

Unfamiliar Spaces, Unwanted Attention

Navigating Street Harassment as a Dutch Solo Female Traveller



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“Unfamiliar Spaces, Unwanted Attention: Navigating Street Harassment as a Dutch Solo Female Traveller”

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Abstract

This thesis explores how Dutch women navigate street harassment while travelling abroad solo, a context where cultural unfamiliarity and isolation can exacerbate gendered vulnerabilities. Street harassment can be understood as both a manifestation and reinforcer of systemic gender inequality, which substantially limits women's mobility, impacts their sense of safety, and forces them to modify their behaviour to mitigate risks. Through semi-structured interviews, conducted in the Netherlands with Dutch solo female travellers, this thesis centres women's voices, stories, and lived experiences of street harassment abroad. Findings reveal that women constantly negotiate between a performance that reinforces or challenges dominant gender norms, balancing hypervigilance and extensive 'safety work' with efforts to assert independence and reject fear, a tension that starts with pre-trip planning and persists through post-trip reflections. The travel context heightens feelings of vulnerability to sexual violence, forcing women to engage in safety work, such as changing appearance, being accompanied by men, staying hypervigilant, and avoiding nighttime. However, this individualised responsibility put on women obscures the root causes of street harassment and does not stop women from experiencing a range of non-verbal, verbal, and physical invasions of personal space, such as catcalling, following, and unwanted touching. The wider normalisation of both street harassment and safety work perpetuates victim blaming, trivialises the invasions on women's autonomy, and internalises safety work and harassment as common sense and 'not serious'. This can even influence women's own sensemaking and narratives at times. The invisibility of this inequality, manifested in women's safety work, harassment experiences, and accompanying emotional labour, must be disrupted in order to make public spaces equally accessible to women.

Keywords: Solo Female Traveller, Performance of Gender, Femininity, Street Harassment, Public Space, Safety Work, Normalisation

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1. Introduction

On October 25, 2024, a fragment from the Graham Norton Show went viral with guest actors Eddie Redmayne, Denzel Washington, Paul Mescal, and Saoirse Ronan (Access Hollywood, 2024). Male actor Eddie Redmayne jokingly talked about the self-defence techniques he had to learn for his part in a TV series. He said, bewildered, he learned to shove “the butt of your phone” into the neck of the attacker. Paul Mescal responded, “Who is actually going to think about that? If someone attacks me, I am not gonna go, ‘Phone!’”, which sparked laughter from the host, other guests, and the audience. As the only woman, Saoirse Ronan quickly interrupted this conversation by saying, “That is what girls have to think about all the time. Am I right ladies?”, which left the male actors speechless.

The viral clip perfectly captures how men and women are socialised to navigate public spaces. While the men never thought about using personal items as safety items, women, like Ronan, are aware of the need to think about their safety in public. This moment resonated with me as I was writing the proposal for this master's thesis. ‘How fitting’, I thought, as I was reading and writing about the normalisation of this kind of violence in the public sphere. This exchange encapsulates my motivations to focus on gender-based violence in my thesis and conduct research that focuses on women's experiences regarding safety in public spaces, both at home and abroad. Having these conversations about women's experiences is important to create awareness and not leave the responsibility on women to protect themselves against this violence. As argued by Emma Lingley Clark, this moment encapsulates a larger issue: “a broader tendency to underestimate how pervasive these issues women face are” (Clark, as cited in Davies, 2024, para. 19).

For years, studies have shown that women have a higher fear of crime than men do in public spaces (Ferraro, 1996; MacMillan et al., 2000; Pain, 1997). However, according to general crime statistics, women have a lower risk of being victimised by crime than men in public spaces (Hale, 1996; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). This apparent contradiction, known as the ‘fear of crime paradox’, has started an extensive scholarly debate on women's fear of crime in the public sphere. These existing explanations are not mutually exclusive and may all exist alongside each other (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Notably, however, it appears that many of these explanations point to the significance of sexual violence in women's perceptions and experiences and the ‘fear of crime paradox’.

One critical explanation of women's elevated fear lies in the type of crime they fear most: sexual violence. Sexual violence is a crime primarily perpetrated by men against women, and thus a fear particular to women (Ferraro, 1996). However, it is well-known in contemporary society that rape as a crime is seriously underreported, which means crime statistics may not fully capture the prevalence of these experiences and thus women's risk of victimisation (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). On top of that, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) explain women's fear is also influenced by experiences that often do not officially ‘count’ as a crime in the statistics touched upon above. Gender-based forms of violence, such as sexual harassment, are highly likely to be experienced by women throughout their lives, elevating their sense of fear in the public space. Even so, these types of

violence are absent from crime victimisation statistics which thus subsequently do not paint an accurate picture of women's victimisation to crime in the public space (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Furthermore, scholars point out the role of gender socialisation in explaining women's higher level of fear. Many studies have argued that the view that women are cautious and vulnerable, whereas men are fearless and strong, could explain why women report higher levels of fear of crime than men do (Franklin & Franklin, 2009; Van Eijk, 2017). In fact, Fileborn and O'Neill (2023) argue that many women are socialised from a young age to be fearful of strange men and the possibility of sexual violence in public spaces. Women are told to "keep your legs together, keep your skirt down, and avoid talking to strange men because if you do not, something bad could happen to you" (Madriz, 1997, p.11). These explanations together underscore how sexual violence can impact women's perceptions of safety and fear in public spaces, and street harassment emerges as a widespread manifestation of this systemic issue of gendered violence (Fairchild, 2023).

Indeed, street harassment is often seen as the most prevalent manifestation of sexual violence around the world (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Raj et al., 2024; Stop Street Harassment, n.d.). For instance, in Australia, eighty per cent of young women indicated they experienced either physical or verbal harassment in their lives (Johnson & Bennett, 2015). Women in Delhi, India, reported they were harassed at least half of the time they entered public spaces, while some reported being harassed every time they entered public spaces (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). Even though there exists a lot of ambiguity around what 'counts' as street harassment in the literature, the most common view is that it is "a form of sexual harassment that is overwhelming perpetrated by male strangers against women in public space" (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023, p.127). This encompasses behaviours such as catcalling, kissing noises, unwanted conversations, staring, following, unwanted touching, and public masturbation (Brundson, 2018; Macmillan et al., 2000). They range from seemingly minor actions, such as staring and gestures, to more grievous forms of sexual violence, like physical attacks. Nevertheless, all fall under the continuum of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988).

These 'minor' actions that fall under the continuum of sexual violence are often normalised and trivialised in society (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). It is frequently dismissed as harmless flirting, a joke, or 'boys being boys'. However, the impacts of this form of sexual violence can be substantial and not as harmless as often thought and suggested in the normalisation discourse (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). Research has shown that the fear of sexual violence restricts women's movement in public spaces (Valentine, 1989) and negatively impacts their sense of safety (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Macmillan et al., 2000). In the short term, it can induce feelings of fear, worry, and anxiety (Avezahra et al., 2023). In the long term, it can lead to women being critical of their own appearance and body shape, feeling guilty, or being ashamed of their identity as a woman (Avezahra et al., 2023). Moreover, this fear leads women to engage in pre-emptive 'safety work' (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Hypervigilance, carrying your keys between your fingers, self-imposed curfews, and adjusting your clothing, all safety measures prompted by the fear of gendered violence in public spaces and not unknown to most women (Cobbina et al., 2008; Pain, 1997).

While much research has explored women's experiences of street harassment in their everyday environments (Brockschmidt & Wadey, 2021; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Mellgren et al., 2017), far less attention has been paid in the literature to how female travellers navigate street harassment

while abroad (Su & Wu, 2020). Studies focused on gender-based violence in travel often focus on the experiences of employees in the tourism sector with sexual harassment (Alrawadieh et al., 2023; Chueng et al., 2018) or gender-based violence affecting travellers' safety concerns (Yang et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018; Thomas & Mura, 2019). They hardly focus on the lived experiences of harassment itself. The lack of research on the lived experiences of sexual harassment of solo female travellers, or travellers in general for that matter, is of importance given solo female travellers are arguably at greater risk for experiencing sexual harassment in these unfamiliar settings (Brown & Osman, 2017; Su & Wu, 2020).

Brown & Osman (2017) argued in their study of the female tourist experience in Egypt that "vulnerability may be greater in an unfamiliar destination whose norms and values are distinct from the tourists' own" (p.14). Moreover, in familiar environments, women have developed "coping mechanisms to negotiate the social, cultural and gendered constraints and boundaries of our public environments", which increases their confidence in dealing with harassers (Wilson & Little, 2008, p.167). Without this familiarity that is present in home environments, navigating public spaces can become an intimidating task for solo female travellers (Berdychevsky, 2018; Jordan & Gibson, 2005; Su & Wu, 2020). To make matters worse, Kelly (1988) noted in her research on sexual violence that women disproportionately experienced flashing, sexual harassment, and sexual assault on holiday, and Jordan and Aitchison (2008) stated that particularly female travellers' bodies and their solo presence invite unwanted attention and sexual advances from male strangers. As a result, solo female travellers often feel compelled to engage in safety work to navigate public spaces while travelling, restricting their personal freedom on holiday (Kaba, 2021).

Within this context, it is particularly interesting to focus the analysis on Dutch solo female travellers as research has shown that the cultural expectations around femininity can influence how women interpret and respond to street harassment (Ahmad et al., 2020; Bharucha & Khatri, 2018). It is therefore valuable to consider how broader societal gender norms influence women's navigation of street harassment while travelling solo. The Netherlands ranks highly on international gender equality indices (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2023), has one of the largest funds worldwide for the promotion of equal rights (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024), and has taken proactive measures to combat street harassment by criminalising sexual harassment in public (Fischer, 2024). As such, it can be argued that Dutch women are raised in a society where more of an emphasis is placed on gender equality, influencing how they experience and perceive street harassment.

However, Van Eijk (2017) argued it can result in Dutch women receiving conflicting narratives: traditional norms make women aware of their presumed vulnerability and need to be cautious, while gender-equal discourses challenges these norms by underscoring autonomy and independence. In her study, Van Eijk (2017) looks into the effects of this ambiguity on women's narratives on fear in public spaces. Here, she shows that Dutch women do not consistently reject or accept traditional gender norms in their narratives about navigating fear in public spaces. Their responses are very complex and often full of contradictions, reflecting the ambivalence around gender norms. Similarly, in Sweden, a country known for its high level of gender equality, Sandberg & Rönnblom (2013) found that women rejected the performance of femininity aligned with

traditional norms prescribing vulnerability and fearfulness to women, due to the influence of expectations for independence and greater gender equality in society.

In this thesis, I explore how Dutch solo female travellers navigate, experience, and respond to street harassment during travel while considering the influence of wider gender norms and social expectations surrounding gender. I will centre women's lived experiences and voices in this study to highlight the deeply personal and widespread nature of street harassment. Given the tendency to underestimate the extent and impact of street harassment in society (Davies, 2024), I believe it is crucial to shed light on how women negotiate their safety, freedom, autonomy, and gendered expectations while entering unfamiliar public spaces abroad alone.

Research Questions

I decided to conduct research among Dutch female travellers to discover how they navigate and experience street harassment when travelling alone. I wanted to learn more about how solo female travellers perceive and experience street harassment in different environments. Moreover, I am interested in how they either conform to or resist traditional norms and expectations of femininity, consciously or subconsciously, when navigating harassment abroad. By addressing the following research questions in this thesis, I aim to contribute to capturing the diversity of experiences of solo female travellers, while offering insight into how women negotiate their performance of gender in unfamiliar settings to navigate street harassment. Therefore, the main research question is formulated as follows:

“How do Dutch solo female travellers negotiate femininity as they navigate and respond to street harassment in unfamiliar gendered public spaces?”

To answer this question, three supporting research questions have been formulated:

- I. *“How do Dutch female solo travellers experience street harassment as part of a continuum of violence in unfamiliar destinations?”*
- II. *“How do Dutch solo female travellers perform femininity to navigate perceived vulnerability and actual threats of harassment in unfamiliar public spaces?”*
- III. *“How do gender norms and social expectations shape the experiences of and responses to street harassment among Dutch solo female travellers?”*

I have used these research questions as a guideline and red thread throughout the whole research. The first sub-question examines the nature and forms of harassment experienced by solo female travellers in unfamiliar spaces, including their emotional responses. It focuses on how women experience street harassment as part of the continuum of violence that posits harassment as part of a broader pattern of gendered violence. The second sub-question focuses on how women respond to their feelings of unease or unsafety and threats of harassment in public spaces through the lens of performing gender. This question explores the ways women adjust their behaviours or appearance to navigate harassment, so-called 'safety work', and how this either reinforces or challenges dominant gender norms. The third sub-question examines how broader gender norms and societal expectations influence how solo female travellers experience, interpret, and respond to street harassment. It focuses on how societal expectations that are

placed on women influence their feelings of unsafety and how they feel they should respond to harassment. Rather than answering each research question in an isolated analytical chapter, I will address these three questions throughout the analysis due to their interconnectedness.

Academic and Societal Relevance

As argued by Fileborn & O'Neill (2023), street harassment and its impact have often been trivialised and positioned as harmless, even though research has situated street harassment as a harmful experience that is connected to more grievous forms of sexual violence, stereotypically seen as 'more serious'. As a result of this normalisation and trivialisation, street harassment has also received minimal attention in research and policy (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). Surely, Adur and Jha (2016) had come to realise sexual violence and harassment in public spaces had not received the same level of attention as other forms of gender-based violence. They demonstrate feminist scholarship that focuses on gender-based violence mostly interrogates rape and intimate partner violence, while rarely engaging in everyday forms of harassment in public spaces. Moreover, the studies that do focus on street harassment in public spaces are often focused on workspaces, universities, and schools, not streets and neighbourhoods (Adur & Jha, 2016). In the context of travel, there is even less attention in the literature on sexual harassment experienced by travellers in public spaces like the street (Su & Wu, 2020).

Furthermore, gaining insight into these experiences is critical, as the harmfulness of street harassment has been extensively documented in studies. It can have psychological, physical, or emotional impacts on women, who may experience symptoms such as dizziness, numbness, and difficulty breathing, along with negative emotions such as fear, anger, and embarrassment (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1995). It simultaneously sustains a culture that devalues, degrades, and dehumanises women (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Walton & Pedersen, 2021). Ultimately, street harassment is both a cause and a symptom of broader patterns of gender inequality in society (Fairchild, 2023; Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Valentine, 1989). The relevance of this thesis lies in the attention given to women's experiences, voices, and perspectives on street harassment, contributing to broader scholarship on sexual harassment in public spaces and the niche field of solo female travel.

Additionally, as a feminist researcher and a woman, I hope this thesis will:

- I. Raise awareness and develop a greater understanding of the pervasiveness and impact of street harassment by solo female travellers, and women in general.
- II. Empower other women to share their stories and advocate for their safety and freedom of movement in public spaces.
- III. Challenge the wider normalisation and trivialisation of street harassment in public spaces.
- IV. Contribute to broader discussions on changing and evolving gender norms and expectations.
- V. Inform policies that aim at improving women's safety in public spaces and travel safety.
- VI. Encourage further research on the intersections of gender, travel, and public safety.

Thesis Set-up and Reading Guide

This thesis is structured into eight chapters and in the concluding section of this introduction, I would like to explain the structure of this thesis. Below, I outline the purpose and content of each of the following chapters.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework of this thesis which forms the foundation for the analysis by introducing the three main theoretical perspectives: Butler's gender performativity, Kelly's sexual violence as a continuum, and key theories of gendered spaces. Gender performativity provides a framework to understand how women's gendered behaviours, interactions, and narratives reflect, reinforce, and resist norms and societal expectations surrounding gender. The continuum of sexual violence allows for emphasising the interwovenness of all forms of sexual violence, including street harassment, and the importance of subjectivity and context. Lastly, gendered spaces theories underscore that public spaces are not neutral entities and emphasise the inequality women face in public spaces. This theoretical framework provides a foundation for understanding the gender-based violence women face while travelling.

Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter explains the reasoning for the feminist-grounded research approach used in this thesis. It explains how data was collected through qualitative methods and describes the interactive process of coding and analysing the data. Reflexivity is emphasised throughout the methodology, as acknowledging my positionality and its influence on the research process is essential in feminist-grounded research. Furthermore, the consideration of research ethics, such as anonymity and confidentiality, is discussed throughout.

Chapters 4-7. Analytical Chapters

The four analytical chapters present a mainly chronological analysis of how solo female travellers anticipate, navigate, and respond to street harassment while exploring unknown destinations alone. Each analytical chapter focuses on a distinct stage or theme, combining women's narratives from the interviews with theoretical interpretations based on the theoretical framework.

Chapter 4 explores women's anticipation of street harassment pre-travel and initial feelings of fear or vulnerability when entering new and unfamiliar public spaces. Furthermore, it explores how women's perceptions of safety are shaped by their personal experiences and societal expectations of femininity.

Chapter 5 outlines the vast variety of safety strategies women have employed in order to avoid street harassment abroad and produce a sense of safety in public spaces, also known as safety work. Moreover, this chapter dives deeper into the ingrained and automatic nature of this safety work, which renders it invisible, while simultaneously challenging the notion of safety work being framed as 'common sense'.

Chapter 6 delves into women's personal experiences with the various forms of street harassment they encounter in [semi-]public spaces while travelling, including women's immediate emotional

reactions and real-time responses. In addition, this chapter looks into the possible effects of the normalisation and trivialisation of street harassment in society on women's own sensemaking of harassment experiences and their responses.

Chapter 7 considers the emotional and mental toll of navigating, experiencing, and responding to street harassment while being alone in unfamiliar spaces for Dutch female travellers. This chapter addresses women's coping mechanisms, emotional labour, and reflections solo travelling as a woman.

Chapter 8. Conclusion and Discussion

In the concluding chapter of this thesis, I synthesise the findings from the analytical chapters to address the central research question. Furthermore, the findings are situated within the larger academic discourse on gender, harassment, safety, and travel, contributing to our understanding of how these intersecting issues shape women's experiences in public spaces across different environments. Additionally, this chapter offers some suggestions for future research directions.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis on women's experiences with and navigation of street harassment during solo travel. The theoretical foundation consists of: Butler's (1988) gender performativity, Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence, and several key scholars' theorisations of gendered spaces. Together, these theories provide a lens through which I will examine how women anticipate, navigate, experience, and respond to harassment in unfamiliar public gendered spaces.

Gender performativity, introduced by Judith Butler, helps us understand how women's behaviours and interactions are gendered and shaped by societal norms and expectations. The continuum of sexual violence, developed by Liz Kelly, highlights how all forms of sexual violence are interconnected but not experienced in the same way by women, due to varying impact and context. Lastly, gendered spaces show how public spaces are shaped by and reinforce gender dynamics that influence women's feelings of safety and vulnerability. The following sections will explore each of these theories in greater detail, demonstrating their relevance and connection to the central research question.

Gender Performativity Theory

The concept of gender is a vital component of this thesis. While first-wave feminism already identified a social division between men and women, the concept of 'gender' with its associated meaning today was not introduced within feminist theory until after the 1970s (Rahman & Jackson, 2010). Until then, gender had been seen as the same as biological sex; binary, fixed, static, and unchangeable from birth. However, as argued by Butler (1990), if we believe gender is natural or innate, this would mean gender inequality and gender stereotypes are inevitable and natural. The early work of Simone de Beauvoir and the post-structuralist literature of Judith Butler have been influential in moving away from this understanding of gender as biologically determined.

In her landmark feminist text *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes biological sex from gender with the following quote: "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Butler, 1988, p.519). An individual acting 'feminine' or 'masculine' means that the behaviour conforms to the wider expectations established in a given society and culture about femininity and masculinity, not that is inherent to a woman's or man's nature (Hurlock, 2021). While sex calls attention to biological differences between female and male bodies, such as reproductive organs, hormonal states, and chromosomes, gender is a social construct and hence, not 'natural' or 'unchangeable' (Lips, 2020).

Butler (1988) builds on this argument by adopting a performative approach to gender, arguing that gender "is only real to the extent that it is performed" (p.527). Gender is thought to be something we are, but Butler argues that gender is something we do through time. In their book, they argue: "gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame", the broader social structures and norms that define what is considered acceptable within a given cultural context (Butler, 1990, p.45). Similarly to the post-structuralist understanding of gender of Butler (1990), West and Zimmerman's (1987) theory of gender also emphasises that gender is performed rather than an inherent identity. In their seminal work, they state "a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is

something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others” (p.140). In West and Zimmerman’s (1987) ‘doing gender’ the focus lies more on how gender is created and maintained through social interactions, rather than individual performances. As this thesis focuses on how solo female travellers enact gender through self-presentation, behaviour, and adherence to social expectations, even outside direct social interactions, Butler’s gender performativity forms the best fit.

Following the logic of gender being performative, it may seem that one can freely choose or alter one’s gender identity by merely adopting different performances. However, society prescribes a strict connection between biological sex and gender, and “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect” (Butler, 1988, p.528). On the other hand, “performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (Butler, 1988, p.528). Indeed, this continuous performance creates and maintains an appearance of a stable gender identity. As people repeatedly perform the same behaviours, society starts to view them as ‘real’ or ‘natural’. However, this is an illusion; one’s gender identity cannot exist before these acts, as these repeated acts, behaviours, and performances constitute one’s gender identity. In other words, there is no ‘real’ gender beneath these performances; the performances themselves create gender. Gender exists in performative acts that create gender and do not reflect gender identity.

For gender norms to sustain themselves, they need to be repeated over and over, throughout time, across generations. In other words, gender norms only remain intact because of the continuous performance of gender according to these norms. Every time we ‘do’ gender, we are repeating the social expectations and gender norms that already exist before we do (Butler, 2009). However, as gender is understood as an adaptable, fluid, and flexible concept, what it means to act ‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ can change over time and across places. Even though Butler’s theory of gender performativity has been criticised for lacking agency and intentionality in performance (Huey & Berndt, 2008), this is not the case. Indeed, the behaviours that are repeated in our performances of gender are not free from social norms and expectations. As Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* (1990), “this repetition is at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (p.191). The way we speak, dress, walk, and so forth are not original or unique to us, they are drawn from the pre-existing norms and social conventions created by society.

“The theory of performativity presupposes that norms act on us before we have a chance to act at all and that when we do act, we recapitulate those norms, perhaps in new or unexpected ways, but always in relation to the norms that precede us.”
— Joy et al., 2015, p.1742

However, this does not mean that there is no room for change or agency in that sense, we may, as argued by Joy et al. (2015), perform gender in new, unexpected ways. When gender is performed unexpectedly, it can disrupt traditional gender norms and open up new possibilities. The norm is then not entirely removed, but it might be reshaped over time. A ‘wrong’ performance of gender can cause these norms to be ‘undone’ or ‘redone’ over time, making them more acceptable over time (Butler, 2009). Ultimately, however, one is always acting within existing social norms, whether we conform to them, modify them, or challenge them. Hence, individuals do

possess the agency to alter their performance of gender and destabilise traditional norms of femininity and masculinity, but this occurs within the boundaries of a cultural context they cannot completely escape (Huey & Berndt, 2008).

When it comes to navigating public spaces, women are expected to perform gender in such a way that positions them as weak, vulnerable, and passive in public spaces (Neupane, 2017). They are expected to be non-confrontational and submissive in social interactions, all deeply tied to traditional gender roles (Swim & Hyers, 1999). However, in gender-equal societies, these femininity performances aligned with traditional gender norms might be challenged (Sandberg & Rönnblom, 2013; Van Eijk, 2017). Women might reject fearfulness and a passive attitude in public spaces. However, as discussed, performing gender 'wrong' can result in punishment and backlash (Butler, 1988). This can take the form of gendered violence (Huey & Berndt, 2008), in which street harassment can be understood as a way to police these performances and punish women who reject traditional gender roles, reminding women of their 'place'. Women may thus adjust their gender performances to align with dominant expectations and avoid harassment.

The theory of gender performativity provides a powerful lens for understanding how women anticipate, navigate, and respond to street harassment. By recognising the influence of broader social norms and power structures on gendered performances, this approach highlights both the constraints placed on women's behaviour and the potential for resistance. Furthermore, understanding gender as a fluid and adaptable concept allows for negotiations and conflicts between different performances of femininity. This can also be strategic: as Huey & Berndt (2008) demonstrated in their study on homeless women, gender performativity can be consciously employed to minimise the risk and prevent victimisation in public spaces. Hereafter, the concept of street harassment will be discussed.

Street Harassment and the Continuum of Sexual Violence

Academic research on street harassment began in the 1980s, when Gardner (1980) explored street harassment as a violation of the civil inattention that is expected between strangers in public spaces. Civil inattention, as understood by Goffman (1965), means acknowledging another stranger's presence but maintaining and respecting each other's privacy. Street harassment can thus be seen as a breach of civil inattention and, as put by Gardner (1995), done with the intention of reinforcing men's right to public space and making commentary on women's bodies. Similarly, Kissling & Kramarea (1991) argued that street harassment impacts women's privacy and safety, ultimately pushing them out of public spaces. Hence, street harassment may be defined in broad terms as an act of sexual violence that tries to restrict women's access to public spaces by inducing fear in women (Fairchild, 2022).

Since then, street harassment has been described in the literature under many different names, such as stranger harassment, public harassment, and catcalling, but the term 'street harassment' has been primarily used in the literature (Fairchild, 2023). Nevertheless, no matter the exact term, it focuses on unwanted sexual attention, occurring in [semi-]public spaces, between individuals who are strangers (Fairchild, 2023). Street harassment includes a broad array of behaviours, and to this date, there is a lot of ambiguity about which behaviour 'counts' as street harassment (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). Actions such as staring, following, unwanted conversation, catcalling,

unwanted touching, etc., are typically associated with street harassment. However, several studies have also included actions such as sexual assault and rape (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). This thesis adopts a broad conceptualisation of street harassment, encompassing all forms of gender-based intrusion in [semi-]public spaces: from non-verbal staring to physical violations. Furthermore, the usage of the term street harassment in no way means this form of harassment is limited to the actual street; it can take place in a variety of [semi-]public spaces (Vera-Gray, 2016a). It is just the stereotypical image of a man harassing a woman walking by on the street that has formed its name.

In this thesis, street harassment is conceptualised as a form of sexual violence, drawn on Kelly's (1988) continuum model that captures the difficulty in distinguishing between categories of sexual violence. The definition of a continuum is used in two different ways: as a common element connecting different events and as a series of events that flow into each other without clear boundaries (Kelly, 1988). The first definition makes it possible to understand the key characteristic shared by all sexual violence, which is "the abuse, intimidation, coercion, intrusion, threat and force men use to control women" (Kelly, 1988, p.76). This implies that all forms of harassment, from staring to assault, are supported by the same gendered power structures (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). The second meaning enables discussions on the wide range of behaviours that women experience as harassment or sexual violence. There are no fixed categories into which the experiences of women can be placed, as women might not share a similar definition for the same incident (Kelly, 1987). The experiences of harassment are highly fluid and subjective. In the end, however, the continuum intends to "highlight that sexual violence exists in most women's lives, whilst the form it takes, how women define events, and its impact on them at the time and over time varies" (Kelly, 1987, p.48).

As the experience of harassment depends highly on the perception and subjectivity of the individual woman, the continuum is not created with the intention to pass judgment on how serious or impactful an experience of sexual violence is for a woman (Kelly, 1988). Kelly (1988) argues that the impact of a particular experience is not tied to the form of sexual violence, the emotional impact of continuous catcalling can be similar to sexual assault. Instead, the continuum highlights how common each form of sexual violence is (Kelly, 1988). At one end of the continuum, where street harassment is placed, forms of sexual violence with a higher incidence can be found, meaning that most women experience this form of sexual violence throughout their lives. However, these forms of sexual violence are often trivialised and defined by men as acceptable behaviour or 'only a joke' (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). The cumulative effect of this seemingly normalised behaviour can add up to feelings of unsafety, anxiety, or hyperawareness. For instance, even though a woman might see catcalling as a 'minor' incident, the repeated experiences of verbal harassment can add up and create a sense of unsafety, influencing her behaviour.

Thus, understanding street harassment as being part of the continuum of sexual violence, allows for a more holistic understanding of harassment, in which there are no discrete categories of harassment, and all forms of sexual violence are interconnected. It allows for a perspective on how different women interpret their experiences of harassment, including the immediate and

cumulative effects of the experiences on their behaviour and navigation of public spaces. Furthermore, it can show how a woman might experience the same form of harassment differently based on the context. Ultimately, street harassment profoundly impacts women's use of public spaces and hence regulates their movement in public spaces. It reinforces the idea that public spaces are inherently gendered, and women cannot access, use, and feel the same sense of safety as men do in public spaces.

Gendered Spaces

It has long been recognised that men's and women's experiences and use of space are different (McDowell, 1983). That being the case, spaces are not gender-neutral and not equally accessible to women as to men (Anushka, 2022). Like gender, "space is socially constructed and, in its turn, once bounded and shaped, influences social relations" (McDowell, 1983, p.62). Space is simultaneously a medium for social practices as it is the outcome of social practices (Hille, 1999). Public spaces are defined through the way individuals interact, use, and perceive space, while simultaneously, spaces also reflect social norms, power dynamics, and cultural practices (Spain, 2014). Space can thus become a site that reflects the broader inequalities in societies, while reproducing them through its use. Gendered power relations constrain women's freedom in urban space, which in turn, reinforces the same gendered power relations.

The constrained access of women to public spaces is highly influenced by "the ideology that a 'women's place is in the home'" (Anushka, 2022, p.187). Societal norms associate femininity with the private/domestic sphere (home, family, nurturing), while masculinity is associated with the public sphere (work, public spaces, politics) (Anushka, 2022). This is only reinforced by women's fear of crime in public spaces, particularly gendered forms of violence like street harassment. Researchers over the years have found that women experience more fear in cities than men and the greatest fear of women in public spaces is that of sexual harassment, specifically rape (Spain, 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that fear is also a social construct. Women's fear of crime is not just an internal response to danger, it is a performance of femininity based on the social norms that dictate how women should behave in public (Anushka, 2022). While women are taught public spaces are unsafe, rape in public spaces is rare, and the home is the location where most violence against women happens (Pain, 1997). Still, women do have to routinely deal with a variety of gender-based sexual intrusions, harassment, and microaggressions in public spaces (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023).

As argued by Valentine (1989), "the attachment of fear to public places, and the precautions which women take as a result, constitute a 'spatial expression of patriarchy', reproducing traditional notions about women's roles and the 'places' which are considered appropriate for them to use" (Valentine, 1988, as cited in Pain, 1995, p.231). The belief that a women's place is not in a public space is so dominant that women might be held responsible when sexually harassed or raped, as the women are 'out of place' in a public space at night (Anushka, 2022; Phadke, 2007). As a result, women may take precautions such as avoiding certain spaces, self-imposing curfews, or not going out alone (Anushka, 2022; Spain, 2014). However, this repetitive action of avoidance reestablishes

the notion that these spaces are masculine, where men can move freely, and women must navigate them with caution (Hille, 1999). Over time, women's absence in spaces reinforces the perception that women do not belong there, maintaining a gendered division of space.

Conclusion

These three theoretical perspectives, gender performativity, the continuum of sexual violence, and gendered spaces, are highly interconnected. Space and gender are both socially constructed, being shaped by and reproducing gender power relations. Gender performances in line with traditional norms associate women with fear, vulnerability, and passivity in public spaces, reinforcing the gendered division. Moreover, street harassment can be understood as a societal mechanism to push women out of public spaces and reinforce these gender performances aligned with traditional gender norms. To fully understand how solo female travellers anticipate, navigate, and respond to street harassment, all three theories offer complementary insights into the relationship between gender, power, and space.

These theories not only provide an analytical lens through which I analyse my research questions but also influence my methodological approach and choices. The theoretical perspectives highlight and emphasise the importance of understanding lived experiences, social construction, and spatial dynamics, which align with qualitative research designs. This methodological foundation will be further discussed in the following chapter on methodology.

3. Methodology

In this chapter, I will outline the methodological foundation and choices I made in conducting my research, including a reflection on those choices. First, I will explain the qualitative and feminist nature of the research, the rationale for this choice, and the influence of a feminist methodology on the research. I will then discuss how I selected the participants, followed by a brief, general description of the 17 women who participated. The specific research methods will be discussed after, including the data collection methods, interview process, and data analysis. Ethical considerations are integrated throughout the methodology section and touched upon when relevant, rather than presented in a separate section. Finally, ensuring that the research remains grounded in the principle of reflexivity, I will reflect on the influence of my positionality on the overall research process.

Research Design

To explore the lived experiences of Dutch solo female travellers regarding street harassment, I applied a feminist qualitative research approach. While quantitative research can provide valuable insight into the prevalence or locations where women experience harassment (Keel et al., 2024), it overlooks the complexity and lived experiences of women navigating these spaces and harassment. Since there is limited research on how solo female travellers navigate harassment abroad, this study takes on an exploratory nature. The aim is to develop a more thorough understanding of how women experience and navigate harassment, manage their safety, and respond to harassment in public spaces. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for this purpose, as it provides detailed, rich data that captures the personal experiences of participants (Fossey et al., 2002). This approach allows me put women's voices and narratives at the forefront of the research. Moreover, a qualitative research approach is considered to be particularly suitable for sensitive topics such as sexual harassment (Figueroa-Domecq et al., 2015).

With this thesis, I aim to shed light on the experiences of street harassment of solo female travellers, which are often trivialised and normalised, to contribute to greater awareness and improvement of their safety. This research aligns with feminist scholarship's aim, as Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002) emphasise:

Feminist research seeks to “produce knowledge that will be useful for effective transformation of gendered injustice and subordination.”

— *Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002, p.147)*

This perspective guided my approach in exploring how women navigate safety and harassment while travelling, contributing to a wider discussion on gender inequality. In doing so, the understanding of the gendered constraints women face while travelling is deepened while simultaneously highlighting the need for change. The principles of feminist qualitative research support the methods and methodological choices throughout this thesis at every stage, from participant selection to data collection, analysis, and reviewing my positionality. The three key principles which guided my research process are as follows: 1) prioritising women's experiences and perspectives, 2) rejecting the power imbalance between the researcher and participants, and 3) seeking to challenge social inequalities between men and women and raise awareness about

the disparities (Kumar et al., 2019). In this context, I committed to a collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship between the researcher and the participants, co-producing knowledge by including women's stories, experiences, and perceptions (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004). Furthermore, feminist methodology places importance on the principle of reflexivity, meaning to recognise the role of the researcher's identity, experiences, and beliefs in shaping the overall research process (Kelly & Gurr, 2019). In this thesis, I aimed to create a safe space for women to tell their stories and reflect on their experiences as female solo travellers while also reflecting on how my own experiences and biases as a researcher may have influenced the research process.

Participant Engagement

Access

To gain access to participants who were willing to share their experiences, I employed three different strategies. Ultimately, I approached 17 different Dutch females who wanted to talk about their experiences with navigating harassment and public spaces during travels either through personal networks or Facebook.

To start the process of identifying participants for interviews, I used my personal network by asking friends and family whether they knew any solo female travellers. This got me in contact with eight different women who were willing to participate in the study. Besides utilising my personal network, I used the online platform Facebook to find solo female travellers to interview. On Facebook, one can develop groups based on a certain topic, including solo travelling or backpacking, of which many solo female travellers are part. After identifying relevant travel groups, such as: '*Azië Backpackers*', '*Midden- en Zuid-Amerika backpackers*', and '*Alleen op reis: alles over soloreizen*', I contacted the administrator of the Facebook group to ask permission to post a message surrounding my research. After receiving a decline to post in the group '*Alleen op reis: alles over soloreizen*', I only posted the message in the two other travel groups. However, later in the research, during the interviewing phase, multiple women told me that they were part of all the groups, and therefore, it is likely that the members of the several Facebook groups were comparable.

The message that I posted included the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, and general information about the interview (Appendix A). For ethical reasons, the minimum age to participate was 18 years old. Multiple women replied to me in a private message on Facebook, saying they would like to participate in the study. Through Facebook Messenger, I made sure the women fit the criteria to participate. Initially, the open invitation primarily attracted white Dutch female solo travellers. Recognising the importance of a diverse range of experiences and identities, I consciously made an effort to reach out to individuals with different backgrounds who did not respond to my message but were part of the Facebook groups. This approach aimed to ensure a diverse range of voices in the study. In the end, nine different women were contacted for interviews through the online medium Facebook.

Due to the open invitation, it is possible that women with either very traumatic experiences or no experiences with harassment at all did not feel inclined to respond or participate in the study. This

may have influenced the diversity of experiences shared in this study, but this effect may have also been minimised due to the three different methods of selecting participants.

Trust

While selecting participants, it was important to build trust so that the women felt comfortable sharing their experiences. In all communication with participants, I answered additional questions about the study and explained what would be expected of them. Additionally, I ensured anonymity and confidentiality beforehand while also stressing the voluntary nature of the study. Since some of the women were introduced to the study through personal networks, I believe that my connection, either directly or through mutual contacts, helped build a sense of trust and comfort in the interviews. For the women I contacted through Facebook, chatting in Facebook Messenger as well as small talk before starting the interview helped build rapport. At the start of the interview, I told participants they could also ask me questions at any time during the interview and asked if they already had any questions before starting. In a few cases, women asked me for more details about my motivation and interest in the topic. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, I wanted to ensure that participants felt comfortable and respected. A more detailed discussion on how I addressed the sensitivity of the subject matter and the well-being of the participants will follow in subsequent sections.

Research Participants

Of the 17 Dutch women who participated in the study, 12 were working and 5 were students. The age of solo female travellers ranged, at the moment of travel, from 18 years old to 41 years old. As expected, most women were in their twenties, as 12 women fell in the age range of 22 to 28 years old. The participants were all Dutch but varied in ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The majority identified as having a white Dutch background, while one participant identified as having a Muslim background and another as having an Asian background. The women were either first-time solo travellers, occasional solo travellers, or frequent solo travellers. The participants were approximately evenly divided among the three experience categories. Asia, Europe, and Central/South America were the most popular solo travel continents for these women, with Oceania decreasing in popularity, and Africa and the Middle East being the least popular, as only one to two solo female travellers in this study had travelled there. Aspects of positionality, such as age, background, or any other relevant aspects, will be incorporated into the analysis when they add to the understanding of the participants' stories. To ensure the anonymity of participants, all names mentioned in the analysis are pseudonyms. Appendix B. provides an overview of the women who participated, including key information and the pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

Data Collection Methods

Phase I: Exploratory Social Media Analysis

As part of the data collection, I conducted an exploratory social media analysis to gain initial insights into the experiences of solo female travellers regarding safety and harassment. The literature, social media posts, and travel blogs were used to understand what topics, themes, issues, etc., are discussed among solo female travellers who share their experiences online. This

preliminary exploration ensured that the interview questions were relevant and resonated with the lived experiences of the participants.

Hashtags such as #solofemaletravel, #femaletravel, #solotravel, and #travelsafety were used on Instagram to come across relevant posts. Instagram posts are highly focused on the visual element, and some tips and tricks regarding solo female travel were shared. Online travel blogs dived deeper into personal experiences and stories about harassment and safety from solo female travellers. I noted down relevant concerns, themes, and examples related to the research topic to use in the semi-structured interviews.

Phase II: Semi-structured Interviews

After conducting the initial social media analysis, I conducted semi-structured interviews in the Netherlands with Dutch solo female travellers. As such, semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection, given the method's ability to gather rich and in-depth data about women's experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). I chose semi-structured interviews due to their flexibility and the possibility to ask follow-up questions. A list of key topics and questions was prepared to guide the interview, but it was flexible depending on the women's answers and the direction of the interview. Key topics included: pre-trip planning, arrival and navigating public spaces, behaviour adjustment and gender performance, experiences of harassment, reactions to harassment, and cultural and gender norms (Appendix C.). I conducted a pilot interview with a fellow female student who had experience solo travelling to ensure the interview questions were clear, well-structured, and effective. The feedback from this pilot interview helped me clarify questions and confirm whether the questions obtained the desired insights. I conducted all interviews from the 8th of November 2024 until the 6th of December 2024 in the Netherlands, either online or face-to-face.

Aligned with the feminist methodological approach of self-disclosure (Renzetti, 1997), I started all interviews by introducing myself and the purpose of the study, including my interest in the topic and their experiences.

"Researchers are encouraged to start from their own experience; to freely share information about themselves, their personal lives, and their own opinions with those they are studying."

— *Renzetti, (1997, p.134)*

I explained to all participants that the interview was anonymous and confidential; they were not obliged to answer every question and could stop at any time during the interview if they wanted to, without any consequences. After this was properly explained, I obtained informed verbal consent for the interviews. Moreover, all participants gave consent for the interview recordings, which facilitated the process of data transcription and analysis later in the research. Furthermore, being able to record the interview allowed me to fully concentrate on the conversation at hand and engage more deeply with the participant's responses, without constantly needing to take notes. All 17 interviews were done in Dutch and roughly lasted between 1 hour and 1,5 hours, which was highly dependent on the solo travel experience of the woman. After the interviews were

completed, I shared the transcriptions with the participants to ensure they agreed with how their interview was represented and gave them the possibility to add or remove any information. Returning the transcripts to the interviewees ensured that the women who participated were able to control the content of their interviews (Rowlands, 2021). I made some minor adjustments in the transcriptions as requested by the participants. Ultimately, all participants provided their permission for me to use their transcripts in the analysis.

Sensitivity and Well-being

As the interview touches upon sensitive topics, such as sexual harassment, it is important for the participants to feel safe and comfortable (Westland et al., 2025). Therefore, I prioritised the emotional well-being of the women in a variety of ways during the research process. To make the women feel comfortable, the interview started with more general questions about themselves, their solo trips, and their motivation for travelling. Depending on the comfort and openness of the participants, their experiences of harassment either came up during the beginning of the interview or later on, to which the interview guide was adjusted. As the questions had the potential to trigger negative memories, I paid close attention to any non-verbal cues and emotions. While none of the interviews needed to be stopped, I was aware that at times participants might not have wanted to dive deeper or share more about certain experiences. In such instances, I shifted the conversation in a different direction or moved to a more 'light-hearted' question. The more interviews I did, the more comfortable I was with being flexible with the interview guide. Moreover, I intentionally ended the interview with questions about positive experiences of solo travelling, such as empowerment, friendship, and self-growth. Many participants responded enthusiastically and said they liked the question, suggesting that the approach to balance the difficulty of some of the questions helped.

Additionally, to respect the autonomy of participants and prioritise well-being, I offered to do the interview either online or face-to-face, depending on the preference of the interviewee. Studies have shown that online interviews can be beneficial for researching sensitive topics as the interviewees can stay in the comfort and privacy of their own homes (Khan & McEachen, 2022). Therefore, I explained that the time and place of the interview were open for the women to decide. Six interviews were done face-to-face, either at the home of the participant, at the university campus, or in a different public space chosen by the participants. The other eleven interviews were done online through Microsoft Teams with image. Offering to do the interview online lowered the bar for participation for multiple women, as they could do it in the evening after work in their own homes.

Interview Setting

Before conducting the interviews, I expected the face-to-face interviewing method to facilitate building trust between me and the interviewee and capturing non-verbal cues and emotions, an argued benefit of face-to-face interviews (Hesse-Biber, 2014). However, in hindsight, the setting of the online interviews was very appropriate for the topic of this thesis, which is supported by Khan and McEachen (2022). During the online interviews, women felt comfortable talking about their experiences, and the video image allows for catching non-verbal cues. Since online interviews were conducted in private spaces, there were no distractions from any noises or other people during

the interview. The interviews that took place face-to-face offered more distractions from other noises and people, except for one interview conducted at the participant's private home. For me, as a researcher, the noises and presence of other people occasionally made it harder to concentrate. Additionally, I worried that participants were wary about sharing their personal experiences and feelings regarding sexual harassment in a place where other people could overhear, but this did not seem to affect the interviewees, as they were very open regarding their experiences.

The online format also contributed to a more conversational dynamic in some cases, as participants could not visibly see my interview materials, which possibly fostered a more equal dynamic between me and the interviewee. However, both the face-to-face interviews as well as the online interviews produced equally valuable knowledge, and I believe the ability to choose allowed women to be interviewed in the setting that works best for them. When interviewing the individuals I encountered through personal networks, the line between interview and conversation blurred further as I felt I was seen as a peer rather than a researcher. However, my reflections on the benefits of an online interview are based on my perceptions and not on direct feedback from the women I interviewed on the format of the interview.

Data Analysis

As stated above, all interviews were recorded with permission on my phone, which applies to both the face-to-face and the online interviews. To ensure the confidentiality of the recordings, the Dictaphone app was locked with my Face ID, preventing anyone else from accessing it. The recordings were transcribed in Dutch with the transcription program 'Good Tape', which adheres to the general data protection regulation and deletes transcripts after completion. After using Good Tape, I listened to each interview recording again to correct mistakes and ensure the accuracy of the transcription. All data was anonymised and stored on my personal device as well as in the cloud, both of which are protected with passwords.

Hereafter, I started the data analysis, which had an inductive approach as the codes emerged from the stories of women and were not pre-determined by theory (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). For the analysis and coding of the data, I used 'Atlas.ti', a qualitative data analysis software. In total, 102 codes were created in the program through several rounds of coding, which were subsequently categorised into different code groups. A few codes were deleted due to irrelevance to the research questions or high similarity with other existing codes. The process of coding and formation of code groups was an iterative process, and codes and themes were adjusted and reviewed throughout the data analysis. I used the code groups as the basis for writing and structuring the analytical chapters. The main code groups were 'safety before going', 'forms of harassment', 'context harassment', 'vulnerability foreigner', 'safety strategies', 'immediate responses', and 'reflections on trip'.

Reflexivity and Positionality

"Reflexivity is commonly viewed as the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement

and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.”

– *Berger (2013, p.2)*

Throughout this thesis, I practised reflexivity by being aware of how my identity as a young Dutch woman and personal experiences with harassment have shaped this research. Reflexivity, a key aspect of feminist research (England, 1994), is affected by the researcher’s position on the insider-outsider nexus, as argued by Berger (2013). In this research, reflexivity is affected by the fact that I, as a researcher, share the experiences of the women I interviewed (Berger, 2013).

On the one hand, I felt that being a young woman myself, with the highly likely chance of experiencing harassment throughout your lifetime or at least the gendered understanding of public spaces, made it easier to access the ‘field’. The high response I got to the open invitation on Facebook to participate in the study, I believe, can be partly explained by my gender and the stated purpose of the study. Moreover, I felt that during my conversations with women, the shared understanding that came from being a [young] woman helped my participants open up about personal experiences. My identity allowed me to develop a greater understanding and empathise with women’s stories, which facilitates sharing personal stories (Brown & Osman, 2017).

On the other hand, I noticed in some interviews that my gender influenced the participants’ answers. The assumed familiarity with the topic has the inherent danger that participants withhold or do not share some information, as it might seem obvious to me as a woman (Berger, 2013). In several answers, women assumed that I understood some of their vagueness or indirect connotations around sexual harassment (e.g. you know...). Women reported feeling afraid that the ‘worst case scenario’ would happen or something would go ‘wrong’, layered with the assumption that I would understand the worst-case scenario would be rape or murder. Besides the fact that I often felt I did understand what women were implying, I tried to avoid making assumptions based on my positionality. This meant I explicitly asked what women meant in the interview to understand their thought processes, if I suspected assumed shared knowledge.

Moreover, my heightened awareness of this topic was influenced by my own experiences with catcalling, unwanted touching, and feeling unsafe in public spaces. Even though it is slightly different, in the third year of my bachelor's, I went on an exchange for half a year to Milan. I remember choosing cities based on how much I liked them as well as how safe I perceived them to be. I had been on vacation in Italy multiple times before this, so the city of Milan gave me a certain kind of familiarity and sense of security. I rented a room in an apartment that was close to a metro station for safety purposes. In the first few weeks, I had a heightened awareness of my surroundings as I was unfamiliar with the space. After a while, I felt more at ease due to building a network, becoming familiar with the place, and having no bad experiences. However, that did not stop me and my friends from occasionally calling each other while walking home or being observant when walking home alone. An important difference here to note is that I stayed in one place for a long time, unlike the women solo travelling. This allowed me to build a network I knew I could depend on and become familiar with my surroundings. However, I do remember feeling the effect of the unfamiliarity of the place, its systems, and feeling alone when I first got there. My

personal connection to the topic has made me particularly attuned to the ways women navigate public spaces and safety while abroad.

However, approaching this topic from a feminist perspective, I recognise that my view and understanding of gender and harassment influenced the way I conducted interviews and interpreted participants' responses. I understand sexual harassment as a systemic issue tied to gender inequality, which may have shaped my formulation of questions, where I choose to ask more questions, and my interpretation of their responses. Given the focus on the experiences of sexual harassment in [semi-]public spaces, I initially expected that women would share experiences of sexual harassment and worry about their safety while travelling alone. I was slightly surprised and even contradicted in a few of the interviews when women told me they had never experienced harassment while abroad. This made me aware of my default assumption that women would be concerned about sexual harassment while travelling alone. I recognised that my personal experiences could help me empathise with women and show understanding, but they should never dictate women's answers or guide the interview in a certain direction. Throughout the interview, analysis and writing process, I made a conscious effort to reflect on this bias and ensure that all women's voices, whether they had experienced harassment or not, were represented in the research. Each perspective adds a new dimension to understanding how women navigate public spaces while abroad, and the personal narratives of solo female travellers form the foundation of this research.

Moreover, during the analysis, the theoretical lens of gender performativity is applied to women's narratives and responses. As Butler argues, gender performances can become natural and normal due to repeated actions and societal expectations becoming ingrained, influencing our perceptions and behaviours without consciously recognising them. Many of the women had internalised societal norms surrounding women's vulnerability, safety, and harassment. However, I realised that I too have internalised some of these scripts and enacted the same gender performance without conscious awareness. For instance, during interviews, I asked women whether they changed their clothing and appearance while travelling abroad. Many women responded that they do not dress 'revealingly' or 'nakedly', which initially seemed like a normal, expected response to the question. It was not until later in the analysis that I realised I had not asked them about dressing in a revealing way; their response was influenced by the deeply ingrained idea that women's clothing can invite harassment. This realisation highlighted how deeply ingrained societal messaging about clothing and harassment both influence the participant and me as a researcher. This made it challenging at times to critically uncover underlying assumptions, as I, as a researcher, could be part of the same gender performance. As such, analysing participants' responses became, at times, a process of introspection. By recognising this, I critically engaged with the data to ensure I did not reproduce my assumptions but instead remained open to diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the methodological foundation I used and the choices I made to answer the central research question in this thesis. The research adopts a qualitative approach to discover the lived experiences of solo female travellers, grounded in feminist research principles.

I carried out an exploratory social media analysis as well as 17 semi-structured interviews, either online or face-to-face in the Netherlands. Throughout the interviews, participants' well-being, autonomy, and comfort were prioritised as well as the ethical principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Interviews were analysed through several rounds of coding and grouping of related codes. It is important to acknowledge the influence of my positionality on all stages of the research, including the interviews and data analysis. In the next four chapters, I turn to the analysis of women's narratives.

4. From Pre-travel to On-the-ground Vulnerability

Before embarking on their solo journeys, many women shared that travelling solo brought concerns regarding safety and sexual harassment to their minds. These concerns shape how they plan their trips, where they go, and where they sleep. Once they arrive at their destination, these feelings of concern can remain, particularly when alone at night or in male-dominated public spaces, even without an immediate threat. At the same time, many women resist feelings of vulnerability and fearfulness when travelling alone, even though they might still acknowledge gendered risks and undertake gendered safety strategies.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity highlights how gender is not a fixed identity but rather something fluid, shaped and reshaped through repeated behaviours. This means that women may negotiate a performance of femininity that reinforces or challenges dominant gender norms, rather than simply conforming to a performance of femininity aligned with traditional gender norms. Indeed, as Van Eijk (2017) argues, increasing gender equality in the Netherlands and women's emancipation have challenged the traditional gender norms, creating not just room for manoeuvre but also ambiguity. She has demonstrated how women move on a continuum between a performance reinforcing traditional gender norms and a performance challenging these dominant gender norms when it comes to navigating risk and fear in public spaces. Drawing on the interviews with women who travel solo, I observe that they, too, exist on a similar continuum between performances that either reinforce or challenge dominant gender norms. The ambivalence about gender norms was also present in their responses regarding their fears and safety concerns, both before and during travel.

In this chapter, I explore women's pre-travel safety concerns and feelings of vulnerability in foreign public spaces through this understanding of negotiating femininity. I will explore the influence of destination choice and positionality on women's pre-travel safety concerns and the difference between situational and foreign vulnerability.

Women's Pre-travel Safety Concerns and Safety Work

Multiple women expressed that they felt worried and anxious when I asked them if they had any concerns regarding their safety as solo female travellers before going. They explained they had actively thought about their safety, considered the gendered risks of sexual violence, and put priority on their safety while travelling. Sarah told me that safety concerns were the number one reason for her anxiety around solo travel. She expressed that even though fear of crime played a role in travelling abroad, her biggest fear was that of sexual violence. One of the few pieces of research looking into the harassment solo female travellers encounter also found that the gendered risk of sexual assault was the primary concern of solo female travellers (Yang et al., 2018). Here, an excerpt is shown from my interview with Sarah in which she talks about her worries before going on her solo journey.

X: "Before you went on your trip and were in the Netherlands, did you already worry about your safety, or was it something you thought about because you were travelling alone?"

"Yeah, actually, I did. I think that was one of the biggest reasons why I found it nerve-wracking to travel alone. I also always find it really annoying, I never actually want to give in to it, even here in the Netherlands. But it is always there in the back of my mind."

X: "And when worrying about this safety, were you concerned about intimidation, from men to women?"

"Yes."

X: "Do you think your gender plays a role in these concerns about your safety?"

"I think it did, but of course, I have always been a woman. But I do think it is really different for a man. I can hardly imagine not worrying about it or not having it in the back of your mind, it sounds so nice. Yeah, I think it is mostly because I am a woman."

— *Sarah, first-time solo traveller*

This feeling of anxiousness and the mental preoccupation with safety before travelling, as experienced by Sarah, was present in around one-third of the women I spoke to. When talking to Yara, she mentioned she "was really quite nervous beforehand in that regard". When I asked women about what they specifically feared, their responses were almost unanimous: the threat of rape and physical sexual violence.

"Well, very directly rape, that is what I am afraid of."

— *Femke, occasional solo traveller*

"I think I was mostly worried that I, maybe it is a bit exaggerated, but that I would be touched or that something physical would happen to me."

— *Noor, frequent solo traveller*

"Well, as extreme as it may sound, but rape or ending up in an alleyway somehow, dead."

— *Noa, first-time solo traveller*

In these quotes, women express that their fear of rape is 'extreme' or 'exaggerated', likely recognising the likelihood of being raped by a stranger is low. Likewise, Yara explained that even though a more 'rational' fear is that of robbery or crime, her worst fear is that of physical sexual violence, particularly rape. These feelings of vulnerability and feeling at risk when travelling alone as women are not only emotional responses to the perceived risks but are also shaped by dominant gender norms that construct femininity as inherently vulnerable or at risk. In this sense, their fear is influenced by the dominant gender norms that impose weakness and vulnerability onto women. However, I argue that the act of choosing to travel alone and enter public spaces challenges the same gender norms that try to restrict women's mobility. It demonstrates how they negotiate their dominant gender norms by deciding to travel despite these concerns.

However, these women try to mitigate their fears through careful planning of their trips. Strategies that women shared often included researching the destination and their accommodations and reading about other solo travellers' experiences. Their feelings of fear and vulnerability are thus embodied and expressed through these pre-travel behaviours, which align with the cultural expectations of traditional femininity, specifically the idea that women should be careful and cautious. Particularly the destination choice proved to be an important factor in minimising the perceived risks of solo travelling. Femke explained she planned her solo journey in such a way as to feel comfortable and decrease concerns surrounding safety, by going to 'safe' countries and enrolling in a language school. 'Safe' countries were often perceived as Western destinations or 'Western-like', due to perceived trustworthiness and cultural familiarity. For instance, Noor did not feel concerned about her safety when travelling to 'western-like' countries, but her worry increased when travelling to countries she felt upheld a 'female-unfriendly' culture.

"I choose countries where that [high concern of safety] is a bit less of an issue. I do not just go alone to countries where it is, well, known to be really unsafe. And I made it a bit easier for myself in the sense that I went to a language school for a month. So, those people had my details and knew where I was staying."

— *Femke, occasional solo traveller*

"I think it kind of depended on the countries I was going to. If I was going to Japan or Korea, I felt really safe. I think it had something to do with the fact that they are relatively Western countries in a way. I am not really sure how to explain it, but when I went to other countries, like when I went to Egypt, for example, you do think, okay, there might be a different standard in how they treat women, and I am there alone, and maybe it is different. So, yes, sometimes I did worry about it before I left."

— *Noor, frequent solo traveller*

Additionally, women new to solo travel started their journey in popular tourist destinations, such as Bali, Thailand, or Costa Rica. Although not explicitly stated by these women, I understood they expected a certain level of infrastructure and security in these destinations due to their popularity. Both Margot and Sarah started their trips in Bali, as “it feels very touristy, so at first, that seemed like a good choice in terms of safety” (Sarah). Jasmijn and Femke both chose Costa Rica as the destination for their first solo trip since the country is portrayed as the safest in Central America.

“Yes, well, I indeed made a very conscious choice for the country. One that would be relatively safe for women, and that was Costa Rica. [...] Also because Costa Rica is of course known for being the safest country in Central America.”

— *Jasmijn, occasional solo traveller*

This phenomenon also works the other way around. Most women did not consider visiting Africa, the Middle East, or certain countries such as India or Brazil as solo female travellers, especially when they were quite new to solo travelling. High crime rates, very patriarchal societies, and underdeveloped tourist infrastructure are some of the explanations women gave for not wanting to visit these regions. Additionally, multiple women expressed that religion had a big impact on this distinction between more ‘easy’ and ‘challenging’ countries to travel to solo. Islamic countries were generally seen as less safe and female-unfriendly, which lowered their intentions to travel to these countries. The higher risk perception of Islamic regions in this thesis aligns with wider research on tourists’ risk perception. Carballo et al. (2024) found that Western travellers perceived Muslim countries as riskier than Christian countries. However, Layla, a solo female traveller with a Muslim background, did not share the same sentiment towards Islamic countries as many of the other solo female travellers. She told me that her trips to Morocco and the United Arab Emirates were some of her best travel experiences, and the media does not portray these countries accurately. In contrast, Noor experienced that there was a reason for some countries to have a reputation as female-unfriendly. Even though it did not turn out as badly as the media portrays, she saw some truth in some countries’ reputations.

“But that is because the media and people create an image of a certain country that does not match reality at all. Those are often the countries that already have a negative reputation in the news, but they actually turn out to be the most fun to visit.”

— *Layla*

“I do think it is also because you read news reports about countries that are less female-friendly so to say. That definitely influences your perspective, and I think that happens quite often. Many countries are labelled as unsafe due to drug crime or gang violence, but as a tourist, you rarely experience that. So, while they may seem unsafe in the news, the reality for tourists is often different. However, I think that in countries known for being less female-friendly, you do actually notice it as a tourist. So, in that sense, I think the reputation is somewhat justified.”

— *Noor*

While Layla emphasised that her Moroccan background did not influence her sense of safety in Morocco as she argued “in the end, I am just a woman”, it is important to consider how her positionality shapes her experiences. Even though she separates her Muslim background from her experience, her gender and ethnic background cannot be separated, and her identity influences how she navigates these spaces and is perceived by others in this context. It highlights how different parts of a woman’s identity interact in each space, rendering it as ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’. Even though Noor shares that the reputation of some of these countries as female-unfriendly is justified based on her personal experience, I noticed that some of the women who deemed Islamic countries as unsafe had never visited them before. This suggests their perception may be shaped, at least to a certain extent, by external narratives and media representations, rather than personal experience. Western discourses often represent Muslim women as passive, submissive, and oppressed, reflecting Orientalist narratives and reinforcing the idea that these societies are unsafe for women (Al-Hejin, 2014; Bullock & Jafri, 2000). This is not to say women’s safety concerns about these countries are completely ungrounded; a few women in this study have visited Islamic countries and faced harassment throughout their travels. However, when some regions or particular countries are overwhelmingly framed as unsafe for women, without any personal experience, it is important to recognise the influence of dominant narratives.

Thus, researching and choosing a ‘safe’ destination can be a safety strategy for women to decrease their worries and enable solo travel. However, multiple women who talked about deliberately choosing a destination with safety in mind did not express feeling worried about their safety beforehand. They rejected the idea that they should be fearful when travelling alone. However, they did acknowledge the gendered risk women can face while travelling and took some precautions, such as researching a safe destination. Even though Layla says she is not worried about her safety while travelling, she is aware that her gender brings specific risks and makes her a target in the eyes of strange men.

“Honestly, I never really worried about my safety beforehand. [...] You sometimes hear those stories about girls being raped abroad. That is absolutely terrible, well, everything is terrible, but those are the kinds of things that can happen when you are a woman travelling alone. In the eyes of men, they always think that a woman... yeah, is an easy target. They can always try, these are the kinds of things that can happen to a woman travelling alone.”

— *Layla*

About half of the women who rejected worry or fear before travelling immediately followed their answer with an explanation to nuance their statement. When Layla travelled to Madagascar, she said she did not worry about her safety, but “of course you keep it the back of your mind”. The ‘no, not really’ answer was almost always followed with an explanation as to why not. ‘No, not really’, but “I consciously chose to go to Singapore alone because I knew that Singapore was a safe country” (Jasmijn). These women framed their answers in such a manner that the lack of explicit fear and worry could be attributed to the fact they had already taken precautions.

"I did not really worry myself because I had done quite a bit of research, and there were not many negative experiences to be found about the places I was going to."
— *Suzanne, first-time solo traveller*

"I always do some research, for example, I am going to Panama. So, then I will look up: How safe is it there? As a woman?"
— *Nicole, frequent solo traveller*

"No, yeah, I was not really thinking about that a lot. I did, of course, look up in advance which places are suitable for a woman to travel alone, especially without having a lot of experience. Because, before that, I had only been on vacation in Europe. So, I did some research online, like, which countries are easily accessible? Where could I, as a woman, easily travel alone? And, of course, I also kept safety in mind."
— *Margot, first-time solo traveller*

As argued, the specific consideration of their gender while researching safety demonstrates their awareness of the associated risks with solo female travel and the gendered nature of this precautionary work. The rejection of fear and simultaneous engagement in precautionary research and planning, is particularly interesting through the lens of gender performativity. These actions can be understood as negotiating between behaviours that align with traditional gender norms, which construct women as inherently vulnerable, and those that resist such norms by asserting agency and autonomy. For example, expressing a lack of fear challenges and travelling solo challenges dominant expectations of female vulnerability, while precautionary actions such as researching 'safe destinations or booking female-only dorms reflect the ongoing influence of gendered risk perception and align with traditional understandings of femininity. Ultimately, these women do not allow fear or caution to restrict their mobility but rather use it as a tool to enable solo travel.

The remaining women, about half, who rejected fear were confident in their ability to navigate and handle unfamiliar environments. They did not frame their lack of fear as being dependent on precautionary safety work. Sophie told me she did not worry about her safety beforehand as she "just figures things out as she goes". Similarly, Carlijn told me, "well, if you just use common sense, you'll figure it out". They put less emphasis on precautionary behaviour, and even when they research destinations, they frame it as universal and something all travellers do, regardless of gender. They reject a performance aligned with traditional notions of femininity rooted in vulnerability by reframing their safety precautions as universal, not fear-based or inherently tied to them being a woman. Even though their actions might be similar to other groups, they enact a form of femininity that emphasises independence and self-reliance, challenging the assumption that fear or caution should restrict women's mobility. However, as I will discuss later in more detail in the next chapter, even though the phrasing of 'common sense' does position their strategies, before and during travel, as universal behaviour, it still reflects gendered safety strategies.

That women who travel solo are challenging dominant gender norms is reflected in the statements and concerns they receive from their networks. Questions like 'Is that not dangerous as a woman

alone?' and families expressing concern reinforce the societal belief that women should stay in safe, controlled environments, instead of exploring the world alone. From talking about safety concerns from family before travelling solo with Suzanne, Anouk and Lotte, it seems this uneasiness expressed by family members is underscored by the understanding that the female sex is more at risk and thus expected to behave in more risk-averse ways. When women share these stories, they explain that they are aware others might perceive them as more vulnerable, but they do not let it affect them. Although worry and concern from family members to a certain extent is normal, a few women said they felt their family was particularly concerned because they are women.

X: "So, you did not worry much about your safety, but to what extent do you feel your gender played a role in the concerns your direct environment expressed?"

"I do think that women are seen as the weaker sex, yeah, that is what I think."

— *Lotte*

"I think if one of my brothers were to do this, they would be much less concerned because he is a man."

— *Suzanne*

"I also already knew back then that if I had been a man, my family wouldn't have been as worried. Well, I think they would have still been concerned, but more about whether the trip went well, but still less about your safety in general. That is really what it was."

— *Anouk*

Even though these women told me they were not worried about travelling alone, the reactions from their networks prove that society expects them to be, reaffirming the act of solo travel challenges dominant gender norms. Indeed, society tells women who travel solo should be concerned about their safety. When I started this thesis, I did a Google search on safety and travelling solo. Using the search term 'countries safe for solo female travel', a page of blogs tailored to female safety for solo travellers pops up. Searching 'countries safe for male travellers' results in a list of websites which do not even refer to men in the title or talk about 'fun' destinations instead of 'safe'. Men, particularly white, cisgender, heterosexual men, are not expected to be concerned about their safety travelling alone, whereas women are. Risk-taking is strongly associated with masculinity, while being risk-averse and spending time to reduce risks is a desirable trait for femininity (Riyami, 2021).

As women navigate the continuum of traditional and non-traditional forms of femininity, their position is not static. I noticed when talking to female solo travellers that age and travel experience are important factors that could shift women's performance of gender over time. Anouk and Jasmijn both embarked on solo travels after finishing high school and being around 18 years old. Anouk explained she did not worry about her safety, but, looking back, she ascribes it to her being a bit naive and lacking proper risk assessment. Now, being 23, she explains she would be thinking a lot more about her safety if she were to travel solo again. Similarly, Jasmijn and Sophie mentioned

that they were not fully aware of the risks at that time, and when they got older, they got a better grasp of the risks associated with solo female travel.

X: "Before you go on a solo trip or make those decisions, were you already concerned about your safety because you were travelling alone?"

"I have to honestly say that I did not really think about that at the time, because I was 18. [...]. So, I had much fewer worries about that back then, whereas now that I am 23, I would have much more of it. Maybe back then, my assessment of danger was lower or something, because you are still a bit younger in your head. [...] I think that was definitely the case, yes, I had less of a risk assessment or something."

— *Anouk, first-time solo traveller*

"Yes, I think when I was younger, I was a bit naiver. So, I saw less danger in situations. And also because it was my first trip, I think. So, not just age, but also experience, I would say."

— *Sophie*

Unlike Anouk and Jasmijn, Noa and Femke felt more vulnerable because of their age at the time of travel, as both were 18. Being young for them meant having a certain insecurity and lack of confidence.

X: "And you said earlier that because you were still quite young, being 18, was that also the reason you might have felt more vulnerable? Like, "Oh, because I am only 18 and then a woman?"

"I think so. I did not consciously think about it. But I think I was subconsciously aware that I like look young. I think I was aware that people could see me and think, "That is a young girl. She's not 26, for example."

— *Noa*

Through ageing and accumulating travel experience, the awareness of gendered vulnerability had grown for some of these women over time. As expressed by Anouk, if she were to travel solo again, she would be more worried about her safety than when she was 18. However, for others, their feelings of vulnerability may have persisted, but their confidence to handle and manage these risks had increased. Even though Femke would still have the same worries when travelling alone, she is more confident in her ability to handle anything she comes face-to-face with, growing independence and a shifting performance of femininity.

This section has shown how, before travelling solo, women had various perceptions on their safety as solo women entering unfamiliar public spaces. While some were fearful and expressed concerns, others rejected a sense of fear in anticipation of solo travel. In the next section, I will

explore women's discomfort and feelings of vulnerability when entering new and unfamiliar public spaces abroad.

Women's Sense of Vulnerability in Unfamiliar Public Spaces

Situational Vulnerability

When travelling, women constantly enter and navigate new spaces. During the day, when surrounded by a diverse crowd or in well-lit streets, women explained they were confident in navigating public spaces. However, many women felt uneasy or uncomfortable when in public spaces alone at night, in isolated areas, or in spaces dominated by men. In these situations, there does not have to be a direct or immediate threat to make women feel uncomfortable. It is important to note that, as solo travellers, these women are often alone in such situations. As a result, their feelings of vulnerability is already higher than with other people around, given that being alone is a well-proven factor of increasing fear of crime in women (Day, 1999).

Walking alone in the dark was often the first thing women mentioned as something that made them feel uncomfortable. In the words of Yara, "It is more like a gut feeling, rather than something actively threatening you". She was not alone in this feeling, many women mentioned the nighttime as adding feelings of vulnerability, even without perceiving immediate danger, and preferring well-lit streets when walking alone. Solo female travellers in the study of Wilson and Little (2008) also experienced the night as the peak period for feelings of unsafety, and previous research has shown that fear of crime is higher for women at nighttime (Day, 1999; Tandogan & Ilhan, 2016; Su & Wu, 2020). Sophie explained that walking alone at night was always accompanied by a sense of discomfort. Similarly, Suzanne talks about how the same alley transforms at night, suddenly making her feel uneasy when walking through it alone.

"Yes, definitely, when you walk there in the evening, you always feel less comfortable."
— *Sophie, Mexico*

"Some girls I had met along the way, their hostel was on this street, and mine was over here, and I had to go back to my hostel through an alley. During the day, it was fine, but often you would head back late, and suddenly it became a really unpleasant alley."
— *Suzanne*

Women also expressed this gut feeling of discomfort when entering public spaces solely occupied by men. Jasmijn explains that the absence of families, women, and children in a space signals danger in her mind. Similarly, Femke feels she should not be in a certain space when solely occupied by men.

"Well, it was not really evening yet, but it was around the afternoon when I arrived. And there were only men on the street. There was not a single woman, and I really thought, this is strange, and I felt uncomfortable because of that. For example, in Costa Rica, that was not necessarily the case. It was just mixed there. There were different kinds of people on the street, old, young, families, couples, and that made it feel much more normal, so to speak, which made it not feel threatening or anything."
— *Jasmijn*

"Or if, for example, there are mostly men walking around on the street and no women or children. For me, those are signs that make me think, okay, I should not stay here long."

— *Femke*

However, the intimidation and unease felt by women when being surrounded by a group of men depended on the country they were in and the appearance of the local men. Some women explained that the presence of non-well-groomed individuals, such as intoxicated people, homeless individuals, or 'junks', indicates a potentially dangerous and threatening situation due to the perceived unpredictable behaviour of these individuals. Additionally, Jasmijn explained that she felt less intimidated by Asian men due to their physical stature and height.

"This might sound a bit strange, but I also remember being in Singapore and then in Thailand, and the physical size of the men, especially, because that is where I could feel intimidated, is just small. They are almost all a head shorter than you, which makes them immediately seem much less intimidating."

— *Jasmijn*

When I asked why women felt uneasy in these spaces, even without a direct threat, they often had a hard time pinpointing an exact reason. At face value, women associate the nighttime with decreased visibility, fewer people around, and greater difficulty in seeking help, as expressed by Nicole. In case of a threat, there is no one there to see and to help them, which increases feelings of being at risk. Likewise, Lahsaizadeh & Yousefinejad (2011) investigated the experiences of Iranian women of sexual harassment in public spaces and found that less social guardianship increased the fear of being harassed. Temporary bystanders might feel like 'guardians' to women, and in isolated areas, this feeling subsides. As such, alleys, dark pathways, parks or side roads are often mentioned by women as places where they experience an increased level of fear.

"Yes, I think the night feels more unsafe. And why? Well, the evening is of course already something... how do you say it? Yeah, a bit more mysterious. During the day, it is light. Maybe there are more people on the street? In the evening, it is quieter after all. Things are less likely to be seen. Yeah, because it is dark. But anyway, in some places, some countries, you just always have to be aware of where you are. Whether it is during the day or in the evening, in the evening it will be even worse."

— *Nicole*

"This was indeed in a dark alley where there was no one, at least no people. And you also know that if something were to happen now, there would be no one who could come to help you."

— *Suzanne*

However, digging deeper into the reason why, Carlijn explains that she understands it as something "you are told from a young age". Her parents told her to be home before dark, not to cycle home alone, or to pick her up at night, which made her associate danger with darkness. Similarly, Evelien said this sense of vulnerability was something she was taught from a young age to feel.

"Well, back then it was also like you have to be home before dark. Not just walking through dark alleys, and make sure you are always where there is light and where people are. Actually, it is still everything I do now."

— *Evelien*

These women show that, throughout their lives, they are repeatedly warned about the dangers of being alone in the dark and that men pose a potential threat in public spaces. As explicitly expressed by a few women in this study, women are constantly told they are at higher risk of harassment in certain settings and are vulnerable alone at night. Looking at this through the lens of gender performativity, these warnings frame vulnerability and caution as inherently tied to being a woman. Over time, through repeated exposure to these framings, women come to internalise this gendered vulnerability. Indeed, as Valentine (1992) argues, the idea that women should feel afraid in public spaces, especially at night, is the result of societal and cultural messaging that instils this fear in women. This can be seen in the way women feel fear and unease, even without an immediate threat present, as this has become so ingrained.

That women have internalised this societal message can be seen in Evelien's response about feeling discomfort when alone in the dark. When I asked Evelien what precisely she is afraid of when walking alone at night, she responded by saying, "I am not sure, it is just a feeling". Going further, Evelien states that her unease and fear in these situations result from what society, particularly her parents, told her, rather than negative personal experiences. Here, I understand the inability of Evelien to articulate what exactly she is afraid of and the lack of bad experiences in such a setting, as an example of how this fear is largely constructed by messages telling women they should feel vulnerable and afraid in public spaces, rather than it being a result of her negative personal experiences. Similarly, the following quote by Nicole can illustrate the internalised gender vulnerability in the case of male-dominated spaces.

"And I do think it is different when you are the only woman there, with all these men. Look, if there are a few women, then you feel like you are allowed to be there too. And that is a feeling. Maybe I am just not thinking clearly. Maybe I am allowed to be there, and those men are fine. But I feel like if I were only with men, and they are all looking at me a little, and they do not say anything to me, then I think, oh yeah, I do not think I am supposed to be here as a woman. You can feel that immediately, I think."

— *Nicole, frequent solo traveller*

In this quote, she says, "Maybe I am allowed to be there, and those men are fine, but...". It demonstrates that it is not always about the actual danger but about the socially ingrained narratives that make these spaces feel unwelcoming and dangerous. Being the only woman reinforces the idea that they do not 'belong' there and makes the space 'masculine' in women's eyes. As argued by Hille (1999), masculine spaces are perceived as dangerous and unwelcoming, which often stems from the perceived power imbalance. Women voiced that when entering these spaces, they feel watched, vulnerable, and out of place. The unequal power dynamic between men and women likely influences their perception of these spaces, rendering them risky and unsafe, even if nothing explicitly happens.

However, I want to emphasise that women's fear is not solely a response to societal norms and expectations. Personal experiences further entrench the internalisation of dominant gender norms that presume women are inherently vulnerable. Multiple women shared having experienced harassment when alone at night or entering male-dominated spaces. When women experience harassment, it confirms what they were told, validating their fear and need to remain cautious. Interestingly, I noticed in the women I spoke with that it seemed those who had frequently encountered sexual harassment in the Netherlands or at the destination itself were more vocal about feeling on edge and uneasy in the settings described above. Their feelings of fear and hyper awareness at night, when alone, or surrounded by men, become justified through these encounters, further entrenching their sense of vulnerability. Noa explains this in her interview by referring to other experiences she had with harassment while travelling with her friends. In her view, all her past experiences with harassment have made her more aware and feel more vulnerable navigating public spaces.

"I think the more often you experience those kinds of situations, the more aware you become that such things can happen. Yeah, so that has contributed to how I walked around there."

— *Noa*

While many feel vulnerable at night, darkness does not always induce feelings of vulnerability. Some women expressed they felt comfortable walking alone at night in certain destinations when streets were well-lit, and a variety of people were still outside. For example, Anouk had no problem walking alone when it was dark in Sydney, and Evelien felt safe in Florence as her hostel was in the city centre, the streets were well-lit, and people were still outside. In these instances, they challenged the idea women are at risk and perform a form of femininity that challenges traditional norms, but this independence remained conditional: safety was still reliant on situational factors, and isolation or poorly lit areas could quickly shift their sense of safety.

Vulnerability as a Foreigner

Almost all women explained that these feelings of vulnerability, particularly when alone at night, in isolated spaces, or in male-dominated spaces, are stronger abroad than in the Netherlands. Being a foreigner and unfamiliar with the destination makes them feel more at risk, for which they share multiple reasons. First, women explained that they do not have the intuitive knowledge of the environment that they have at home. They are unsure which routes are 'safe' or which neighbourhoods to avoid, particularly at night. Evelien explains that in her hometown, she knows where all the alleys, dark places, or 'unsafe' spaces are found.

"I mainly think it is because it is dark and because you do not know the area very well, so you also do not know where, for example, alleys or corners might be where someone could potentially jump out from."

— *Evelien*

Additionally, women shared they often felt more at risk because they do not have a support network while travelling, which they can rely on in times of distress, as explained by Jasmijn. At home, women could call a friend or return to a safe space with family or friends. This is lacking

abroad, especially when considering the time zone difference, making it harder to reach people at home.

"Because, of course, in the Netherlands, you also have those kinds of moments where, for example, you call someone or something, so that if something happens, someone knows, and you are not really all alone somewhere. That is obviously harder when you are abroad because you cannot always call someone, but you do know that if something happens and no one notices."

— *Jasmijn*

The insecurity also tends to extend to the institutional support in the destination that women visit. Women often do not know the location of police stations or whether they can trust the police in case something happens to them. None of the women in this study needed the police on any occasion, but the psychological effect of the potential problem still affects women. Noa explains that in the Netherlands, she does not feel the same heightened sense of vulnerability because she is familiar with the environment and police.

"But that also comes from the fact that I know better where the police stations are and things like that. So, you just know your surroundings better. And I think that automatically gives a safer feeling. So, I think that contributes."

— *Noa*

Lastly, language barriers also seemed to play a significant role in women's sense of safety. Many women struggled as they did not speak the local language, which could hinder their ability to communicate when they need help or express discomfort when they are being harassed. Anouk explains that is why she felt more comfortable in Australia because she knew she could speak the same language as everyone around her. In contrast, Nicole shares how not speaking the language could cause distress in situations where she would need help.

"Maybe also a lot safer because I knew that, okay, if I go there, I can just ask for directions in English. People understand me, I understand the signs, so to speak."

— *Anouk*

"So, I think that if something happens, you cannot explain it at that moment, you can try, and you hope others understand, but you cannot explain what you feel, what you are thinking, what you have experienced. And I think that is what might make it sometimes scary. What if something happens to me? Who is going to help me?"

— *Nicole*

Women thus associated safety with familiarity and control, which might explain the feeling of safety in destinations similar to the Netherlands and 'Western-like' countries as discussed before. In such cases, many of the systems, such as the police, public transport, and urban infrastructure, feel familiar and comforting to solo female travellers.

Conclusion

In sum, women continuously navigate an in-between space between performances of femininity that either reiterate or challenge dominant gender norms, rather than strictly adhering to one performance of femininity. Many women experience pre-travel fears about sexual violence, which prompts them to research destinations and take precautions before going. While these concerns about gender violence influence their choices, their decision to go challenges norms that try to restrict women's mobility. Gendered safety concerns shape, but do not fully restrict their freedom and autonomy. Some women reject narratives of fear and perform a form of femininity that asserts independence through this rejection of risks and fearfulness and pre-travel safety strategies. However, searching 'women-safe' destinations and accommodations suggests an underlying awareness of gendered vulnerabilities. They do not want to frame caution and fear as a defining factor in their travels, but their actions do reflect safety concerns as solo female travellers.

Once travelling, this negotiation continues regarding their feelings of vulnerability in public spaces. Many women feel vulnerable or at risk in certain conditions, such as at night, in isolation, in unfamiliar environments, and in male-dominated spaces, which reflects the internalisation of dominant cultural and societal messaging that construct femininity as inherently vulnerable. However, many women also report feeling safe and confident when walking in public spaces during the day, and at night when people are still outside, streets are well-lit, and harassment has not yet occurred. These expressions of walking confidently at night resist the narrative of feminine vulnerability and reflect a performance of femininity that is grounded in independence and confidence. Yet, this independence and sense of security are conditional, as awareness of gendered vulnerability continues to shape their mobility.

In response to the unease felt by being in unfamiliar spaces, women adopt safety strategies when arriving in new destinations to safely navigate these public spaces. This next chapter will explore the various safety strategies female solo travellers employ to keep themselves safe and avoid sexual harassment.

5. Women's On-the-Ground Safety Work

As shown above, when women travel to unfamiliar spaces, they lose a sense of control over the environment and their own safety. Their feelings of uneasy and vulnerability in public space causes them to engage in a variety of safety strategies, which can be seen as performative acts which often reinforce traditional gender norms around femininity and vulnerability. However, at the same time, changing their behaviour becomes a way to produce a sense of safety and try to control the risk of experiencing sexual harassment. Liz Kelly (1988) came up with the term 'safety work' to capture the effort and energy that requires the constant decision-making, modifications, and adaptations women employ to create a sense of safety in public spaces. Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) argue that, over time, some of these behaviours can become internalised to such an extent that women do not consciously think about them as safety strategies, but as just 'common sense'.

This is something I also recognised in women's responses in this thesis. Women employ a variety of safety strategies to try to avoid harassment and thus create a sense of safety when entering public spaces. Over time, some of these safety strategies and thus the adaptations and modifications women need to make to enter public space become so habitual and ingrained they feel normal. This embodies Butler's notion of performativity in which the repeated reiteration of gender norms makes them come to see as natural and inherent. However, other strategies were met with more critical reflection, as women sometimes resisted the traditional gender expectations that were embedded in these performative acts. This shifting dynamic shows how safety work can both reinforce and resists dominant gender norms, highly dependent on the context and women's agency.

In this chapter, I explore the variety of women's safety strategies and their alignment with wider social expectations of femininity and victim-blaming narratives. Moreover, I focus on women's agency in employing these strategies and the extent to which they have become 'common sense'.

Women's Safety Work

"As a woman, you are always very alert" - Vigilance

Being on alert, staying vigilant, and being aware of your surroundings was undoubtedly the most common way for women in this study to try to avoid harassment. *In what kind of environment am I? Is this a safe neighbourhood? Which people are around me? Why is this person walking so close to me? How would I escape here? Which transport am I going to use? What would be my next move if someone harassed me?* These are all examples of questions women ask themselves and think about, consciously or subconsciously, when they navigate public spaces. It helps them to feel in control and anticipate any kind of danger they might encounter. Both Noa and Margot demonstrate that vigilance is a continuous thought stream running in the back of their minds while navigating public spaces.

X: "Do you notice during your trip that you are very alert or constantly aware of your surroundings?"

"Yes, definitely. [...] But even just walking on the street, I noticed that I was always kind of scanning, like, okay, who is around me, where are we? I am walking through a park now, oh look, there is a random couple coming by."

— Noa

"What kind of people are around me? What kind of situation am I in right now? Are these people that I feel it is okay to be near, or is it kind of shady, and would it be better to find another place? I think, yeah, that is something you do think about during the trip, how to get from A to B or the other way around, with that in mind. It is not like it ruined my trip or anything, but you are still kind of assessing, like, okay, what kind of neighbourhood am I in, what kind of place is this, what kind of people do I see? Is this okay, or would it be better to choose something else?"

— Margot

As explained by Margot, it is not always a conscious effort that overtakes their trip or is very much present. Rather, it is an ingrained, automatic awareness in which women are constantly assessing possible risks in their current environment. Noor explains how she is always aware of her surroundings and immediately notices if someone's behaviour is out of the ordinary. However, the level of vigilance women enact is not the same across all contexts but heightens in response to certain contextual elements. In the quote of Jasmijn, it becomes clear that vigilance heightens in situations where she feels a higher sense of vulnerability, such as at night.

"I think that as a woman, you are always very alert and on edge wherever you are. And if you even get the feeling that someone is coming too close too often or starts following you, I immediately go on high alert, thinking, okay, now I really need to pay attention. Maybe I will grab my phone or look around a bit to see where I am and whether it is a place I would want to stay if things were to escalate."

— Noor

“When you are cycling and you think, “Oh, this is not very smart,” you start to plan ahead, like, okay, if something happens, do not panic. And you already think about what you could do, just in case something was to happen, so to speak. And that was not necessarily because there was an immediate threat or anything, but simply because you are in the dark in a place where you know there are some people, but not many. So, if something were to happen, it might not necessarily be seen. And you think, “This could potentially be unsafe,” because it is.”

— *Jasmijn*

Women explain vigilance includes thinking ahead of possible strategies in anticipation of harassment, scanning people on their appearance, and scanning the physical environment. The constant state of vigilance is often reported in studies surrounding the unsafety of women in public spaces (Condon et al., 2007; Brown et al., 2020). As discussed above, women share how being in an unfamiliar environment, where not knowing what might come next in terms of the physical environment and people, automatically heightens their level of alertness. Over time, this feeling can decrease when they feel comfortable and safe in a new destination. However, as Noor explained, one bad encounter or experience will immediately shift her level of alertness.

“For example, in Japan, I always feel super safe. And then you let your guard down. But suddenly, you find yourself in some dark streets at night, running into a group of drunk men, and I think, “Wait, I am still alone, I need to stay alert.” And usually, I am alert, but sometimes I feel so safe that I end up in certain situations that aren’t completely safe.”

— *Noor*

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that vigilance had become a largely unconscious safety strategy as women explained barely noticing how they constantly assess the situation, illustrating how this performative act has become habitual and ingrained. They explain it is not a conscious, deliberate choice that when they enter public spaces at night, they think ‘I must increase my vigilance now’. It has become normal to the extent that the increase in the level of vigilance is an automatic response to their environment. This can be perceived as a performative act in line with traditional femininity where women are expected to always be cautious and aware. Many women shared that being with other travellers would decrease the need to be constantly aware of their surroundings.

“I often lied about having a boyfriend” - Male and Female Companionship

Women often shared that embarking on adventures, going out at night, and navigating public spaces with others, male or female, would severely decrease their feelings of vulnerability. Yara explains that having a male or female companion implies not having to carry the responsibility of your safety alone, which can be a relief for solo female travellers. Multiple women told me, like Sophie, that being with others would make them feel safer and therefore decrease their constant need to be vigilant.

"I think I partly feel less safe when I am on my own. But partly, it also feels like you are the only one doing the work of staying alert. So, I think that plays a role too. You do not have a second pair of eyes to look around or a second sense of awareness. You just have to do more of it yourself and rely on your own instincts. And when you are travelling with someone who has travelled more often, you share that responsibility together."

— *Yara*

"Yes, that is true. When you are with someone, you do tend to let it [vigilance] go a bit more easily."

— *Sophie*

I want to emphasise that women did not frame their answers in such a way that they actively sought out male companionship for safety. In many cases, especially during the day, women explained that they travelled with men primarily for companionship and enjoyment, not just for protection. However, they still recognised its convenience and benefits in certain situations, especially at night. In situations like walking in the dark at night, women often consciously think about having a man with them for safety purposes. Some women shared that they did not perceive a difference between male and female companionship, while others acknowledged a certain hierarchy of protection, where male presence was seen as the safest option. Both Jasmijn and Suzanne experienced that they felt safer when accompanied by another male traveller.

"Yes, I have travelled alone and also spent days travelling with girls, and separately with a guy, and you can clearly notice a difference. Maybe it is mainly about how you feel yourself, I am not sure if it is because the environment reacts differently or handles the situation differently when you are just with other girls. But for me, it definitely feels more comfortable. It feels like there is a bit more physical distance between you and other people? So, yeah, travelling with just another girl is fine too, but when there is a guy with you, it somehow feels more relaxed."

— *Jasmijn*

"For example, in Thailand, after going out, I was often walked home by someone, and you definitely feel much safer than when you are walking back alone or with another girl."

— *Suzanne*

Regardless of women's initial intentions to travel with other men, many women not only noticed a difference in their own feelings of safety but also in how others interacted with them. Multiple women mentioned a decrease in interaction with male strangers, catcalling, or staring when being accompanied by a man. Previous research also argues that male companionship is one of the most effective strategies to avoid sexual harassment (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Anwar et al., 2019; Brown & Osman, 2017). Although women expressed uncertainty about this, due to the importance of context, multiple women thought they may experience less harassment when they did activities in groups or with men while travelling solo.

“In Vietnam, I actually travelled the whole country with a group of guys, so I was not really worried about it because I was with 7 or 8 guys, and they are not going to do anything to me. [...] In Vietnam, I never really had issues with being harassed, maybe because of that. But in other countries, indeed, it was different. For example, when you went out or to the beach with a group of girls, there would always be someone shouting something or trying to start a conversation, but when you are with guys, that just does not happen.”

— *Suzanne*

“While I was with a man those two evenings before, there was no problem. But when I was alone, they started bothering me. Even though it was the same people.”

— *Nicole*

Interestingly, Noor mentioned the deliberate decision not to engage in contact with other male travellers. While for many women men could serve as a form of protection, for her, it always turned into a hard time trying to part ways, which made her decide not to engage with other male travellers anymore. Furthermore, solo female travellers did not only use the physical presence of men but also the illusion of men. Multiple women shared that they had frequently lied about having a boyfriend, and Nicole even wore a ring to deflect unwanted attention in various spaces. As explained by Evelien, women use this strategy to end unwanted conversations or questions from male strangers who try to find out if they are travelling alone. Women told me that lying serves two different purposes: to make sure the harasser understands someone will notice when they are gone, and to stop unwanted flirting and sexualised conversations as they are not ‘available’.

“Yes, and I have also often lied about being in a relationship or having a boyfriend. There was also one time when someone came up to me and said he thought I looked nice, and his next question was whether I was married. I just said yes, and then he left.”

— *Evelien*

Whether it is a deliberate choice or not, the sense of security women feel in the presence of men reflects the deeply internalised idea of men being associated with protection and safety. Both the avoidance of harassment by walking with a man and unwanted attention through lying about a boyfriend can be seen as performance of femininity in line with traditional gender norms, in which women are positioned as in need of male protection. In the literature, this performative act is often critiqued for reinforcing male privilege and the idea that women are inherently vulnerable without men (Gunby et al., 2019). However, I want to underscore that multiple women expressed throughout the interviews that they are aware that this behaviour reinforces the idea that women need men to navigate public spaces. Despite their frustration with the implicit message of lying about a boyfriend, many women see it as a necessary safety measure. Women thus strategically make use of this performative act even though they critique the fact it reinforces dominant gender norms. However, unfortunately, it is perceived as more effective than expecting male strangers to respect their autonomy when saying ‘no’. Still, Lotte rejected this safety strategy precisely because she did not want to reinforce the idea that she needs a man to protect her.

“There are also women who say they have a boyfriend and stuff. No, I do not do that, but I am also not very good at lying. I just find it morally wrong or something that when you say you are not interested, they keep going, and when you say you have a boyfriend, they stop. Like, you need a man in your life to have enough of a reason to be left alone, I just find that ridiculous.”

— *Lotte*

As shown, many women want to reject this performance and the idea that they need men for protection. When they are back home in the Netherlands, they explain that they do not employ this strategy to the same extent and are thus able to perform gender in a different way through challenging the idea they need a man for protection. However, in these moments, in an unfamiliar environment, safety concerns override the desire for many women to reject these patriarchal ideas. Ultimately, regardless of their intention, the behaviour “further reaffirms the notion that men control women’s “rights to passage through public space”” (Laniya, 2005, p.107).

“I dress less revealingly when in public” - Changing Physical Appearance

The next safety strategy that came up in almost all interviews is that of changing one's appearance through dressing style. Women mentioned they changed their clothing in certain contexts in order to respect the local culture and minimise the risk of harassment. Similarly, Brown and Osman (2017) found that female tourists in Egypt changed their clothing to respect cultural norms and to use public spaces without being harassed. As expressed by Lotte and Jasmijn, many women decide how to adjust their clothing style by looking at the local population. It is a way to blend in with the local population and stand out less, implying that by standing out, you become an easier ‘target’ for any kind of unwanted attention.

“As for clothing, I do pay some attention to it. Ideally, I prefer wearing a tank top and shorts, but it is quite noticeable when the rest of the population does not dress like that. So, in those cases, I just wear a T-shirt or something like that. [...] I think when I am travelling alone, especially using public transport, I tend to dress a bit more conservatively, mainly to stand out less. Overall, I think it is also because it is convenient, and I do not have a lot of clothes with me. There was one time on the bus when it was really crowded, and I was the only white person there. You can tell they are talking about you. [...] And I was wearing shorts and a tank top with some cleavage showing, and I thought, ‘Oh, that was not a smart choice’. After that, I decided to just wear a T-shirt instead.”

— *Lotte*

“Well, in Costa Rica, at some point, you get a sense of what is acceptable, and then you notice that everyone is walking around in summer dresses, so to speak. Then I do the same because I do not necessarily feel like I am more of a target since everyone is already dressed that way. But if that is not the case, and I notice this in the Netherlands as well, you do become more conscious of maybe wearing a bit more or bringing something extra that you can put on to cover up more.”

— *Jasmijn*

When I asked if women changed their clothing in any way, I noticed that in answering the question, women included the inherent assumption that it meant covering up more and showing less nudity. This became particularly apparent when women responded they did not change anything in their clothing, since they “already do not dress in a revealing manner” (Noa). Without explicitly acknowledging it themselves, women’s answers reflect the wider discourse around clothing and sexual harassment, in which women’s clothing has often been used to legitimise harassment (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). Women have been told through victim-blaming narratives that the way they dress and their appearance are responsible for attracting harassment in the first place (Fairchild, 2015; Jang & Lee, 2013; Johnson & Workman, 1994). As such, many women associated nudity with harassment and adjusted their clothing choices to avoid this.

“I also noticed, for example, that when I was walking around alone in big cities, I preferred wearing just a T-shirt instead of a tank top, and not something cropped. And I often avoided wearing really short shorts or anything like that.”

— *Yara*

“I think, and I am quite sure about this, that I dress less revealingly when walking around there or just while travelling in general. It is really just about not wanting to send the wrong signal.”

— *Sarah*

Besides clothing, the amount of make-up worn has also been a factor associated with victim-blaming in the literature (Workman & Johnson, 1991). While several women mentioned they wore less makeup during travels, they explained this was out of convenience and not for safety. It might be that wearing less makeup lowered the frequency of harassment, but it was not a conscious choice to do so for the women in this study. Only Yara noticed a difference when wearing less make-up and her hair in a bun, which resulted in her sometimes doing this to reduce harassment.

“I also often noticed that it helped if I did not wear makeup and just had my hair in a bun. Because then it was not so ‘in-your-face’ blonde, you know?”

— *Yara*

In a sense, Yara is describing a way to ‘dull down’ her feminine appearance through wearing less make-up and typical feminine clothes. Vera-Gray (2018) describes this as the ‘unsafety of femininity’, in which a typical feminine appearance, such as skirts, dresses, and makeup, is seen by others as an invitation for unwanted attention, particularly in patriarchal societies. As a result, women often choose to ‘dull down’ their appearance (Nicholls, 2017), by dressing less revealing or ‘provocative’ to minimise the risks of ‘attracting’ harassment. Vera-Gray (2018) further argues that the avoidance of the typical feminine appearance could be either embraced in particular contexts or permanently. Indeed, many women in this study expressed dressing less revealingly in countries or certain regions where the predominant religion is Islam due to their perception of these societies as highly traditional and patriarchal. Moreover, when women felt the need to dull it down, this was usually done constantly throughout the day. In contrast, they expressed only occasionally modifying their appearance when at home, suggesting a greater sense of safety to embrace a typical feminine appearance.

Despite the importance given to dressing style, women did acknowledge that wearing less revealing clothing does not completely stop harassment from happening. Every woman who mentioned thinking about their clothing choices had experienced some form of harassment during their travels. However, they continued to do this, as they believed it reduced the likelihood of experiencing harassment. Moreover, while women did not explicitly state this, the internalisation of the societal expectation that women hold responsibility for avoiding male attention through their clothing choices means they may also dress this way to avoid blame if something happens. When it came to clothing choices, I observed a lot of tension between women's awareness of the problem with this strategy and the internalisation of it. Many women told me they recognise that they should not have to change the way they dress, yet because of the deeply ingrained belief that women should, they felt irresponsible when ignoring it. I even noticed that a few women who consciously rejected victim-blaming still subtly blamed other women with the mindset that 'she should have known better' or 'she should not be surprised' when referring to women who dressed in ways that could be perceived as inappropriate. While it is true that dressing in a certain way can reduce unwanted attention, I find it important to emphasise this strategy exists in the first place because gender norms prescribe responsibility on women to manage their appearance to avoid negative consequences, a burden that itself reinforces the same norms.

"I fake walking with full confidence" - Modifying Public Behaviour

Literature also shows that many women modify their public behaviour, not just their appearance (Guano, 2007; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). Throughout the interviews, a few different ways in which women modified their public behaviour came up. For instance, Laura explained that she adopted certain body language that, in her mind, indicated 'do not mess with me'. This included having an angry expression on her face or walking with confidence and making yourself taller, as Noa explains.

"And I also think it helps that when I am just standing relaxed, I have a major resting bitch face. And because of that, I think they leave me alone a bit (laughs). And then I think they probably say, well, let's skip her because she looks so angry."

— *Laura*

"And walk as if you know what you are doing, even if you are completely lost. Like, literally lost. And for example, I am also much more aware of my posture. Really pull my shoulders back. I am walking here. Even though that is not really in my system. Then I just act like I am walking with full confidence. And you cannot mess with me. Those are things that you really start doing."

— *Noa*

Women explained to me that the reason behind such behaviour was to come across as confident and less vulnerable, even if it may not reflect their true feelings at the moment. Showing confidence and no fear reflects a 'fake it till you make it' approach. Through the lens of gender performativity, this behaviour challenges the performance of traditional femininity, which associates femininity with passive body language, smiling, and approachability. These women felt that making oneself smaller would send a message that they would be vulnerable or fearful, which

would attract harassment. In contrast, other women like Jasmijn expressed deliberately avoiding eye contact, walking faster, or walking with their heads down. She felt that through this behaviour and body language, she would stand out less, implying again that standing out would invite unwanted attention.

“I am not sure if I consciously think about it, but I would, like, put my head down when I think back to how I behave in those kinds of situations, especially if I have, like, a jacket or a hood or something that covers my head. I would just put my head down, walk quickly, and get through it as fast as possible. So, definitely not looking around or making eye contact. I would rather not look at them, because I always feel like if you look at those kinds of people, or especially men, in my mind, if you look at men, they think they can get something from you or that you want something or that you want to interact, if you just walk past them.”

— *Jasmijn*

About half of the women expressed walking either with more confidence or making themselves smaller to avoid harassment. However, this was mostly done in moments where they felt really vulnerable or at risk, such as when walking alone at night or when anticipating harassment, not continuously throughout their travels. Furthermore, the feeling that having eye contact might initiate some men to make contact relates to the anxiety that multiple women expressed about unintentionally giving clues that express any interest in men, while they do not have it. For instance, Lotte mentioned that she might become less friendly to strangers while travelling, specifically men, as she is afraid her friendliness will be misinterpreted as flirting, which was backed up by previous experiences. Similarly, Abbey (1982) found that in the context of college students, men often misinterpreted female friendliness in a sexual manner. Both Anouk and Sarah were indeed afraid that their friendliness would be misinterpreted in a sexual manner.

“Then I paid more attention to how I behaved, like being friendly, but not too friendly, so they wouldn’t think anything of it or something, but still just being friendly.”

— *Anouk*

“Because yeah, in my experience, even if you are just being nice to someone, it can still often be interpreted differently, and you are not really waiting for that. So better not say anything and be kind of rude in your own mind (laughs).”

— *Sarah*

The expectation for women to not express their sexuality and to not be ‘too friendly’ links to the argument of RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR and MORGAN (2009) that women need “to contain their sexuality to avoid being harmed by predatory men but also to ‘protect’ men from misreading the signals about your sexual availability” (p.500). This reflects the victim-blaming narrative that women who are too open, too friendly, or too expressive are responsible for the male reactions and the possible harassment that follows (RÚDÓLFSDÓTTIR & MORGAN, 2009). The other half of the women in this study expressed that they did not consciously think about modifying their behaviour. They would move and walk through public spaces like they normally do, without thinking about their body language.

"I think I always avoided being outside in the dark" - Spatial Restraints and Avoidance of Night-time

Women shared that the fear of harassment poses a restriction on their sense of freedom to move around in certain spaces freely. Dark alleys, side streets, or isolated places or villages were often mentioned as being unsafe for them and thus avoided. Additionally, women explained they avoided certain neighbourhoods and tried to stay within 'tourist spaces' as they were perceived to be safer for them. Their spatial restraints worsened at night, as almost all women expressed avoiding going out alone or at all at night during their travels. This safety strategy is linked to the contextual elements of night and isolation discussed before in Chapter 4, which contributed to feelings of vulnerability.

"And in the evenings, I really did not feel comfortable, when I was alone, I almost never went out on the street alone when it was dark."

— Sarah

Sarah's experience was not rare, many women said they did not go out at night alone. If they had male or female companionship, they felt comfortable going out at night, but if not necessary, they avoided it. Many women agreed with the sentiment to not wander alone at night if there was no purpose to do so. Additionally, some women would order a taxi if they had to go somewhere at night that would drop them off at the exact location, to avoid walking alone in the dark. Some also did not realise they avoided the night-time, but looking back, they realised they felt uncomfortable going out alone, showing performative acts like the avoidance of nighttime can become habitual, normalised, and embodied.

"But I am not going to look for a nice café at 11 PM just to find some fun. So no, I do not know if I consciously avoided it, but I just thought, well, as long as I do not have to be somewhere on my own, I am not going to be outside."

— Carlijn

"Then I think, oh yeah, I actually almost never went out in the evening. I was really almost always back at my hotel around eight or so. And then I was fine with it. I think I unconsciously always avoided being outside in the dark. Well, at eight o'clock it is often already dark, but not really pitch dark. I would always go back to my hotel room or my hostel in the evening."

— Noor

Deciding whether it is safe to go out at night was highly context-dependent. In some places, women did not feel too unsafe to go out, depending on the gender presence in public, the well-lit streets in the city, the general advice, or advice from locals. In some countries, going out at night is always against the advice, regardless of gender, due to criminal activity. In other countries, locals advised women that going out at night was not favourable or dangerous for women. The choice to do so was also dependent on their sense of safety and previous harassment experiences at the destination. Whether they ultimately decide to go out or not, it is something women have debated and thought about to a certain extent.

"Some countries get dark pretty early. Do you still travel in the evening then? In general, I do think about how and what."

— Nicole

Am I alone? Is it necessary? Did I feel safe during the day? What is the general travel advice? What did locals tell me about safety at night? Were there any women in public spaces? Are the streets well-lit? Did I experience any catcalling or other harassment at this destination? This is a glimpse of the list of questions women, subconsciously, use to decide if they go out or not. The avoidance of nighttime and spatial restraints can be perceived as a gender performance aligned with dominant gender norms. However, a few women challenged idea by walking alone at night when they felt more confident, and they felt safe in that environment. For example, Anouk explained that in Sydney, Australia, she would walk around alone at night very often during her stay. Similarly, Sophie stated that even though she might feel a bit uncomfortable walking alone at night, this never stopped her from doing so.

X: "Have you ever had moments, like you said earlier, when you felt unsafe when you were walking alone on the street, that you did not go outside at night?"

"No, I have never done that. No, it is not really my style to then not go out."

— Sophie

Even though she acknowledges the possibility of feeling unsafe when going out at night, she does not let this fear limit her behaviour, resisting traditional gender norms that restrict women's mobility. Some women tended to avoid going out at night unless with others, others made their decision depending on their perceptions of safety, experiences with harassment in that destination, and the context.

Bowman (1993) argued that street harassment restricts a woman's mobility and freedom of movement, preventing women from having liberty in the public sphere. Women in this study experience the same spatial restraint while travelling, being forced out of public spaces at night. The avoidance of the dark when travelling alone and the limited mobility have also been found in other studies on the female travel experience (Osman et al., 2020; Seow & Brown, 2018; Wilson & Little, 2008). Women who avoided going out are aware that spaces, especially at night, can become masculine and unsafe as women's presence is policed. In certain regions of countries, going out at all at night can be seen as crossing the line of what is considered appropriate femininity, inviting harassment as a way of control to limit women's presence in public spaces.

"I always limit my alcohol consumption" - Alcohol Intake

Lastly, for multiple young women in this study, going out at night with friends to places where alcohol is consumed is part of their travel experience. However, all of them shared that if they went out and consumed alcohol, they consciously thought about their alcohol intake, drinking less than they normally would in the Netherlands. Reducing the amount of alcohol one drinks is a common strategy to avoid unwanted attention in the night-time economy and reduce feelings vulnerability (Gunby et al., 2019; Quigg et al., 2020). Sarah explains that the reason for limiting her alcohol intake is to stay present, as losing control would make her an easier target.

"Yes, I also drank less alcohol, indeed, because you think I need to stay mentally present. You do not want to be completely out of it; that does not seem smart. Then you are really more of an easy target if they see you can barely stand."

— Sarah

Women explained that they lessened their consumption of alcohol to stay in control over their own bodies and wanted to prevent being seen as a target. Moreover, women mentioned they would guard their drinks to avoid spiking and made sure they saw their drinks getting made and handed to them, not accepting drinks from strangers.

"I never accept drinks. I would always hold my beer bottle like this, with a thumb over the opening."

— Yara

Thus, women would drink less when going out in foreign spaces than at home in order to stay in control. Fileborn (2016) found that young adults limit alcohol intake to maintain bodily control and autonomy to feel safe while going out. Similarly, women in this study feel safe while going out by maintaining control over their own bodies, which would be compromised through excessive drinking. Given the victim-blaming narratives surrounding alcohol consumption prior to being harassed (Weiss, 2010), it is not surprising that women like to feel in control over their alcohol consumption. Implicit in the statement of Sarah is that you are at least partially responsible if you get drunk and harassed, as you made yourself an 'easier target'. Moreover, Fileborn's (2016) argument that in the night-time economy familiarity of the people and the venue produces a sense of safety is also relevant in this context. The lack of being with friends and in a familiar venue might contribute to an over-dependence on limiting alcohol consumption to produce a sense of safety. Many women mentioned that, although they went out with friends while travelling, they did not know them well enough to be confident that these friends would help them in times of distress.

The Automatic Nature of Safety Work

Women's safety work is largely anticipatory, carried out before any harassment occurs. Women have grown accustomed to changing their movements and behaviour in order to avoid experiencing any form of harassment. Drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity, I argue that many of these safety strategies women employ have become habitual, ingrained responses to their internalised feelings of vulnerability. These performative acts, such as avoiding certain areas, changing dressing style, or limiting alcohol intake, are repeated over and over throughout time as so they appear natural. I also noticed this through the fact that many women struggled with specifically naming strategies they performed to feel safe in public spaces in interviews. It has become a routine which, to a certain extent, they do not consciously think about anymore. Furthermore, it was not rare for women in this study to talk about safety work as 'common sense'. Walking through dark alleys or walking alone at night was often not mentioned by women until I specifically asked, since it is 'just common sense'.

"If you just use your common sense, the chance of ending up in a truly unsafe situation is quite small."

— Jasmijn

"But if you ultimately use your common sense, you'll get pretty far."

— *Carlijn*

Women describing their safety work as common sense disguises the gendered nature of safety work. This 'common sense' is shaped by experiences of harassment throughout their lives combined with societal discourses that position women as responsible for preventing harassment from happening (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Consequently, safety work is often overlooked by others, but also by women themselves, rendering it invisible. Multiple women did not realise how much safety work they performed until the point of the interview. The same occurred in the study of Ison et al. (2024), which focused on women's safety work while using public transport. Summing up all their strategies and thought processes made women in the study see the extent of their safety work. Answering questions about how the women in my study changed their behaviour or movement was therefore often a hard question to answer, because how can you know if it has become natural?

"Yes, I think so. Yes, and well, an interview like this helps me remember all the things I already do to feel safer. A lot of what I have just said, I do not usually think about at all."

— *Femke*

"And I also notice now that I find it very difficult to answer your questions because I think that many things have just been learned over the years and become subconscious, both through different travel experiences and simply through living as a woman. Anywhere. It just happens very subconsciously, and I do not always reflect on it."

— *Yara*

"Yes, I think it happens unconsciously. Because here, too, I do not walk through alleys in places where I am not familiar. So, I think it happens automatically that I do not walk there. No, it just happens automatically. It is not like I consciously think, 'Oh, this is an alley, I cannot walk through here.' No, it really just happens automatically."

— *Layla*

Even though it happens mostly subconsciously, "women have developed a highly attuned sense of their environment and those within it" (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020, p.226). It is a skill they have developed throughout their lifetime to navigate public spaces and not common sense. In this study, many women found the best advice for solo female travelling to be 'listen to your gut'. Indeed, Holt and Lewis (2023) found that 'gut feelings' played a central role in women's stories about safety and danger, influencing their safety precautions. However, I argue this gut feeling is highly trained throughout women's lives, sensing environmental or social cues when something feels 'wrong' or 'off'. Many solo female travellers listened to and acted upon their gut feelings, even better than in the Netherlands.

“That is more of a vibe you get from someone. I firmly believe that if you meet someone and your gut feeling tells you not to trust them, then I do not trust that person either. I just do not trust it. I pay a lot of attention to that. I really go with my gut feeling.”

— *Layla*

“Above all, trust your instincts, your gut feeling, it says everything.”

— *Lotte*

The problem with the invisibility of safety work is that some women may report never feeling unsafe, because they undertake all this safety work that has become ‘common sense’ for them (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). It is very similar to what was discussed in Chapter 4: women express not being worried about their safety before travelling solo because they had already taken precautions. Similarly, some women in this study said they never felt unsafe while travelling while engaging in several safety strategies that involved changing their behaviour and limiting their movement. Moreover, I argue that while safety strategies are performative acts that reinforce traditional gender norms, they simultaneously can be seen as tools that enable women to assert agency and independence. Multiple women expressed that employing safety strategies makes them more confident navigating these spaces, regaining a sense of security. I argue these safety strategies can almost be thought of as a ‘toolbox’, which women mentally store and use as needed when they feel vulnerable. However, even when women do not always explicitly recognise this, this toolbox is developed through lived experiences and safety advice that place the responsibility of negotiating harassment and danger on women (Phadke, 2010).

Conclusion

This chapter has given an overview of women’s safety work and shown that public spaces are not equally accessible to women and are thus gendered. Women’s safety work can be seen as a response to their feelings of vulnerability and uneasy in public space while reinforcing dominant gender norms. Vigilance, male or female companionship, modifying public behaviour, changing physical appearance, spatial constraints, and alcohol intake are all tied to the gendered risk of sexual violence that women face in public spaces. Over time, a large part of these behaviours has become automatic, instinctual behaviours that women engage in when they feel vulnerable. They have come to internalise the idea that these behaviours are just part of what it means to navigate public spaces and are thus thought of as ‘common sense’.

However, particularly male companionship, lying about having a boyfriend, and changing clothing brought out stronger critique and reflection from women. Women understood the deeper social implications of these behaviours: needing men for safety or being responsible for others’ behaviours through the way they dress. Consequently, these strategies create an internal conflict for many women. They recognise they should not have to employ these strategies, but they still feel compelled to do so because of the real-world risks of gendered violence and internalised victim-blaming narratives. As such, some of these behaviours also are sites for resistance, they are not passively reproducing dominant gender norms but feel like they cannot completely escape the behavior in order to feel safe. Solo female travellers are thus faced with this dilemma of either

challenging traditional gender norms or prioritising their safety in a world where gendered violence is a real risk.

I argue that one possible explanation for this difference in eliciting critique is that some of the safety strategies, like vigilance, walking confidently, sticking with female friends, or moderating alcohol intake, can feel like safety strategies that allow women to access public spaces on their own terms and have control over their own safety. Even though they are still rooted in traditional gender norms, they create a sense of agency. In contrast, relying on male protection, lying about having a boyfriend, or changing clothing does not provide the same feeling of independence. It reminds them how men are more respected than women, that their own 'no' might not be respected, or how they cannot wear what they want to wear because of others' judgment. These strategies do not feel self-determined but rather imposed upon them, and more directly highlight gender inequality. Even though women felt the former group of these strategies were seen as practical and providing a sense of control, they still exist within the same framework of gendered expectations where women must constantly navigate harassment and safety.

6. Experiencing Harassment - A Continuum of Sexual Violence

Despite women's safety work, the occurrence of harassment remains a reality. The efforts of women, unfortunately, do not eliminate the possibility of encountering harassment. Almost all women, except for two, expressed experiencing at least one form of harassment, if not multiple throughout their travels. Furthermore, for the majority of women, the frequency and intensity with which they experienced street harassment abroad was either comparable or higher than in the Netherlands. Many women experience these instances as either annoying, uneasy, or unsafe. However, an underlying thread of normalising and downplaying harassment shines through throughout the interviews with solo female travellers. Moreover, women must decide how to respond to the harassment they encounter, which ranges from avoidant to confrontational responses based on their personal risk assessment.

In analysing women's experiences of harassment, this chapter draws on Kelly's continuum of sexual violence. It presents a conceptual lens through which to understand the varying forms of harassment women experience, from more subtle and everyday forms of violence to more overt acts of violence, showing their interconnectedness. Additionally, the continuum allows for exploring perceptions, differences, and similarities in how women experience harassment while acknowledging that women's emotional responses and the impact of harassment cannot be deduced from the form of harassment. The division of the forms of harassment in this chapter is based on the broader categorisation of harassment present in the literature: non-verbal, verbal, and physical (Anwar et al., 2019), Amanee's (2022) categorisation of harassment experiences, as well as women's personal accounts of harassment.

In this chapter, I will base my analysis on the lived experiences of solo female travellers to shed light on the various forms of sexual harassment women encounter and their immediate responses while navigating public and [semi-]public spaces abroad. After the exploration of women's experiences with harassment, the narrative of normalisation and downplaying of harassment will be discussed.

The Multifaceted Nature of Street Harassment

Non-Verbal Harassment

"You feel the eyes glued to you as you walk by" - Staring

Walking down the street while a strange pair of eyes follows you around. Many solo female travellers expressed encountering stares from strangers while abroad. Women often distinguished between two ways of being looked at: with curiosity or in a disturbing and sexual manner. As explained by Carlijn, the former was felt as a consequence of standing out in certain countries due to her Western appearance, white skin, or blond hair.

"Of course, I am very blonde, so that already stands out a lot to people in Asia. So, you did get looked at because of that."

— Carlijn

They often interpreted these stares as a result of being a tourist, Western, or physically different, rather than being tied to their gender. When women with Caucasian features went to Australia, Canada, or various countries in Europe, they did not experience any staring as they 'blended in'. However, this type of staring did not bother them, as opposed to the disturbing stares they got from male strangers in public spaces. Women explained that they could sense when a man was staring at them in an unpleasant way by "the look in a man's eyes" (Yara). It felt different from being looked at with curiosity, and made women feel uneasy. Lotte and Carlijn recalled walking down the street in various countries and examining the stares of male strangers, trying to discover their intentions.

"I was also in Tulum, which is a somewhat larger tourist city, but also more of a criminal city, in a sense. A bit more of people standing still, waiting, looking around, and then you walk by, and there is nothing else nearby. And then, yeah, it is kind of an instinctual feeling, like, is he looking at you in an unpleasant way or in a friendly way?"

— Lotte

"And I think, in terms of interaction with people, it is often a certain kind of look in men's eyes. [...] And sometimes you can just see that they are looking at you in a genuinely dirty, desirous way, and you just think, oh no, you really want something from me."

— Carlijn

I recognise what both women are describing here as the so-called 'male gaze' (Sullivan et al., 2010), a form of looking, staring, or ogling that facilitates objectification and sexualization of women (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). As explained by Quinn (2002), the gaze becomes a way for men to assert power and control over women, reducing them to sexual objects. Even though Lotte and Carlijn did not explicitly address experiencing the male gaze in a sexualising and objectifying way, it is clear they understand its layered connotations, as evidenced by the unease they often felt while being stared at and the description of the gaze being "dirty" or "desirous" (Carlijn). This feeling of unease is not rare, as other studies have found the male gaze triggers feelings of conspicuousness, shame, fright, and anxiety in women (Wilson & Little, 2008; Roy & Bailey, 2021).

Although none of the women expressed feeling shame or fright when being stared at, they did feel anxious or were worried that staring would escalate into other forms of harassment.

"The looks we got. It was just very unpleasant, and you really felt like we should not stay here too long because then bad things might happen."

— *Suzanne*

Suzanne explains in the quote above why she feels worried by the looks of strange men, as the staring feels like the beginning of something 'bad' happening. Analysing this through the lens of the continuum of sexual violence reveals that more common forms of harassment, such as staring, can escalate into more severe acts of sexual violence and can thus be seen as part of a larger pattern, or so to speak, continuum, of sexual violence. And women, as the quote suggests, recognise that staring can be the first step into more overt behaviours. Besides being stared at while walking outside, multiple women experienced staring, or rather ogling, while going out in bars or clubs with friends. Anouk shares how strange men in the club often stared at her while she was going out in Australia, which eventually led to men imposing themselves on her.

"There were a few guys who did not really dance but just stood on the side watching you like that or eventually came up to you and started imposing themselves a bit."

— *Anouk*

Many women, however, told me they would not describe this type of staring as harassment. They explained that being stared at while going out caused feelings of annoyance and frustration, but not fear, as they expect the unwelcome staring after having experience in the night-time economy. Moreover, like Anouk, most women went out with other male or female travellers, which offered a form of protection, as opposed to stares encountered in the streets. I noticed that women described staring in clubs as normal and part of nightlife, as this is something they also experience in the Netherlands when going out. This aligns with existing literature, which argues that bars and clubs are highly [hetero-]sexualised spaces in which harassment is common and normalised (Gunby et al., 2019; Nicholls, 2017). Even though women described staring as relatively trivial, they recognised and experienced how this form of harassment can shade into different forms of sexual violence, as shown in the quotes from Suzanne and Anouk.

Verbal Invasion of Personal Space

Verbal harassment was the most common form of harassment women encountered during their travels. It ranged from catcalling, such as name-calling or whistling, to sexualised comments made at a woman in passing, to unwanted conversations, in which men persistently engage in contact with a woman despite her showing no interest. The idea that harassment contributes to a hostile social environment for women, as suggested in the literature (Walton & Pederson, 2021), is also evident in my study through the unease and discomfort women expressed about constantly being approached by strange men. Moreover, while catcalling almost exclusively took place in the street, the unwanted sexualised conversations took place in the streets, hostels, and clubs.

"Hey, you pretty lady!" - Catcalling

The women I spoke with recalled being catcalled or receiving obscene comments while walking down the street in several countries during their travels. The majority of women remembered at least one instance in which they had encountered some form of catcalling. However, it was hard for them to remember the exact words or phrases used by these strangers. Usually, it is obvious that men comment on their physical appearance or attractiveness. Noor explains she does not remember word for word what was said, but it was something slightly inappropriate.

"I cannot remember anyone shouting really nasty things or anything like that, more maybe slightly inappropriate things or something like that."

— *Noor*

Some women attributed the forgetting to the fact that these comments and calls with sexual innuendo took place in foreign languages, unknown to them. Still, women recognised it as catcalling through non-verbal cues, such as the tone of the speaker's voice, their demeanour, or the look in their eyes, even if they did not understand the words being said. This highlights how women experience verbal harassment not just through language, but also through context and delivery, making it more than just a comment. Usually, these women recall the general setting of them walking down the street and being faced with 'typical' phrases, as Carlijn explained:

"In the South of Thailand, we walked around in the evening to go out for dinner. So at a certain point, we were walking down the street in the evening and there were indeed men calling 'you pretty lady' for example, those kinds of remarks happened more often."

— *Carlijn*

The ordinary nature and frequency of catcalling, as reflected in the quote above, was a recurring theme in several conversations I had with women. While a few women shared they did not recall being catcalled, others described experiencing it daily or in almost every country they visited. The list of countries in which Femke recalled experiencing some form of catcalling highlights its frequent occurrence.

"I think I experienced catcalling in every country. It happened in France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. I experienced it in the Czech Republic, Germany, Slovenia, Slovakia, Croatia and Poland. In every country, it was some form of catcalling."

— *Femke*

I interpret this variation as more than simply suggesting catcalling happens only to some and not to others, but rather that it may be experienced, interpreted, or remembered in different ways. Both Jasmijn and Sophie shared with me that it might be possible they did not consciously register, and thus remember, catcalling as they are so unbothered by it. It is possible some women have become desensitised to it throughout time, while others remain more aware of it, being able to give me examples. This is not to say that women who said they did not experience catcalling did, but rather that this might be one possible explanation of the high variation in responses when it comes to catcalling. Overall, even when remembered, women expressed not being severely bothered by it. They described catcalling as 'laughable', 'annoying', 'unpleasant but tolerable', or

'mildly discomforting', as can be seen in the quotes below. The emotional responses to these comments were generally low, meaning they did not provoke high levels of distress or discomfort. As a result, women often saw catcalling as insignificant and dismissible, steering away from calling it [sexual] harassment.

"I wouldn't even really know exactly what. But nothing, I mean, more things that you can just laugh about. Nothing insulting or really bad or anything. At least, not that I can remember."

— *Noor*

"Yes, in every country, there was catcalling. It is more common in southern countries for people to come closer, yeah. But that does not necessarily have to be something unpleasant. I find it annoying when I have made it clear that I do not want it, and they keep going."

— *Femke*

In contrast, a few women shared that catcalling served as a reminder of their vulnerability to other forms of sexual violence. This is a known immediate psychological effect of street harassment (Thornton et al., 2023) and supports Kelly's continuum of violence, which emphasises how different forms of harassment are interconnected and reinforce a culture of fear. The act of catcalling made a few women feel 'on edge' or increased their attentiveness to safety. Moreover, when the harasser persists, as explained by Femke, it does evoke feelings of discomfort and distress. Similarly, Yara found one experience of catcalling particularly uncomfortable and distressing due to its high frequency. This suggests that stronger feelings of discomfort and anxiety were only provoked in cases where the frequency of catcalling went beyond the threshold of what a woman considered to be 'normal'. In the case of Yara, she explained she is used to sexualised remarks, sounds, and noises to a certain extent while travelling abroad. However, the intensity and frequency in León, Nicaragua, was something she had not experienced before.

"But in Granada and in León, especially in León, it was so intense that I was constantly being catcalled when I walked alone. And I had actually never experienced it like that before while travelling. Just really, every time I walked down the street, and actually every- this is probably a huge exaggeration, of course, but in my experience, almost every man I came across would whistle, try to talk to me, say something, or shout something. To some extent of course you experience it everywhere, but this was really extreme."

— *Yara*

The intensity of catcalling was new for her, making her feel unsafe while walking in public. The extreme matter of catcalling made her feel tense in her stomach and body, and as a result, she decided it was unsafe for her to be walking outside alone. She explains this is not how she always feels in response to catcalling, but "just there because it happened so often". Yara's experience demonstrates how behaviours often deemed 'insignificant', such as catcalling, can add up over time, reinforcing their impact. The severity of verbal harassment is not fixed. As suggested by Kelly (1988), the harm and impact of this behaviour cannot simply be deducted from the form of

harassment; context and repetition significantly influence a woman's experience. In line with this argument, Nicole spoke very dismissive and unaffectedly about singular and isolated events of catcalling during her travels to various countries, hardly remembering any details of the situation. However, in Suriname, she had experienced whistles and comments with a higher frequency than in any other country, which made her bring up this experience during the interview.

"Actually, I do not really mind it [catcalling] that much, I make a joke out of it. [...] In Suriname, you really got whistled at a lot and shouted after, that does give you a bit of an unsafe feeling."

— *Nicole*

Catcalling tends to create discomfort or annoyance within these women without a sense of threat, if the amount of catcalling is seen as 'tolerable', as we saw in Yara's experience. Noa explains she has learned throughout her lifetime that, in general, catcalling stays just that, a catcall that does not escalate into anything else. Women know this type of behaviour, know how to respond, and know the chance of something else happening when they walk away is small. However, when the behaviour becomes 'abnormal' due to high frequency or persistence, it becomes intimidating. Listening to women's stories on their harassment experiences, I also derived that the physical distance from the harasser and the shortness of the interaction due to movement lessen the overall impact catcalling has on their sense of safety. Multiple women expressed that as long as the harasser stays in their place and keeps their distance, it is not threatening. However, this changes when men harass women with sexual questions or unwanted conversation, as then women must deal with more prolonged and direct verbal intrusions of personal space.

"Can I have your phone number?" - Unwanted Conversations and Intrusive Questions

Women experience unwanted conversations and intrusive questions as a more purposeful and direct form of verbal harassment. The physical proximity of the male stranger makes it harder to remove themselves from the conversation and avoid confrontation. Solo female travellers have come across many variations of this type of harassment: attempts to chat despite showing no interest, questions that invade personal boundaries, and small talk transforming into suggestive conversations. I would like to start with an experience shared by Noor in which she was approached by a male stranger on the beach that encompasses all three elements.

"I was on vacation in Thailand, and I was somewhere on one of the beaches or something, and I was also alone. I was swimming in the sea, and there was another tourist there. I think he was German or Swiss or something. He just started making small talk with me. [...] He started asking things like, 'Where are you staying? What are you doing tonight?' At some point, I thought, okay, these questions are starting to feel very specific. Then he started telling me all about his sexual preferences and asked if I wanted to come by his place that evening. He said we could have a nice time together. And I was just thinking, I really have no interest in this. I do not even know why you are telling me this. I also have a boyfriend. And he said, 'Yeah, but your boyfriend does not have to know. We can just have fun and enjoy ourselves.'"

— *Noor*

At first, Noor sees no harm in another tourist approaching her to engage in small talk. However, when he starts asking questions about her accommodation and plans, she starts to get uncomfortable. This increases even more when he, without any invitation or indication that she is interested, starts talking about his sexual preferences. This encounter happened on the beach, but women told me they had to deal with intrusive questions about their relationship status, the location of their accommodation, their phone numbers, or plans in various public spaces. Moreover, men would persistently request to go out with them, comment on their attractiveness, and continue conversations of a similar nature, while women had expressed disinterest. Even though women did not explicitly state that these comments and conversations were objectifying and sexualizing, the sole focus on their physical appearance or sexual availability, something they recognised, along with the discomfort they expressed, strongly suggests a sexualizing and objectifying dynamic of these interactions (Baptist & Coburn, 2019). For instance, when a male stranger approached her, Nicole was very much aware of the fact that the interaction was focused on her physical appearance.

"Yeah, that man was probably somewhere in his 50s, I think. He said, 'You are such a beautiful woman, you have beautiful eyes, and I see you are wearing a ring.' So that man immediately scans me, judging me entirely on my appearance. 'Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?'"

— *Nicole*

Yara and Laura also shared having experience with taxi drivers asking intrusive questions regarding their phone numbers or relationship status. The driver would engage in flirting behaviour by complimenting a woman's appearance or trying to get their phone numbers at the end of the ride. These interactions made Yara feel very uncomfortable due to the inability to remove herself from the situation, in contrast to unwanted conversations on the street. Laura explained that she did check on her phone if the driver was driving in the right direction after he made such comments, feeling a bit uneasy, but this quickly disappeared when she found out he was bringing her to the requested location. Similarly, sexualised social interactions in hostels made a bigger impact on women as they felt like they could not go anywhere else. It is their place of accommodation, and if the person stays in the same hostel, they will keep running into them.

"I thought he just kept asking annoying questions like, 'Do you have a boyfriend? Do you want to go out to eat with me?' [...]. One time, I was sitting in the common area, and he came over with two beers, as if I had asked to drink a beer with him. I just did not touch that beer at all. That really made me feel a lot less safe, actually."

— *Femke*

It is super important for women to feel safe at their hostel, as they express this is often something they look out for when booking one. When harassment occurs in their hostel, this sense of security in their place to sleep is taken away, as expressed by Femke. I believe that the focus on camaraderie and the general expectation to be open to social interaction in hostels can blur the lines between harassment and 'just being social'. I also saw this expectation to be open to social interaction with other travellers in women's stories. In several cases, other male travellers bothered women with personal questions and persistent conversation. Women often initially

engage in conversations with other travellers who approach them due to a perceived similarity of both being travellers. However, when they give cues of disengagement and the male persists in conversation, it creates discomfort due to its pressuring nature.

“I was just walking around alone, and there was also a Western guy travelling. He spoke to me and said, 'Are you travelling too?' I said yes, and then you have a bit of a conversation and at first, you think, 'Oh, nice.' But at some point, it became uncomfortable because he wanted too much, like more than I wanted.”

—*Jasmijn*

Besides the verbal invasion of space, the male traveller also physically stays with Jasmijn, not wanting to leave without her. For many women, the physical invasion of their personal space is a clear violation and crosses a line, more so than the forms of harassment discussed up to this point. Verbal forms of harassment do create feelings of unsafety and discomfort in women, but this is highly dependent on context and persistence. When I asked whether women had felt unsafe at any point during their travels, those who had experienced male strangers physically invading their personal space first brought up these encounters before anything else.

Physical Invasion of Personal Space

Even though less common, multiple women said they experienced a form of physical intrusion of personal space on top of other harassment experiences discussed before. Here, I included the range of behaviours in which a stranger physically intrudes on a woman's personal and private space, with or without direct physical contact. This entails that forms of harassment in which the harasser's physical presence or body is used as a main tactic to intimidate women are also included in this section. More so than any other form of harassment, the physical invasion of personal space evoked feelings of unease, fear, and unsafety.

“They followed you right up to the doorstep” - Following

Multiple women expressed being followed for a certain amount of time while walking outside alone. Even though following is perceived to be a less common form of harassment (Fleetwood, 2019; Brockschmidt & Wadey, 2021), one-third of the women I spoke to mentioned having experienced being followed during their travels. Existing studies show that following, either on foot or in a vehicle, can be seen as a prolonged form of harassment that might last for several minutes (Osmond & Woodcock, 2015; Hutson & Krueger, 2018), which was also experienced by women in this study. Besides the prolonged nature of following, women also expressed that following was particularly intimidating, more so than 'just' being catcalled, as you are not able to remove yourself from the situation. Both Lotte and Femke told me about this categorisation they had in mind, agreeing that following was scarier than catcalling. Similarly, other women explained that if verbal harassment were to transform into or be accompanied by following, they would feel intimidated or scared.

"I think it becomes intimidating when they actually start following you, or will not leave you alone. If they just leave you alone after waving, smiling, and talking, and let you walk on, then it is just uncomfortable. But if they start walking with me or actually touch me, then it does become really intimidating. [...] Yes, I have experienced someone following me, but only a few times, not very often."

— *Lotte*

"I have not had someone actually chase after me, because then I would immediately feel unsafe."

— *Femke*

Most women, like Noa and Suzanne, as shown below, reported feeling unsafe, threatened, or intimidated when being followed. However, Laura expressed she did not find the instance of following threatening, rather 'annoying'. She attributed the lack of feeling vulnerable or afraid to not having any bad past experiences, and a mentality "to fight them off". To understand this difference, Kelly's continuum is particularly useful as it acknowledges variation in individual experiences. While one woman may not perceive following as particularly threatening due to her personality and past experiences, another might be deeply unsettled by it. However, this difference in perception does not mean following is not part of the continuum. It underscores how experiences of harassment exist on a spectrum, affecting all women differently.

"And the other time was when I was followed for a good 20 minutes by a man in Rome. I even tried that trick of walking in a circle, but he just kept following me. So, then you start walking faster and faster, and in the end, just as I passed the street, I was able to dive into my hostel. But that was really scary."

— *Noa*

"We were just on the street, we were hungry, so we went to the store. And it was already evening, that is true. But looking back, you are better off not going down that street at night. Yeah, and also, when we were walking at first, we hadn't taken a taxi yet, but at some point, bigger groups started following us, and then we felt like, this is really not okay. So, we went into a shop and did not come out until a taxi was there."

— *Suzanne*

Following seems to be particularly threatening due to a feeling of being unable to escape. In instances of catcalling, staring, or unwanted conversation, the woman is often able to walk away or keep walking, leaving the harasser behind. However, in these instances, the harasser deliberately chooses to follow these women and walking faster or changing routes does not guarantee getting rid of them. Additionally, women express the act of following to be particularly frightening as it signals being targeted for a specific reason, namely, for it to escalate into physical forms of sexual harassment. Hutson and Krueger (2018) argue that following in a vehicle adds another dimension of power, physically and psychologically, as the harasser can quickly close the distance or block paths. Both Suzanne and Sarah described feeling unsafe after being followed by men in a vehicle at night, experiencing this added dimension of power and, consequently, vulnerability.

"Yeah, at one point, I was staying in a different hostel than my friends, the girls I had met along the way. Their hostel was on this street, and mine was here, and I had to walk back through an alley to get to my hostel. During the day, it was fine, but sometimes I would come back late, and then it suddenly felt like a really unpleasant alley. I always walked because it was only a 5-minute walk. But one time, a scooter with two guys on it passed by, and they yelled things at me as they rode by, and then at the end of the street, they turned around again. And then I really thought, okay, I hope nothing happens now because I am completely alone, and there is really nothing I can do. I was a little scared, but fortunately, they just yelled something and drove off."
— *Suzanne*

"I do remember one time, when we were walking down the street a bit later in the evening, I thought, yeah, I am just not going to do this anymore. I do not remember exactly what happened, but there was a lot of talking and yelling, and yeah, just slowly riding next to you, I find that unpleasant too, then I think, what are you going to do?"
— *Sarah*

As discussed above, in both quotes, it becomes clear Suzanne and Sarah fear following might escalate into other forms of violence, asking themselves, 'what do you want?'. Fortunately, in both cases, the harasser drives off, but that does not prevent these women from feeling truly fearful in the moment.

"I felt trapped" - Physical Intimidation

Another way in which men physically invaded women's personal spaces is when men tried blocking a woman's path with their bodies, trying to cage her in. In Ecuador, Yara experienced a male stranger, who had previously already harassed her in a different context with verbal comments, trying to kiss her at the entrance of her hostel late at night. In Rome, Noa experienced being cornered by a male stranger when she left a shop in the street on her own.

"And really, it felt like he came out of nowhere, and yeah, it was just dark there, and my friends had just brought me home, so yeah, what more can you do, you know? Then he just, yeah, tried to grab me in some way, and that was really awful. I started running into the hostel, and luckily, I had a private room with my friend, so I was really lucky with that. I could just lock my door from the inside."
— *Yara*

"This was not great either, but one time I walked out of a little shop, just around the corner, and a man suddenly put his hand against the wall so I couldn't walk any further, bam, standing right in front of me. And then he said to me, 'I go home with you,' or something along those lines."
— *Noa*

The experience of Yara shows how different forms of sexual violence can intersect and overlap (Kelly, 1988). She explained she had had multiple encounters with this male stranger up until this point. He started with staring, sexualised comments, and even entered the communal area in her hostel to talk to her. Eventually, one night, this escalated into following and physical intimidation.

Both Yara and Noa found that these experiences represent the most severe and intense experiences of harassment they encountered while travelling, reporting fear, panic, and shock. Yara even partly reported feeling self-blame as she split up with her friend, and this was 'not smart'. However, she also acknowledges that some male friends dropped her off at the entrance of her hostel, and she did everything 'right' in a sense. This highlights how she has internalised the idea that women are responsible for managing their own safety and that, if something happens, they are to blame. Yet, when discussing the experience with friends afterwards, she recognises that it was not her fault. Like Yara's experience, Noor felt really scared when a male stranger, who was part of the hostel staff, tried to enter her private room multiple times.

"But there was one time, I was staying in a hostel. [...]. But the person who was managing the hostel, or the manager or something, kept coming to my room. I had a small room, and it was really tiny; you could barely fit a bed in it, and the door could barely open. He tried to come in, and then he would push on the door, and that was really scary."

— *Noor*

The feeling of fear and panic in these situations comes from the understanding that the physical intimidation or blocking one's path is not the end goal, the men likely have an ulterior motive. Women know these strange men intended to inappropriately touch or kiss them, which, in their eyes, would have happened had they not defended themselves. Moreover, the threat felt by these women when being physically intimidated is also explained by the physical proximity and build of the male stranger that makes women feel trapped.

"If I really cannot leave, then I feel genuinely unsafe. I always have this idea in my head that there are still ten other outcomes, like how it could still go or what could still change. But if you are just somewhere where you cannot leave, I find that really scary."

— *Noor*

Previous research has also shown that the inability to escape instils fear in women in harassment situations (Day, 1999; Hutson & Krueger, 2018).

"I think I was drugged" - Drink Spiking

One woman, Carlijn, expressed that she believed she was drugged when she went out with other travellers she met in Thailand. Although she could not be certain, her experience and story strongly suggest she was drugged against her will. She went out with a group of Dutch travellers and recalls drinking a beer with a weird taste, but as she got the drink herself and watched it getting opened, she did not think anything was wrong at the time.

“At one point, I had a beer in my hand, and I literally said to a girl, 'Hey, this beer does not taste good.' And when I think back now, I think that if you say that, you should leave the beer. At that moment, I did not do that because I thought, 'Well, I got this beer myself. I got it at the bar. I saw it being opened.' So, in theory, there should not have been anything wrong with it. [...] And at some point, I blacked out. I have no idea. Because I woke up in my hostel bed the next morning, that is for sure. But I was only wearing the shorts from that night. I did not have my top on, I did not have my underwear on, and I had thrown up. [...] But because I did not have any underwear on either, I started to panic a lot at one point. Like, did someone do something in a sexual way?”

— *Carlijn*

The strange taste, blackout, and memory loss highly suggest she was drugged. As she explains, when she woke up, she was worried and panicked that someone had taken advantage of her. Luckily, the hostel she stayed at had security cameras, and the footage showed that she got home with another girl who stayed in the same room, which dissolved this anxiety. Afterwards, she felt very vulnerable and anxious when going out, as she no longer trusted the ‘friends’ she had met while travelling. They had left her and later explained that they thought she could ‘fend for herself’, likely suggesting she can handle alcohol well, because she was from Brabant [a province in the Netherlands]. Moreover, Carlijn felt that she was to blame, at least to a certain extent, as she drank her beer while acknowledging it tasted weird and she ‘should have known better’. It reflects the internalisation of the victim-blaming narrative when it comes to alcohol intake, as discussed in Chapter 5.

“He just grabbed my butt out of nowhere” - Unwanted Touching

A few women experienced being touched against their will while travelling. I noticed that unwanted physical touch was often seen by women as very severe, since multiple women expressed being relieved and lucky that they did not experience anyone physically touching them. Nicole and Femke shared that they were touched or grabbed by the arm by locals, which they saw as crossing personal boundaries but not threatening, as the act did not have a sexual undertone. In contrast, a few women mentioned they had been groped, meaning strange men touched their intimate areas. This was interpreted and seen as an act of sexual harassment by them.

“One time in Vietnam, we were out somewhere, and I was wearing a skirt because it was really hot there. Then a man just put his hand under my skirt three times, even though I did not know him at all. I do not think you just do something like that out of nowhere.”

— *Suzanne*

“And then someone came, kind of, I was just walking, I do not know exactly how to describe it, but he sort of came under my armpits with his arms. I was just walking, and then he just started squeezing my breast.”

— *Yara*

Both women describe being touched by strange men who randomly walk by and with whom they had not even made eye contact. Suzanne and Yara described the groping as 'uncomfortable' and 'weird' as they cannot grasp why someone would feel entitled to touch them out of the blue. They explained they did not feel unsafe because they were with friends, and the harasser tended to disappear in the crowd after. Rather, they felt like their personal boundaries were violated. The initial emotional reaction of these women is often shock, followed by frustration or anger. I noticed that all three women experienced being groped by men in crowded areas, while in general, women said they feared isolated areas more, as discussed in Chapter 4. This could explain why the incidents of physical intimidation described above had a bigger emotional impact on women, as they were alone and isolated. The contradiction I observed between physical touch being perceived as the most severe form of harassment and instances of physical intimidation evoking the highest sense of fear and vulnerability shows the impact and importance of contextual factors in women's experiences.

Normalisation and Trivialisation of Harassment

Much of the literature that focuses on gendered harassment agrees that women's experiences with street harassment are highly normalised in society, rendering it an expected part of entering public space (Chafai, 2020; Cullen-Rosenthal & Fileborn, 2022; Fairchild, 2022; Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). Normalisation often goes hand in hand with minimisation and trivialisation, which can invalidate women's experiences with street harassment by reducing them to 'nothing' and disregarding anything other than the most extreme manifestations of sexual violence (Kelly, 1988; Cullen-Rosenthal & Fileborn, 2022). Some scholars argue that, beyond normalisation rendering 'minor' forms of harassment as invisible, it can also influence women's own perceptions of harassment. According to Cullen-Rosenthal and Fileborn (2022), women might internalise this constant trivialisation and normalisation of harassment, meaning it decreases women's perception of its harm and reduces their inclination to define certain forms of sexual violence as serious, even if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe.

Initially, I did not set out to focus on normalisation or steer my interviews in this direction. However, reflecting on the interviews I conducted, the discussion of normalisation influencing women's sensemaking of their experiences became relevant in my own research. I noticed a few recurrent patterns that hinted at women normalising and downplaying their experiences with harassment. For instance, after a few interviews, I started to notice many women would start an interview by stating they had not experienced harassment, only to later remember several instances which, by definition, would fall under street harassment. For example, Noa did not bring up catcalling throughout the interview, until I specifically asked, to which she responded she forgot about it due to its normalcy.

"Yes, that is actually terrible because now that you mention it, I did experience that [catcalling]. And it is also so standard that I did not even really register it as something that happened."

— *Noa*

This happened in multiple interviews, which made me reflect on how the act of forgetting in itself could be a sign of normalisation. These behaviours can become so 'normal' and 'standard' that

they do not stand out anymore in women's travel experiences, making them easy to forget. As discussed in the section on catcalling, Jasmijn and Sophie also explained that it is possible they do not remember instances of catcalling as they see it as 'normal'. Jasmijn mentioned "it happens to you and then you simply just move on", suggesting it becomes part of everyday life. This made me wonder whether women were truly unaffected by these encounters or if they had become desensitised by them over time because of normalisation. I do not want to suggest that there is a certain way women should feel in response to this kind of behaviour, as women's experiences vary, and harassment impacts everyone in a different way. That being said, as argued by Cullen-Rosenthal and Fileborn (2022), it is possible that normalisation desensitises some women to harassment, while others might refrain from labelling uncomfortable and unsafe experiences as harassment due to the wider trivialisation of these behaviours. For example, Noa expresses how she became less affected by random catcalls over time, suggesting she has become desensitised to catcalling to a certain extent.

"The first time someone catcalls you is a whole different experience than the 25th time someone catcalls you."

— *Noa*

Additionally, women added comments such as 'nothing happened in the end' or 'it ended well' multiple times after telling stories about their experiences with harassment. This took me by surprise as accounts of following or physical intimidation, which clearly made women uncomfortable, were ended with such remarks. This minimisation might be a result of normalisation, as women may have internalised the idea that these encounters are not significant or serious, even when they feel uncomfortable. For instance, Yara recalls a memory of a male bothering her on the beach, not leaving her alone and persisting in conversation. This story came up in response to the question if she ever felt unsafe, but still, she ended her account of this incident with 'nothing happened at all'.

"I did have a situation with that guy once when we were at a beach party a bit farther away from the village, about a half-hour walk along the beach, with some people. On the way there, it felt fine and seemed okay, but then we ran into him on the way back, and he just wouldn't really leave us alone. And so, we were kind of in the middle of nowhere on the beach, and I did think, yeah, this does not feel entirely great. But in the end, nothing happened at all."

— *Yara*

That some women may have internalised the trivialisation of harassment appears to be reflected in these quotes, as I believe they dismiss, at least to a certain extent, their experiences with harassment. Noor also began the interview by saying, "I did not really experience big things or anything", while she had experienced catcalling, unwanted conversation, and following. This tendency to downplay experiences unless it escalated into something physically threatening, which is seen as 'serious' or 'big', was reflected in the stories of more solo female travellers. Some scholars also suggest that minimisation and downplaying can be a way of coping with harassment (Vohlídalová, 2015; Kelly, 1988). By dismissing their experiences, solo female travellers could try to avoid the emotional exhaustion that could come with constantly recognising it as clear violations,

which will also be touched upon in the following chapter. Even though it might be possible for women to downplay their experiences in order to stay unaffected while travelling, only Noor explicitly stated this. She explains that she tries to 'push away' her experiences to keep her travels enjoyable.

"If someone follows me, I do find that very scary. But after a few hours, I can sort of push it away. And because there are so many new impressions around me. If you just repeatedly think, okay, stop thinking about it. You are here now, you have saved up for this, you have made the effort to get here. If you just focus on that every time, then you can suppress it reasonably well, at least that is how I feel."

— *Noor*

The habit to downplay experiences also aligns with the reluctance of some women I spoke with to label encounters as harassment. Cullen-Rosenthal and Fileborn (2022) argue that the construction of harassment as normal and trivial may, in turn, limit women's ability to label their experiences as harassment, as they may not feel justified to do so. Multiple women told me that they did not want to label acts of catcalling or unwanted conversations, examples of highly normalised behaviour in society, as harassment.

"Well, I think a comment like that is still acceptable to me. I mean, it is not pleasant, but there are far worse comments. Technically, it would be street harassment, but I do not really see it that way."

— *Carlijn*

"I was just walking down the street in the evening, you know. And people are just sitting on a bench, and they come and sit next to you to start a conversation. And then they tell you, 'You are exactly what I am looking for in a woman. With someone like you, I really want a relationship.' And I think, well, if I wanted that, I would have walked up to you or gone to a café or something. But I just want to sit here in peace, leave me alone. They did not pick up on the hint. But I do not feel threatened or anything, I just think it is annoying. But because of that, I cannot really say that I was truly harassed, because I do not think that ever happened to me. I find it all more annoying or unpleasant, but not really harassment."

— *Laura*

"I think they see the whole concept of, hmm, yeah, sexual harassment sounds so intense, but I mean like catcalling and that kind of stuff."

— *Yara*

As reflected in their quotes, Carlijn and Laura feel that simply finding something annoying or unpleasant is not 'valid' enough to label something as harassment. Similarly, Yara feels the label of sexual harassment is too extreme for seemingly 'minor' forms of harassment, such as "catcalling and that kind of stuff" (Yara). Their responses suggest a hierarchy of harm, in which less overt forms of harassment are more easily dismissed. Even though women tended to downplay these forms of harassment, they still strategically considered how to respond to them in the moment.

Women's Immediate Responses

Previously, I have touched upon the pre-emptive safety work women take to protect themselves and prevent or minimise encountering street harassment in public spaces. Now, I turn to women's immediate responses when faced with street harassment. While the pre-emptive strategies reflect anticipatory safety work, immediate responses reveal women's real-time negotiation of risk, power, and safety. Much of the existing literature on women's immediate responses distinguishes their reactions in passive and assertive (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fitzgerald et al., 1995; Lennox & Jurdi-Hage, 2016). However, I find framing responses as 'passive' can overlook women's agency in so-called 'passive' strategies and implies they are accepting the behaviour, which is not necessarily the case (Swim & Hyers, 1999). Women may choose to ignore or engage in less confrontational responses not because they are passive, but because they are making strategic choices which are influenced by their assessment of risk, social expectations, and possible consequences. Therefore, I distinguish women's immediate responses as ranging from avoidant to confrontational, in which both responses can be a deliberate, strategic choice.

From Avoidant to Confrontational Responses

The majority of women explained that ignoring or avoiding the harasser was their most used strategy. This was particularly the case when harassment was non-verbal or verbal, as explained by Nicole. Previous research has shown "women may not respond because of social influence pressures to not respond, social pressures against identifying oneself as a feminist, fears of retaliation, or fears of being perceived as impolite or overly aggressive" (Swim & Hyers, 1999, p.69). Indeed, the fear of retaliation and the situation getting even worse was the main reason for women to ignore the harasser.

"Maybe if it is about staring or noticing from a bit of a distance, then you do not really respond."

— *Nicole*

"I personally feel like if I just quietly leave, no one will notice, and then there won't be... then there won't be a spark that could suddenly ignite, you know? Yeah, so I just prefer not to engage with it at all. [...] And also, if they say something to you, just keep your head down and keep walking."

— *Jasmijn*

As catcalling and staring occur from a certain distance, most women continue walking and remove themselves from the situation. Similarly, when women are being followed or men persist in conversation, they would remove themselves from the situation by going into a shop or restaurant.

"And if someone follows me more persistently, I always find that really scary. Then I try to stay around other people. So, I make sure to walk in a busy shopping street or go into a store where there are more people. I actively seek out crowds."

— *Noor*

Multiple women also reported initially saying 'I am not interested' or 'do not touch me' when harassed and would ignore the harasser afterwards if he persisted. This can be seen as a middle ground between an avoidant and confrontational response. Women do want to express disapproval of the behaviour by stating they are not interested or asking them to stop, signalling it is not acceptable. However, by ignoring further persistence, they want to avoid further confrontation, which could make the situation potentially unsafe. Suzanne initially said, "do not touch me", when a male stranger touched her while she was going out with friends. However, after this, she ignored the male stranger as she was not even sure he would understand English.

"I initially did say, 'do not touch me.' But whether they can understand English, you never know. You say it, but whether you are really understood, you also do not know."

— *Suzanne*

In certain situations, women deliberately choose to avoid confrontation with the harasser if they know they could run into him again. This could be the case when the harasser was another solo traveller or sleeping in the same hostel. Evelien explains that during one of her travels, another male traveller, who slept in the same room, showed interest in her. She tried to turn him down politely, not necessarily because she wanted to, but rather as a strategic choice, as she needed to consider that he slept in the same room and becoming angry could make the situation worse in the long run.

"There was also one time a guy who showed interest and was sleeping in the bunk above me in the hostel. You respond a bit differently then, you keep him in the back of your mind, like, "Oh yeah, we're still sleeping in the same room."

— *Evelien*

Strategically engaging in conversation with the harasser was also done by women in order to avoid escalation. One time, Yara found herself in a taxi when the taxi driver started flirting with her. When they arrived at the destination, he asked her for her Facebook and locked the doors. In that instant, she decided it was better to respond politely and give him her Facebook, as that response would give her the best chance of getting out of the taxi as fast as possible. Similarly, Femke explained that when a male stranger would harass her with unwanted conversations, she often would engage in the conversation to assess how dangerous this man was. In a way, she is using this extra time to assess whether a confrontational response is possible without fear of retaliation.

"I did not necessarily want to be friendly, but in this specific situation, I thought that was my best chance to get out of it safely, if he believed it was just a fun flirt with someone in my taxi. So yeah, in that situation, it was purely strategic."

— *Yara*

"I do not necessarily find it difficult to reject the harasser, but I do find it nerve-wracking because I do not know if someone might suddenly become aggressive. So maybe, in that sense, I intentionally keep the conversation going a bit longer so I can assess... yeah, what they are like. Because if they had already come across as quite aggressive during the conversation, I might have walked over to other people. Yeah, at that moment, I thought, "This guy seems fine," and then I could just send him away."

— *Femke*

In the quote above, Femke is also responding to a question of mine regarding feeling 'impolite' or 'mean' when telling the harasser to stop or go away. As can be seen, she does not find it difficult or has any problems with rejecting harassers and the only difficulty is found to be assessing the risk of escalation. However, I noticed multiple women found it difficult to ignore or reject a harasser as they found it was 'mean' or 'impolite'.

"Yeah, I think I would ignore them. I think I would first say something short, like "I am not interested," and then ignore them. Sometimes I might ignore them right away. That is not very friendly, and I would prefer to be polite, but not if I feel like my safety is at risk."

— *Sarah*

Similarly, Lotte and Noor told me they often smiled or responded politely when they felt uncomfortable in certain situations. Saying it out loud in the interview made them reflect on this behaviour as they wondered why they responded this way. Subsequently, I asked them why they responded in this way, did they feel a certain need to respond politely?

"Yes, I think so. Why am I actually looking at them? I think it is a kind of politeness to be polite to them. Like, I acknowledge your presence and the fact that you have said something, but other than that, yeah."

— *Lotte*

X: "Yes, and you just mentioned that you often try to respond politely? Do you feel like that is expected?"

"Yes, good question. Yeah, when you said that, I thought, yeah, definitely. Because when I was just telling you, I also thought, yeah, you know, why am I even doing that? But you do not want to hurt people. I do not want people to think I am angry with them. Also, because I am a guest there. And I think as a woman, you care more about that. [...] And I would still think, I do not want them to think I am angry at them, because that would bother me. And you end up thinking like this, even though now that I think about it, it does not make any sense. But you do it anyway, because as a woman, you do not want to hurt them, you do not want them to think you are angry."

— *Noor*

While responding politely can be a strategic choice to de-escalate a situation, some women felt a need to be polite, even when faced with harassment, because of the fear of being perceived as angry or impolite. This aligns with the earlier statement of the research from Swim and Hyers (1999). Being impolite and being angry do not align with the dominant gender norms of femininity, in which women are expected to always be polite, non-confrontational, and passive. This suggests that, to some extent, these women have internalised these traditional gender norms, making them feel impolite if they ignore or reject the harasser in certain situations. Women's responses can thus simultaneously be a strategy for managing immediate threats and a reflection of wider societal expectations of femininity. However, as argued by Chafai (2020), the avoidant responses unconsciously reinforce the cycle of normalisation and trivialisation of harassment.

Only in a few instances did women become angry and resort to direct confrontational responses, especially when they felt threatened or were touched. For example, when Noa left a shop in Rome and was cornered by a man saying, 'I am going home with you', she started screaming. She explains she did not think about the fear of possible escalation, as adrenaline and shock made her respond that way.

"I know for myself, in terms of fight or flight, I have fight (laughs). I have experienced that a few times. So, I just started screaming really loudly. Like, 'No, you are not, fuck you.' Something like that. And because I screamed at a high level, so to speak. He did not expect that. And I noticed that he was really confused because of that. And then I just ran away really fast."

— *Noa*

Similarly, Nicole screamed at a male stranger when he suddenly grabbed her by the arm. In a sense, she surprised herself by responding in such a manner as usually she is calmer. However, the build-up and the surprise of the men touching her made her react this way.

"I was really... I... I wanted to... I also shouted really loudly 'stop,' but so loudly that I actually got scared of myself. No, it was just really annoying, and that guy had already caused trouble a few times before, and he just kept going, it kept going. And then I just really said, 'From now on, I am done, I am really going to keep walking, have a nice evening, bye,' and then he first walked away. He turned around. And then he came back and grabbed me by my arm."

— *Nicole*

In these moments, women's responses, such as yelling, shouting, or asserting themselves, are instinctual rather than thought-out actions. They arise out of the discomfort, fear, or threat they are experiencing at that moment. These responses challenge the normative expectation that women should be composed and non-confrontational. Nicole and Noa are willing to confront the violation of their boundaries, and Noa also recognises that a more confrontational response is not 'what is expected from women' in society.

“Do not people-please but scream in the face of a man (laughs). And do not smile back politely, you know? Yeah, you do not have to be the perfect girl here, you know.”

— *Noa*

Noa recognises here that society expects women to people-please, be polite, or smile back in these instances, which align with the image of ‘the perfect girl’. However, she argues that you do not have to conform to this and can confront men when you are harassed, challenging dominant gender norms.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided insights into the extent and forms of street harassment that women encounter when travelling solo. While verbal harassment was the most common form, physical forms of harassment were experienced and seen as more threatening, while verbal harassment was often considered just ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘annoying’. However, women’s experiences demonstrate that the cumulative effect of repetitive encounters with behaviours that are labelled as ‘harmless’ in society can be harmful. Using Kelly’s continuum of violence has helped frame these incidents as interconnected, showing how ‘everyday’ forms of sexual violence can be just as harmful and substantial as more overt forms of violence. Furthermore, the continuum has helped illustrate how women recognise that ‘everyday’ forms of violence, such as street harassment, are connected to more extreme forms of violence, such as rape. This understanding contributes to their sense of unease and fear in certain situations as they perceive these smaller acts as a possible predecessor to other forms of violence, and thus a reminder that they might fall victim to this type of violence. In this way, these more common forms of street harassment also limit women’s freedom in public spaces.

Moreover, it is important to consider how the constant trivialisation and normalisation of harassment have influenced women’s own sensemaking of harassment. From forgetting encounters of harassment, framing them as ‘nothing’, to the reluctance to call them street harassment, could all be indicators of how women have internalised the wider societal normalisation of street harassment. Even though women’s subjective experiences are at the core of this thesis, I find it important to acknowledge the possible influence of the normalisation of harassment on some of their experiences.

Unfortunately, without intention, women’s inclination to engage in more avoidant responses to street harassment can reinforce the normalisation of street harassment. Women explained they engaged in more avoidant behaviours when encountering street harassment due to fear of retaliation. Moreover, they felt ignoring, walking away, or engaging in a non-confrontational way with the harasser was often the most effective response to get out as quickly as possible. However, in some cases, smiling or politely responding was not necessarily strategic, but influenced by the wider societal expectation that women must be non-confrontational and polite. Only in a few instances did the shock of harassment combined with a surge of adrenaline prompt women to become angry and directly confront the harasser. This highlights how a surge of emotions can cause women to temporarily shift their responsive behaviour and move away from their usual avoidant responses.

7. The Emotional Burden of Harassment and Safety Work

How women navigate their safety and harassment while travelling solo has up until this point mainly focused on women's external and behavioural strategies, modifying public behaviour, choosing to travel with companionship, avoiding certain spaces etc. However, in this chapter, I shift the focus on the internal work women engage in throughout their whole travel journeys: the mental load and emotional work.

Liz Kelly describes safety work as "the strategising and planning that women and girls undertake in responding to, avoiding and/or coping with men's violence" (Vera-Gray, 2016b, p.2). Even when most of this work is pre-emptive, as shown in Chapter 5, the coping with experiences of harassment can also be seen as part of women's safety work. Solo female travellers also bear the emotional burden of not only avoiding risk but also processing and emotionally managing the aftermath of these experiences. This aligns with the broader concept of emotional labour of Hochschild (1983), which Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) have used to theorise how women manage and minimise the threat of male violence in their daily lives (Lombard & Proctor, 2025).

In this chapter, I will explore the mental load of always having to be on guard and prepared while travelling as a solo woman. Furthermore, I will examine how women process their experiences, whether through reframing, emphasising the good, or seeing harassment as 'bad luck', and its effect on the wider narratives surrounding street harassment. Finally, I will show how women experience self-growth and empowerment through the very challenges they are forced to navigate.

The Mental Load of Safety Work

In Chapter 5, I discussed the extent to which women perform safety work and employ a variety of safety strategies in anticipation of harassment. It became clear that the majority of solo female travellers are constantly assessing the level of risk, anticipating harassment and making strategic decisions to ensure their safety. It requires a lot of mental work and goes beyond physically changing behaviour. Safety work “is work because it takes time, energy and head space which could be used for more rewarding activities” (Kelly cited in Vera-Gray 2018, p.11). Women share that this mental load can be draining, particularly because feelings of vulnerability and subsequently safety work are heightened in the context of solo female travel.

“I think it is quite exhausting, and I noticed that in myself too. At the end of the day, I really thought I had been very alert. And so going back to your hostel really means, okay, I am stepping out of the observation, let's say, modes.”

— *Noa*

“I think so. Yes, I think it does. It is almost automatic that it drains energy because I already have to know beforehand if I think a place is safe enough or not.”

— *Femke*

“Yes, it really cost me a lot of energy. I was also really happy when that guy was there because I kind of expected that it would actually help, so to speak (laughs). It really gave me a sense of relief, it just felt like something I did not have to deal with on my own anymore. It honestly just took a lot of energy out of me, and there were already so many stimuli, especially when you are travelling around a lot using public transport, that alone is already tiring. This just doubled it, I really felt that.”

— *Sarah*

That it drains women's energy becomes particularly apparent for solo female travellers who were abroad for longer periods, such as multiple months. These solo female travellers are constantly on the move and never have to chance to develop a certain comfort and familiarity with the environment. Every location brings new potential risks that need to be evaluated and managed, keeping them in a constant state of mental alertness. This results in mental fatigue as they cannot let their guard down and must constantly take precautionary measures. Beyond the mental load of avoiding harassment, women also engage in the emotional effort to process their encounters and experiences with harassment while travelling. The coping process can thus also be seen as an added mental load on navigating harassment during solo travel.

Reframing and Resisting as a Coping Mechanism

Many women resisted the narrative that harassment impacted their travel experience, seemingly wanting to avoid the narrative that their experiences with harassment entirely defined their trips. For instance, Noa shares that her experiences with harassment were highly unpleasant, but did not weigh against all the positive memories of Rome. I noticed that rather than just concluding passively that the good outweighs the bad, women are consciously trying to prioritise the joy experienced. This requires emotional work: they acknowledge and process the negative experience while deliberately framing and putting emphasis on the positive aspects of their travels.

For example, Suzanne had read online that Cambodia was not safe for women to travel alone, and it was best to find other travel companions to explore the country with. In the end, she travelled with two other female travellers through Cambodia and could confirm she did not feel safe alone outside. Reflecting on her trip to Cambodia in the interview, she acknowledges that this need for companionship did feel restrictive on her freedom. However, this is not something she wanted to emphasise about her travels to Cambodia. Every time this was brought up, she started to talk about how, without this, she would not have met two girls who would turn into great friends.

“Fortunately, I have mostly had really great experiences. Those two incidents in Rome do stand out in my mind, like, oh yeah, that happened too. That was really unpleasant. But on the other hand, there were so many good moments that outweigh them.”

— *Noa*

“Yeah, a little bit, but on the other hand, I also met two really nice girls, and the three of us had a great time together. Of course, you do not always have to do everything alone, but it is nice to feel like you could if you wanted to. You do realise that on my own, I wouldn’t have been able to do this, but with the three of us, it was just really fun.”

— *Suzanne*

I noticed that similar to Noa and Suzanne, women often brought up positive aspects and memories of their travels throughout the interview. It felt as though they wanted to reassure both me and them that the incidents of harassment, they shared did not entirely define their trips. The safety strategy of female companionship was often reframed by saying it was also just fun. The safety strategy of going out at night was often presented as a natural preference rather than a necessary precaution. I argue this may be seen as a coping mechanism that can help them to emotionally manage fear or distress that comes with navigating harassment and safety alone. They are actively shaping the narrative around their experiences, moving the focus away from vulnerability and towards enjoyment. Similarly to resisting a negative narrative, women would reframe their experiences with harassment as ‘just bad luck’ or ‘a coincidence’.

“And every time, I just tell myself, ‘Yeah, that was really just bad luck or pure coincidence.’ The chances of the exact same situation happening again, or of another similar situation occurring, are actually pretty small.”

— *Noor*

“You know? Of course, you can always be unlucky, but that is just as true in the Netherlands.”

— *Jasmijn*

I recognised in the quote of Noor that the reframing of harassment into bad luck can work as a coping mechanism. I argue that framing experiences of harassment as ‘bad luck’ or ‘pure coincidence’ makes them seem random, rather than a systemic issue of gendered violence. Furthermore, if her experiences are just ‘random’ and ‘bad luck’, not the result of gender inequality, she can continue travelling without being overwhelmed by fear. It is possible this could help

women feel more in control of their safety instead of feeling powerless in the face of street harassment. All this emotional work and cognitive work in the aftermath of street harassment can be understood as part of women's safety work. Women internally manage their emotions by rationalising their experiences or reframing them as bad luck, which allows them to keep travelling. By downplaying the risks, they may also be engaging in emotional labour for others to reassure them that it is not dangerous, such as friends, family, or the interviewer. While many women try to reframe their experiences of harassment or discomfort as a side note to their otherwise enjoyable travels, not all the experiences can be easily reframed or forgotten.

The Lingering Impact of Harassment

Some experiences of harassment can linger, impacting women's emotional well-being and shaping their future travel choices. This psychological and emotional impact of harassment extends beyond the trip itself and still affects them at the moment of the interview. Some women expressed that harassment becomes more than a momentary disruption in their travels when it taints their travel experience to certain destinations. A negative impression of a certain place lingered, particularly when women experienced frequent harassment or felt 'truly threatened', as they would say. Yara also felt these strong emotions when a male stranger harassed her at her hostel, trying to kiss her. When sharing the story with me, I noticed that retelling the story triggered negative emotions and painful memories. Later, she explained that this particular incident of harassment could still elicit distressing emotions when talking about it.

"And I do notice, especially that one experience in Ecuador... that it was really intense for me in some way. I still notice that when I talk about it, I think, "Oh no, that was not a good experience."

— *Yara*

Harassment can thus leave a lasting impression on certain places or cities, centring negative encounters with male strangers. Women shared that recommendations of cities and destinations would also reflect their sense of security when visiting them. When people ask Yara for advice on where to travel in South America in person, she places a strong emphasis on female travel safety. Due to the frequency and intensity of catcalling in León, she often does not recommend this city to other women in her close circle of friends. Similarly, Nicole would tell others about her negative experiences in Gambia to warn them and prepare them for this possibility.

"But I do tell people, yeah, personally, I did not really like León that much. Or I will say to people that Guatemala feels really nice as a starting point. Costa Rica also has a really nice feel to it. I often say something like, yeah, this or that city is just not really my thing."

— *Yara*

"Well, I would tell people... Yes, if they want to go to Gambia, even though it is just a really relaxed place where I have been. Yes, I would really tell them, you know, this can really happen. So do not be surprised or caught off guard by it."

— *Nicole*

However, it was really rare for women not to recommend certain places to other solo female travellers. Besides the examples above of Yara and Nicole, only Sarah expressed not wanting to return or recommend Sri Lanka to others as a result of her experiences with harassment and safety work. Interestingly, in the quote of Yara, she mentions she would tell others Léon is not a good starting place, but not specifically why: street harassment. It seems like she does not want to scare other female travellers by telling her personal experiences but still prevent it from happening to them. I also saw this form of reassurance in how women reflect on their overall travel experiences, which I will explain in the next section. How women further reflect on these experiences, whether they see it as part of their travels or something unacceptable, also shapes the broader narratives surrounding street harassment.

Reinforcing or Challenging the Normalisation of Harassment

In Chapter 6, I discussed several signs that the normalisation and trivialisation of street harassment might affect women's own sensemaking of their harassment experiences. Besides the normalisation of harassment influencing the sensemaking of harassment experiences itself, I noticed women's own narratives can occasionally, unintentionally, reinforce the normalisation of harassment.

Even after recounting multiple forms of harassment, a variety of safety strategies, and mental exhaustion from constant vigilance, women often told me that the destinations they visited were 'safe'. This contradiction of experiencing gendered risks but labelling the country as safe took me by surprise. For instance, Femke would still label the countries she visited in Europe, as well as Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, and Morocco, as safe, even though she could remember a variety of instances she was faced with street harassment.

X: "Yes, and you are saying that the safety you expected was ultimately what you experienced. But at the same time, you can name quite a few examples of intimidation that you encountered. Yet, in the end, you still think, 'Oh, this was actually safe.' How? How do you think that works?"

"Because I experience the same things in the Netherlands, and I do not constantly feel unsafe here, I think. Maybe if I compare myself to a man, I do automatically feel a bit less safe. Yeah, but I also do not think it benefits me to always feel unsafe. So maybe my threshold is a bit higher than it would be for a man, but because of that, I feel more or less equally safe or unsafe in most European countries."

— *Femke*

As Femke explains, the threshold for labelling a place as 'unsafe' is higher for a woman; it is shaped by a lifetime of navigating public spaces in which being alert or experiencing harassment is expected and part of their gendered experience. The experiences of harassment have become part of the deal and therefore are not framed as an explicit threat and something that would deem a country 'unsafe'. Moreover, multiple women explained they did not want to frame a whole

destination as unsafe because incidents of harassment, and thus violence against women, could happen anywhere in the world, during any trip or in any destination.

“And like I said, it is dangerous everywhere, people get murdered here too, people get raped here too.”

— *Lotte*

“I mean, you can adjust to some extent and avoid certain areas or things, but it can happen anywhere. You are never really completely safe.”

— *Noor*

These statements frame women’s safety concerns and experiences with harassment as universal, something that could happen anywhere. On the one hand, women try to reassure other women, or maybe themselves, about their safety concerns when travelling solo by suggesting it is not that different from other unsafe spaces women must navigate throughout their lives. On the other hand, it does normalise gendered violence and further reinforces the idea that public spaces are inherently unsafe for women, no matter where they are. As argued by Thomas and Mura (2019), these mitigating narratives of gendered violence demonstrate how solo female travellers have come to internalise the ‘normality of unsafety’. Thomas and Mura (2019) argue that the way female travellers talk about safety in their blogs, which I recognised in the quotes above, often reinforces the idea that women must be cautious and constantly aware of the danger.

This internalisation of the ‘normality of unsafety’ mirrors what I noticed in online discussions regarding safety for female solo travellers. At the beginning of my thesis, I did an exploratory social media analysis about how solo female travellers talked about safety online. With a few exceptions, the consensus on Facebook seems to be that most solo female travellers felt safe in a variety of countries, but ‘of course, you need to use common sense as you would do anywhere’ and ‘focus on the way you dress’. Although I cannot know the personal experiences of women posting online, the responses of the woman I interviewed, alongside the findings of Thomas and Mura (2019), suggest that many solo female travellers define destinations as ‘safe’ despite experiencing harassment. This suggests experiencing street harassment is not seen as enough of a threat to render a destination ‘unsafe’ due to its normalcy and expected nature. Additionally, as Vera-Gray (2018) argues, safety work can become so automatic and ingrained that women perceive an environment as safe precisely because they are constantly engaging in safety work. Multiple women I interviewed also advised to ‘listen to your gut’ and ‘use common sense’ when I asked which advice they would give to other solo female travellers. In this way, it reinforces traditional gender norms that say women should ensure their own safety through changing their behaviour.

However, a few women, and in some cases even the same, express frustration with carrying this burden and wish things were different, revealing cracks in the normalisation, and challenging these norms. Reflecting on the constant safety measures she took while travelling, Jasmijn shared, “it is just really frustrating that you have to be so preoccupied with it or feel like you have to be”. Again, the fact that Jasmijn shared that she feels she is ‘obliged’ to be concerned about her safety implies this responsibility and expectation that women should be. Many described feelings of anger and frustration regarding not only the occurrence of harassment itself, but also the

necessity of employing safety strategies to protect themselves and stay safe. The following excerpt from an interview with Femke further illustrates this frustration as she reflects on her harassment experiences.

X: "Have you ever thought during a trip or afterwards about how different your experience might have been if you were not a woman?"

"Yeah, I do often think about whether what happened to me would also happen to a man. Being followed, I think that could happen to a man too, at least that is where I have landed on that. But sitting somewhere and having a man not leave me alone? No, I do not think that would happen to a man. Or being catcalled or grabbed. That frustrates me endlessly (laughs). Yeah, it really frustrates me a lot."

X: "Do you find that difficult? I can imagine it being very frustrating, but what do you do with that feeling?"

"Well, in the moment, not much, really. But I always have my opinion ready when a conversation about these kinds of things comes up."

X: "And what is your opinion? What would you say?"

"I do think that men get catcalled too, I believe that. And that men can also be afraid of assault or rape. But statistically speaking, I have to be a lot more afraid of it. So, I think it is really important to have these conversations and to say, 'We both deal with this, but I deal with it more (laughs).' So, I try to include both perspectives but also make sure the proportions are clear, so that we understand we all have a role in this."

— *Femke*

Femke explains that after experiencing harassment, she often feels frustrated about the fact that she deals with this while travelling. Similarly, Jasmijn is frustrated with the fact that she has to be so preoccupied with her safety, whereas before she framed harassment as just 'bad luck'. It shows how normalisation and resistance can coexist within the same experiences. Their frustrations show a growing awareness that this should not be accepted and expected of women. This tension can also be interpreted as a gender performance that both reinforces and challenges dominant gender norms at the same time.

A few women in the interviews talk about actively trying to challenge these narratives and trying to create awareness. While Femke feels there is not much she can do when it happens, she tries to educate others on the issues women face in public spaces afterwards. Similarly, Yara and Noa expressed talking to other male travellers or male friends to create awareness about the inequality women face and to air their frustration.

"Yeah, I definitely have moments where I just get really angry at the whole system. And I can get really frustrated that this is even necessary. But most of all, I just really feel the need for men to understand what we go through. That feeling is really strong. It is not like I see it as my responsibility, because it is not my job to educate them, but I just wanted to have as many conversations as possible with other male travellers about these things. So, I had a lot of those conversations where I thought, 'You are going to listen, whether you want to hear it or not,' about what we experience."

— *Yara*

"Yeah, well, I think it is frustrating. And what I find especially irritating about the bigger picture is that there is so much talk about what women can do to protect themselves, what they can do to avoid attracting unwanted attention, and all that. But we're not focusing on teaching boys not to behave that way in the first place. That is something that really makes me think, like, guys, we're going about this all wrong."

— *Noa*

Noa wants to push back against the narrative that places responsibility on women. It is not women who need to change their actions, but rather the individuals who perpetrate violence. It shows she knows society puts responsibility on women through socialisation and victim-blaming narratives, rather than challenging male behaviour. Similarly, Yara wants to educate other men on the underlying societal systems that allow for this to happen and make women feel responsible. It aligns with the study of Fileborn and Vera-Gray (2017), which investigates the desired justice response to street harassment of victims. They found that "participants advocated for a justice response concerned with transforming cultural and structural norms, in particular gender norms" (p.203). However, this means they also face additional emotional work by advocating for change, as expressed by Yara, and possibly reliving their experiences to explain the problematic nature of street harassment.

Self-growth, Confidence, and Empowerment

Despite and because of all the challenges solo female travellers must navigate, women felt solo travel had shaped and affected them on a personal level. Their responses to the question of whether they have grown as a person as a result of travelling solo were filled with joy, self-discovery, and resilience, a confirmation that travel fosters self-growth, independence, and empowerment (Yang et al., 2018). Each story of personal growth was unique, yet together they form a narrative that centres on women's empowerment and self-confidence. Interestingly, most women did not initially travel solo because they were in search of self-discovery or empowerment; rather, there was nobody else who wanted to join them. However, ultimately, with or without it being their initial motivation, every solo female traveller said they experienced personal growth, gained independence or important personal skills.

"You find yourself wondering, 'How will I fix this?' But you always do. That is really empowering."

— *Noor*

“And when I think about how travel has shaped me, I realise that I have grown more confident in myself.”

— *Nicole*

“I have gained a lot more independence and self-confidence.”

— *Layla*

“And despite all the challenges, I have this newfound feeling of empowerment, like: ‘I can handle this. Drop me anywhere, and I will be just fine.’”

— *Yara*

The process of managing safety strategies, handling difficult situations, and independently making decisions led to a strengthened sense of independence. Furthermore, women must navigate and adapt to several challenges while travelling solo, not just street harassment, and in doing so, foster personal growth in ways they did not anticipate beforehand. Being able to entertain yourself, feeling comfortable being on your own, encountering other cultures, being pushed out of your comfort zone, and meeting people you might not normally encounter, all reasons why women report experiencing self-growth due to solo travel.

“That I am enough of my own. That was just really nice. And I am capable of giving myself what I need. I can handle things.”

— *Noa*

“But it turned out to be an amazing journey where I proved to myself that I could manage perfectly fine on my own. I realised I do not need someone else to do these things, I can do them myself.”

— *Margot*

The focus on building self-confidence and empowerment helps explain why most women reported feeling more confident and less anxious when navigating safety and harassment on subsequent solo trips, particularly when it was their first one. A lot of unknowns about solo female travellers were answered after their first trip, and growing self-confidence and independence made them less worried about future endeavours.

“I think that I would feel safer next time. I think that I am trusting myself more and more that I can deal with such situations.”

— *Femke*

While women gain confidence through navigating risks, including harassment, I find it crucial to acknowledge that empowerment comes not because of harassment, but in spite of it. Facing gendered violence and having to bear the responsibility of managing your own safety are not necessary precursors to personal growth and gaining independence, this is still possible in a world where safety work is not required, and public spaces are equally accessible to women. In fact, self-growth and meaningful outcomes of travel have often been found when individuals come in

contact with other cultures and communities, stay in destinations for a longer period of time and actively reflect on their travels (Huang et al., 2023; Pung & Chiappa, 2020).

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the often invisible emotional and mental work required of Dutch solo female travellers as they navigate harassment abroad. Having to be constantly on guard and mentally aware is tiring enough, even without facing harassment. However, when women do personally encounter harassment, an additional load of emotional work is added through having to cope with this. Many women tried to push down the significance of harassment experiences in their travel stories and bring up positive and fun memories instead. Another coping mechanism would be reframing harassment as 'bad luck' or 'a coincidence', because recognising it as a systemic issue of gendered violence might be restricting their sense of enjoyment during travel. These coping mechanisms are part of women's safety work, requiring time, energy, and effort. While this worked for experiences of harassment they saw as minor, some specific experiences of harassment would still affect them, showing the long-lasting impact street harassment can have.

Furthermore, the ways in which women talk about their experiences illustrate that their narratives hold power, to either uphold the normalisation of street harassment or challenge it. However, it is important to recognise that this, unintentional, reinforcement of gendered violence is not an endorsement for harassment, but likely a coping mechanism and view that in itself is influenced by the normalisation of harassment. This normalised sense of unsafety seems to even extend to the discourse online, such as in Facebook travel groups. Despite the pervasive normalisation, some women showed resistance to the system that perpetuates harassment. Their anger and frustration at being unable to fully embrace an independent form of femininity, and their tiredness of feeling compelled to perform safety work, illustrates women are challenging dominant gender norms. Through dialogue and awareness spreading some women try to change this, starting by educating others, especially men, on the inequality they face in everyday life.

Despite all of this, women gained a lot of fun memories, independence, self-growth, confidence, etc. by travelling solo. The act of travelling solo as a female can thus be seen as a possibly transformative tourist experience. While encountering and overcoming challenges of harassment and keeping yourself safe has helped women to grow confidence, it is important to note this is not a reason to see street harassment as something 'positive'.

8. Conclusions and Discussion

In this thesis, I set out to explore how Dutch solo female travellers negotiate femininity and navigate street harassment in unfamiliar, gendered spaces. Through the lenses of gender performativity, the continuum of sexual violence, and gendered spaces, I have discussed how solo female travel is shaped by gendered norms and the threat of harassment. From the anticipation and pre-emptive safety strategies to the personal experiences with harassment and the emotional labour that follows, women's narratives reveal the constant negotiation between how gender is performed in relation to risk and safety.

Women's narratives revealed various forms of harassment experiences along the continuum during their travels: from staring and unwanted comments while walking down the street, to being followed or physically touched while going out with friends. Multiple women remembered several incidents of verbal harassment during their trips, which often had a clear sexual undertone. For example, women talked about hearing sexual remarks or dealing with suggestive conversations. Other women also described experiencing physical intimidation in addition to the verbal harassment. Physical forms of harassment were often perceived to be more threatening than verbal forms of harassment, because in the case of physical harassment, the inability to escape often induced particularly strong feelings of unease or fear.

Women's emotional response varied greatly depending on the context in which harassment occurred, their past experiences with harassment (in the Netherlands and the travel destination), and the persistence of the harasser. These variations in perception of street harassment and emotional response are well-captured by the continuum of sexual violence. Still, most women similarly responded to harassment: by ignoring the harasser, walking away, or trying to defuse the situation to avoid any escalation. A few women also described a need to be polite, not to de-escalate but to avoid being seen as impolite or mean, showing the influence of traditional gender norms that prescribe women to be polite and non-confrontational. Only in a few instances, often involving physical touch, did women adopt a more confrontational response. Ultimately, street harassment occurred across a variety of settings: during the day and at night, in isolation and crowds, whether alone or with others, highlighting the unpredictability and pervasiveness of street harassment in women's travel narratives.

Central to these narratives is the concept of women's safety work, which highlights how women modify, regulate, and adapt their behaviour and appearance to safely enter public spaces. Women described that they were constantly aware of their surroundings, chose to walk home with others, changed the way they dress, limited their alcohol intake, endured spatial restraints, etc. Even though all these safety strategies might seem diverse at first glance, they all have the same underlying logic of women trying to minimise their visibility. Women explained they engaged in safety work in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves, to not 'stand out' in spaces, and to minimise the chance of becoming a possible target of street harassment. The implicit message is clear: to move safely through a public space, women must make themselves as invisible as possible.

This impulse of a solo female traveller to try to avoid 'standing out' is very similar to the broader societal narratives in which women are blamed for the occurrence of street harassment. Victim-blaming discourse suggests that if harassment occurs, it is because a woman failed to manage her own visibility or behaviour, rather than holding the perpetrators accountable. This creates an internal conflict for many women while travelling, they recognised that they should not have to engage in these safety strategies, yet not doing so felt naïve or irresponsible, as if failing to do so would justify any gendered violence that might follow. This tension between knowing perpetrators should be held accountable and feeling personally responsible for prevention is a recurring theme in women's internal struggles with safety work.

This sense of responsibility becomes even more pronounced in the unfamiliar environments solo female travellers enter, where situational vulnerability intersects with the added vulnerability of being a foreigner. This layered vulnerability, which does not exist in their home environments, leads women to adapt their safety work, using it to compensate for the uncertainty of their surroundings. The influence of the uncertainty in new environments also helps explain why such behaviours feel less necessary in culturally familiar environments, such as Western or Western-like countries. Still, even in the spaces that feel more familiar, women feel uneasy in isolated, dark, or male-dominated areas, due to the internalisation of societal messaging and past experiences with harassment.

Importantly, these shifts in the level of safety work are not always conscious. Safety work becomes habitual, automatic, and even performative, a constant feature of women's lives. As such, solo female travellers are continuously negotiating when they can perform a femininity that stretches dominant gender norms (in well-lit spaces, western countries, during the day etc.) and when they feel the need to perform gender in line with more traditional gender norms (when it is dark, isolated, or only men are present in public space). This negotiation is intuitive and often goes unnoticed, reinforcing the idea that these strategies are 'common sense'. However, this intuition is not natural to women, their intuition in public spaces is shaped by the experiences of harassment throughout their lives and the societal discourses that position women as responsible for their own safety. Framing safety work as 'common sense' disguises its gendered nature, and the disproportionate burden placed on women.

It is crucial to emphasise that, although safety work is shaped by gendered expectations and can reinforce traditional gender norms, it is neither unnecessary nor irrational. Women's safety strategies are an effective response, as experienced by solo female travellers, to the real threat of gendered violence. However, the fact that such strategies are needed or are expected of women in the first place reveals a deeper inequality: women are expected to trade parts of their freedom for the possibility of safety; they cannot fully enjoy both at the same time. Even when there is no direct threat of harassment present, the possibility of facing street harassment can exert control over women's movements, choices, and behaviour in public spaces.

This produces a paradox: safety work is an act of agency, a way for women to reclaim autonomy and exert some control in risky environments, yet it is also a response to conditions that are beyond their control. The tension between agency and constraint seems to run throughout

women's narratives of solo travelling. The existence of gendered violence limits how far women can safely push the boundaries of femininity in public spaces. Women are not fully able to perform gender in ways that fall outside dominant norms without facing risk, which can create this frustration when it goes against women's desires.

Beyond the physical and behavioural adjustments, there is an added emotional and mental burden to travelling alone as a woman. Anticipating, avoiding, and responding to street harassment, as well as coping with these experiences, can all contribute to emotional and mental fatigue while travelling solo. Certain coping mechanisms, downplaying emotional impact, and rationalising the need for safety strategies, help women to carry on travelling. Yet, they reveal the broader inequality in which women also carry the mental load of managing both their safety and the emotional aftermath of harassment. This emotional labour is largely hidden in the context of solo travel, yet it is a significant part of women's safety work.

An important theme that runs throughout this thesis is the trivialisation and normalisation of street harassment in today's society. The constant normalisation of street harassment transforms this manifestation of sexual violence into something 'not serious' and may also influence how women interpret and understand their own experiences with harassment. The constant exposure to street harassment can eventually desensitise women to this type of behaviour. This results in the behaviour being seen as 'normal' and thus accepted. This may be very damaging as the normalisation of harassment suppresses any resistance to its occurrence and further entrenches gender inequality in public spaces.

To return to the main research question: "How do Dutch solo female travellers negotiate femininity as they navigate and respond to street harassment in unfamiliar gendered public spaces?". This thesis has shown that Dutch solo female travellers are constantly navigating between performances that either reproduce or stretch dominant gender norms. This negotiation does not indicate an absence of agency, women make both conscious and intuitive decisions, but rather illustrates that agency is always exercised within a context shaped by safety concerns, cultural norms, and the internalisation of gendered expectations. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the act of travelling solo as a woman already challenges the dominant gender norms. These often position women as risk-averse and in need of protection, and the choice of solo female travellers to navigate unfamiliar spaces alone can thus be understood as a form of resistance. However, the threat of gendered violence often pushes women to perform gender in alignment with traditional gender norms, not out of personal desire, but because these performances feel like the safer option.

Reflections and Theoretical Considerations

In reflection on the theory I have applied throughout my analysis, I found Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence particularly useful and appropriate in analysing women's experiences with and interpretations of harassment. Some scholars, like Vera-Gray (2016a), have argued that the term harassment itself is problematic because it places the responsibility onto women to define an encounter as such, moving away from men. Writing this thesis and analysing women's interpretations of harassment made me realise that solely relying on women's subjective

experience to define an act as harassment indeed is limiting, precisely because their interpretations might have been influenced by the normalisation of harassment in the first place. However, defining harassment without taking women's perceptions into account also feels inappropriate in such a matter. Therefore, I found Kelly's continuum of sexual violence extremely helpful: it underscores the complexity and diversity in women's experiences, illustrating the form of harassment does not dictate the emotional response, while simultaneously showing that regardless of women's perception, all acts are part of the broader patterns of gendered violence. It allowed me to value and centre women's experiences and underscore that all the behaviours discussed in this thesis are harassment, without dismissing women's voices.

In addition, reflecting on my findings and analysis, I am left with the question of what the right balance is between resisting dominant, traditional gender norms and navigating the real, unfortunate risks of gendered violence women face in public spaces. Throughout the analysis, I have described a variety of safety strategies, such as lying about having a boyfriend, walking home with men, dressing more modestly, etc., as performative acts that align and thus reinforce traditional gender norms that position women as vulnerable and responsible for their own safety in public spaces. But I find myself questioning: to what extent is this really 'wrong' or even avoidable? What is the responsibility of an individual women to try to reject these safety strategies when we are talking about her own safety? How can women resist these traditional gender norms when complying to them gives them the highest chance of being safe; or prevent them from receiving blame is something happens? There seems to be no 'win-win' situation for women in this scenario, as both resistance and conformity seem to come with a cost. If society does not tackle the broader issues of gender-based violence, there seems to be a limit to the agency of an individual women to change the underlying systems.

Furthermore, I wonder to what extent the interviews I conducted with women can themselves be seen as part of women's gender performance. Internal feelings of vulnerability or fear do not automatically reinforce (or challenge) dominant gender when women do not act upon them. But what happens when the performative act of speech comes into play? Does saying 'I feel unsafe at night' or 'I have feelings of vulnerability' in answering a question in the interview reinforce traditional gender norms? Or might this be seen differently, as women share reflections on their feelings and behaviours in hindsight and this often includes critical reflection, which might even challenge the norm? Ultimately, I am still left with the question how speaking of these feelings in an interview contributes to the performance of gender.

Contribution to Academic Literature

Due to the pervasive normalisation of street harassment, it remains and under researched topic in academic literature (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). With this thesis, I have contributed to growing body of work surrounding street harassment and its normalisation, while also focusing on the specific niche of solo female travel, an underrepresented group in street harassment research. While studies have mentioned the heightened risks solo female travellers might face, there is little in-depth research surrounding their experiences with and navigation of harassment. By putting women's narratives before, during, and after their travels at the forefront of this thesis, I have given insight and contributed to this gap in the literature. It became clear that the environment of

solo female travel is indeed different in comparison to one's home environment when dealing with street harassment. Women felt a heightened sense of vulnerability, increased their level of safety work, and encountered a greater frequency of street harassment abroad.

This thesis also adds a culturally specific perspective, offering insight into the influence of cultural gender norms and perceptions of safety. It has shown Dutch women's constant negotiation between resisting and confirming to traditional gender norms and expectations while abroad. Interestingly, it seemed gender differences became more visible and felt in the context of solo travel for Dutch women. This often led to a stronger awareness of gender inequality in public spaces and subsequent frustrations. It illustrates again how gender is not a stable identity, but that it is felt and performed differently depending on the environment, very much in line with gender performativity.

Furthermore, my findings add to the debate on the normalisation of street harassment and its effects and risks. What runs through the findings of this thesis is a clear message: street harassment is not just about individual experiences, but about broader societal structures that enable and normalise it. The responsibility for addressing and managing it must shift away from individual women and towards society. This means challenging the cultural norms that excuse or downplay male behaviour in public space, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, and challenging existing gender norms. Research has shown that normalisation is one of the key motivators for men to keep engaging in this kind of behaviour, as discussed by Hinder and Fileborn (2023). Rather than expecting women to reduce the risk of victimisation in public spaces, it should be expected of society to reduce the conditions in which street harassment is enabled in the first place.

Limitations and Future Research

This research has gathered valuable insights into the experiences with and navigation of street harassment through solo female travellers' narratives. However, as with every research, it also has its limitations. First, due to the timeframe within which this thesis is conducted, it is limited in scope. As a result, the research has focused on a relatively small and homogenous group in terms of age, race, and socioeconomic background. While the profile of research participants slightly varied, it did not provide enough diversity and breadth to explore the influence of, for example, race or age on the negotiation of gender performances and the experiences of harassment. Future research might employ a greater intersectional lens, which can explore how identities of race, age, sexuality, or disability may intersect with gender to shape women's experiences of street harassment and safety work.

Furthermore, the research does not focus on specific regions of destinations visited by solo female travellers. As it is highly focused on understanding the perspectives and experiences of navigating street harassment of solo female travellers, I decided not to use the destination visited as a criterion for participating in the research. I believe this broad approach allowed me to capture a diverse set of experiences in this thesis, but it also meant that I could not go into detail on the influence of the country's cultural or societal contexts. However, as discussed, it became clear that familiarity with a country and its likeness to Western culture influenced women's experiences with

safety, hinting at the importance of the destination. Therefore, future research could focus on a specific region or country to fully explore how this may influence female travellers' experiences with navigating harassment and safety alone.

As a final thought, future research could delve deeper into the role of normalisation and trivialisation of street harassment in women's interpretations and sense-making of their experiences as well as their responses. While the normalisation played a significant role in the findings of this thesis, it was not the initial focus and thus a deeper exploration of this was beyond the original scope. However, how normalisation of street harassment is perpetuated through media, cultural discourse, and conversations can be an interesting and important avenue. If street harassment continues to go unchallenged, its normalisation becomes part of a vicious cycle that reinforces itself and becomes increasingly difficult to break.

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10. Appendices

Appendix A. Open invitation interview

Hi!

Mijn naam is Ilja, en ik ben masterstudent aan de Universiteit van Wageningen. Voor mijn masterscriptie doe ik onderzoek naar de ervaringen van solo reizende vrouwen, met een focus op veiligheid en ervaringen rondom intimidatie. Het doel van het onderzoek is om inzicht te krijgen in de diverse ervaringen van vrouwen die solo reizen rondom veiligheid en intimidatie en om meer bewustzijn te creëren over dit onderwerp.

Daarom ben ik op zoek naar vrouwen boven de 18 jaar die solo hebben gereisd buiten Nederland en hun ervaringen hierover zouden willen delen in een interview. Het interview zou maximaal anderhalf uur duren en kan online of persoonlijk plaatsvinden, op een tijdstip dat jou goed uitkomt. Het zou heel waardevol zijn voor mijn scriptie!

Je kunt erop vertrouwen dat je antwoorden vertrouwelijk zullen worden behandeld en dat je anoniem blijft in mijn onderzoek.

Als je geïnteresseerd bent om deel te nemen of vragen hebt over het onderzoek, stuur me dan gerust een privébericht.

Alvast hartelijk bedankt!

Groetjes,
Ilja Hesselink

Appendix B. Research participants

Pseudonym	Age	Occupational status	Solo travel experience	Continents/Regions Visited
Anouk	23	Student	First-time / 1 trip	Oceania
Lotte	28	Working	Frequent / 5+ trips	Asia, Central America
Sarah	25	Working	First-time / 1 trip	Asia, Oceania
Jasmijn	23	Working	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Asia, Central America
Nicole	41	Working	Frequent / 5+ trips	Asia, Europe, South America
Noa	23	Student	First-time / 1 trip	Europe
Noor	28	Working	Frequent / 5+ trips	Asia, Middle East
Suzanne	22	Student	First-time / 1 trip	Asia
Evelien	28	Working	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Europe
Femke	23	Student	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Europe, Central America
Sophie	26	Working	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Asia, Europe
Carlijn	23	Working	First-time / 1 trip	Asia, Oceania
Margot	30	Working	First-time / 1 trip	Asia
Yara	25	Student	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Central America, South America
Laura	40	Working	Frequent / 5+ trips	Asia, Africa, Central America, Europe, Oceania, South America, North America
Layla	40	Working	Frequent / 5+ trips	Africa, Central America
Kyra	38	Working	Occasional / 2-3 trips	Europe

Appendix C. Interview Guide

Introduction

Start by introducing the research and the researcher. Emphasise it is about their personal experience, no right or wrong answers. Talk about my educational background, interest in the topic, and objective of the study. Mention verbal consent, right to withdraw/not answer every question, anonymity etc. Ask permission to record the interview on a mobile phone.

Ask if there are any other questions they already have before starting the interview, and assure that they can ask questions throughout the interview to the researcher.

Background information

Introduction interviewee

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Introduce yourself?
- Can you tell me about the trips you took as a solo traveller?
- What motivated you to travel solo, and how do you usually plan your trips?

Pre-trip planning

To understand how they feel about and prepare for the safety challenges on their trip in relation to their gender

- Before you travel, do you consider/are you worried about your safety when booking a solo trip?
- Do you do any research about safety in the destination prior?
- To what extent do you feel your gender influences this concern about and planning for safety when travelling alone?
 - difference women/men
- Do you bring specific safety items (e.g. alarms, airtags, pepper spray) or prepare other ways to stay safe in advance?

→ do you feel any other aspects of your identity impact your concerns on safety when you plan a solo trip?

Arrival and navigating public spaces

How do they approach new environments, how do they behave, and preemptive safety measures in response to threat of harassment

- When you first arrive, do you take any steps to understand local norms about gender? If yes, how?
 - Does it influence your behaviour?
- Are there any strategies or rules you have for yourself no matter what when navigating these unfamiliar places? (avoid areas, not go out at night etc.)
- Do you change your behaviour in response to how people react to you as a foreigner?
- How do you feel as a woman you are expected to behave in these places and explore new places? (modest, hyper awareness etc.)

→ do you feel your nationality or your appearance affect how locals perceive or react to you?

Examples?

Behavioural adjustment and performance of gender

To understand how they change behaviour or their appearance in response to perceived or actual harassment

- Did you ever change your appearance to avoid drawing attention?
 - (changing dress, jewelry)
- Are there any other behaviours you employ to avoid any unwanted attention to minimise it happening (to the extent you can)?
 - (avoiding eye contact, walking with confidence, headphones etc.)
- Are there times where you felt you acted differently than you were actually feeling to feel more safe? Example?

Experiences of harassment

Use the continuum of violence to understand the varying degrees of harassment participants experience, from "light discomfort to harassment"

- Have there been moments where you felt unsafe or uncomfortable because of the behaviour of others?
- Can you share some examples of interactions, even if they do not involve physical contact?
 - context/environment?
- Are there situations where you felt people invaded your personal space? staring/following etc?
 - How do these situations make you feel?
- Have you also experienced more forms of harassment, with catcalling/comments/groping?
- Are there differences in when you feel uneasy/uncomfortable versus feeling threatened/unsafe?
 - context/space/time/intensity or number of times
- Were these situations something you prepared for or saw coming?

→ how do you feel your experience of harassment is influenced by your identity? more attention, preconceived notions etc.

Reactions to harassment

To understand how they react in the moment or process and cope with their experiences of harassment

- How do you respond when someone is making you feel uncomfortable or unsafe at the moment?
 - Depend on environment/ how often it has happened / passive or assertive
- Is your reaction influenced by the pervasiveness of harassment?
- How does it make you feel? Psychological impact/emotions? Exhausting?
- Has the way you respond to harassment changed over time or with experience?
 - If so, how?
- Did you change your behaviour in any way after having experienced uncomfortable/unsafe moments?
 - the aftermath?

Cultural and gender norms

To understand the importance of the context of unfamiliar spaces and the difference when travelling solo than in the Netherlands

- Do you feel like the street harassment you experience abroad is different from what you experience in the Netherlands? If so, how?
- Does your response or the strategies to stay safe you use abroad differ to what you would do at home in the Netherlands? How?
- Do you find yourself more cautious or alert when travelling solo, or does it feel like the same level of awareness you'd have in the Netherlands?

Reflection and ending

- How would you describe the impact of these experiences as a solo female traveller on your overall experiences or confidence as a solo traveller?
- Is there anything else you feel is important about your experience that we have not discussed?
- What would your advice be for other solo female travellers?

Thank the interviewee for participating. Ask for any other participants they might know and want to participate and help the research. Talk about sending the interview back to the interviewee so they can check the text or add any additional information. End recording.