the discourse on street harassment, the concept of the fear space plays a central role. It refers to public places perceived as dangerous due to the threat of male violence. Ruth Becker (2008) critiques this framing for focusing attention on the space itself rather than on the male violence enacted within it. In this sense, harassment operates as a form of symbolic control that disciplines female bodies in public space (Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Valentine, 1989). Feminist urban theory examines how cities are structured by gender and how gender is shaped by urban design (Bondi and Rose, 2010; Massey, 2002). Much of the built environment remains designed for a normative user who is young, male and able-bodied, while other groups are often overlooked (Franck and Paxson, 1989; Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Urban planning is thus inherently political. It can either reproduce existing inequalities or challenge them through inclusive design strategies (Pereira and Rebelo, 2024).

Efforts to reclaim public space include participatory planning, gender-sensitive design, improved infrastructure and the representation of marginalized groups. Queer geography and activist movements such as BlackSpace offer important counter-narratives and push for visibility and autonomy in urban contexts (Kromberg and Rau, 2021). Public space must therefore be understood as a politically and socially contested terrain (Bondi, 2005; Vera-Gray and Kelly). A critical awareness of its gendered structures is essential to understanding how and why practices such as street harassment emerge and persist in daily urban life.

3. Cologne as the Empirical Context

3.1 Urban Structure and Historical Background

Cologne is one of Germany's largest cities, located in the southwest of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, and forms a central part of the Rhine-Ruhr metropolitan region. With over one million inhabitants across 405 square kilometers, it ranks as the country's fourth largest city (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2024a, 2024b). Its position along the Rhine and proximity to the Belgian and Dutch borders reinforces its role as a key node for transport, culture, and the economy. The city's spatial structure reflects its long urban history, dating back to its Roman foundation as Colonia Claudia Ara Agrippinensium in 50 CE (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2024a). This early urbanization shaped the medieval city and remains visible today in the concentric street patterns of the (Kölner) Ringe, the Inner and Outer Kanalstraße, and the Gürtel. These structures are complemented by the Inner and Outer Green Belts, which are central to the city's ecological and recreational landscape (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023). This spatial logic is also mirrored in parts of the public transit network, such as the Gürtelbahn (Line 13), which follows the historic ring system (see Map 2). Administratively, Cologne is divided into nine city districts and 86 neighborhoods (Veedel), each with a distinct local identity that shapes social life (see Map 1; Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2024a). A key spatial divide runs along the Rhine River. The right bank, known locally as the Schäl Sick (literally: bad side), was historically perceived as less developed and less prestigious

(Weißenberg, 2020). Industrialization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, transformed the right bank into a site of economic importance. Districts such as Deutz now host the Cologne Deutz trade fair, key transport and media infrastructure including the Köln Messe, Messe / Deutz station, the Lanxess Arena, and the headquarters of a major broadcasting company (Heinze GmbH, n.d.; Schäfke, 2017; Weißenberg, 2020). Beyond that Mülheim has undergone significant post-industrial transformation with redeveloped sites (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023; Rainer, 1993). Nevertheless, the left bank remains the city's historic and symbolic center, home to landmarks such as the Cologne Cathedral, various museums, and culturally vibrant neighborhoods including the Belgisches Viertel, the Südstadt, and the Agnesviertel. Urban renewal projects such as the Rheinauhafen with its Kranhäuser exemplify the city's shift from industrial to post-industrial spatial development. Media organizations including the Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) underline Cologne's importance as a media hub. Events like the Cologne Carnival further demonstrate how public space is tightly interwoven with collective identity and urban culture (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023).

Map 1: Administrative Map of Cologne: Districts and Neighborhoods



3.2 Demographics and Social Inequalities

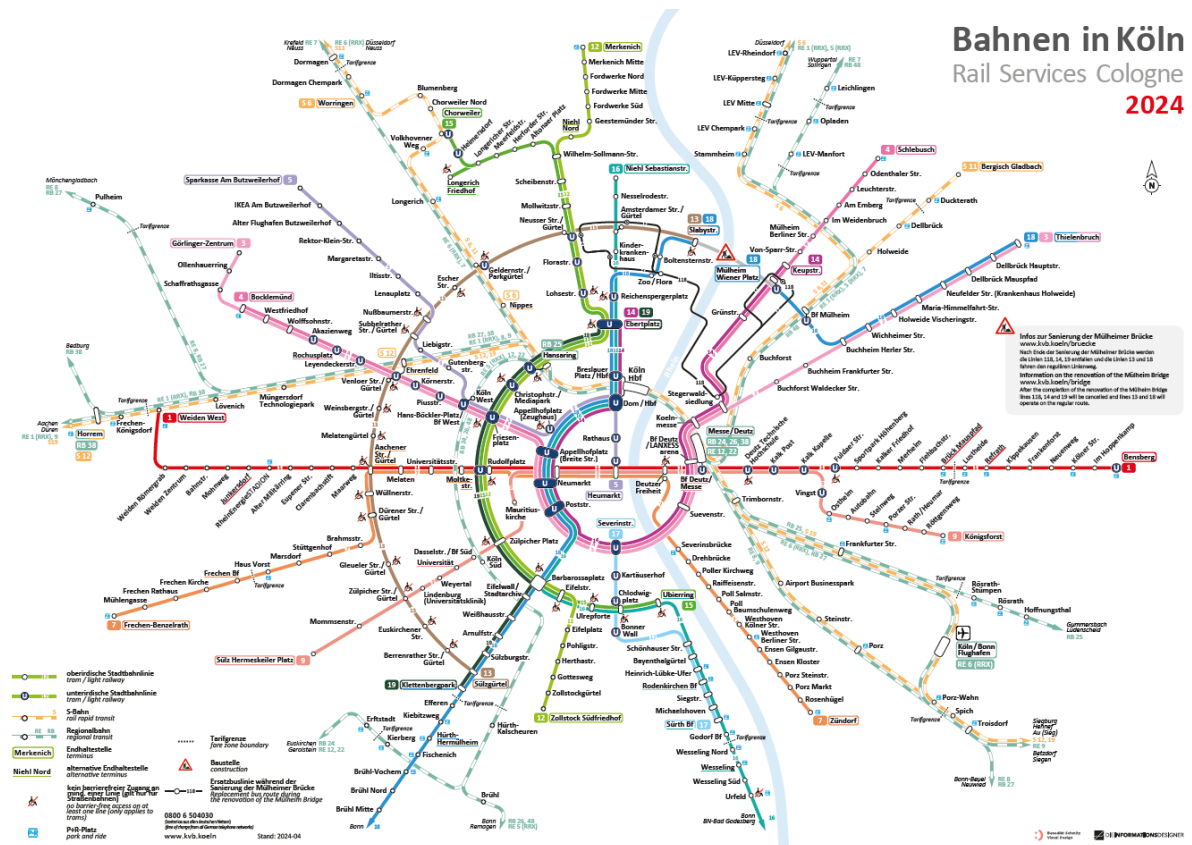
As of 2024, Cologne is home to 1,097,519 residents, making it one of the largest cities in Germany (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2025). Women account for 51.2 percent of the population, and the average age is 42.4. Nearly 50 percent of all households consist of single individuals, reflecting broader trends of urban individualization, delayed family formation, and rising living costs (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2025; Schäfke, 2017). Cologne's social structure is highly segmented, with clear spatial inequalities. Affluent districts such as Lindenthal and the city center report high purchasing power, with per capita values exceeding €33,000 and index ratings of 128. In contrast, economically marginalized districts like Chorweiler, Kalk, and Mülheim have significantly lower purchasing power and index scores below the national average, ranging from 84 to 93 (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2024b). These disparities are further reflected in unemployment rates. While the citywide average was 8.6 percent in 2023, Lindenthal reported only 4.3 percent, whereas Kalk and Mülheim reached 13.3 and 11.8 percent respectively (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2025). These patterns are not merely statistical but influence everyday life and perceptions of public safety. In areas with fewer resources and less social infrastructure, reduced public oversight can heighten feelings of insecurity. This is especially relevant to the phenomenon of street harassment, which thrives in environments lacking social control or inclusive infrastructure. Another defining feature of Cologne is its high level of international diversity (Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021; Sailer, 2003). In 2024, 42.7 percent of the population had a migration background and 21.2 percent did not hold German citizenship. The largest communities include Turkish (91,720), Polish (36,811), and Italian (28,465) residents, alongside more recent groups from Syria (10,940), Ukraine (17,976), Iraq, Iran, and Russia. These groups are not evenly distributed across the city. Right-bank districts such as Kalk, Vingst, and Ostheim report migration background shares exceeding 60 percent. Left-bank areas like Chorweiler and parts of the northern suburbs show similarly high figures (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2025). This uneven distribution reflects post-war labor migration, the construction of large-scale housing estates, and the availability of affordable housing (Schäfke, 2017). This demographic heterogeneity is central to any intersectional analysis of street harassment. Experiences of harassment are shaped not only by gender but also by ethnicity, language barriers, and socioeconomic status. These overlapping factors influence both the likelihood of exposure to harassment and the ways public space is perceived and navigated by different social groups (Pereira and Rebelo, 2024).

3.3 Public Space, Mobility, and Central Urban Areas

Public spaces form the everyday backdrop for urban life in Cologne. The city features a wide variety of such spaces, each serving distinct social and infrastructural functions. Among the most frequented are the Domplatte and Cathedral Square, located directly in front of the main train station and primarily frequented by tourists and passersby (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023).

Mobility in Cologne is structured by a well-developed public transport system operated by Kölner Verkehrs-Betriebe (KVB), including light rail lines, buses, and regional trains (see Map 2). Key interchange stations such as the Hauptbahnhof, Neumarkt, Ebertplatz, and Köln Messe/Deutz connect the city's districts and serve as central points in the urban mobility network. The Neumarkt acts as the central hub of the city's light rail system and marks the entrance to Schildergasse, one of Cologne's primary shopping streets. Rudolfplatz and Friesenplatz mark the central section of the Kölner Ringe and border vibrant neighborhoods such as the Belgisches Viertel and Aachener Straße, linking major transit routes with the city's nightlife and gastronomy. Additional important locations include Barbarossaplatz, a high-traffic node in the public transport network, Brüsseler Platz in the Belgian Quarter, Chlodwigplatz at the heart of the Südstadt, and Wiener Platz, the main transport junction in the right-bank district of Mülheim. These urban nodes reflect the diverse structure of public space in Cologne and highlight its multifunctional nature across different parts of the city (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023).

Map 2: Rail Services in Cologne (Kölner Verkehrsbetriebe, 2024)



Cologne also offers an extensive network of green spaces. The Inner Green Belt curves west of the city center and includes popular areas such as Hiroshima-Nagasaki Park and the Aachener Weiher. On the eastern bank of the Rhine, Rheinpark provides expansive open space with views of the old town and cathedral. Other significant parks include the Volksgarten, Blücherpark, and Stadtgarten, which serve as sites for leisure, sport, and informal gatherings (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023; Schäfke, 2017).

3.4 Social Contrasts, Urban Realities, and the New Year's Eve 2015/2016

The urban structure of Cologne is marked by pronounced social contrasts, which are manifested both spatially and culturally. Neighborhoods such as the Belgisches Viertel or Ehrenfeld are emblematic of creative milieus, high residential attractiveness, and a dense network of bars, cafés, and cultural venues. These areas tend to attract young people, students, and early-career professionals who actively shape the city's urban lifestyle. Similarly, the Südstadt around Chlodwigplatz exemplifies a unique blend of traditional Cologne identity and contemporary urban living, illustrating the coexistence of historical roots with modern urban development (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik, 2023).

In stark contrast, districts such as Kalk, Mülheim, and Chorweiler are characterized by lower average incomes, higher unemployment rates, and an above-average proportion of residents with a migration background (Amt für Stadtentwicklung und Statistik and Amt für Presse- und Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2025). These areas often suffer from infrastructural deficits and offer fewer leisure and cultural facilities. Chorweiler, with its large-scale post-war housing estates, stands as a prime example of urban planning focused on functional separation and standardized residential construction. In many of these neighborhoods, lower levels of social oversight in public space contribute to a heightened perception of insecurity (Schubert, 2025; Weißenberg, 2020). These contrasts have direct implications for how public space is used and how safe people feel. Wealthier and more frequented areas like the Belgisches Viertel or the city center tend to offer a greater sense of safety, reinforced by better lighting, higher foot traffic, and stronger social control. By contrast, districts such as Kalk or Chorweiler are often perceived as less safe, particularly in the evening hours, due to poor lighting, limited social surveillance, and the absence of accessible meeting places (Kurtenbach, 2017; Schubert, 2025).

The events of New Year's Eve 2015/2016 at Cologne's central train station highlighted these tensions in a particularly striking way. The widely reported sexual assaults against women sparked an intense societal and media debate, intertwining questions of gender-based violence, migration, and public safety (Frey, 2020; Schuster, 2021). These events intensified existing discourses around supposedly dangerous urban spaces and the city's internal social divides. Spaces like the main station and the plaza surrounding the cathedral (Domplatte) became symbolic sites of urban vulnerability, significantly shifting the collective perception of public safety. In response, authorities increased police presence and implemented security measures such as expanded video surveillance—developments that illustrate how spatial and social structures are deeply interwoven with security discourses (Boulila and Carri, 2017).

In this thesis, the New Year's Eve incident functions as a key contextual reference point for examining the intersections between spatial inequality, gendered violence, and public space. It reveals how urban environments are not only physically but also symbolically charged. Cologne, with its highly diverse urban fabric and visible social contrasts, offers an ideal setting to analyze street harassment through an intersectional lens and to understand how space, social inequality, and gender interact in shaping everyday urban life.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative design in order to explore how women in Cologne experience and cope with street harassment through the lens of their intersecting social identities. As the phenomenon remains under-researched in the German-speaking context, especially from an intersectional perspective, it is essential to first understand the scope of the issue and how individuals make sense of and respond to it in their daily lives. Qualitative methods, particularly semi-structured in-depth interviews, are especially well-suited to capture these subjective realities and the emotional complexity involved. They provide the flexibility needed to uncover meanings that would be lost in standardized surveys or quantitative tools (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The topic also requires a sensitive and ethically aware approach. Asking participants to complete standardized questionnaires, either online or in public spaces, would not only have limited depth but also risked retraumatization or disengagement. In contrast, the interview setting allowed for a respectful, trusting, and personal atmosphere. Participants were able to share their experiences in a safe space with a female researcher who shares a similar social background and personal understanding of the topic. This relational proximity contributed to the emotional safety and authenticity of the data. Moreover, qualitative research enables the investigation of complex, multilayered experiences such as those shaped by intersecting identities including race, religion, age, or class. These dimensions interact with broader systems of power and cannot be meaningfully captured by predefined response categories. Instead, open dialogue allows women to define what harassment means to them, how it is embedded in social structures, and how they navigate public space accordingly. While no strict methodological tradition was chosen in advance, the research is influenced by feminist, constructivist, and interpretivist approaches. These perspectives collectively emphasize the value of lived experience, the co-construction of meaning, and the need to center marginalized voices in the production of knowledge.

4.2 Epistemological Framework

This research is grounded in a combination of constructivist, interpretivist and feminist epistemological perspectives. It is based on the understanding that knowledge is not neutral or objective but shaped by social context, language and power relations. Street harassment is therefore not seen as a purely individual or behavioral issue, but as a socially constructed phenomenon that reflects and reinforces broader gendered power structures in everyday urban life (Baptist and Coburn, 2019; Roenius, 2015).

A constructivist approach frames harassment as something whose meaning is produced through discourse, norms and repeated interactions. It is not the act alone that defines it, but how it is perceived, labelled and responded to within a given social context (Crotty, 1998; Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). The language used to describe street harassment, the way it is talked about or silenced, and the cultural assumptions around gender and space all contribute to shaping how such experiences are understood and dealt with (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild, 2023). Constructivism provides the basis for viewing knowledge itself as something dynamic, situated and relational (Crotty, 1998). Whereas taking an interpretivist perspective means that the focus

lies on how women make sense of their own experiences (Claire M. Renzetti, 2018). The aim is not to find one universal definition of harassment, but to explore how different women perceive certain situations as threatening, uncomfortable or invasive, and how they emotionally and practically respond. Rather than aiming for statistical generalizations, the research looks at what these personal stories reveal about social norms and boundaries (Kearl, 2010; Mores, 2020). At the same time, it pays attention to recurring patterns and common themes that may emerge across different interviews. These are not treated as fixed categories but as shared experiences that are shaped by broader cultural and structural conditions. Lastly, feminist epistemology plays an essential role in this study. It challenges the idea that only certain forms of knowledge, often produced by dominant groups, are considered valid (Harding, 1991). Instead, it centers the voices of those whose experiences have historically been ignored or dismissed. The concept of epistemic injustice is particularly relevant here, as it points to the ways in which marginalized people are not only excluded from mainstream discourse, but are also denied credibility as knowers (Fricker, 2007). Making these voices heard is not only an academic task, but a political one.

Moreover, emotions are also treated as meaningful sources of knowledge rather than as irrational or distracting. Feelings such as fear, shame or anger are deeply connected to how street harassment is experienced and interpreted, and can reveal how power operates on an embodied level (Jaggar, 2014). Acknowledging emotion as epistemically relevant helps to understand the impact of harassment beyond just verbal accounts. As a researcher, I bring my own perspective into the process. I identify as a cisgender woman and share certain experiences with the participants, including having been subjected to street harassment myself. This closeness allows for a degree of empathy and trust in the interviews. At the same time, I am aware of my own position of relative privilege, for example in terms of race, language and education. This means I do not claim to speak for others, especially those facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. My goal is to make space for these voices in the academic and public discourse, while staying conscious of the responsibility that comes with this position. The decision to frame this research epistemologically in this way is also a response to the fact that many forms of knowledge have traditionally been shaped by the perspectives of white, cisgender, heterosexual men (Massey, 2002). With this work, I aim to contribute to a more inclusive and diverse understanding of social realities by focusing on lived experience, especially in areas of life that are often normalized or made invisible.

4.3 Sampling Strategy

The sampling strategy for this study was guided by the aim of capturing a range of perspectives on street harassment from women with different social backgrounds and everyday realities in Cologne. The research did not seek statistical representativeness, but prioritized variation and depth of experience across intersecting dimensions.

Participants were selected based on a set of inclusion criteria. They had to self-identify as women, be between 18 and 45 years old, live in Cologne, and have personal experiences with street harassment in the city. The aim was to include women who navigate Cologne regularly and are familiar with the city's public spaces in their everyday life. Tourists or short-term visitors were excluded in order to center the perspective of local residents with an ongoing relationship

to the urban environment. The final sample consisted of 16 women aged 18 to 44, including students, employed and unemployed women, mothers, and individuals in a variety of living situations such as shared flats, partnerships or solo households. Efforts were made to reflect a broad spectrum of intersectional realities, though full demographic diversity could not be achieved within the scope of the project. Nonetheless, the sample includes variation in migration background, descent, and visible or embodied social markers.

4.4 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted between April and June 2025. The semi-structured interview format was chosen to balance comparability across participants with openness to individual narratives. This format allowed to explore specific research interests while still remaining responsive to the unique ways participants framed and interpreted their experiences. At the beginning of each interview, a short introductory statement was read aloud to clarify the purpose of the study, outline the interview structure and reinforce the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were reminded that there were no right or wrong answers, that any question could be skipped without justification and that the interview could be paused or terminated at any time (see Appendix A). This opening served to foster a respectful atmosphere and to strengthen participants' sense of control and autonomy throughout the interview. The guiding questions were structured into thematic blocks that covered general perceptions of public space and the feeling of safety, personal experiences of street harassment, emotional responses, coping strategies, and potential influences of personal characteristics such as appearance, age, or clothing. Later sections addressed behavioral adaptation, mobility patterns, as well as suggestions for improvement. Although the questions were not asked in a fixed order, they were informed by theoretical literature on gendered space, intersectionality, and street harassment. Participants were encouraged to respond in their own words, and follow-up prompts were used flexibly depending on the flow of the conversation. This allowed for the emergence of personal boundaries, emotional insights and local knowledge that would have been difficult to capture using standardized formats.

A total of 16 women living in Cologne participated. The central goal was to explore their personal experiences with street harassment and to understand how intersecting social identities may shape these experiences and responses. Participants were recruited through a variety of channels, including social media, personal networks, community spaces and public outreach. A visual call for participation was circulated on Instagram and WhatsApp, posted in local bars and shared by the activist platform "CatcallsofCologne" (see Annex C). In an effort to reach a broader audience and connect with individuals outside familiar social circles, a dating app profile was created specifically for sharing the call for participation. The call appeared as the profile image, accompanied by a short research statement included in the profile description.

In the call for participation, the term "Catcalling" was prominently featured, as it has gained widespread recognition in German public discourse and tends to evoke immediate understanding. In contrast, expressions such as "street harassment" or the German equivalent "Belästigung im öffentlichen Raum" (literally: harassment in public space) are less commonly used and often less accessible to those unfamiliar with academic or activist contexts. The choice to foreground "Catcalling" was therefore strategic: it served as a linguistic entry point that made

the topic intuitively relatable, while still allowing the study to include a broad range of public harassment experiences.

This multi-platform approach was further supplemented by snowball sampling and spontaneous recruitment in everyday social contexts. Although the call for participation was made available in both German and English to ensure broader accessibility and to signal openness to non-native speakers, no non-German-speaking participants came forward during the recruitment process. As a result, all interviews were ultimately conducted in German.

The majority of interviews were held in person, while one took place online via Microsoft Teams based on the participant's preference. Each session lasted approximately 25 to 45 minutes. The duration depended on how much the participants wished to share, as the conversational format allowed them to speak freely and in as much depth as they felt comfortable with. With regard to location, most interviews took place in outdoor public spaces such as parks or city squares. In several cases, participants invited me to their homes, and a few interviews were conducted at my home. I gave participants the option to choose a setting in which they felt most at ease. To protect their privacy and ensure undisturbed conversations, cafés and other public venues were deliberately avoided.

During the interviews, the more general term "Belästigung im öffentlichen Raum" was consistently used. While "street harassment" is well established in international academic and activist discourse, it remains largely unfamiliar to the general public in German-speaking contexts. Moreover, both the English and German terms carry ambiguities. For instance, "street" may suggest limited spatial contexts, while "öffentlicher Raum" (literally: public space) can be interpreted broadly and variably depending on social background, age, or experience. These differences occasionally required clarification to ensure that participants and researcher referred to similar types of public settings.

Before each interview, participants received detailed information about the study's objectives and their rights (see Appendix B). They were asked to sign a written consent form, which explicitly covered audio recording and data handling. The recordings were saved in a password-protected folder and are scheduled for deletion by October 2025. To protect participants' anonymity, each individual was assigned a pseudonym. I intentionally chose to use names rather than numerical codes in order to preserve a sense of personal presence throughout the analysis. Following the interview, participants were invited to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Annex A). This included items on age, place of residence, migration background, first language, educational level, employment status and living situation. While this contextual data was not used for statistical comparison, it served to enrich the interpretation of each participant's narrative within her broader social reality. In addition, visible markers and information on descent were noted when participants chose to share them before, during or after the interview. A summary of these characteristics is included in Appendix E. In addition, all locations mentioned during the interviews were georeferenced and mapped using QGIS in order to illustrate spatial patterns of harassment (see Map 3 in Chapter 5).

Given the sensitivity of the topic, particular attention was paid to creating an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. The shared gender identity between myself and the participants contributed to a sense of familiarity and openness, which allowed many to speak freely about personal and

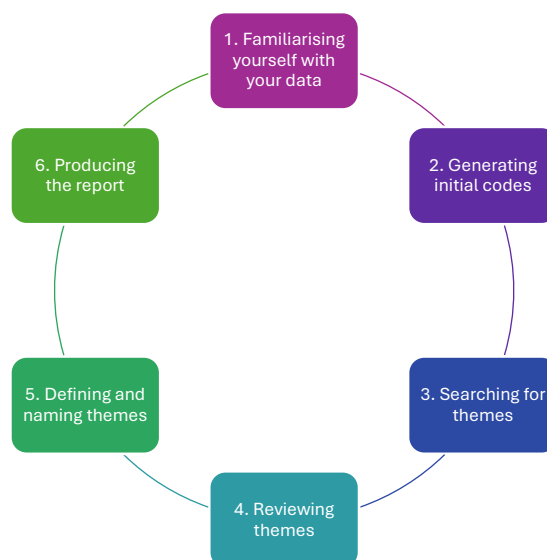
sometimes painful experiences. This openness was not taken for granted and was met with care and responsibility throughout the research process.

4.5 Data Analysis

The analysis followed the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which was chosen for its methodological flexibility and its capacity to capture both commonalities and nuances across participants' narratives. This approach allowed for identifying meaningful patterns in the data while remaining grounded in participants' own language and lived realities. Given the explorative nature of the study and its focus on personal experience, thematic analysis offered the necessary openness to allow themes to emerge both within individual interviews and across participants with diverse social backgrounds.

The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model. After completing the interviews, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. I began by reading and re-reading the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data and to take initial notes (Phase 1). In the next step, I systematically coded salient features of the data using MAXQDA, organizing relevant passages under initial codes (Phase 2). The coding system was built as a tree structure, consisting of seven main categories (Level 1), each with multiple subcategories and further sublevels (see Appendix D). To visually differentiate levels of abstraction, a color gradient was used: the deeper the code hierarchy, the lighter the assigned color. While main categories served primarily as overarching thematic containers, more detailed coding took place at the level of subcodes and their nested branches. Memos were created for main and subcodes to document conceptual notes and emerging connections.

Figure 1: Phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006)



Phases 3 and 4 involved organizing the codes into potential themes and checking whether these themes coherently reflected both the coded material and the dataset as a whole. At this point,

patterns began to emerge that aligned with the research questions while also highlighting unexpected aspects, such as the wide range of individual boundary-setting practices. In Phase 5, I defined and refined the themes in greater detail, ensuring that they captured the diversity of responses while avoiding overlap. The final phase (Phase 6) involved selecting illustrative data extracts and integrating the results with relevant literature to develop the analytic narrative presented in the findings chapter.

The coding was based on a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. Some initial codes and sensitizing concepts were drawn from literature on gendered space, fear of crime, and intersectionality, while other codes emerged directly from participants' statements. This hybrid approach allowed for theoretical orientation without forcing the material into predefined categories. Intersectionality was not employed as a strictly comparative analytical model but functioned as an interpretive lens embedded in the coding system. It was operationalized through a dedicated category with subcodes, applied only when participants explicitly referred to experiences such as racism, religious discrimination, or heteronormative assumptions. Rather than imposing these dimensions onto the material, I treated them as context-dependent aspects of subjective experience.

Some analytical limitations became visible during the coding process. For example, spatial categories such as "Locations & Situations," "Time of Use," and "Mode of Transport" often overlapped conceptually (see Appendix D). In hindsight, a more integrated structure, such as a unified category like "(Perceived) Spatial and Temporal Safety", might have better captured the interconnectedness of these aspects and reduced redundancy. However, due to the advanced stage of the analysis, a full restructuring was not feasible without compromising consistency across the dataset.

Despite these minor limitations, the thematic approach allowed for a rich and multi-layered understanding of participants' experiences, emotions and strategies in navigating public space under conditions of gendered vulnerability.

4.6 Ethical Considerations and Researcher Reflexivity

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. All participants received detailed information about the study and provided informed consent. To ensure privacy, pseudonyms were used and all identifying details were carefully removed. Although no separate consent was obtained for direct quotations, confidentiality was rigorously maintained throughout. Furthermore, the interviews were designed to prioritize participant agency and emotional safety. It was clearly communicated that any question could be skipped and that interviews could be ended at any time without explanation. While no participant requested professional support, the interviewer remained attentive to signs of discomfort. A small token of appreciation was offered at the end of each session.

Reflexivity also guided both the design and implementation of the study. My positionality influenced access to the field, making it easier to recruit participants with similar educational and social backgrounds. In contrast, it was significantly more difficult to reach women affected by intersecting forms of marginalization. Rather than expanding the sample without increasing its diversity, I chose to acknowledge this limitation as part of a reflexive and ethically responsible research approach.

5. Findings

This chapter presents the main findings of the qualitative analysis, based on sixteen in-depth interviews conducted with women living in Cologne. The aim was to explore how participants experience and interpret street harassment in relation to their social positioning and everyday lives. The results are organized thematically, drawing on recurring patterns across the data while also highlighting individual differences and complexities. All quotes were originally spoken in German and have been translated into English for presentation. The original German versions can be found in Appendix F, as well as the table of demographic markers of all 16 participants (see Appendix E).

5.1 Types of Street Harassment and the Emotional and Behavioral Responses to them

Non-verbal Street Harassment

Non-verbal forms of harassment were described by almost all participants and emerged as one of the most frequent patterns in the data. This category included behaviors such as staring, leering, manspreading, sexual gestures, and exhibitionism. Among these, staring and leering appeared most prominently, with 25 coded text segments, followed by a smaller number of accounts of manspreading. Sexual gestures were mentioned only occasionally, while exhibitionism and public masturbation, though also rare, were described as particularly shocking. Taken together, participants underlined that even in the absence of words or physical contact, such behaviors produced strong feelings of discomfort, exposure, and vulnerability.

Staring and leering was by far the most common non-verbal form of harassment. Almost all women recalled situations where they were subjected to gazes that felt intrusive, prolonged, or openly sexual. These experiences occurred in a variety of settings, but were most often linked to public transport, streets, and other everyday environments. Participants emphasized that such looks were rarely neutral: they were described as “scanning” the body, focusing on specific body parts, or creating a sense of being checked or judged. Gina described how a routine journey on the train became an uncomfortable experience when she was targeted by the fixed gaze of a stranger:

“A man [...] sat directly opposite me in the four-seater, even though there were plenty of empty seats on the train. And then he started staring at me, really from head to toe. I had my headphones in and tried not to look at him, but I could still feel his gaze on me.” (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC)

Her account illustrates how enclosed spaces such as trains could intensify the discomfort, as participants felt unable to escape the unwanted attention. Other women similarly reported that such gazes were not isolated incidents but a recurring part of daily life. Jolina, for instance, emphasized how repeated experiences of being visually “scanned” created feelings of disgust and violation:

“I always notice that, and it's not only men but also women, they scan me up and down. Especially my legs. Sometimes it's disgusting—recently someone even looked between my legs while I was sitting. I found that really gross. I usually wear skirts or dresses, and

this happens so often, people just checking me out, and men looking as if they enjoyed it. Even older ones. It's just really gross." (Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded)

Another behavior that several participants mentioned was manspreading, particularly on public transport. Although not described as often as staring, women highlighted that this practice made them feel uncomfortable and physically restricted. Men sitting with legs spread wide were perceived as encroaching on the space of others, forcing women into cramped positions and leaving them with little room to move. Aurelia described how this played out in her own experience:

"[...] I do everything I can to avoid our bodies touching, and yet he still moves further in." (Aurelia, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Her experience illustrates how even behaviors that might appear trivial at first glance can create persistent discomfort. While manspreading was sometimes seen as less severe than other forms of harassment, it nevertheless contributed to women feeling disregarded and excluded from equal use of public space. This perception was shared across participants, including both white-coded women and BIPoC individuals such as Gina, indicating that the sense of being marginalized through such everyday practices cuts across different social positions. At the most extreme end of non-verbal harassment, two participants described incidents of exhibitionism and public masturbation. While rare, these experiences stood out as particularly shocking and unsettling. The two white-coded participants who experienced these acts of street harassment emphasized that the explicitness and suddenness of these acts created a strong sense of violation, even when no direct contact occurred. Alex recalled one such incident during a walk with friends near the Rhine on their way to Cologne Central Station:

"[...] I think we were near the Musical Dome [...], and suddenly a guy shouted 'Hey girls!' He was completely naked and masturbating." (Alex, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Her account shows how such acts could intrude abruptly into everyday routines, creating feelings of fear and insecurity even in public settings and within a group.

Sexualized Comments and Catcalling

Sexualized comments and catcalling were the most common forms of verbal harassment described by participants. With 31 coded segments for sexualized comments and 20 for catcalling, they represented the largest category within this theme. All women in the study reported such experiences, highlighting their presence in everyday life. A characteristic feature was that they often appeared suddenly and without prior interaction, emerging in situations that initially seemed ordinary. For some participants, the remarks were openly vulgar. Ina recalled how a casual greeting quickly escalated into verbal abuse one summer evening on Zülpicher Straße, a busy nightlife area popular among students:

"They first said hello, and I thought, okay, we also said hello back. But then they kept going, asking where we were from, and when I didn't respond anymore, they got upset.

The next thing they shouted at us was 'suck my dick'." (Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded)

Her story shows how a short interaction in a lively public space could suddenly turn into a degrading situation, leaving her and her friend exposed to hostility. Neither of them experienced any bystander intervention, even though many people clearly witnessed what was being said. No one addressed the perpetrator, commented on the behavior, or checked in with Ina and her friend to see if they were alright. Many other participants reported similar incidents of sudden changes in language and tone of voice when perpetrators were ignored. They also emphasized that such remarks were often directed at specific body parts, making them feel reduced to their physicality and objectified. Regardless of the exact wording, participants consistently described these interactions as intrusive and unwanted. Across the interviews, the absence of bystander intervention emerged as a recurring pattern throughout diverse intersectional backgrounds, reinforcing feelings of isolation in situations of harassment.

Furthermore, women stressed that the repetition of such incidents, sometimes happening several times within a single week, contributed to a sense of constant exposure. The settings where these experiences occurred were diverse. Some recalled nightlife areas such as the Ringe or Zülpicher Straße, particularly near clubs or shisha bars, where groups of men gathered outside and directed remarks at passing women. Others described sexualized comments during the day, for example while cycling, waiting for the tram, or simply walking home. Younger participants particularly mentioned Carnival, where the festive atmosphere seemed to create a sense of impunity among men who made sexually explicit remarks even toward teenagers.

Racialized Verbal Street Harassment

Another recurring form of verbal harassment concerned racist insults and derogatory remarks. With 10 coded segments, this subcode was less frequent than sexualized comments. What stands out is that all incidents came from women with a migration background or visible markers of difference, who described being singled out in public space through slurs linked to religion, ethnicity, or skin color. Aylin recalled one particularly hostile encounter in the district of Vingst, when she was driving her car:

"[...] That was even here in Vingst. A man braked suddenly and got out of his car because I had honked, and he insulted me as an 'Islamist terrorist woman'. He told me to get out of here and hit my car." (Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya)

Her account illustrates how racist harassment could erupt abruptly in everyday traffic situations, turning a routine encounter into an intimidating confrontation that also carried an element of physical aggression. Gina also reported repeated incidents of being verbally attacked in public. She described hearing racist insults in different places, including on the street and at public transport stops:

"I definitely get insulted on the street. People say the N-word, for example, or tell me to go back where I came from." (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC)

Taken together, the accounts highlight how verbal street harassment was not limited to sexualization but also included racist verbal attacks. The examples show that insults linked to religion or skin color marked out specific participants in public space, reinforcing their visibility as targets. Although fewer in number than sexualized comments or catcalling, racial slurs emerged as a distinct pattern, reported consistently by those with distinct visible markers such as ethnicity or religious clothing. Shadi's experiences, however, represented an exception, as she did not report being subjected to this particular form of street harassment.

Physical Street Harassment

Physical harassment was described in multiple forms, ranging from subtle invasions of personal space to acts of direct aggression. In total, 99 coded segments fell under this category, making it one of the most prominent themes. The most frequent subcode was invasive physical proximity (40 coded text segments), followed by (sexual) touching (21) and following or stalking (20). Less common, but no less significant, were reports of physical aggression (12) and hair touching or pulling (3). Together, these accounts reveal how harassment could escalate from everyday intrusions to overt attacks, often unfolding suddenly and without any clear provocation. The most common form described was men intentionally invading women's personal space. This includes experiences where men deliberately position themselves too close, particularly in spaces where women felt unable to withdraw. This occurred frequently in public transport, but also in parks and other open spaces. An exception to this pattern was Aylin's experience while wearing an Abaya:

"Before, when I walked by, men would come up to me like, you know, and now when I came they already kept like ten meters distance, and honestly I really felt like a princess, no lie. I was shown a great deal of respect." (Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya)

Nevertheless, for most participants, close physical intrusion remained a recurring and unwelcome element of street harassment.

(Sexualized) touching was the second most frequently described form of physical street harassment. Many women emphasized that these incidents often occurred in nightlife contexts such as clubs and bars, where alcohol consumption was high and crowded dancefloors made unwanted contact difficult to avoid. Isabelle recalled an episode during Carnival, when she was caught in a crowded polonaise and suddenly subjected to unwanted touching from behind:

"He grabbed me by the hip, where you would normally place your hand on someone's shoulder. Then at some point he touched my breasts from behind." (Isabelle, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Her statement highlights how physical contact could take place in dense, festive environments, where anonymity and the physical closeness of bodies made it easy for strangers to touch without being immediately identified. Similar experiences were described by others during Carnival, a setting repeatedly mentioned as particularly prone to such incidents. Nightlife areas such as the Ringe were also frequently associated with harassment of this kind. Xenia, who has a Southern European migration background, described how touching occurred repeatedly when she went out to mainstream clubs in this area:

"[...] I would stand at the bar for maybe half a minute, and someone would suddenly touch my ass or hit it. Sometimes even when walking past, someone would touch me. When I confronted them, they were usually so drunk they did not even understand what I was saying." (Xenia, 18–32, migration background, Southern European descent, white-coded (Greek origin))

Her description illustrates how such incidents often happened in passing, with perpetrators exploiting the crowded environment and alcohol as a cover. However, reports were not limited to nightlife. Instances of touching also took place in public transport or while moving through the city, frequently presented as accidental. Altogether, 12 participants from varied backgrounds described experiences of physical street harassment, and the majority responded with feelings of anger and discomfort.

Following or stalking was another frequently reported form of harassment. Participants described men walking directly alongside them, trailing them for several streets, or even continuing to follow across different means of transport. In many cases, this behavior overlapped with persistent unwanted attention. Several women also described the impression that men deliberately used following as a way to intimidate, particularly at night. Alex, for example, recalled being followed by three young men when she was alone on her way home late at night. She explained that the men appeared offended because she had ignored their attempt to speak to her, and instead of leaving her alone, they trailed behind her. For her, this created a strong sense of threat and fear, which is a common reaction to this kind of intrusion.

Physical aggression was less frequently coded during the analysis, however, the incidents described under this code were among the most severe experiences, often remembered by participants in striking detail even many years later. Unlike other forms of harassment, which could be recurring and normalized, physical aggression was described as a sudden escalation that left a lasting impression. One example was recalled by Paula, who described an incident on her way home in Cologne, close to her apartment. Together with her roommate, she was confronted by three men in winter during the night. Without any apparent reason, the situation escalated into direct violence:

"[...] They grabbed my hair and pulled me to the ground, and the other one hit my roommate on the head. The third didn't find it funny and told them to stop. We shouted and asked what was going on." (Paula, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Her story illustrates how physical aggression could erupt out of nowhere and continue even after the women had sought to retreat, leaving them exposed in the immediate surroundings of their own home. The fact that the perpetrators were a group reinforced the sense of helplessness, as the women could not rely on strength or numbers to defend themselves. Shadi, who had migrated to Germany herself, reported a similarly formative experience when she was 17 years old. After being approached by a well-dressed man near Cologne's Central Station and naively agreeing to show him the way to a nearby hotel, she found herself followed all the way to her doorstep:

"He [...] pressed me against the wall, and I screamed and said, if you don't let me go now, I will scream so loud that my mother will hear me." (Shadi, 25–34, immigrant background, Middle Eastern descent, racialized as Middle Eastern)

During the interview, Shadi visibly struggled with her emotions when recalling this event, underlining how such moments of aggression remained deeply embedded in memory even years later. She emphasized how close she had come to serious harm and how difficult it was to regain a sense of safety afterward. Other forms of aggression were less common but equally disturbing. Aylin, who was wearing her abaya in this situation, described being attacked while shopping together with a female friend:

"We were out shopping and I was really pelted with beer bottles right next to me. With beer bottles, really with beer bottles." (Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya)

This incident, too, occurred without any prior interaction, targeting her appearance in a routine everyday situation. Her companion later emphasized how shocking it was that, in this case, Aylin rather than herself, as a trans woman, became the target. In a particularly degrading case, Ina, whose family has an Eastern European background, described how a man urinated on her as she tried to walk past him and his friend on a sidewalk in Belgisches Viertel:

"Then one of them just swung over while I was passing, and he peed on my leg. I was so perplexed, shocked, and of course disgusted." (Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded)

While such cases were rare, they exemplify the range of physical aggression reported in the material. Participants noted that these incidents often took place either close to home, in everyday errands such as grocery shopping, or during nights out where alcohol was involved. In some cases, individual perpetrators acted alone, while in others, groups of men carried out the aggression together. What all accounts had in common was the suddenness and unpredictability of the attacks. Women emphasized that these were not moments that could be shrugged off, instead, they marked turning points after which feelings of safety and light-heartedness in public space were significantly diminished.

Interpreting Boundaries: Between Discomfort and Harassment

Exploring the personal boundary at which participants considered behavior to constitute harassment was another focus of the interviews. The majority indicated that the threshold from discomfort to harassment is crossed once their clearly expressed boundaries, whether verbal, nonverbal or physical, are disregarded. The violation of personal integrity or the neglect of personal space already evokes a sense of harassment. Alex illustrates this neglect of boundaries as follows:

"Or, even worse, when you have to say you have a boyfriend so that the 'no' of a man, whom you may even have invented, carries more weight than your own." (Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded)

At the same time, participants described a variety of behaviors that they perceived as crossing their limits, while acknowledging that context plays an important role. For every participant without exception, however, sexualized comments and any form of unwanted physical approach were seen as clear violations. Some participants, such as Xenia, Finja, Luna and Gina, emphasized that their threshold is already reached with staring or intrusive looks.

"For me, harassment encompasses anything that violates my boundaries, whether through words, gazes, or physical contact." (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC)

Theresa, by contrast, emphasized that it was also important to her whether an act could be legally prosecuted. She considers staring highly unpleasant but not harassment, since she views the behavior as too minor. Kira expressed a similar perspective. Aylin, however, stated that the threshold is already crossed in the case of latent racism and that she refuses to tolerate such behavior, instead she is usually confronting the person verbally.

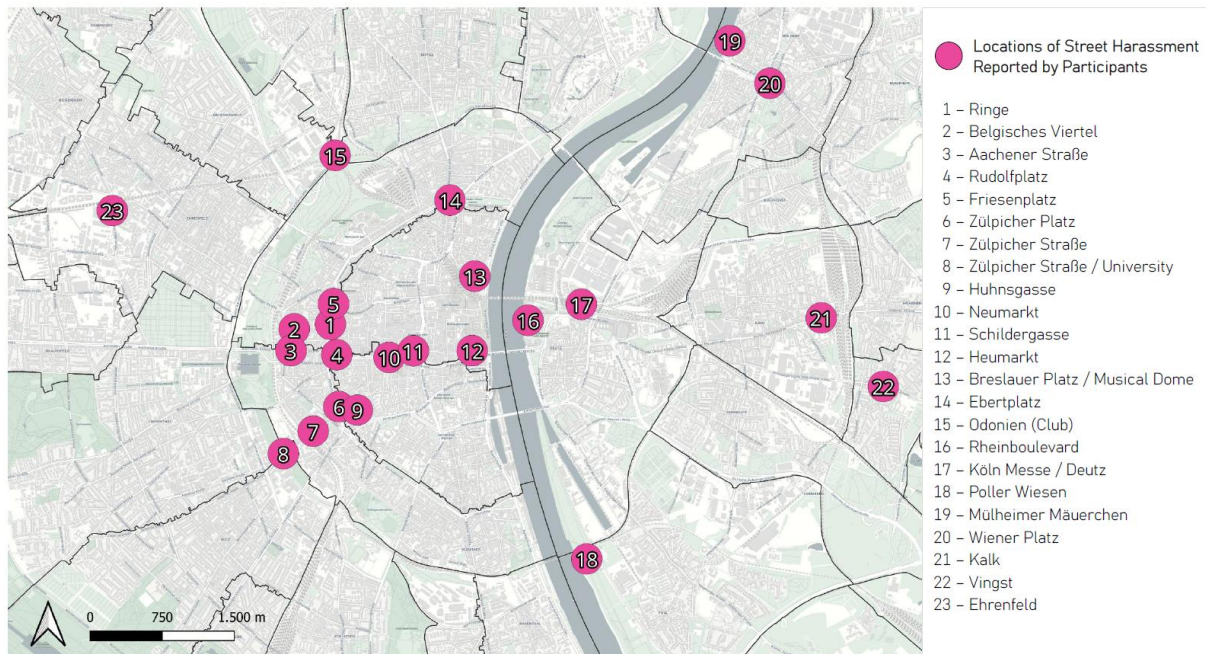
5.2 Space, Time and Movement

Participants' accounts reveal how their experiences of street harassment in Cologne are closely shaped by the ways they move through urban space and time. When and where they travel, and how they navigate certain areas, strongly influences how harassment occurs and how safe or unsafe they feel.

Time of day emerged as an important factor. While the evening and nighttime hours were described as unsafe by all participants, street harassment during the day was also common. Several women reported experiencing catcalling, staring, or aggressive comments while walking to work or shopping in broad daylight. Spatially, certain locations were repeatedly described as problematic and causing a fear of unsafety. Metro stations like Ebertplatz and Neumarkt were mentioned often (both 11 times), particularly in the evening, due to poor lighting and the presence of groups of men, visible drug use, or a general sense of disorder. Underpasses and areas with narrow passages intensified fear, especially when few people were around. Despite being widely perceived as one of the most unsafe places in Cologne, Ebertplatz was linked to only three coded text segments of actual street harassment incidents.

More concretely, many participants reported harassment in and around the Kölner Ringe (12 coded segments) and nearby metro stations (see Map 3). These locations were strongly associated with nightlife and large crowds, particularly during the evening. Zülpicher Straße and the adjacent university quarter were also highlighted, with eight coded text segments, further underscoring the link between nightlife environments and street harassment. Several references were made to locations along the border between Altstadt-Nord and Altstadt-Süd as well (e.g. Schildergasse). In some cases, participants mentioned very specific sites, such as Huhnsgasse (9), which was described by Alex, while others referred more generally to entire neighborhoods, as Aylin did when recounting her Islamophobic street harassment incident in Vingst (22) (see Map 3).

Map 3: Cologne: Locations of Street Harassment Incidents Reported by Participants (Author's own illustration based on empirical data)



When speaking about safety, participants emphasized that the sense of vulnerability was not limited to distant or unfamiliar places. Participants did not only feel unsafe in unfamiliar places. Harassment near their own homes, as Alex and Aylin experienced, or even within their buildings, as Kira mentioned, was reported multiple times, showing how the boundary between private and public spaces can feel fragile. Parks, especially at night, were widely avoided due to poor lighting and isolation. Mobility choices reflected these concerns. Many women described changing their routines to avoid certain places or times. Walking after dark was often avoided. Cycling was seen by some safer than walking, although not entirely free of risk as Theresa stated. Public transport, while essential, was often described as a space of tension. Empty carriages, especially at night, led to discomfort. Some avoided certain stops or sat in visible areas to stay alert as Jolina mentioned. Late-night rides were often described as moments of heightened awareness.

Financial resources influenced how participants responded to these risks. Women who could afford it often used taxis or ride-hailing services like Uber instead of public transport at night. For others e.g. Xenia, this option was not financially viable, limiting their choices and reinforcing unequal access to safer mobility. Furthermore, cars, when available, were seen as personal safe zones. For Aylin, the car has become her primary mode of transport, as she feels secure only in this private space. Having endured numerous experiences of street harassment on public transport in the past, she now relies exclusively on driving as a way to protect herself from further exposure. Some participants like Isabelle still took precautions, and tend to avoid drop-offs directly at their home, to reduce potential risk.

Familiarity with space and the presence of social networks also played a role. Some participants felt safer in neighborhoods with greater ethnic diversity or where they had personal ties. Others avoided areas where they felt too visible or where people of their background were rarely seen. Known workplaces, bars, and social environments created a stronger sense of safety, even when located in busy or central districts.

Across all 16 interviews, it becomes clear that movement in the city involves continuous assessment and adjustment. The experience of navigating Cologne is not only about reaching a destination but about avoiding threat and managing vulnerability. For many women, daily routes involve calculated decisions based on time, environment, identity, and past experiences. These patterns of avoidance and adaptation reveal how harassment does not just occur in space, but actively reshapes how space is used and experienced.

5.3 Coping Strategies

In total, coping strategies represented one of the most extensively coded areas in the material, with 259 coded segments. Participants described a broad spectrum of behavioral responses that can be grouped into preventive, reactive, post-incident social, and passive forms of coping. These strategies ranged from subtle adjustments in everyday mobility to active attempts at defense. The typology of coping has been summarized in the table below, which illustrates the diversity of measures and provides selected quotations for illustration (see Table 2). The quotations serve as examples and are included to make the range of strategies tangible.

Table 3: Coping Strategies of Participants (Author's own illustration based on empirical data)

Coping Type	Subcategory	Number of Codes	Example Quote
Preventive Coping	Avoidance (Physical distancing / Using alternative transport)	16	"And I've already gotten into the habit that, yes, if it's really late, or sometimes when you're walking through the streets you just have a gut feeling about the mood of the people around, then I'd rather choose an Uber instead of taking the train or actually walking." (Paula, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Collective safety strategies	3	"Yes, and somehow it has become completely ingrained in our circle of friends. It's become ingrained. Yes, somehow we've found other ways around it. And now we've actually found quite good ways of getting around it. Mhm. Um, exactly, that you're definitely not confronted with it." (Melina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded)
	Sharing live location	6	"Yes, so my, all my friends have my location in any case and my brother too." (Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded)
	Pre-planning route	1	"So, I always kind of look at how I could get home, where we're probably going or does someone have to go in a similar direction with me and because I live centrally, the distances are always relatively short." (Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Scanning environment	7	"[...], in such a way that I can keep an eye on my surroundings and that nothing can surprise me." (Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Coping Type	Subcategory	Number of Codes	Example Quote
Preventive Coping	Reduced phone use in public space	1	"But... I look at my phone less, which is also quite weird. But in the last two years, I've been completely insulted twice by men because I was looking at my cell phone [...] One guy really, he stopped in broad daylight and screamed at me 'you cunt, you cell phone whore' [...] I don't do that anymore." (Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded)
	Key in hand / entry readiness	5	"But it's always the classic thing to get the keys out, even if I'm still 200 meters away from the door, so I don't have to stand there rummaging around [...]" (Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Heightened alertness / hypervigilance	8	"Especially in the evenings there's this constant tension, because you're always kind of prepared, like, okay, something could happen at any time. So, I think you can never really walk around outside completely relaxed." (Valentina, 25–34, migration background, white-coded)
	Pretending to be engaged in phone activity	2	"So I usually have my phone ready, so I can quickly call someone if a situation becomes uncomfortable. Or sometimes I even pretend to be on the phone, haha. And the thing with the headphones, sometimes I wear them without music, so I can still notice everything going on around me." (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC)
	Wearing (noise cancelling) headphones	4	"These days I often wear noise-cancelling headphones, so sometimes I might not even notice things [...]" (Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Removing headphones to increase awareness	7	"When I have my headphones in, I keep the music really low or switch to transparency mode so that I can still notice everything." (Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded)
	Changing routes	9	"So, within Mülheim, when I'm out at night, I usually try to take a detour so I don't end up walking through streets where I know nobody is around. Or most of the time I just take the subway instead." (Valentina, 25–34, migration background, white-coded)
	Arranging company	19	"And especially once it got dark, or after 10 p.m., I wouldn't walk through the streets alone anymore, but always made sure that someone was with me." (Finja, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Coping Type	Subcategory	Number of Codes	Example Quote
Preventive Coping	Adjusting clothing	17	"I experienced a lot of assaults back then, and every time there was some news report about it in the media [media reports about Islamist terror], it was very unpleasant. I went through many things, especially because of the abaya, which I unfortunately had to stop wearing, since I no longer felt I could move around safely in it." (Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya)
Reactive Coping	Seeking out safe spaces	4	"I find there's a certain feeling of safety, although I have to say that in public spaces like bars I rarely felt unsafe, because Cologne's pub culture is, at least partly, very left-leaning. So I think there's already quite a strong sense there that people look out for each other. It's more the public space outside. Honestly, I've never thought about it before, but maybe if I felt unsafe I could just go into a bar and wait there. Maybe that could be an option." (Alex, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Displaying deliberately unattractive / off-putting behavior	3	"[...] but if I really feel threatened or watched by a man on the train, then sometimes I even pick my nose, just really to appear unattractive. Or I pretend I've got something stuck in my teeth, or, I don't know, that I've got really bad stomach pain or something like that. The main thing is just to make sure I don't appear attractive in that man's eyes. And so I resort to whatever means I have." (Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Reporting to staff / management	2	"Yeah, I think it's great. I actually used it in Brussels, and that's how I became friends with some people at a bar, they're now long-term friends. Back then it was called an 'Angel Shot.' I used it once when I was on an unpleasant date and the guy suddenly started telling me this murder story, which made me feel incredibly unsafe. So I went up to the bar and asked for an Angel Shot, and they were like, 'Yeah, don't worry, we'll help you, it's all good, bla bla.' [...] very discreet, very well done." (Shadi, 25–34, immigrant background, Middle Eastern descent, racialized as Middle Eastern)
	Avoiding specific person	1	"[For example,] in bars, I just avoid that person." (Isabelle, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Leaving the location / situation	19	"He came up to me, and I was like, whoa, I need to get out of here, and then I just ran off really quickly." (Theresa, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Coping Type	Subcategory	Number of Codes	Example Quote
Reactive Coping	Walking faster	5	"But with three of them [men] there was no chance, and I already had my key in my hand, which was shaking as I tried to get it into the lock. I had just turned the corner and kept telling myself the whole time: walk as fast as you can without drawing attention, don't run, don't run, but go really fast, really fast. I can't tell you exactly how many meters behind me they were, but I made it inside and just shut the door." (Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded)
	Physical boundary enforcement	3	"Oh right, I mentioned manspreading earlier. That's definitely something I no longer tolerate at all. So if someone sits next to me and does that, or if I sit next to someone who does, I always push their leg away. I just don't go along with it." (Valentina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded)
	Discreet defiant gestures or expressions	8	"So, um... I don't. But sometimes, if people give me a weird look, I've sometimes shown them the middle finger. Or if they stare somewhere for a long time, for example at my legs, I've always kind of scratched them with my middle finger, because I think maybe they'll feel ashamed and realize that I see it. And that's what I do, for example, or I just look at them angrily." (Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded)
	Verbal confrontation	34	"I was so shocked and I shouted, would you say that to your daughter too, you asshole?" (Xenia, 18–32, migration background, Southern European descent, white-coded (Greek origin))
	Seeking bystander support	9	"And I try to make the people around me aware that something just happened." (Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded)
	Reporting to authorities	4	"Of course I called the police then, while I was on my bike." (Theresa, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Calling someone (real / fake)	6	"[...] and then first call a friend so that you have someone on the phone." (Aurelia, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
Post-incident Social Coping	Talking to friends / family	5	"At some point we got off and went straight to a friend's apartment, and he basically took care of it." (Melina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded)
Passive Coping	Repression / forgetting	4	"You always have all these stories, but at some point they start to blur together, or you only remember the

Coping Type	Subcategory	Number of Codes	Example Quote
Passive Coping			most recent one and not the ones before." (Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)
	Ignoring / indifference	15	"Most of the time I try to avoid contact and just keep walking, because I've noticed that it doesn't help to give those people attention, since it only makes things worse." (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPOC)

Furthermore, within the broader category of coping, 32 coded segments referred specifically to protective tools or self-defense items. The most frequently mentioned strategy was the use of keys as a potential weapon, which came up ten times across eight participants from all three age groups. Several women described this practice as almost universally known among women, with Gina remarking that it was a common and self-evident measure. Keys were perceived as a low-threshold option, always at hand and easy to use in situations where other means might not be accessible. Other items were mentioned less frequently but still appeared across the interviews. Pepper spray was reported in seven segments of five different participants, followed by the Kubaton (a short, stick-like keychain weapon) with six mentions across three different interviews. Four participants referred to personal alarm devices, while rape whistles appeared in two accounts. In rare cases, knives were brought up (two mentions), specifically by Kira, who emphasized her more radical approach to self-defense. She reflected on the challenges women face in such situations:

"But these are just the kinds of thoughts I have when I come out of such a situation and then the next day I think, well, okay, what options do I actually have as a woman? I have to make sure that I do everything right in that situation. As a victim. I have to make sure that it is also really harassment, that there are witnesses somehow, and that I only defend myself with the right tools. So, I think they really make it hard for you, but yes, just the fact that you even think about it is somehow difficult, and many women simply don't do it or can't do it. And even if you do have such a tool, who says you would actually use it in an overstepping situation?" (Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded)

Alex also recounted that after a severe incident, when she was followed home at night by three men in the vicinity of her apartment, she was given a personal alarm device by a close friend. This illustrates how, for some participants, the acquisition of such tools was directly tied to concrete experiences of harassment. Overall, while a variety of protective equipment was discussed, participants expressed ambivalence about their practicality and effectiveness. Keys remained the most widespread option, valued for their accessibility and familiarity, while other tools such as sprays or alarms were considered useful by some but not as commonly carried in daily life.

5.4 Intersectional Differences

The interviews reveal that experiences of street harassment are shaped by the intersection of multiple identity dimensions. While all participants identified as cis-women, significant differences emerged based on age, migration background, visible markers, descent, and social status. Many participants reported that harassment was most intense during their teenage years and early twenties, with catcalling and unwanted advances beginning as early as age 13. As they grew older, most observed a decrease in frequency, often linked to increased self-confidence, changed appearance, or avoidance strategies. Yet, some such as Jolina, also noted a shift in the nature of harassment, from objectification to forms of hostility or disregard.

Participants with visible racial or ethnic markers described qualitatively different experiences. Women like Gina, reported a combination of sexualized and racist comments, often being fetishized or questioned about her origin despite being German-born:

"People always want to touch my hair. In the train, in clubs, it happens again and again that someone suddenly grabs my curls without asking. They think it is a compliment, but for me it is just crossing a boundary. I do not feel seen as a normal woman, only as something exotic." (Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC)

Similarly, Xenia, with a Southern European background, described being misread as Latina and subjected to stereotypical assumptions about sexuality. Religious visibility, as in the case of Aylin who wears a hijab and formerly an abaya, brought additional layers of vulnerability. She described both a reduction in sexualized comments since she started wearing the abaya and a sharp rise in Islamophobic abuse, including verbal attacks and physical threats. This led her to taking off her gown because of safety concerns. Nowadays she still wears a hijab but there are still other factors making her a target of street harassment:

"But there are always some who give me those stupid looks. Especially when I wear my Palestinian scarf. I am an activist, I am pro-Palestine [...] That is when I get those looks again [referring to the time she still wore the abaya]." (Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly)

Her account demonstrates how harassment can transform from sexualization to Islamophobic aggression and even up to politically hostility, depending on markers of religious or political identity. Her experiences highlighted how visibility can function both as protection and as a target. Appearance and clothing also influenced how harassment was experienced, though not always predictably. Tight or revealing clothes often led to more comments, but women also reported being harassed in winter jackets or oversized clothing. Summer was frequently mentioned as a time of increased exposure. Body features such as hair length, bust size, or stature shaped the way participants were approached or perceived, while smaller women sometimes felt more physically vulnerable.

Economic resources played a role in access to safety. Some women mentioned relying on taxis or Uber to avoid late-night harassment, which introduces a financial burden not everyone can afford. Mental state and self-confidence also influenced how women coped with harassment. Those who felt stronger or more self-assured described more agency in reacting, while others emphasized the stress of constant vigilance. Overall, the findings show that street harassment cannot be understood through gender alone. It is deeply structured by racialization, religious

identity, class, and embodiment. These intersecting factors shape who is targeted, how safety is experienced, and what strategies are available in response.

5.5 Participants' Suggestions to Make Public Spaces Safer

Across the interviews, participants shared a broad range of measures that shape their feelings of safety in public spaces, as well as suggestions for future improvements:

1. One consistent finding was the widespread support for **low-barrier safety tools**. **Codeword systems** like "Ist Luisa hier?" or "Angel-shot" were seen as useful by most, especially for allowing discreet access to help. Women from different backgrounds described them as reassuring. Concerns existed about their practical use in emergencies, but overall they were valued.
2. **Awareness teams in nightlife spaces and during carnival** were also appreciated. Some participants regretted their removal, interpreting it as a step backward in public safety infrastructure. Public transport and mobility emerged as another shared concern.
3. Several women mentioned past or proposed **women-specific transport solutions**, including shared taxis and voucher programs. These were described as cost-effective and helpful. The idea was supported across all backgrounds, reflecting a general need for safer travel at night.
4. When it came to **police and security personnel**, views diverged more clearly. Women without a migration background often described police presence as protective. Others, especially those with visible minority identities such as Aylin, Gina or Xenia, expressed mistrust based on negative or discriminatory experiences. Reports included feeling ignored, profiled, or unsafe around officers. Private security was perceived in similarly mixed ways. While some felt comforted by their presence, others emphasized poor training and a lack of sensitivity. Across the board, participants welcomed the idea of **more women in policing and security roles**. They hoped that female officers would listen more closely and respond with greater understanding. This was mentioned by women from different demographic groups and seen as a way to improve the quality of interaction in tense situations.
5. **Education and awareness** were key themes throughout. Most participants stressed the importance of teaching boys from an early age about consent and respect. Several expressed frustration that women are already aware of risks, while many men still lack the same level of responsibility. This need for prevention and early intervention was one of the most frequently mentioned points.
6. Furthermore, some women highlighted the **lack of public knowledge about support services**. This was especially present among those with migration backgrounds, who called for better communication and outreach. The promotion of civil courage was also suggested. A number of participants believed more people should learn how to support others in threatening situations.
7. **Urban design and infrastructure** were also addressed. Better lighting, visible signage, emergency contact points, and open, clearly structured spaces were all suggested to

reduce fear. Participants across all backgrounds described avoiding certain locations due to poor lighting or confusing layouts.

8. **CCTV surveillance** was mentioned as helpful by some, although others were unsure of its usefulness without active monitoring. Trust in such systems varied depending on participants' prior experiences with institutions.
9. Moreover, **digital safety tools** such as escort apps and emergency call services were named as effective and reassuring. These tools were praised especially by those who often walk home alone. The popularity of such apps did not differ notably between groups.
10. One participant expressed a wish for **women-only cafés**, pointing to a desire for culturally safe environments. This idea was not repeated often, but it illustrated how personal identity can influence perceptions of public safety.

In summary, the strongest agreement appeared around education, mobile safety tools, urban improvements, and discreet intervention measures. Distrust in police and institutional actors was much more common among women with migration backgrounds and visible minority status. These differences reflected wider experiences of exclusion and suggest that safety in public space cannot be understood without considering identity-based vulnerabilities.

6. Discussion

This discussion section synthesizes the empirical findings from the qualitative interviews with existing theoretical frameworks on street harassment, public space, and intersectionality. It highlights how participants' lived experiences in Cologne both confirm and enrich established scholarly concepts, offering a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

6.1 Conceptualizing Street Harassment: Bridging Theoretical Ambiguity and Lived Experience

To situate the interview data, it is first necessary to address how street harassment is conceptualized. The participants' accounts reveal how theoretical ambiguities translate into everyday understandings and language.

The empirical data from Cologne strongly confirms the conceptual ambiguity of street harassment, a point extensively discussed by scholars like Arndt (2018), Logan (2015), and Fileborn and O'Neill (2023). Participants frequently used terms like "sexual harassment" or "catcalling" interchangeably, indicating a lack of a clear, commonly accepted German term for "street harassment" in public discourse. This variation in terminology reflects the academic debate about which acts are included under the term street harassment and how it differs from related concepts. The frequent use of catcalling in everyday discourse, compared to the broader term street harassment, reflects how the former has become more established in public vocabulary. Furthermore, participants' understanding of the boundary between discomfort and harassment was consistently crossed when their expressed boundaries, whether verbal, nonverbal, or physical, were disregarded. For all participants, without exception, sexualized comments and any form of unwanted physical approach were identified as clear violations. This aligns precisely with Kearsley's (2014) core definition, which characterizes street harassment as

boundary violations in public spaces between strangers, directed at perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender expression, and always occurring without consent. Gina, for instance, succinctly stated, "For me, harassment encompasses anything that violates my boundaries, whether through words, gazes, or physical contact". This shows that beyond the specific acts themselves, a lack of respect for personal integrity is a core element of the harassment experience.

In addition, the research underscores that street harassment is not an isolated phenomenon but is deeply embedded within a continuum of gendered violence. Scholars such as Logan (2015) frame street harassment as part of a broader continuum of gender-based violence, a perspective echoed by Bowman (1993) and Thompson (1994), who argue that seemingly minor incidents can escalate to sexual violence. The empirical findings support this by showing that even incidents perceived as "minor", such as staring or manspreading contribute to an overall diminished sense of safety and hypervigilance. Participants' accounts of sexualized comments or unwanted physical proximity, while varying in severity, collectively erode their feelings of security and autonomy in public spaces, forming a continuous spectrum of gender-based intimidation.

This shows that definitional ambiguity is not only a scholarly concern but part of how harassment is lived and named in Cologne. Establishing this conceptual groundwork provides the basis for examining how such experiences become embedded in urban spaces.

6.2. Public Space and Gendered Vulnerability: Theory in Urban Realities

Building on the conceptual framing, the analysis now turns to the spaces in which harassment is experienced. The interviews demonstrate how public places, often valued for their positive qualities, simultaneously function as sites of gendered vulnerability.

The empirical finding that a favorite place can simultaneously be a site where street harassment has been experienced strongly confirms its gendered and contested nature, as articulated by feminist geographers such as Bondi (2005), Duncan (1996), and Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020). Examples such as Jolina's favorite place in Deutz by the Rhine, Valentina's "Mülheimer Mäuerchen" (also by the Rhine), or Aurelia's preferred Belgisches Viertel where she was catcalled, vividly illustrate this paradox. These spaces, cherished for their positive attributes, simultaneously become sites of vulnerability, underscoring how deeply gendered power relations permeate seemingly innocuous urban settings.

Moreover, the empirical data identifying narrow/closed paths as a significant insecurity factor, particularly when associated with sexualized attention, aligns with feminist urban theory. Alex's experience of being followed by three men in the narrow Huhnsgasse, for instance, directly reflects the argument by Franck and Paxson (1989) and Navarrete-Hernandez et al. (2021) that urban design often overlooks women's safety needs. The explicit call by participants for sufficient lighting especially in narrow construction areas demonstrates a keen awareness of these urban planning deficits, mirroring Pereira and Rebelo's (2024) critique of how cities are structured by gender.

Furthermore, the avoidance of places connected to past incidents, such as the vicinity of a perpetrator's home, illustrates Bowman's (1993) concept of "informal ghettoization." This term describes how repeated harassment gradually excludes women from parts of the city, limiting

their freedom of movement and participation in urban life. For Jolina, this pattern took an especially severe form: she avoids the site of a sexual assault, making the withdrawal from that area a particularly profound and understandable response to trauma. More broadly, participants' widespread lack of ease in public space and their ongoing engagement in Safety Work (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020) demonstrate how women's autonomy is eroded through the need for constant self-monitoring in potentially hostile environments (Di Leonardo, 1981; Kissling, 1991). This continuous, often invisible labor of risk management shows how deeply fear and caution become embedded in women's everyday lives.

The findings underline that public space is not neutral but shaped by gendered power relations. These spatial dynamics in turn condition the emotional and psychological consequences of street harassment, which the next section explores in more detail

6.3 Impacts and Consequences: Manifestations of Theoretical Frameworks

Experiencing street harassment in public space does not end with the incident itself. It leaves lasting traces on women's emotions, perceptions of safety, and everyday practices. The interview data illustrate the depth of these consequences.

The emotional and psychological impacts reported by participants directly corroborate the effects described in theoretical literature. High frequencies of emotional responses such as fear (26 coded text segments), anger (13), shock (9), and helplessness (3) align with the findings of Fairchild and Rudman (2008), Heben (1994), and Vera-Gray (2014) regarding the profound psychological toll of street harassment. The experience of "Trauma" (7 instances) is particularly significant, as DelGreco and Christensen (2020) and Mores (2020) link harassment to psychosomatic symptoms and the triggering of prior traumatic experiences. Shadi's visible struggle with emotions when recalling a past aggressive encounter, even years later, vividly illustrates this long-lasting traumatic impact.

The reported increase in hypervigilance (8 coded text segments) and constant environmental scanning in public spaces again confirms Vera-Gray and Kelly's (2020) concept of "safety work" as an invisible, burdensome labor women perform to manage risk. This constant internal risk assessment, ranging from choosing routes to modifying expressions, demands significant emotional and cognitive energy. The finding that street harassment incidents in other cities (e.g., Theresa's experience of being chased by a group of men at Leipzig Central Station) influence participants' overall safety perception in Cologne further highlights the systemic and cumulative impact of street harassment, extending beyond isolated incidents and reinforcing Logan's (2015) continuum of violence framework.

Experiences of self-objectification, where women feel visually scanned and reduced to their physicality, are empirically evident in Jolina's account of people looking at her legs, making her feel disgust. This phenomenon is consistent with discussions by Bowman (1993) and Kissling (1991) on the long-term decline in self-worth and personal agency that harassment can engender. Furthermore, the empirical accounts demonstrate the disruption of Goffman's (1963) norm of civil inattention. Gina's detailed description of a man intensely staring at her on a train, making her feel unable to escape the unwanted attention, illustrates how unsolicited comments

and intrusive gazes violate this social expectation of minimal, non-intrusive engagement in public spaces, forcing women into unwanted interactions.

These accounts make clear that harassment operates less as isolated events than as cumulative burdens. This helps explain the centrality of coping strategies, which the following section discusses.

6.4 Coping Strategies: Applying the Four-Phase Model

Given the significant emotional and practical toll, it is crucial to understand how participants attempt to manage or resist harassment. The data provide a wide range of strategies that highlight both resilience and constraint.

The extensive coding of coping strategies (259 segments) empirically supports Farmer and Smock Jordan's (2017) four-phase model (preparation, experience, response, and coping). This model provides a robust framework for understanding the diverse ways individuals anticipate, endure, and process incidents of street harassment.

Preventive Coping: The data reveal frequent proactive measures. The use of alternative transport like taking an Uber or taxi at night (20 coded text segments) or using alternative transport (15 coded text segments) as a preventive coping strategy due to safety concerns, often influenced by economic constraints as Xenia noted, illustrates direct behavioral adaptation to perceived risk. Adjusting clothing (17 coded text segments) is a key preventive measure, exemplified by Aylin no longer wearing an abaya due to safety concerns stemming from Islamophobic abuse. This aligns with theories of modifying one's appearance to manage risk (Kissling, 1991). Other notable preventive strategies included arranging company (19 coded text segments) and heightened alertness / hypervigilance (8 coded text segments).

Reactive Coping: Participants described immediate responses to harassment. Verbal confrontation (34 coded text segments) was a prominent strategy, with examples such as Xenia's shouting, "would you say that to your daughter too, you asshole?". However, participants like Kira and Isabelle often felt externally judged for overreacting, highlighting the social consequences and victim-blaming often associated with asserting boundaries (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Physical boundary enforcement (3 coded text segments), such as Valentina pushing away a manspreading leg, also occurred. Other common reactive strategies included leaving the location or situation (19 coded text segments) and seeking bystander support (9 coded text segments).

Protective Equipment: The widespread use of keys as a weapon (10 coded text segments across 8 participants) is a common, low-threshold self-defense tool, often perceived as universally known among women. Other tools considered or carried included pepper spray (5 coded text segments) and personal alarm devices (4 coded text segments), reflecting a perceived need for external protection in unsafe environments. Kira's reflection on the challenges women face in such situations, and her contemplation of a knife, illustrates a more radical approach born from a sense of vulnerability and the limitations of existing self-defense options. Alex's immediate acquisition of a personal alarm after being followed by three men further underscores the direct link between severe incidents and the adoption of protective measures.

Passive Coping: Strategies such as ignoring and indifference (15 coded text segments) and repression or forgetting (4 coded text segments) are consistent with observations by Gardner (1980), Heben (1994), and Kearl (2010), who noted individuals reframing incidents or trying to maintain control. However, these tactics can reinforce self-blame and be particularly harmful for individuals with prior trauma or low self-esteem. Luna's comment about stories blurring together highlights this coping mechanism.

These strategies show how harassment structures women's everyday routines and sense of safety. Yet they also vary according to social positioning, pointing to the importance of an intersectional perspective

6.5 Intersectional Realities: Differentiated Experiences and Vulnerabilities

The findings strongly support intersectionality as a crucial framework for understanding street harassment, demonstrating that experiences are profoundly shaped by social positioning (Crenshaw, 1992; Carastathis, 2014; Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023).

Age-related vulnerability is confirmed, with participants reporting harassment most intensely during their teenage years and early twenties. Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi (2015) also observed that teenagers are often affected. As participants aged, many noted a decrease in frequency but sometimes a shift in the nature of harassment, from objectification to hostility or disregard. However, the perception of street harassment has evolved for most interview participants over time. As teenagers, many did not fully understand the nature or origins of the behaviors exhibited by men in public spaces. It was only through increased engagement with feminist thought, personal growth, and the development of self-assurance that a more critical awareness emerged, often accompanied by more confrontational responses. This shift may partly explain a perceived decline in such incidents, or, in cases where participants like Aurelia reported continued experiences, it has at least altered their way of reacting to them significantly.

Women with migration backgrounds or visible markers of difference (e.g., Gina, Xenia, Aylin) experienced qualitatively distinct harassment, including "racialized verbal street harassment" (10 coded text segments). Gina, a BIPoC woman of West African descent, reported both sexualized and racist comments (e.g., "N-word," "go back where I came from"), and unwanted touching of her hair, making her feel "not seen as a normal woman, only as something exotic". This corroborates theories on the intersection of racialized and sexualized harassment (Davis, 1994; Kearl, 2010, 2014) and the fetishization of racialized identity. Notably, Shadi, despite her migration background and visible marker as being racialized as Middle Eastern, did not explicitly attribute her experiences to these factors. She neither mentioned them as potential reasons for being targeted nor reflected on how they might have shaped her encounters with street harassment. Moreover, women with a migration background from Eastern European regions did not report being targeted based on their descent, as they are generally perceived as ethnically German. Their appearance, lack of accent, and cultural assimilation render their migration background largely invisible in public interactions. As a result, they often remain 'under the radar' in terms of racialized street harassment. However, this does not mean they are exempt from such experiences, rather, the nature of the harassment shifts. Specifically, racially motivated elements such as slurs or xenophobic remarks are absent, while gendered harassment persists in other forms.

Aylin's case illustrates how multiethnic environments in public spaces can positively influence perceptions of safety. She described feeling more secure in neighborhoods like Vingst and Kalk, which are characterized by a high proportion of residents with migration backgrounds. In her view, the ethnic diversity of these areas creates a sense of familiarity and belonging. At the same time, Aylin acknowledged that such spaces are not perceived as safe by everyone, noting that for others, entirely different urban areas evoke a sense of comfort or threat. This contrast becomes evident in statements by other participants such as Alex, who explicitly expressed feeling less safe in Kalk. However, Alex also pointed out that specific settings, particularly pubs and nightlife venues, can function as safe spaces in Cologne when they are shaped by left-leaning, progressive values and awareness-oriented practices. She emphasized the role of collective care and mutual attention in these contexts. These divergent perceptions underscore that urban diversity does not uniformly translate into safety. Instead, feelings of vulnerability or security are shaped by intersecting factors such as ethnicity, class, political atmosphere, and local community dynamics.

Furthermore, the presence of groups of men (8 coded text segments) as a factor influencing safety perception, as well as the higher frequency of group perpetrators (22 coded text segments), demonstrates the gendered power dynamics and the potential for increased intimidation, consistent with Kissling and Kramarae's (1991) theory of opportunistic displays of power in public interactions.

An intersectional lens reveals that harassment produces differentiated forms of exclusion and insecurity. This highlights the need for safety measures that acknowledge diversity rather than assuming a single, universal experience of women in public space. The following section turns to participants' own suggestions for such change.

6.6 Suggestions for Safer Public Spaces: Bridging Lived Needs and Systemic Change

Finally, the discussion turns to participants' reflections on what would make public space safer. Their suggestions range from immediate practical tools to deeper cultural and institutional transformations.

The interviews reveal that safety in public space cannot be understood as a uniform experience but is shaped by intersecting identities, spatial dynamics, and cultural norms. While participants shared a range of suggestions for improving safety, their accounts consistently pointed toward the limits of technical solutions and the necessity of addressing deeper social structures.

One dimension concerns the role of low-barrier safety tools. Codeword systems such as "Ist Luisa hier?" or safety escort apps were described as reassuring mechanisms in moments of vulnerability. These interventions provide immediate relief, yet their significance lies less in their practical application than in what they symbolize: the outsourcing of safety to individual coping strategies. By relying on discreet tools, women continue to carry the invisible burden of pre-empting and managing risk. The reliance on such mechanisms underscores that society has normalized harassment to the extent that individualized tactics are necessary, rather than questioning why these risks persist in the first place.

The ambivalence expressed toward policing and security further demonstrates how institutional responses are experienced unevenly. While some participants regarded police presence as reassuring, others, particularly women racialized as minorities, described mistrust, neglect, or profiling. These accounts highlight how institutions may reproduce rather than mitigate inequalities. Fricker's (2007) notion of epistemic injustice is particularly relevant: the credibility of marginalized women is often denied, leaving them without recourse to protection. Within critical criminology, this pattern is understood as part of a broader reproduction of racial and gender hierarchies. The call for more female officers therefore cannot be read merely as a demand for representation, but as an attempt to reimagine policing as relational, empathetic, and attuned to the embodied vulnerabilities of women in public space.

Discussions of urban design and surveillance similarly highlight the ambivalence of environmental solutions. Suggestions such as better lighting, clearer routes, and CCTV are consistent with research on the relationship between the built environment and perceptions of safety (Franck and Paxson, 1989; Navarrete-Hernandez et al., 2021). Yet participants' reflections went beyond environmental determinism. Many insisted that while improved lighting may reduce fear, it does not address why harassment occurs. This recognition echoes Lefebvre's (1991) theory of the production of space, which suggests that spaces are not only physically constructed but socially coded. Safer environments therefore require more than architectural adjustments: they demand cultural and political transformations that alter the social meanings attached to space.

The absence of support from others in public space was described as one of the most painful aspects of participants' experiences. This highlights the relevance of bystander intervention as a collective resource. Several accounts resonate directly with the 5Ds model (Right To Be, formerly Hollaback!), which provides concrete strategies for intervention: distract, delegate, document, delay, and direct. The prominence of this theme demonstrates how harassment is not simply a dyadic interaction between perpetrator and victim but a social event shaped by the presence and inaction of others. When bystanders fail to act, the responsibility for safety is intensified for women themselves, expanding the realm of safety work. NGOs thus emerge as critical actors, not only in developing practical intervention frameworks but also in transforming cultural norms by insisting that responsibility be distributed collectively rather than placed solely on those targeted.

At the heart of the participants' reflections was a persistent concern with education and cultural transformation. Many voiced frustration that women are already acutely aware of risks while men remain insufficiently socialized to responsibility. This aligns with transformative justice approaches of Fileborn and O'Neill (2023), which call for interventions that challenge patriarchal gender norms rather than relying exclusively on punitive measures. The suggestion that boys must be taught about consent and respect from an early age is therefore not only a practical recommendation but a recognition that harassment is embedded in cultural reproduction. It is a demand to shift the socialization of masculinity itself, in line with Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic masculinity. These demands become particularly urgent when viewed through an intersectional lens. Women such as Aylin and Gina reported harassment that combined sexist and racist elements, while others, such as Alex, associated certain spaces with heightened insecurity despite their diversity. This illustrates that safety is not evenly distributed but mediated by visible identity markers. Crenshaw's (1991) framework of intersectionality is essential here:

vulnerability in public space cannot be explained solely through gender, but must account for how race, ethnicity, and religion intersect with sexism to produce layered forms of exclusion. Participants' calls for stronger advocacy on behalf of marginalized groups therefore reflect not only individual experiences but structural inequalities in who has access to credible protection and who remains invisible.

Taken together, the data shows that while immediate measures such as codewords, apps, lighting, or bystander models are valued, participants clearly recognized their limits. These interventions provide short-term reassurance but leave the root causes intact. Street harassment persists because patriarchal and racist structures continue to shape everyday interactions and public space. Sustainable change therefore requires more than technical fixes. It demands education, cultural transformation, and the redistribution of responsibility so that safety is no longer outsourced to individuals but collectively guaranteed. In this sense, the participants' voices align with feminist and intersectional theories that locate harassment within broader systems of inequality and insist on change at both structural and cultural levels.

6.7 Reflections on Methodology and Positionality

Reflecting on the methodological process, several strengths and limitations became apparent. A key strength of the research process lay in the ability to adapt the interviews to the individual communication styles and levels of willingness of participants to share their experiences. This flexibility allowed the conversations to unfold in a way that felt natural and participant-driven, which in turn generated rich and candid narratives. Another strength was the relatively low hierarchical distance between myself as the interviewer and most participants. Being a young woman myself, and interviewing primarily women of a similar age or slightly older, created an atmosphere of familiarity and mutual understanding. Many of the interviews resembled conversations among peers, which fostered trust and openness. It is likely that this positionality facilitated disclosures that may not have been as readily forthcoming in a more formal or hierarchical research setting.

At the same time, this positionality also shaped the limitations of the study. As a white, educated, middle-class cis woman, my networks and recruitment channels were inevitably limited, and I was not able to include as many multiply marginalized perspectives as would have been desirable. In particular, women from more diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds and disabled women proved difficult to access within the scope and timeframe of this project. This limitation narrows the diversity of lived realities represented in the study, even though it was anticipated at the outset. A larger and more heterogeneous sample would have provided further insights into how intersecting structures of marginalization shape experiences of harassment.

Looking back, I also recognize that the openness with which I approached the field meant that I did not yet know which thematic foci would prove central. As a result, I occasionally refrained from probing more deeply into certain areas that, in hindsight, would have benefited from greater detail. In retrospect, I see the value of asking more targeted follow-up questions and of complementing the interviews with focus groups, which could have highlighted how women negotiate and share experiences collectively. Bringing women into collective dialogue could

open additional layers of analysis, particularly in revealing shared strategies, contestations, and solidarities.

Despite these limitations, the overall interview dynamic can be considered a significant asset. The atmosphere of trust, relatability, and flat hierarchies created a research context in which participants felt comfortable sharing sensitive and often painful experiences. In this respect, my positionality was not merely a background factor but an active element in shaping both access to participants and the depth of the material collected. It also highlights how certain research topics, such as street harassment may be particularly difficult to study from positions marked by greater gendered or social distance.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how intersectional identities shape women's experiences with street harassment in Cologne, and what coping mechanisms they employ to navigate or mitigate these experiences. Drawing on sixteen in-depth interviews, it became evident that street harassment is not merely a collection of isolated incidents, but a structural and spatial form of gendered exclusion. The findings reveal a deeply entangled web of power, space, and identity, where harassment manifests in distinct ways based on the social position of the individuals targeted.

The typologies of harassment reported ranged from pervasive non-verbal behaviors such as staring and manspreading to overt physical violations including unwanted touching, following, and, in extreme cases, physical aggression. Sexualized comments and catcalling were near-universal experiences, while racialized and Islamophobic abuse was reported exclusively by women with visible markers of racial, ethnic, or religious difference. These forms of harassment were not experienced in a vacuum. Rather, they were intricately linked to the time of day, specific urban environments, and the perceived anonymity or social disorder in those spaces. Areas like Ebertplatz and Zülpicher Straße, for example, emerged repeatedly as fear spaces shaped by poor lighting, crowding, or past traumas. For many women, harassment began early in life and continued into adulthood, transforming everyday urban routines into carefully calculated acts of safety work.

Crucially, the research revealed that women do not navigate public space as a monolithic group. Rather, their strategies for coping with harassment are profoundly influenced by their intersectional identities. Age, race, clothing, economic status, and even political expression shaped how harassment was experienced, interpreted, and responded to. While some women modified their routes or behavior preemptively, others responded with confrontation or passive withdrawal. The use of protective tools, from keys to pepper spray, further underscored the emotional labor and sense of vulnerability embedded in navigating the city. At the same time, these strategies were not equally available to all women. Economic constraints and differing levels of perceived legitimacy in the public sphere meant that not everyone could access safer transport or seek support after an incident.

Taken together, the study offers a comprehensive answer to the research question. It demonstrates that intersectional identities not only shape the frequency and intensity of harassment, but also condition the emotional and material resources available to cope with it. Black women, Muslim women, and women with visible or politicized markers of difference

reported a compounded form of street harassment that was both sexualized and racialized. Their responses reflected a heightened state of vigilance and adaptation that went beyond the already significant efforts undertaken by their white or cis-assimilated counterparts. These findings carry several practical implications. Most urgently, the data underscores the need for early and inclusive educational interventions that challenge gendered power norms and teach respectful behavior in public space. Schools should integrate anti-harassment education that begins in childhood and is sustained throughout adolescence. Public campaigns, too, must reframe harassment as a form of violence rather than flirtation or social awkwardness. In parallel, urban planning must adopt a gender-sensitive and intersectional lens. Poorly lit underpasses, isolated transit stops, and neglected green spaces should be redesigned with input from diverse communities, particularly those most affected by public violence. Infrastructure alone, however, is not enough. The presence and behavior of others in public space matter significantly. Cities like Cologne should invest in bystander education, awareness teams, and codeword systems in nightlife spaces, ensuring that collective responsibility becomes a cultural norm. Importantly, policing and security must be reformed with an eye toward equity. While some participants welcomed increased police presence, others, especially those from marginalized communities, expressed mistrust or even fear of profiling. Addressing this requires both institutional accountability and the inclusion of diverse voices in designing community safety strategies. Mobility also emerged as a critical axis of safety. Late-night transport options such as taxis or rideshares were often mentioned as safer alternatives, but financial limitations made these inaccessible to a few. Subsidized or women-centered transport programs could provide an equitable solution. Beyond this, better staffing, visibility, and lighting on public transport networks would directly address many concerns expressed in the interviews. Lastly, all interventions must be rooted in intersectionality. Safety cannot be guaranteed by gender-neutral policies or one-size-fits-all solutions. A hijab-wearing woman does not experience public space in the same way as her white counterpart. The same is true for Black women, queer women, and those navigating class-based disadvantage. Policies that fail to consider these intersecting dimensions risk reproducing the very inequalities they aim to dismantle.

The study also opens pathways for further research. Expanding the sample to include more diverse and multiply marginalized voices would strengthen the empirical base. Longitudinal and comparative studies could provide insight into how experiences evolve across time and urban contexts. Investigating the perspectives of perpetrators and bystanders would enrich prevention strategies, while place-based methods like participatory mapping could offer more granular insights into spatial dynamics. Finally, evaluating the impact of existing interventions, be it urban design changes, educational programs, or safety apps, would help ensure that responses are both effective and equitable. In conclusion, this thesis affirms that street harassment in Cologne is a socially patterned, spatially situated, and deeply intersectional phenomenon. It is not merely an individual problem, but a collective challenge that demands systemic responses. Women's coping mechanisms, though often resourceful and resilient, should not be the frontline defense against gendered violence. A truly inclusive urban future depends on shifting that burden from individuals to institutions and from silence to shared responsibility.

Revisiting the research questions, the study demonstrated first that women's experiences of street harassment in Cologne are deeply shaped by intersecting identity markers such as age, migration background, visible religious or racial markers, and socioeconomic status (RQ1). Second, it showed that women employ a wide range of coping mechanisms, from avoidance and

route adjustments to confrontation, protective tools, and the use of private or shared transport, with these strategies strongly conditioned by resources, self-perception, and social positioning (RQ2). Finally, the study highlighted the measures that women themselves see as necessary to foster safety in public space, including educational interventions, gender-sensitive urban planning, and more equitable institutional responses (RQ3). Together, these findings underscore the importance of an intersectional perspective in both understanding and addressing street harassment.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide and Demographic Questionnaire (in german)

Interviewfragen

Einleitung

Vielen Dank, dass du dir die Zeit für dieses Interview nimmst.

In diesem Gespräch geht es um deine Erfahrungen im öffentlichen Raum in Köln, insbesondere in Momenten, in denen du dich unwohl, unsicher oder bedroht gefühlt hast.

Ich schreibe meine Masterarbeit im Studiengang Urban Studies an der Vrije Universiteit Brüssel und möchte durch diese Interviews dazu beitragen, das Thema Catcalling und Belästigung im öffentlichen Raum sichtbarer zu machen. Dabei interessiere ich mich besonders für die Perspektiven von weiblich gelesenen Personen mit unterschiedlichen Hintergründen und Lebensrealitäten – mein Ziel ist es, möglichst viele verschiedene Perspektiven einzubeziehen, um besser zu verstehen, wie unterschiedlich Erfahrungen und Wahrnehmungen im öffentlichen Raum sein können.

Es gibt keine richtigen oder falschen Antworten – deine Sicht und deine Erfahrungen stehen im Mittelpunkt. Wenn dir eine Frage unangenehm ist, kannst du jederzeit Bescheid sagen oder sie überspringen. Du kannst das Gespräch auch jederzeit beenden.

Alles, was du erzählst, wird vertraulich und anonym behandelt und ausschließlich im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit verwendet.

Ich würde das Gespräch gerne zur Auswertung aufnehmen und in einem geschützten Ordner speichern. Die Aufnahmen bleiben dort bis Mitte Oktober und werden anschließend gelöscht. Ist das für dich in Ordnung?

Einstieg & allgemeine Wahrnehmung öffentlicher Räume

Zum Einstieg möchte ich gern ein Gefühl dafür bekommen, wie du öffentliche Räume in Köln grundsätzlich wahrnimmst. Mich interessiert, wie du dich dort bewegst, welche Orte du gern nutzt oder meidest und was für dich ein sicherer oder unsicherer Ort ist.

- Gibt es einen öffentlichen Ort in Köln, an dem du besonders gerne bist? Was magst du dort?
 - Wie sicher fühlst du dich grundsätzlich im öffentlichen Raum in Köln? (z. B. im ÖPNV, auf der Straße, in Parks)
 - Gibt es bestimmte Faktoren, die dein Sicherheitsempfinden im öffentlichen Raum beeinflussen? (z. B. Tageszeiten, Orte, persönliches Befinden, Umfeld)
 - Woran machst du fest, ob du dich an einem Ort sicher oder unsicher fühlst?
 - Gibt es in Köln Orte, die du bewusst meidest, weil du dich dort besonders unwohl oder unsicher fühlst?
-

Persönliche Erfahrungen im öffentlichen Raum

In diesem Teil geht es um typische Situationen, in denen du dich im öffentlichen Raum unwohl, verunsichert oder bedroht gefühlt hast – etwa durch das Verhalten anderer Menschen.

Ich möchte verstehen, was du als unangenehm oder übergriffig empfindest und wie du in solchen Momenten reagierst.

- Ist dir im öffentlichen Raum schon einmal Verhalten von anderen Menschen aufgefallen, das bei dir Unsicherheit, Angst oder ein Bedrohungsgefühl ausgelöst hat? (z. B. Blicke, Kommentare oder Nähe von Fremden)
- Wie gehst du in solchen Momenten normalerweise damit um?
- Kannst du typische Situationen beschreiben, in denen du dich unwohl oder bedroht gefühlt hast?
- Welche Art von Verhalten oder Interaktionen haben in diesen Situationen eine Rolle gespielt? (z. B. Blicke, Hinterherrufen, unerwünschte Nähe, Kommentare, Anstarren, Geräusche wie Pfeifen oder Kussgeräusche)
- Was hat in diesen Situationen bei dir Unsicherheit, Angst oder Bedrohungsgefühle ausgelöst?

Eigene Wahrnehmung & Definition von Übergriffigkeit

Hier geht es darum, wie du selbst Situationen einordnest, in denen du dich unwohl oder bedrängt gefühlt hast. Ich möchte nachvollziehen, wie du den Begriff "Belästigung" verstehst und wo für dich persönliche Grenzen verlaufen.

- Wenn du an solche Situationen denkst: Wie würdest du für dich definieren, was "Belästigung" im öffentlichen Raum bedeutet? (z. B. unerwünschte Kommentare, Blicke, Pfeifen, Nachlaufen, unangemessene Nähe oder körperliche Berührungen)
- (Optional, wenn das Gespräch offen ist) Gibt es für dich eine Grenze, ab wann Verhalten nicht mehr nur unangenehm, sondern wirklich belästigend oder übergriffig ist?

Persönliche Erfahrungen mit Straßenbelästigung

In diesem Abschnitt geht es um konkrete Erlebnisse, die dir besonders im Gedächtnis geblieben sind oder dich nachhaltig beschäftigt haben – Situationen, in denen du dich besonders verletztlich oder übergangen gefühlt hast.

- Gab es eine konkrete Situation, an die du bis heute denkst oder die dich bis heute belastet, in der dir jemand im öffentlichen Raum gegenüber zu aufdringlich oder übergriffig war und bei dir Unsicherheit, Angst oder ein Gefühl von Bedrohung ausgelöst hat? (z. B. durch Kommentare, Gesten oder körperliche Nähe)
- Wie hast du die Situation erlebt – was ist passiert, und wie hast du dich dabei gefühlt?
- Ist so etwas schon häufiger passiert? Gibt es bestimmte Orte in Köln oder bestimmte Umstände, bei denen das öfter vorkam?

Einfluss persönlicher Merkmale

In diesem Abschnitt möchte ich besser verstehen, ob persönliche Merkmale wie Aussehen, Alter oder Kleidung deiner Meinung nach Einfluss darauf haben, wie du im öffentlichen Raum behandelt wirst.

- Gab es Erlebnisse, bei denen du das Gefühl hattest, dass dein Aussehen, deine Kleidung oder ein anderes persönliches Merkmal eine Rolle gespielt haben?
- Gibt es bestimmte Eigenschaften, von denen du glaubst, dass sie dazu führen, dass du häufiger oder weniger häufig Belästigung erfährst?
- Hast du bestimmte Reaktionen häufiger erlebt, wenn du z. B. anders gekleidet warst oder dich in bestimmten Gegenden aufgehalten hast?
- Haben sich die Reaktionen anderer Menschen im Zusammenhang mit Situationen, in denen du dich unwohl gefühlt hast, im Laufe deines Lebens verändert? (z. B. Zunahme oder Abnahme von Belästigung, veränderte Reaktionen auf dein Auftreten oder Verhalten)?

Auswirkungen auf Verhalten & Mobilität

Hier geht es darum, ob sich durch frühere Erlebnisse dein Verhalten und deine Mobilität verändert haben – zum Beispiel durch Vermeidungsstrategien, andere Wege oder neue Routinen im öffentlichen Raum.

- Haben deine Erfahrungen dein Verhalten im öffentlichen Raum in irgendeiner Weise verändert?
- Gibt es konkrete Wege oder Orte in Köln, die du meidest oder an denen du besonders vorsichtig bist?
- Gibt es Strategien oder Verhaltensweisen, die du nutzt, um dich sicherer zu fühlen oder unangenehme Situationen zu vermeiden?
- Wie häufig nutzt du den ÖPNV? (Tageszeiten, Gründe) Falls nicht – wie bewegst du dich im Alltag fort?
- (Falls noch nicht beantwortet: Gibt es bestimmte Tageszeiten zu denen du den ÖPNV oder zumindest bestimmte Strecken oder Stationen meidest?)

Maßnahmen & Sicherheitsempfinden

Zum Abschluss würde ich gern deine Einschätzung hören: Was müsste sich verändern, damit du dich im öffentlichen Raum sicherer fühlst? Welche Maßnahmen funktionieren aus deiner Sicht – und welche nicht?

- Gibt es Dinge, die deiner Meinung nach dazu beitragen, dass du dich in bestimmten öffentlichen Räumen sicherer fühlst?
- Hast du das Gefühl, dass bereits existierende Maßnahmen oder Sicherheitsvorkehrungen hilfreich sind? Falls ja, welche? (z. B. bestimmte städtebauliche Maßnahmen, Awareness-Kampagnen, Anlaufstellen, technische Hilfsmittel, Community-basierte Initiativen etc.; gerne auch mit Beispielen aus Köln oder anderen Städten)
- Welche Veränderungen oder Maßnahmen würdest du dir wünschen, um das Sicherheitsgefühl im öffentlichen Raum zu verbessern?

Persönliche Informationen

Die folgenden Angaben helfen mir dabei, die Interviewaussagen besser einordnen und vergleichen zu können. Da es in meiner Forschung auch darum geht, wie unterschiedliche soziale Merkmale Erfahrungen im öffentlichen Raum beeinflussen, sind diese Informationen für die Auswertung besonders relevant.

(Diese Informationen dienen ausschließlich wissenschaftlichen Zwecken und werden anonymisiert.)

- **Alter:**
 - ☐ 18–24
 - ☐ 25–34
 - ☐ 35–44
 - ☐ 45+
- **Geschlecht:**
 - ☐ Weiblich
 - ☐ Männlich
 - ☐ Nicht-binär / Divers
 - ☐ Andere (optional:)

☐ Keine Angabe

- **Geburtsort:**

.....

- **Aktueller Wohnort:**

☐ Köln

☐ Großraum Köln

☐ Andere Stadt (optional:)

- **Migrationshintergrund:**

☐ Nein

☐ Ja, ich bin selbst eingewandert

☐ Ja, meine Eltern/Großeltern sind eingewandert

- **Muttersprache:**

.....

- **Bildungsgrad:**

☐ Kein formaler Bildungsabschluss

☐ Sekundarschulabschluss (Haupt-/Realschule)

☐ Hochschulreife (Fach-/Abitur)

☐ Berufsausbildung

☐ Hochschulabschluss

- **Erwerbsstatus:**

☐ Im Studium

☐ In Ausbildung

☐ Berufstätig

☐ Arbeitslos

☐ Sonstiges (.....)

- **Wohnsituation:**

☐ Alleinlebend

☐ In Partnerschaft/verheiratet (ohne Kinder)

☐ In Partnerschaft/verheiratet (mit Kindern)

☐ Alleinerziehend mit Kindern

☐ Wohngemeinschaft

- **Haushaltseinkommen (monatlich, netto):**

- ☐ unter 1.300 €
- ☐ 1.300–2.500 €
- ☐ 2.500–4.000 €
- ☐ über 4.000 €
- ☐ Keine Angabe

- **Körperliche Einschränkungen oder Behinderungen (freiwillig):**

- ☐ Ja (optional:)
- ☐ Nein

Appendix B: Informed consent form (in german)

Einverständniserklärung zur Teilnahme an einem Interview

Dieses Interview findet im Rahmen meiner Masterarbeit im Studiengang Urban Studies an der Vrije Universiteit Brüssel statt. Der vorläufige Titel der Forschung lautet:

„Unveiling Street Harassment across Cologne: Intersectional Realities and the Spatial Dynamics of Women's Experiences.“

Zweck der Forschung

Dieses Interview ist Teil einer Masterarbeit, die untersucht, wie sich Belästigung im öffentlichen Raum – mit Fokus auf Köln – auf das Sicherheitsgefühl, die Mobilität und das Verhalten von weiblich gelesenen Personen auswirkt. Die Forschung verfolgt einen intersektionalen Ansatz, bei dem auch soziale und persönliche Hintergründe berücksichtigt werden.

Ablauf

- Das Interview dauert ca. 30 Minuten.
- Es findet persönlich oder online statt.
- Das Gespräch wird mit deiner Zustimmung aufgezeichnet und transkribiert.
- Alle Daten werden anonymisiert ausgewertet.
- Die Aufzeichnung wird in einem geschützten Ordner gespeichert und bis spätestens Mitte Oktober 2025 gelöscht.

Freiwilligkeit & Datenschutz

- Die Teilnahme ist freiwillig. Du kannst das Interview jederzeit ohne Angabe von Gründen abbrechen.
- Du kannst Fragen überspringen oder deine Zustimmung jederzeit widerrufen.
- Deine Identität wird nicht offengelegt. Namen, Orte oder andere Hinweise werden unkenntlich gemacht.
- Die Daten werden ausschließlich für wissenschaftliche Zwecke im Rahmen dieser Masterarbeit verwendet.

Kontakt

Livia Henkel
E-Mail: livia.joline.henkel@vub.be
Tel.: [REDACTED]
Instagram: [REDACTED]

Einverständnis

Bitte lies dir die folgenden Punkte durch und bestätige deine Zustimmung:

- ☐ Ich habe die Informationen zur Studie gelesen und verstanden.
- ☐ Ich bin mit der Teilnahme am Interview einverstanden.
- ☐ Ich bin mit der Aufzeichnung des Gesprächs zur Auswertung einverstanden.
- ☐ Ich weiß, dass ich meine Zustimmung jederzeit widerrufen kann.
- ☐ Ich bin damit einverstanden, dass meine Angaben anonymisiert verwendet werden.

Name der teilnehmenden Person: _____

Ort, Datum: _____

Unterschrift: _____

Appendix C: Call for Participants (English and German)

CATCALLING. ANGST.
ALLTAGSUNSICHERHEIT.
ÖFFENTLICHE RÄUME SIND NICHT FÜR ALLE GLEICH.

IM RAHMEN MEINER **MASTERARBEIT** UNTERSUCHE ICH **ERFAHRUNGEN MIT BELÄSTIGUNG IM ÖFFENTLICHEN RAUM IN KÖLN** UND WILL **SICHTBAR MACHEN**, WAS OFT ÜBERSEHEN ODER NICHT AUSGESPROCHEN WIRD.

ICH SUCHE
BETROFFENE WEIBLICH GELESENE PERSONEN

- FÜR EIN **INTERVIEW**
- ANONYM & VERTRAULICH**
- FREI, OFFEN & OHNE BEWERTUNG**
- DEINE PERSPEKTIVE STEHT IM MITTELPUNKT**
- ONLINE ODER PERSÖNLICH**
- DAUER: CA. 30 MINUTEN**
- KONTAKT: DM AN [REDACTED] ODER MAIL AN [LIVIAJOLINE.HENKEL@VUB.BE](mailto:livia.joline.henkel@vub.be)**

CATCALLING. FEAR.
EVERYDAY INSECURITIES.
PUBLIC SPACE DOESN'T FEEL THE SAME FOR EVERYONE.

AS PART OF MY **MASTER'S THESIS**, I'M EXPLORING **EXPERIENCES OF STREET HARASSMENT IN PUBLIC SPACE IN COLOGNE** TO **BRING VISIBILITY** TO WHAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED OR LEFT UNSPOKEN.

I'M LOOKING FOR
WOMEN AND FEMME-PRESENTING PEOPLE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED STREET HARASSMENT

- FOR A **1:1 INTERVIEW (ENGLISH OR GERMAN)**
- ANONYMOUS & CONFIDENTIAL**
- OPEN & WITHOUT JUDGMENT**
- YOUR VOICE MATTERS**
- ONLINE OR IN PERSON**
- APPROX. 30 MINUTES**
- DM [REDACTED] OR E-MAIL [LIVIAJOLINE.HENKEL@VUB.BE](mailto:livia.joline.henkel@vub.be)**

Codesystem

List of Codes	Memo	Coding frequency
Codesystem		1987
1. Types of Street Harassment	This category captures different forms and modalities of street harassment described by the participants. Each subcode refers to a distinct type of expression—verbal, non-verbal, or physical. The aim is to distinguish the mode in which harassment is experienced while allowing for multiple coding in overlapping cases (e.g., verbal + physical). Use this category whenever participants refer to specific behaviors they interpret as harassment, regardless of severity, legality, or physical contact.	0
1.1 Non-verbal harassment	This subcode applies to non-verbal forms of harassment that do not involve speech or physical contact but still convey unwanted sexualized or objectifying attention. Examples include: Manspreading Staring or leering Following someone Public masturbation Gestures or body language with sexual connotation Use even when the non-verbal act is ambiguous but perceived as threatening or inappropriate by the participant.	6
Manspreading		5
(Sexual) gestures		2
Staring / leering		25
Exhibitionism / public masturbation		2
1.2 Verbal harassment	Applies to all speech-based harassment, including sexualized comments, insults, catcalling, and unwanted advances. Includes both direct and indirect verbalizations such as: "Nice legs", "Smile more", "Hey sexy" Threatening or aggressive remarks Dismissive or degrading comments (e.g., when turned down)	1

	This code is used when the participant explicitly mentions being addressed or commented on in public in a way that felt inappropriate or objectifying.	
Unwanted flirting / pickup attempts		11
Racial slur		10
Honking		7
Persistent unwanted attention		21
Insulting comments		15
Objectification		5
Catcalling		20
Whistling / noises		11
Sexualised comments		31
1.3 Physical harassment	Covers harassment involving any physical contact or bodily intrusion, whether subtle or aggressive. Examples include: Being touched, groped, or grabbed Blocking someone's path Invasive proximity More extreme cases such as being spat on or urinated on Use this code whenever the participant reports physical interaction initiated by the harasser, regardless of intent.	0
Urinating on someone / bodily contamination as aggression		1
Kissing		1
Throwing a lit cigarette		1
Physical aggression		12
Invasive physical proximity		40
Following / stalking		20
(Sexual) touching		21
Hair touching / pulling		3
2. Locations & Situations	This code is applied when participants describe specific places, situations, or spatial-temporal contexts in which harassment or fear of harassment occurs. This includes subjective perceptions of places (safe/unsafe), environmental conditions (lighting, presence of others), and types of urban or semi-public settings (bars, streets, riversides, public transport, etc.). It also encompasses how mobility behavior and transport choices interact with the perceived safety of spaces.	0

2.1 Perceptions of Place	This subcode includes statements about how participants perceive specific places, including reasons for feeling safe or unsafe in those spaces. It covers both positive (e.g., calming atmosphere, good lighting, familiar places) and negative perceptions (e.g., presence of intoxicated individuals, unsafe crowd compositions). Mentions of specific areas in Cologne (e.g., Ehrenfeld, Neumarkt) should also be coded here when they are tied to subjective safety assessments or specific emotional responses to place.	0
Safe spaces		0
Reasons for feeling safe		0
Calming atmosphere		3
Positive social interactions		10
Good lightning / open visibility		5
Presence of specific types of people		6
People of the same age		3
Ethnic / social diversity as a protective factor		2
Familiarity		10
Specific favorite places		0
Riverside areas		5
Rheinpromenade		1
Rautenstrauch-Kanal		1
Deutz by the Rhine		2
Mühlheimer Mäucherchen		1
Public squares		0
Brüsseler Platz		1
Rathenauplatz		3
Parks / green areas		3
Grüngürtel		2
Uni-Wiesen		1
Stadtwald Lindenthal / Tierpark		1
Neighborhoods / specific areas		0
Left Side of the Rhine		1
Lindenthal		1
Ehrenfeld		2

Heumarkt / Alter Markt		1
Südstadt		1
Klettenberg		1
Sülz		2
Belgisches Viertel		7
Uni-Viertel		2
Right Side of the Rhine		0
Kalk		1
Vingst		1
Mülheim		2
Dellbrück		1
Harassment-related areas		0
Riverside area south from the Rheinterrassen		2
Area around Odonien (club)		1
Belgisches Viertel		2
Zülpicher Platz		1
Neumarkt		1
Rudolfplatz		3
Friesenplatz		4
Schildergasse		1
Breslauer Platz close to the Rhine		1
Huhnsgasse / Barbarossaplatz		1
Innenstadt		3
Heumarkt		1
Aachener Straße		1
Kölner Ringe		12
Ehrenfeld		1
Zülpicher Straße / Uni-Viertel		8
Vingst		1
Kalk		2
Köln Messe / Deutz		2
Wiener Platz		1
Ebertplatz		2

Known unsafe areas (non-harassment specific)		0
Reichensberger Platz		1
Zollstock		1
Mülheim		1
Schildergasse		1
Breslauer Platz		1
Kölberg		1
Chorweiler		1
Stadtbibliothek am Neumarkt		2
Haltestelle Chorweiler		1
Aachener Weiher		3
Kalk		4
Rudolfplatz		1
Friesenplatz		4
Venloer Straße		1
Wiener Platz		2
Hansaring		3
Köln Hauptbahnhof		2
Kölner Ringe		7
Uni-Viertel		3
Sülz		1
Neumarkt		11
Kwartier Latäng		2
Ebertplatz		11
Ehrenfeld		1
Innenstadt		2
Porz		1
Rodenkirchen		1
2.2 General Mobility Patterns	Applies to mentions of transport habits and general mobility choices (e.g., walking, public transport, car, Uber) in relation to safety. Also includes temporal references (day vs. night) when these influence route decisions, avoidance strategies, or feelings of risk.	0

	It covers how mobility behavior adapts based on learned risks, past experiences, or preferences for familiar and well-traveled routes.	
Proximity of home / familiarity with area		2
Time of Use		0
Daytime		2
Evening		1
Nighttime		1
Both day & night		3
Typical mode of transport		0
Public transport usage		17
Walking		10
Cycling		13
Car usage		4
Taking an Uber / taxi at night		21
2.3 Contexts of Street Harassment / Fear of Harassment	This code captures the situational circumstances under which harassment or fear of harassment occurs. It includes the type of location (e.g., clubs, parks, sidewalks, stations), the presence and state of the perpetrator(s) (e.g., group vs. individual, intoxicated, targeting vulnerability), as well as the time of day, and the social setting (e.g., during events, in crowded or isolated places). Use this code when participants narrate specific harassment episodes or explain why certain settings trigger fear based on experience or environment.	4
Characteristics of perpetrator(s)		0
Harasser type / social setup		0
Group perpetrator(s)		22
Individual		10
Substance use / intoxication of harasser(s)		15
Perceived rejection escalating to harassment		5
Deriving enjoyment from intimidation		2
Targeting perceived vulnerability		5
Time of Day		0
Both day & night		3
Daytime		9
Evening / nighttime		50
Streets & public squares		2

Narrow / enclosed paths		6
Industrial / commercial zones		3
Retail / shopping areas		4
Residential areas		7
Sidewalks		20
Nightlife areas (bars / clubs)		27
Riverside areas		2
Parks / green spaces		11
Public transport		1
Train / bus / tram		21
Stations / stops		18
Work & education commute		4
Events & large gatherings		2
Carnival		19
3. Subjective Impacts & Perceived (Un)Safety	This category captures the psychological, emotional, and behavioral consequences of harassment or fear of harassment as described by participants. It includes their emotional responses, the way they perceive themselves and others, and the changes in behavior or self-perception that result from experiences in public space. The focus is on the internal and external consequences—not the coping strategies themselves, but the underlying shifts they may cause.	0
3.1 Conceptual Understanding of Harassment	This subcode is used when participants reflect on how they conceptualize the boundary between discomfort and harassment. It includes the evolving understanding of what constitutes street harassment and what does not - especially distinguishing it from other types of gender-based violence, such as sexual assault, or inappropriate behavior by non-strangers. It also includes the personal threshold at which participants begin to label an interaction as harassment. Central here is the realisation that street harassment is always perpetrated by strangers in public or semi-public spaces, and how this distinction influences personal perception.	0
Sexual violence / other forms of violence		13
Non-stranger harassment		12
Threshold between discomfort and harassment		28
3.2 Perceptions of Public Space & (Un)Safety	This code captures how participants perceive the safety of public spaces, including factors that increase or decrease their sense of security. It includes	0

	spatial, temporal, social, and situational influences, such as lighting, the presence of intoxicated individuals or groups of men, and experiences with institutions like police or public transport staff.	
Lack of carefree feeling in public space		9
General sense of safety in public spaces		18
Gendered Perceptions of (Un)Safety		0
Perceived vulnerability in gendered shared spaces		5
Gendered differences in perceived safety		3
Everyday disruption through unsolicited gendered attention		5
Negative Experiences Shaping Safety Perception		0
Disappointment in institutions		3
Negative experiences with authorities		7
Fight in public space		1
Attempted theft / pickpocketing		1
Presence of unsanitary conditions		2
Lightning		12
Limited escape options		11
Situational factors influencing safety perceptions		6
Vulnerable station layout		7
Negative experiences (unspecified)		10
Sources of Safety Perception		0
Based on previous experiences		2
Positive experiences with authorities		1
Factors influencing perceived (un)safety		4
Presence of specific types of people / crowd density		0
Influence of companion's gender		2
Crowded spaces		12
Deserted places		20
Behavior of others		3
Appearance / perceived ethnicity of others		4
Presence of intoxicated individuals		17
Presence of groups of men		8
Feeling safer in company		20

Feeling safer in ethnically mixed groups		1
Feeling safer in presence of other women		8
Feeling safer with male company		8
Experiences with authorities		0
Perceived safety in specific neighborhoods		9
Differences by time of day		12
Safe-feeling environments		3
3.3 Emotional Reactions	This subcode collects emotional responses to harassment, such as fear, anger, helplessness, or shock. These reactions reflect the psychological toll of recurring public harassment and show the depth of emotional vulnerability experienced.	0
Shame / Sense of worthlessness		3
Sense of threat		5
Trauma		7
Feeling unsettled / insecure		13
Discomfort		33
Sense of injustice		8
Shock		9
Helplessness		3
Disgust		5
Anger		13
Fear		26
3.4 Physical Reactions	This code documents immediate physical responses to harassment, including symptoms such as freezing, crying, or momentary speechlessness, often indicating acute distress or trauma.	0
Crying		3
Momentary shock or speechlessness		1
Tension / freezing		4
3.5 Cognitive Impacts	This subcode includes the cognitive consequences of repeated harassment, such as normalization, emotional desensitization, and rethinking of past experiences. It also captures changes in how participants assess and interpret harassment over time.	0
Internalization / desensitisation	Refers to mental processes through which participants normalize or downplay experiences of street harassment, often by repeatedly encountering them. This	11

	includes becoming emotionally numb, no longer reacting, or even questioning the severity or legitimacy of the experience.	
Changed perception of harassment		14
Retrospective re-evaluation of past situations		3
3.6 Behavioral Changes	This code refers to how participants have changed their behavior due to harassment. It includes both restrictive measures (e.g., avoiding certain areas, routes, or public transport) and proactive strategies (e.g., reclaiming space, setting boundaries). It reflects the adaptive burden placed on individuals to ensure their own safety.	0
Building confidence / reclaiming public presence		7
Boundary setting / rejecting social expectations		6
Avoiding certain activities		7
Avoiding going out alone at night		7
Avoiding specific routes or places		26
Avoiding taking public transport at a certain time		0
Strategic politeness to avoid escalation		1
Avoidant body language and loss of visibility		4
Acting confident / concealing fear		5
Behavioural adaptation / self-restriction		5
Overcoming fear / re-claiming public space		3
Impacts on mental well-being		1
Changed sense of safety		21
4. Coping Strategies	This code refers to how participants manage, respond to, or prepare for street harassment. It includes both proactive and reactive strategies aimed at maintaining a sense of safety and control in public spaces. These strategies can be preventive, responsive, social, or passive, and may involve both individual and collective elements.	0
4.1 Preventive Coping	This subcode captures proactive measures taken to prevent potential harassment before it occurs. It includes behavioral adjustments like route planning, modifying clothing, increasing alertness, and strategies for enhancing visibility or safety in public spaces. Many of these actions reflect the burden of self-monitoring placed on those at risk.	0
Avoidance		0
Physical distancing		1
Using alternative transport		15

Collective safety strategies		3
Sharing live location		6
Pre-planning route		1
Scanning environment		7
Reduced phone use in public space		1
Key in hand / entry readiness		5
Heightened alertness / hypervigilance		8
Pretending to be engaged in phone activity		2
Wearing (noise cancelling) headphones		4
Removing headphones to increase awareness		7
Changing routes		9
Arranging company		19
Adjusting clothing		17
4.2 Reactive Coping	This subcode involves immediate responses to harassment once it has occurred. These include physical and verbal responses, attempts to remove oneself from the situation, or seeking help from others. It reflects how individuals assert boundaries or protect themselves in real-time, often balancing safety with social consequences.	0
Seeking out safe spaces		4
Displaying deliberately unattractive / off-putting behavior		3
Reporting to staff / management		2
Avoiding specific person		1
Leaving the location / situation		19
Walking faster		5
Physical boundary enforcement		3
Discreet defiant gestures or expressions		8
Verbal confrontation		34
Seeking bystander support		9
Reporting to authorities		4
Calling someone (real / fake)		6
4.3 Protective Equipment	This code refers to the use or consideration of self-defense tools, such as pepper spray or alarms. It highlights the need for external protection in environments perceived as unsafe, and reflects a readiness for potential confrontation or violence.	0

Use / consideration of self-defense tools		1
Knife		2
Rape whistle		2
Kubotan / keychain weapon		6
Personal alarm device		4
Keys used as a weapon		10
Pepper spray		7
4.4 Post-incident Social Coping	This subcode captures social ways of processing harassment experiences after the fact. It includes sharing the incident with trusted others, seeking emotional support, or receiving validation from one's social circle. These responses help mitigate the psychological impact of the incident.	0
Talking to friends / family		5
4.5 Passive Coping	This code reflects avoidant or internalized responses to harassment, such as repression, minimization, or emotional detachment. While these strategies may offer short-term relief, they can also signal resignation or a lack of accessible external support.	0
Repression / forgetting		4
Ignoring / indifference		15
5. Identity-related Vulnerabilities & Intersectional Experiences	This code captures how participants' social identities – such as gender, age, ethnicity, class, sexuality, or religion – influence their experiences with street harassment. It includes reflections on perceived vulnerability, structural inequalities, and identity-specific targeting. The code is rooted in an intersectional understanding of power and marginalization.	0
5.1 Body & Appearance-related Dimensions	This subcode refers to participants' reflections on how their physical appearance, clothing, or grooming influenced their experience of harassment. It includes issues of sexualization, perceived femininity, and how certain features may make individuals more visible or targeted in public.	0
Appearance- and clothing-related factors		42
Internalized sexualization and validation seeking		1
Fetishization of racialized identity		6
Perceived femininity		4
Grooming & appearance		2
5.2 Physical & Mental State	This code includes references to perceived physical or psychological vulnerability, such as disability, physical stature, or mental health. It captures	0

	how internal states (e.g., low confidence) or visible traits may increase perceived risk in public settings.	
Perceived physical disadvantage / vulnerability		1
Mental state & self-confidence		7
5.3 Social Identity Factors	This subcode focuses on specific social identities – such as ethnicity, sexuality, gender identity, or religious affiliation – that participants perceive as influencing how they are treated in public. It includes direct experiences of racism, homophobia, or Islamophobia in the context of street harassment.	0
Experiences linked to ethnicity / migration background		22
Racism		14
Self-reflection on gender identity		2
Religious visibility		10
5.4 Age-related Aspects	This code captures participants' reflections on how age shapes experiences of street harassment, including vulnerability at certain life stages, changes over time, or perceived (in)visibility due to aging. It highlights the temporal dimension of harassment across the life course.	0
Age-related vulnerability		21
Perceived changes in harassment nature		3
Perceived stability of harassment over lifetime		2
Perceived decrease of harassment over lifetime		7
Perceived increase of harassment over lifetime		1
5.5 Structural Awareness	This subcode refers to participants' broader understanding of social structures and how systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, classism) shape individual experiences. It reflects a critical consciousness about societal power dynamics and the unequal distribution of safety in public space.	2
Awareness of intersectional disparities		8
6. Social Responses to Street Harassment	This code refers to the social dynamics surrounding incidents of street harassment, including how bystanders, friends, or authorities react. These responses – supportive or dismissive – can significantly influence how individuals process harassment and whether they feel seen, believed, or blamed.	0
6.1 Immediate responses	This subcode captures the direct reactions of people present during the harassment incident. It includes both active bystander interventions and the absence of support. The code highlights the importance of social responsibility in public spaces and the consequences of silence or inaction.	0

Supportive intervention		12
Lack of bystander intervention		17
6.2 Post-situation responses	This subcode covers how others respond after hearing about an incident, such as friends, family, or institutional figures. It includes supportive listening as well as disbelief, minimization, or judgment. These reactions can either validate the participant's experience or contribute to secondary harm.	0
Helpless / shocked reaction		1
Supportive response		2
Confusion or disbelief		1
Lack of Support		7
Judgmental responses		4
Victim blaming		7
7. Suggestions & Perceived Measures for Safer Public Spaces	This code includes participant suggestions for improving safety in public spaces, as well as perceptions of existing measures. It reflects both practical and systemic ideas, ranging from infrastructural changes to broader societal transformations. These responses highlight a vision for safer, more inclusive urban environments.	0
7.1 Urban & Infrastructure Measures	This subcode captures proposed or appreciated changes in the built environment that aim to increase safety- such as better lighting, visible security, or urban design modifications. It includes measures tailored to vulnerable groups and technical solutions like surveillance systems or safety escort services.	0
Visible safety measures		1
Supportive infrastructure for vulnerable groups		2
Improved lightning		9
Creating women-only spaces		3
Mitigating dark and narrow routes		1
Urban design changes		3
Safe Walk Hotline / Safety Escort App		7
Emergency contact systems		3
Night taxi voucher program		8
Technology-based safety measures		7
CCTV / surveillance		7

7.2 Social & Educational Measures	This code includes societal-level strategies like awareness campaigns, solidarity among women, challenging gender norms, and educating boys and men about consent and respect. These suggestions reflect a desire for cultural change and long-term prevention through education and dialogue.	0
Increased bystander intervention		4
Increased Public awareness campaigns		17
Strengthening solidarity among women		3
Challenging patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes		5
Challenging racism and ethnic / religious discrimination		3
Education of boys / men on respect and consent		10
7.3 Institutional Presence & Criticism	This subcode addresses the presence and performance of formal institutions- such as police, security staff, or municipal services- in promoting or undermining safety. It includes both supportive evaluations and critical perspectives, especially toward superficial or symptom-focused approaches.	0
Critique of symptom-based measures		1
Harsher punishment for offenders		1
Increased female presence in security roles		4
Awareness Teams (On-site)		5
Private Security		0
Supportive		16
Critical / Skeptical		3
Police Presence		0
Supportive		10
Critical / Skeptical		8
7.4 Venue-based & Transport Safety Programs	This code refers to safety programs implemented in nightlife venues and transport systems, such as the "Ist Luisa hier?" initiative or women-specific transport options. It reflects a recognition of situational risk zones and targeted protective efforts.	0
Venue-based safety programs "Ist Luisa hier?"		18
Alternative transport for women		2

Appendix E: Table of Participants Characteristics

Name	Coded Segments	Age	Gender	Current Place of Residence	Migration Background	Descent	Visible Markers	First Language	Education Level	Employment Status	Living Situation	Monthly Household Income (Net)
Ina	112	25–34	f	Neustadt-Süd, Cologne	Yes, my parents/grandparents immigrated	Eastern Europa	white-coded	Russian	University degree	Currently studying	In a relationship/married (no children)	€1,300–2,500
Luna	110	25–34	f	Altstadt-Süd, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Unemployed	Living alone	under €1,300
Paula	132	25–34	f	Neustadt-Süd, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Employed	Living alone	€2,500–4,000
Melina	95	18–24	f	Sülz, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Currently studying	Shared apartment / communal living	under €1,300
Aurelia	104	25–34	f	Lindenthal, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	Vocational training	Employed	Shared apartment / communal living	€1,300–2,500
Alex	128	25–34	f	Neustadt-Süd, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Employed	Living alone	€1,300–2,500
Shadi	107	25–34	f	Altstadt-Süd, Cologne	Yes, I immigrated myself	Middle East	racialized as Middle Eastern	English / Persian	University degree	Employed	Shared apartment / communal living	€1,300–2,500
Gina	141	35–44	f	Ehrenfeld, Cologne	Yes, my parents/grandparents immigrated	West Africa	BIPoC	English / German	Vocational training	Employed	In a relationship/married (no children)	€2,500–4,000

Name	Coded Segments	Age	Gender	Current Place of Residence	Migration Background	Descent	Visible Markers	First Language	Education Level	Employment Status	Living Situation	Monthly Household Income (Net)
Xenia	133	18–24	f	Mülheim, Cologne	Yes, my parents/grandparents immigrated	Southern Europe	white-coded (Greek origin)	Greek	University degree	Employed	Living alone	€1,300–2,500
Finja	94	25–34	f	Neustadt-Süd, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Employed	Living alone	€1,300–2,500
Kira	145	25–34	f	Neustadt-Süd, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Currently studying	Shared apartment / communal living	€1,300–2,500
Theresa	145	25–34	f	Sülz, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Currently studying	Shared apartment / communal living	€1,300–2,500
Isabelle	122	25–34	f	Sülz, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	University degree	Employed	Shared apartment / communal living	€1,300–2,500
Aylin	171	35–44	f	Kalk, Cologne	Yes, my parents/grandparents immigrated	Turkish	Hijab / formerly Abaya	Turkish / German	Lower secondary education (Haupt-/Realschule)	Employed	Single parent	€2,500–4,000
Jolina	124	18–24	f	Dellbrück, Cologne	No		white-coded	German	Higher secondary education (Fachabitur or Abitur)	Currently studying	Shared apartment / communal living	under €1,300
Valentina	124	25–34	f	Mülheim, Cologne	Yes, my parents/grandparents immigrated	Eastern European	white-coded	German / Polish	University degree	Currently studying	Living alone	€1,300–2,500

Appendix F: Interview Quotes English – German

Interview Participant	Interview Quotes Mentioned in the Text	
	English	German
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"A man [...] sat directly opposite me in the four-seater, even though there were plenty of empty seats on the train. And then he started staring at me, really from head to toe. I had my headphones in and tried not to look at him, but I could still feel his gaze on me."	„Da hat sich ein Mann [...] mir direkt gegenüber in den Vierer gesetzt, obwohl total viele Plätze frei waren in der Bahn. Und dann fing an, mich anzustarren wirklich von Kopf bis Fuß. Und ich hatte halt Kopfhörer drin und habe versucht ihn nicht anzugucken, aber habe die Blicke halt trotzdem auf mir gespürt.“(Gina, Pos. 31)
Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded	"I always notice that, and it's not only men but also women, they scan me up and down. Especially my legs. Sometimes it's disgusting—recently someone even looked between my legs while I was sitting. I found that really gross. I usually wear skirts or dresses, and this happens so often, people just checking me out, and men looking as if they enjoyed it. Even older ones. It's just really gross."	"mir fällt das halt immer auf, das machen aber nicht nur Männer, sondern auch Frauen...dass die mir immer so sehr krass auf-, also die gucken immer so hoch runter an mir. Und auch auf meine Beine. Das ist teilweise irgendwie eklig und mir hat auch letztsens einer so zwischen die Beine geguckt. Das fand ich auch ganz eklig. So als ich saß. Und ich trage eigentlich immer Röcke oder Kleider. Also das ist sowas, was so oft passiert und das mich Leute einfach so abchecken oder halt dann auch Männer so, als würden die das halt geil finden. Und auch Ältere und das ist voll eklig." (Jolina, Pos. 21)
Aurelia, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...] I do everything I can to avoid our bodies touching, and yet he still moves further in."	"[...] ich tue alles dafür, dass sich unsere Körper auf gar keinen Fall berühren und trotzdem setzt er sich noch weiter rein [...]" (Aurelia, Pos. 23)
Alex, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...] I think we were near the Musical Dome [...], and suddenly a guy shouted 'Hey girls!' He was completely naked and masturbating."	"[...] meine ich, so Ecke Musical Dome [...], also vorbeigegangen und relativ nah am Rhein rief ein Typ, ey Mädels und war komplett nackt und hat onaniert." (Alex, Pos. 34)
Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded	"They first said hello, and I thought, okay, we also said hello back. But then they kept going, asking where we were from, and when I didn't respond anymore, they got upset. The next thing they shouted at us was 'suck my dick'."	" [Die] haben erst hallo gesagt und ich dachte, ja komm, hallo, haben wir auch zurückgesagt, sind dann weitergegangen und dann wollten, haben die aber weiter meinten, äh, wo kommt ihr her und dann dachte ich mir aber, nee, wir haben jetzt schon nicht hallo gesagt, wir gehen jetzt einfach mal weiter, äh, ja, waren die richtig unzufrieden mit und das nächste, was uns hinterhergerufen wurde, war dann Lutsch, mein Schwanz." (Ina, Pos. 27)
Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya	"[...] That was even here in Vingst. A man braked suddenly and got out of his car because I had honked, and he	"[...] das war sogar hier in Vingst. Dass ein Mann extra stark gebremst hat und aus dem Wagen

Interview Participant	Interview Quotes Mentioned in the Text	
	English	German
	insulted me as an 'Islamist terrorist woman'. He told me to get out of here and hit my car."	ausgestiegen ist, weil ich dann gehubt habe und mich beschimpft hat als "Islamisten-Terroristen-Weib". Und ich soll hier weggehen und hat auf meinen Wagen draufgeschlagen." (Aylin, Pos. 19)
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"I definitely get insulted on the street. People say the N-word, for example, or tell me to go back where I came from."	"Aber Ich werde auch auf jeden Fall beleidigt auf der Straße. Dass Leute das N-Wort sagen zum Beispiel. Oder dass ich wieder dahin zurück soll wo ich herkomme." (Gina, Pos. 25)
Isabelle, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"He grabbed me by the hip, where you would normally place your hand on someone's shoulder. Then at some point he touched my breasts from behind."	"Ich packte mir an die Hüfte wo ich denke, okay, ist eigentlich Schulter, aber, ne. Und irgendwann dann so an die Brüste von hinten." (Isabelle, Pos. 43)
Xenia, 18–32, migration background, Southern European descent, white-coded (Greek origin)	"[...] I would stand at the bar for maybe half a minute, and someone would suddenly touch my ass or hit it. Sometimes even when walking past, someone would touch me. When I confronted them, they were usually so drunk they did not even understand what I was saying."	„[...] eine halbe Minute an der Bar stand und mir einfach jemand auf den Arsch gehauen hat oder am Vorbeigehen irgendwie und ich mich umgedreht habe und diese Person darauf angesprochen habe und sie so besoffen hat, dass sie gar nicht gecheckt hat, was ich da eigentlich sage. (Xenia, Pos. 31)
Paula, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...] They grabbed my hair and pulled me to the ground, and the other one hit my roommate on the head. The third didn't find it funny and told them to stop. We shouted and asked what was going on."	"[...] Und im nächsten Schritt hat der eine mir in die Haare gegriffen mich zu Boden gezogen und der andere meine Mitbewohnerin gegen den Kopf geschlagen. Der dritte fand das auch nicht lustig und hat gesagt, sie sollen das unterlassen. Wir sind laut geworden und haben gesagt, was das soll." (Paula, Pos. 23)
Shadi, 25–34, immigrant background, Middle Eastern descent, racialized as Middle Eastern	"He [...] pressed me against the wall, and I screamed and said, if you don't let me go now, I will scream so loud that my mother will hear me."	"Dann ist er mit mir bis zu meiner Haustür gelaufen, hat mich gegen die Wand gedrückt. Und dann habe ich geschrien und meinte, wenn du mich jetzt nicht loslässt, schreie ich so laut, dass meine Mutter [...], sie wird mich hören" (Shadi, Pos. 19)
Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya	"We were out shopping and I was really pelted with beer bottles right next to me. With beer bottles, really with beer bottles."	"Dann sind wir da einkaufen gegangen und ich wurde wirklich mit Bierflaschen neben mir abgeworfen. Mit Bierflaschen, wirklich mit Bierflaschen." (Aylin, Pos. 19)
Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded	"Then one of them just swung over while I was passing, and he peed on my leg. I was so perplexed, shocked, and of course disgusted."	"Und ja, hab dann gemerkt, dass einer von beiden da so einfach rüber geschwenkt hat, während ich vorbeigegangen bin und hat mir dabei halt ans Bein gepinkelt. Und ich war da, ich war so krass

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		perplex, geschockt und natürlich angeekelt." (Ina, Pos. 49)
Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded	"Or, even worse, when you have to say you have a boyfriend so that the 'no' of a man, whom you may even have invented, carries more weight than your own."	"Oder noch schlimmer ist, wenn du sagen musst, ich habe einen Freund, dass das Nein von dem Typen, den du dir vielleicht im Zweifel sogar ausgedacht hast, mehr zählt als deins." (Alex, Pos. 38)
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"For me, harassment encompasses anything that violates my boundaries, whether through words, gazes, or physical contact."	"Also für mich ist Belästigung alles, was meine Grenzen überschreitet, egal ob es Worte, Blicke oder Berührungen sind." (Gina, Pos. 29)
Paula, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"And I've already gotten into the habit that, yes, if it's really late, or sometimes when you're walking through the streets you just have a gut feeling about the mood of the people around, then I'd rather choose an Uber instead of taking the train or actually walking. "	"Und ich habe mir schon angewöhnt dass ja, wenn es irgendwie sehr spät ist oder ich finde manchmal wenn man durch die Straßen läuft, hat man auch irgendwie so ein Bauchgefühl wie gerade so eine Stimmung von Personen ist, dass ich dann doch eher das Uber wähle, anstatt mit der Bahn oder zu laufen tatsächlich." (Paula, Pos. 31)
Melina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded	"Yes, and somehow it has become completely ingrained in our circle of friends. It's become ingrained. Yes, somehow we've found other ways around it. And now we've actually found quite good ways of getting around it. Mhm. Um, exactly, that you're definitely not confronted with it."	"Ja, und irgendwie hat sich das mittlerweile bei uns im Freundeskreis aber auch so komplett eigentlich eingebaut. Eingespielt. Ja, dass man irgendwie dann so andere Wege gefunden hat. Und jetzt haben wir da eigentlich auch ganz gute Wege, so wie man da so drumherum kommt, gefunden. Mhm. Ähm, genau, dass man da auf jeden Fall nicht konfrontiert ist." (Melina, Pos. 53)
Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded	"Yes, so my, all my friends have my location in any case and my brother too."	"Ja, so meine, alle meine Freunde haben meinen Standort auf jeden Fall und halt mein Bruder auch." (Jolina, Pos. 45)
Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"So, I always kind of look at how I could get home, where we're probably going or does someone have to go in a similar direction with me and because I live centrally, the distances are always relatively short."	"Also ich gucke halt irgendwie immer, wie könnte ich nach Hause kommen, wo gehen wir wahrscheinlich hin oder muss irgendwer mit mir in ähnliche Richtung und dadurch, dass ich zentral wohne sind die Wege immer relativ kurz" (Luna, Pos. 33)
Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...], in such a way that I can keep an eye on my surroundings and that nothing can surprise me."	"[...] auf die Art und Weise so, dass ich halt mein Umfeld im Blick habe und dass die mich nicht überraschen können." (Kira, Pos. 35)

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Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded	"But... I look at my phone less, which is also quite weird. But in the last two years, I've been completely insulted twice by men because I was looking at my cell phone [...] One guy really, he stopped in broad daylight and screamed at me 'you cunt, you cell phone whore' [...] I don't do that anymore."	"Aber... Ich gucke weniger aufs Handy, was auch ganz weird ist. Aber in den letzten zwei Jahren wurde ich zweimal komplett von Männern beleidigt, weil ich aufs Handy geguckt habe. [...] Einer hat wirklich, der ist am helllichten Tag stehen geblieben und hat mich richtig angeschrieben, meinte, du Fotze, du Handynutte. [...] Das mache ich nicht mehr." (Ina, Pos. 67)
Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"But it's always the classic thing to get the keys out, even if I'm still 200 meters away from the door, so I don't have to stand there rummaging around [...]"	"Aber immer so das Klassische schon mal Schlüssel rausholen, auch wenn ich noch 200 Meter von der Tür entfernt bin, damit ich da nicht stehen muss, um zu kramen" (Luna, Pos. 35)
Valentina, 25–34, migration background, white-coded	"Especially in the evenings there's this constant tension, because you're always kind of prepared, like, okay, something could happen at any time. So, I think you can never really walk around outside completely relaxed."	"Aber es ist halt trotzdem immer, vor allem abends natürlich so eine Grundspannung weil man ja irgendwie immer so bereit ist, okay, es kann jederzeit irgendwas passieren, deswegen so richtig tiefenentspannt kann man, glaube ich jetzt nie draußen rumlaufen." (Valentina, Pos. 9)
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"So, I usually have my phone ready, so I can quickly call someone if a situation becomes uncomfortable. Or sometimes I even pretend to be on the phone, haha. And the thing with the headphones, sometimes I wear them without music, so I can still notice everything going on around me."	"Also ich habe meistens mein Handy griffbereit, damit ich schnell jemanden anrufen kann, falls eine Situation unangenehm wird. Oder ich tue dann manchmal auch so, als würde ich telefonieren haha. Und genau das mit den Kopfhörern und dann manchmal ohne Musik, damit ich trotzdem alles um mich herum mitbekomme." (Gina, Pos. 47)
Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"These days I often wear noise-cancelling headphones, so sometimes I might not even notice things [...]"	"Mittlerweile trage ich halt auch viel so Noise-Canceling-Kopfhörer dann kriege ich das vielleicht manchmal nicht mit[...]" (Kira, Pos. 17)
Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded	"When I have my headphones in, I keep the music really low or switch to transparency mode so that I can still notice everything."	"Wenn ich Kopfhörer drin habe, mache ich die Musik so leise oder stelle auf Transparenz, dass ich alles mitbekomme." (Alex, Pos. 20)
Valentina, 25–34, migration background, white-coded	"So, within Mülheim, when I'm out at night, I usually try to take a detour so I don't end up walking through streets where I know nobody is around. Or most of the time I just take the subway instead."	"Also innerhalb von Mülheim, wenn ich da jetzt nachts unterwegs bin, dann versuche ich schon auch immer einen Umweg zu gehen, sodass ich nicht irgendwie durch Straßen laufe, wo ich weiß dass da niemand ist. Oder ich nehme halt eine U-Bahn meistens dann." (Valentina, Pos. 19)

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Finja, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"And especially once it got dark, or after 10 p.m., I wouldn't walk through the streets alone anymore, but always made sure that someone was with me."	"Und dass ich vor allem dann, sobald es dunkel wurde oder nach 22 Uhr, dass ich dann nicht mehr alleine durch die Straßen gegangen bin, sondern da immer geguckt habe, dass jemand auch dabei ist." (Finja, Pos. 45)
Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya	"I experienced a lot of assaults back then, and every time there was some news report about it in the media [media reports about Islamist terror], it was very unpleasant. I went through many things, especially because of the abaya, which I unfortunately had to stop wearing, since I no longer felt I could move around safely in it."	"Ich habe da sehr, sehr viele Übergriffe damals erlebt und jedes Mal, wenn irgend so eine Nachricht war, wieder in den Medien, war das sehr unangenehm. Haben wir sehr viele, also ich habe sehr viele Sachen erlebt, auch wegen diesem Gewand, was ich leider ausziehen musste aufgrund, weil ich mich halt da nicht mehr sicher bewegen konnte." (Aylin, Pos. 9)
Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya	"Before, when I walked by, men would come up to me like, you know, and now when I came they already kept like ten meters distance, and honestly I really felt like a princess, no lie. I was shown a great deal of respect."	„Früher haben die Männer so, wenn ich vorbeigelaufen bin, dann kamen so, dass ich mich da so drauf und jetzt wo ich kam war ich schon so zehn Meter Abstand so und ich habe mich echt gefühlt wie so eine Prinzessin, jetzt ungelogen. Ich habe sehr sehr viel Respekt entgegenbekommen" (Aylin, Pos. 47)
Alex, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"I find there's a certain feeling of safety, although I have to say that in public spaces like bars I rarely felt unsafe, because Cologne's pub culture is, at least partly, very left-leaning. So I think there's already quite a strong sense there that people look out for each other. It's more the public space outside. Honestly, I've never thought about it before, but maybe if I felt unsafe I could just go into a bar and wait there. Maybe that could be an option."	"wobei ich auch sagen muss, so im öffentlichen Raum in Bars habe ich mich selten unsicher gefühlt, weil die Kölner Kneipenkultur natürlich auch teilweise sehr links orientiert ist und das deswegen da schon, finde ich sehr angekommen ist, dass man da aufeinander aufpasst und es ist mehr so der öffentliche Raum. Ich habe ehrlich gesagt noch nie darüber nachgedacht, vielleicht, wenn ich mich unsicher fühle einfach in eine Kneipe zu gehen und da zu warten. Vielleicht wäre das eine Option." (Alex, Pos. 62)
Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...] but if I really feel threatened or watched by a man on the train, then sometimes I even pick my nose, just really to appear unattractive. Or I pretend I've got something stuck in my teeth, or, I don't know, that I've got really bad stomach pain or something like that. The main thing is just to make sure I don't appear attractive in that man's eyes. And so I resort to whatever means I have."	"[...] aber wenn ich mich wirklich in der Bahn bedroht fühle oder beobachtet fühle von einem Mann, dann popele ich auch schon mal in der Nase. Einfach wirklich, um unattraktiv zu wirken. Oder ich tue so, als hätte ich was an den Zähnen oder ich tue so, keine Ahnung, als hätte ich irgendwie so voll die Bauchschmerzen oder sowas. Also Hauptsache man wirkt irgendwie überhaupt nicht attraktiv in den Augen dieses Mannes. Und da greife ich dann halt so zu Mitteln die ich so habe." (Kira, Pos. 27)

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Shadi, 25–34, immigrant background, Middle Eastern descent, racialized as Middle Eastern	"Yeah, I think it's great. I actually used it in Brussels, and that's how I became friends with some people at a bar, they're now long-term friends. Back then it was called an 'Angel Shot.' I used it once when I was on an unpleasant date and the guy suddenly started telling me this murder story, which made me feel incredibly unsafe. So, I went up to the bar and asked for an Angel Shot, and they were like, 'Yeah, don't worry, we'll help you, it's all good, bla bla.' [...] very discreet, very well done."	"Ja, ich finde es super. Ich habe das in Brüssel genutzt tatsächlich und so habe ich mich dann mit den Leuten in der Bar angefreundet auch und die sind jetzt auch langjährige Freunde. Es hieß Angel Shot damals und ja, ich habe es einmal genutzt ich war auf einem unangenehmen Date und dann hat er mir so eine Mord-Story rausgepackt, wo ich mich dann so unglaublich unsicher gefühlt habe, wenn ich zur Theke gegangen bin und habe nach einem Angel Shot gefragt und dann meinte er so ja komm, wir helfen dir, alles gut bla bla, [...] also sehr diskret sehr gut." (Shadi, Pos. 51)
Isabelle, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[For example,] in bars, I just avoid that person."	"[...], dass ich dann dieser Person aus dem Weg gehe [...]" (Isabelle, Pos. 31)
Theresa, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"He came up to me, and I was like, whoa, I need to get out of here, and then I just ran off really quickly."	"Und dann war ich so, boah, ich bin ganz schnell weg und bin dann ganz schnell weggelaufen halt." (Theresa, Pos. 21)
Alex, 25–34, no migration background white-coded	"But with three of them [men] there was no chance, and I already had my key in my hand, which was shaking as I tried to get it into the lock. I had just turned the corner and kept telling myself the whole time: walk as fast as you can without drawing attention, don't run, don't run, but go really fast, really fast. I can't tell you exactly how many meters behind me they were, but I made it inside and just shut the door."	"Aber mit dreien keine Chance und hatte meinen Schlüssel schon parat und meine Hand hat so gezittert als ich versucht habe, da rein und ich war einfach nur um die Ecke und war die ganze Zeit so geh so schnell du kannst, ohne dass es auffällig ist, also nicht rennen, nicht rennen aber ganz schnell, ganz schnell und ich kann dir nicht genau sagen, wie viel Meter Abstand die hatten, aber ich habe es reingeschafft und ich habe nur die Tür zugemacht." (Alex, Pos. 28)
Valentina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded	"Oh right, I mentioned manspreading earlier. That's definitely something I no longer tolerate at all. So, if someone sits next to me and does that, or if I sit next to someone who does, I always push their leg away. I just don't go along with it."	"Achso, ich hatte ja vorhin Manspreading angesprochen, das ist auf jeden Fall auch spezifisch etwas, was ich gar nicht mehr toleriere. Also wenn sich jemand neben mich setzt, der das macht oder wenn ich mich neben jemanden setze, der das macht, dann stoße ich das Bein immer weg. Also, da mache ich nicht mit." (Valentina, Pos. 47)
Jolina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded	"So, um... I don't. But sometimes, if people give me a weird look, I've sometimes shown them the middle finger. Or if they stare somewhere for a long time, for example at my legs, I've always kind of scratched them with my middle finger, because I think maybe they'll feel ashamed and realize that I see it."	"Also ähm... Ich nicht, ich habe jetzt teilweise so Leuten, wenn die blöd gucken, habe ich denen manchmal so einen Mittelfinger gezeigt oder wenn die lange irgendwo hingucken, zum Beispiel auf meine Beine, habe ich es ihnen immer so gekratzt, aber ist es also so mit meinem Mittelfinger so halt und

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	And that's what I do, for example, or I just look at them angrily."	weil ich mir so denke, so vielleicht schämen die sich dann ja und checken dass ich das sehe und deswegen... genau das mache ich zum Beispiel oder ich gucke die halt einfach böse an," (Jolina, Pos. 25)
Xenia, 18–32, migration background, Southern European descent, white-coded (Greek origin)	"I was so shocked and I shouted, would you say that to your daughter too, you asshole?"	"Da war ich so perplex und habe geschrien, würdest du das auch zu deiner Tochter sagen, du Wichser?" (Xenia, Pos. 21)
Ina, 25–34, migration background, Eastern European descent, white-coded	"And I try to make the people around me aware that something just happened."	„Und ich versuche, die Menschen um mich herum darauf aufmerksam zu machen, dass da gerade was passiert ist." (Ina, Pos. 23)
Theresa, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"Of course I called the police then, while I was on my bike."	"Ich hab dann natürlich die Polizei gerufen und so auf dem Fahrrad." (Theresa, Pos. 57)
Aurelia, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"[...] and then first call a friend so that you have someone on the phone."	[...] und dann erstmal eine Freundin anrufst, dass du irgendwen am Ohr hast." (Aurelia, Pos. 7)
Melina, 18–24, no migration background, white-coded	"At some point we got off and went straight to a friend's apartment, and he basically took care of it."	"[...] sind dann halt irgendwann ausgestiegen und sind dann direkt halt bei einem Freund in die Wohnung und der hat sich dann quasi darum gekümmert." (Melina, Pos. 33)
Luna, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"You always have all these stories, but at some point they start to blur together, or you only remember the most recent one and not the ones before."	"Man hat ja immer irgendwelche Storys nur die sich dann irgendwann vermischen oder dass man sich dann halt nur noch an die letzte erinnert und nicht mehr irgendwie davor." (Luna, Pos. 21)
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"Most of the time I try to avoid contact and just keep walking, because I've noticed that it doesn't help to give those people attention, since it only makes things worse."	"Meistens versuche ich, den Kontakt zu vermeiden und einfach weiterzugehen, weil ich gemerkt habe, dass es nichts bringt den Leuten Aufmerksamkeit zu schenken, weil es dann noch schlimmer wird." (Gina, Pos. 17)

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Kira, 25–34, no migration background, white-coded	"But these are just the kinds of thoughts I have when I come out of such a situation and then the next day I think, well, okay, what options do I actually have as a woman? I have to make sure that I do everything right in that situation. As a victim. I have to make sure that it is also really harassment, that there are witnesses somehow, and that I only defend myself with the right tools. So, I think they really make it hard for you, but yes, just the fact that you even think about it is somehow difficult, and many women simply don't do it or can't do it. And even if you do have such a tool, who says you would actually use it in an overstepping situation?"	„Aber also das sind halt so Gedanken, die ich habe, wenn ich aus so einer Situation rauskomme und dann am nächsten Tag denke, so, hm, okay, ja, was habe ich denn eigentlich für Möglichkeiten als Frau? Also, ne, ich muss ja gucken, dass, ich muss ja gucken, dass ich alles richtig mache in der Situation. Als Opfer. So, ja Ich muss gucken, dass sie auch wirklich belastigt wurde und dass es irgendwie auch Zeugen gibt und dass ich mich nur mit den richtigen Hilfsmitteln verteidige. So, also ich finde, das wird einem halt auch richtig schwer gemacht, aber ja also allein die Tatsache, dass man darüber nachdenkt ist ja irgendwie schon schwierig und auch viele Frauen machen das einfach nicht und können das auch nicht und auch selbst wenn man so ein Hilfsmittel hat, wer sagt denn, dass man das dann in einer übergriffigen Situation auch nutzt?" (Kira, Pos. 29)
Gina, 35–44, migration background, West African descent, BIPoC	"People always want to touch my hair. In the train, in clubs, it happens again and again that someone suddenly grabs my curls without asking. They think it is a compliment, but for me it is just crossing a boundary. I do not feel seen as a normal woman, only as something exotic."	Die denken, es sei ein Kompliment oder so, aber für mich ist es einfach eine Grenzüberschreitung. Ich fühle mich nicht als würden die mich als normale Frau wahrnehmen, sondern nur als etwas Exotisches (Gina, Pos. 17)
Aylin, migration background, 35–44, Turkish descent, wears Hijab / formerly abaya	"But there are always some who give me those stupid looks. Especially when I wear my Palestinian scarf. I am an activist, I am pro-Palestine [...] That is when I get those looks again [referring to the time she still wore the abaya]."	"Aber es gibt schon die eine oder die andere, die dann so blöd guckt. Vor allem wenn ich meinen Palischal trage ich bin Aktivistin, ich bin pro Palestine, [...] da habe ich jetzt die Blicke wieder. (Aylin, Pos. 31)