Unpacking Peer Sexual Harassment: Roles, Trajectories, and Contexts from Childhood to Adolescence

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Aziz-Kaan Dönmez

In Memory of Recep Dürüst,
who always believed in and encouraged me

Abstract

Peer sexual harassment (PSH) is a common form of unwanted sexualised peer behaviour during adolescence, yet it has often been studied as a relatively uniform phenomenon. This thesis examines PSH during the transition from childhood to adolescence by distinguishing between patterns of role involvement, developmental patterns of victimisation, and context- and gender-specific associations with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions. Across three empirical studies based on data from the Swedish school-based PRISE project, PSH is examined as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon. Study I used five annual waves from the original cohort (N = 372; Grades 4–8) to examine overlap and transitions in PSH victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing. Three recurring role configurations were identified: Low Engagement, Victim-Witness, and High Engagement. Perpetration did not emerge as a separate perpetrator-only configuration, and movement into more involved configurations was particularly evident between Grades 5 and 7, indicating that adolescents' involvement in PSH may overlap and change across development. Study II used six annual waves from the original cohort (N = 404; Grades 4–9) to examine developmental patterns of PSH victimisation and whether gender, perceived pubertal timing, appearance esteem, and peer social support were differently associated with expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity. Expected PSH frequency increased from Grades 4 to 7 before stabilising, while excess-zero propensity decreased during this earlier period and increased from Grades 7 to 9. At Grade 4, boys and adolescents who perceived their pubertal timing as early or late relative to peers had higher expected PSH frequency. Higher average appearance esteem was associated with lower expected PSH frequency and greater excess-zero propensity, while higher average and higher-than-usual peer social support were associated with greater excess-zero propensity; higher-than-usual appearance esteem and peer social support were also associated with lower expected PSH frequency. Study III used cross-sectional data from a broader sample of adolescents in Grades 7–9 (N = 1,519) to examine associations between school-based PSH, online sexual harassment, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement. School-based PSH was indirectly associated with restricted freedom of movement through anxiety among girls, whereas online sexual harassment showed the

corresponding indirect association among boys; direct associations with restricted freedom of movement were observed for school-based PSH among boys and online sexual harassment among girls. Because Study III was cross-sectional, these findings represent patterns of association rather than temporal or causal pathways. Taken together, the findings show that PSH during the transition from childhood to adolescence is not adequately understood as a single uniform form of victimisation. Instead, its empirical patterning differs across roles, developmental time, contexts, and gender. The thesis therefore highlights the importance of developmental research and prevention that begin early, attend to overlapping forms of peer involvement, distinguish between school-based and online sexualised victimisation, and consider gender alongside psychological, social, and behavioural correlates.

Swedish summary

Sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga är oönskade sexuella eller sexualiserade handlingar mellan barn och ungdomar i ungefär samma ålder. Det kan exempelvis handla om sexuella kommentarer eller skämt, rykten, sexualiserade eller homofoba tillmälen, oönskad beröring eller sexuellt innehåll i bilder och meddelanden. Sådana erfarenheter är vanliga under ungdomstiden och har i tidigare forskning kopplats till bland annat psykisk ohälsa och svårigheter i skolan. Samtidigt har tidigare forskning ofta fokuserat på utsatthet vid enskilda tidpunkter eller studerat olika roller var för sig, vilket riskerar att missa sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga som ett mer komplext och föränderligt kamratfenomen. Ungdomar kan vara utsatta, utsätta andra, bevittna trakasserier eller ha flera av dessa roller, och erfarenheterna kan förändras över tid och skilja sig mellan olika sammanhang.

Syftet med denna avhandling var att undersöka sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga under övergången från barndom till ungdomstid. Avhandlingen bygger på tre delstudier inom forskningsprojektet PRISE, en skolbaserad studie där svenska elever följts från årskurs 4 och upp genom ungdomsåren. Studierna undersökte tre övergripande frågor: hur olika roller i sexuella trakasserier överlappar och förändras över tid, hur utsatthet utvecklas från årskurs 4 till 9, samt hur utsatthet för sexuella trakasserier hänger samman med ångest och begränsad rörelsefrihet i skolbaserade och digitala sammanhang.

I Studie I följdes 372 elever från årskurs 4 till 8. Utsatthet, att utsätta andra och att bevittna trakasserier analyserades tillsammans. Tre återkommande mönster identifierades: låg involvering, ett mönster där elever framför allt bevittnade och även själva utsattes för trakasserier, samt ett mönster med hög involvering i alla tre rollerna. Att utsätta andra framträdde alltså inte som en separat roll, utan förekom främst tillsammans med utsatthet och bevittnande. Elever kunde också röra sig mellan mönstren över tid, särskilt mellan årskurs 5 och 7. Resultaten visar att sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga inte enkelt kan förstås genom fasta grupper av offer, förövare och vittnen.

I Studie II följdes 404 elever från årskurs 4 till 9. Studien analyserade dels den förväntade frekvensen av utsatthet, dels den särskilda ansamlingen av nollvärden i data. Den förväntade frekvensen av utsatthet ökade från årskurs 4 till 7 och stabiliserades därefter. Kön, upplevd pubertetstiming, utseenderelaterad självvärdering och kamratstöd var

dessutom kopplade till de två aspekterna av utsatthet på delvis olika sätt. I årskurs 4 hade pojkar och elever som upplevde sin pubertetsutveckling som tidigare eller senare än jämnårigas högre förväntad frekvens av utsatthet. Högre utseenderelaterad självvärdering var kopplad till lägre förväntad frekvens och till den del av modellen som fångade extra nollvärden, medan kamratstöd tydligast var kopplat till denna nollkomponent. Resultaten visar att olika aspekter av utsatthet kan utvecklas på olika sätt. För förebyggande arbete innebär det att det inte räcker att enbart följa hur vanligt det är med utsatthet; även hur återkommande eller frekvent erfarenheterna är behöver uppmärksammas för att förstå om situationen faktiskt förbättras.

I Studie III undersöktes 1 519 elever i årskurs 7 till 9. Studien fokuserade på samband mellan skolbaserade sexuella trakasserier mellan jämnåriga, sexuella trakasserier online, ångest och begränsad rörelsefrihet. Begränsad rörelsefrihet syftar på säkerhetsrelaterade beteenden, exempelvis att undvika vissa platser eller situationer eller förändra sina rutiner för att känna sig tryggare. Sambanden såg olika ut för flickor och pojkar och mellan de två sammanhangen. Skolbaserade sexuella trakasserier var kopplade till högre ångest bland flickor, medan sexuella trakasserier online var kopplade till högre ångest bland pojkar. Ångest var i sin tur kopplad till mer begränsad rörelsefrihet hos både flickor och pojkar. Det fanns även direkta samband mellan skolbaserade trakasserier och begränsad rörelsefrihet bland pojkar och mellan sexuella trakasserier online och begränsad rörelsefrihet bland flickor. Eftersom studien var tvärsnittlig kan resultaten inte visa vad som orsakar vad.

Sammantaget visar avhandlingen att sexuella trakasserier under övergången från barndom till ungdomstid behöver förstås som ett differentierat utvecklingsmässigt kamratfenomen. Roller kan överlappa och förändras över tid, olika aspekter av utsatthet kan följa olika utvecklingsmönster beroende på om analysen fokuserar på den förväntade frekvensen eller på ansamlingen av nollvärden, och samband med ångest och säkerhetsrelaterade beteenden varierar mellan sammanhang och mellan flickor och pojkar. Resultaten talar därför för att förebyggande arbete bör börja tidigt, riktas mot både individer och den bredare kamrat- och skolmiljön, och ta hänsyn till att sexuella trakasserier kan se olika ut i skolan och online utan att utgå från fasta föreställningar om vilka som är utsatta eller utsätter andra.

List of Empirical Works

This thesis consists of a summary and the following three papers, which are referred to by their roman numerals:

I. Dönmez, A.-K., Holmqvist Gattario, K., Skoog, T., & Lunde, C. (2026). *Overlap and transitions in sexual harassment roles: A five-year longitudinal study from childhood to adolescence*. [Manuscript under revision, Child Development].

II. Dönmez, A.-K., Skoog, T., Holmqvist Gattario, K., & Lunde, C. (2026). *Peer sexual harassment victimization across Grades 4 to 9: Developmental patterns and correlates.* [Manuscript in preparation].

III. Dönmez, A.-K., Holmqvist Gattario, K., Skoog, T., & Lunde, C. (2026). Exploring the link between sexual harassment victimization and restricted freedom of movement: Unique associations with anxiety across victimization contexts and genders. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence.* https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605261426590

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Introduction

Peer sexual harassment (PSH), conceptualised as unwanted sexual attention by McMaster et al. (2002), is a common form of peer victimisation among children and adolescents. It may take the form of unwanted sexual comments or jokes, sexual rumours, unwanted touching, being shown or sent sexual images, or sexualised and homophobic name-calling (Hill & Kearl, 2011). PSH victimisation has been associated with internalising symptoms, including emotional distress, depression, and anxiety, as well as substance use, violent delinquency perpetration, and feeling unsafe at school (Chiodo et al., 2009; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021; Wood et al., 2026; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). Given its prevalence among youth and associations with negative outcomes, it is important to understand its developmental course.

Although research has more often focused on adolescents in later school years, PSH is already reported in late childhood. Swedish research has shown that nearly half of 10-year-olds reported experiencing some form of PSH victimisation during a single school term (Valik et al., 2023). The transition from childhood to adolescence, broadly ages 10 to 15 in the present thesis, is a period of rapid biological, psychological, and social change. Pubertal maturation, peer evaluation, gender norms, and emerging romantic and sexual interests become increasingly salient in young people's everyday lives, creating new situations in which they negotiate attraction, status, sexuality, and interpersonal boundaries (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Dahl et al., 2018; McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009;

Schnoll et al., 2015). These changes provide an important developmental context for examining how involvement in PSH emerges and changes across the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Despite its established prevalence and potential harms, PSH has often been studied as a relatively uniform phenomenon. For example, roles have often been examined separately despite possible overlap; victimisation has frequently been represented as a single outcome; and contextual differences have not always been examined. This can obscure variation in how young people are involved in PSH, how victimisation changes across development, and whether its correlates differ by gender and peer context.

The present thesis addresses this limitation across three empirical studies by unpacking PSH along three dimensions. First, it examines involvement in different and overlapping roles, including victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing. Second, it examines developmental patterns of victimisation by modelling expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity, and investigates biopsychosocial correlates in relation to these two components. Third, it examines whether sexual harassment victimisation is associated with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement, and whether these associations vary by context and gender.

Conceptualising Peer Sexual Harassment

Why Conceptualisation Matters

Conceptualising PSH is not straightforward because behaviours included under this label overlap with several related forms of peer victimisation. The same behaviour may, for example, be studied as PSH, bullying or gender-based harassment, or as youth sexual violence when it involves unwanted sexual touching. How PSH is conceptualised therefore shapes which behaviours are included, how the construct is measured, and the conclusions that can be drawn about its prevalence, developmental patterns, gender differences, and correlates (Bolduc et al., 2023; Borsboom et al., 2021).

Here, conceptualisation refers to how PSH is defined and distinguished from related forms of behaviour, whereas operationalisation refers to how that definition is translated into measures and analytic variables. For example, defining PSH to include sexualised and homophobic name-calling produces a broader conceptualisation than one limited to explicitly sexual comments or physical behaviours. Operationalisation then determines how those experiences are represented empirically: a study may record whether any PSH occurred, how frequently different behaviours occurred, or whether young people were involved as victims, perpetrators, witnesses, or in overlapping roles. These choices are consequential because they determine which aspects of PSH can be observed and which questions can be addressed about prevalence, developmental change, and patterns of involvement. The following sections therefore specify the core features of PSH, its boundaries with adjacent constructs, and the developmental complications that make these boundaries difficult to apply consistently.

What Peer Sexual Harassment Is: Behavioural Definitions and Core Features

PSH can be distinguished by four core features: it involves behaviour directed toward another young person; the behaviour is unwanted by the target or recipient; it has

sexualised content or meaning; and it occurs between peers rather than being perpetrated by adults. The first two features concern directedness and unwantedness. PSH involves behaviour directed toward another young person rather than sexualised behaviour occurring more generally within a peer setting, while unwantedness distinguishes PSH from behaviour that is wanted or mutually accepted. In PSH research, this refers to behaviour experienced as unwanted, uncomfortable, or against the target's will (McMaster et al., 2002; Valik et al., 2023).

The third feature concerns sexualised content or meaning. Some behaviours are explicitly sexual, such as unwanted sexual touching, sexual comments, or unsolicited sexual images. Others may acquire sexualised meaning through references to the target's body, attractiveness, sexuality, sexual reputation, gender expression, or presumed sexual orientation. Homophobic name-calling is one example: although it may not refer directly to sexual behaviour, it can function as sexualised or gendered harassment when used to shame, police, or regulate sexuality, masculinity, femininity, or gender conformity within peer groups (Collier et al., 2013; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Robinson, 2005).

The fourth feature is peer involvement. PSH refers to sexualised harassment occurring between young people of similar age or peer status, distinguishing it from sexual harassment perpetrated by adults or by others whose peer status is not established (Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Hill & Kearl, 2011; McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll et al., 2015; Valik et al., 2023). Behaviour-based measures are particularly useful for capturing such experiences among children and adolescents because they ask about concrete behaviours rather than requiring participants to recognise or adopt an abstract label such as sexual harassment (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Valik et al., 2023). However, identifying a behaviour does not by itself determine how it should be conceptually classified, because the same behaviour may overlap with bullying, gender-based or homophobic harassment, or youth sexual violence depending on its content and context.

Boundaries With Adjacent Constructs

PSH overlaps with broader peer victimisation, bullying, and gender-based or homophobic harassment, but it should not be treated as interchangeable with these constructs. Peer victimisation and bullying encompass physical, verbal, relational, and social forms of aggression that do not necessarily have sexualised content, whereas PSH is distinguished by its sexualised and often gendered meanings (Gruber & Fineran, 2008, 2016). Related work therefore treats bullying, homophobic name-calling, and sexual harassment as connected but distinct forms of peer aggression (Espelage et al., 2015; Espelage, Basile, et al., 2018; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018). The overlap is particularly apparent in behaviours such as homophobic name-calling, which may be conceptualised as homophobic bullying, gender-based harassment, sexual harassment, or gender policing depending on the research question and theoretical framework (Collier et al., 2013; Espelage, Hong, et al., 2018; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Robinson, 2005). These distinctions matter because the conceptual label influences which meanings and mechanisms are foregrounded in research.

PSH also overlaps with youth sexual violence and sexual aggression. Some behaviours included in PSH research, such as unwanted touching of private body parts, are also examined within youth sexual violence frameworks (Gartner & Sterzing, 2016; Valik et al., 2023). Other behaviours, including sexual comments, rumours, gestures, name-calling, or unsolicited sexual images, may be less physically intrusive while still being unwanted, sexualised, and consequential within peer relations. PSH is therefore best understood as a construct with porous boundaries: it shares features with peer victimisation, bullying, gender-based and homophobic harassment, and youth sexual violence, but is not reducible to any one of them. The conceptual task is not to draw a perfectly fixed boundary around PSH, but to specify which features are central to the research question at hand.

Conceptual Problems and Developmental Complications

Although PSH can be defined through unwantedness, sexualised content, and peer involvement, these features can be difficult to interpret during the transition from childhood to adolescence. Sexualised behaviour during this period occurs in peer

contexts where attraction, social status, gender norms, sexual reputation, and interpersonal boundaries are still being learned and negotiated (McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll et al., 2015). A behaviour may therefore be described by the actor or by peers as joking, flirting, teasing, or ordinary interaction while still being experienced by the target as unwanted, intrusive, humiliating, or harmful (Gådin, 2012; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; McMaster et al., 2002). Behaviour-based survey items can capture whether particular behaviours occurred and were unwanted, but they do not typically capture the interactional context in which they occurred, how peers interpreted them, whether adults intervened, or whether the target felt able to object.

The meaning of a behaviour may also vary depending on who is involved and how it is situated within peer relations. McMaster et al. (2002) suggested that same-gender and cross-gender harassment may have partly different meanings, with same-gender harassment more closely connected to sexualised peer aggression and cross-gender harassment sometimes connected to inexperienced attempts to communicate romantic or sexual interest. Schnoll et al. (2015) similarly found that same- and cross-gender sexual harassment victimisation showed different gender patterns and risk factors among middle school students. These findings do not mean that cross-gender harassment is harmless or that intent can be inferred from gender composition. Rather, they illustrate that behaviours grouped under PSH may reflect different peer-relational processes depending on the context in which they occur.

These developmental and interactional complications also have empirical consequences. Reviews of adolescent sexual harassment research show considerable heterogeneity in how sexual harassment is defined and measured (Bolduc et al., 2023), meaning that studies may capture partly different ranges of behaviours and experiences. The present thesis does not seek to resolve all conceptual problems in PSH research, but rather to make explicit the distinctions that are relevant to its empirical questions. Behaviour-based measures remain important for studying PSH among young people, but their findings must therefore be interpreted in relation to the behaviours included, the definitions applied, and the developmental and peer contexts in which those behaviours occur.

Theoretical Perspectives on PSH During the Transition from Childhood to Adolescence

Overview: A Layered Theoretical Orientation

PSH during the transition from childhood to adolescence can be understood through several complementary theoretical perspectives. This thesis does not treat these perspectives as a single unified theory, but instead organises them into three theoretical layers. First, developmental-contextual perspectives provide a broad orientation for understanding PSH during a period of biological, psychological, and social change. Second, gendered and sociocultural perspectives help explain why unwanted sexualised behaviours between peers may carry meanings related to gender, sexuality, sexual interest, gender expression, and norm conformity. Third, perspectives on peer contexts, social norms, and social learning draw attention to the social settings in which PSH is witnessed, interpreted, reinforced, challenged, or normalised.

This layered approach is consistent with reviews showing that adolescent sexual harassment has been examined through several overlapping theoretical traditions, including gender performance theory, social hierarchy theory, evolutionary theory, and transactional/developmental-contextual models (Bolduc et al., 2023). These traditions differ in emphasis and suggest that sexual harassment during adolescence is unlikely to have a single explanation or function. Rather, its meaning may depend on the developmental period in which it occurs, the gendered and sexual norms it invokes, the peer roles adolescents occupy, and the social contexts in which the behaviour occurs or is responded to (Armstrong et al., 2014; Bolduc et al., 2023; Butler, 1988; Pascoe, 2013; Sameroff & Mackenzie, 2003; Vaillancourt & Krems, 2018). The purpose of the theoretical framework is therefore not to test or adjudicate between these perspectives, but to use them as complementary lenses for understanding PSH as a developmentally situated, gendered, and peer-relational phenomenon.

Developmental-Contextual Perspectives: Timing, Change, and Stability

Development as a Person-Context Process

Developmental contextualism understands development as a process of changing, reciprocal relations between individuals and the multiple contexts in which they live (Lerner, 1991). Adolescents therefore do not develop in isolation from their surroundings; biological, psychological, and social changes unfold through repeated interactions with other people and within broader cultural and institutional contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011). Pubertal development, for example, is not only a biological process within the adolescent but may also change how the adolescent is perceived and treated by peers, making those responses part of subsequent social experience. Drawing on this perspective, Richardson (2011) highlights three principles especially relevant to adolescence: young people actively contribute to their own development, development unfolds across the life span, and development is embedded within social contexts. Applied to PSH, these principles direct attention to developmental timing and individual differences, reciprocal social responses, and the contexts in which unwanted sexualised behaviours occur, without reducing PSH to immaturity, lack of social skills, or emerging sexuality.

Developmental Timing and Individual Differences

The first principle concerns young people's active contribution to their own development. This does not mean that adolescents are responsible for behaviours directed toward them. Rather, adolescents enter social situations with individual characteristics, prior experiences, and ongoing developmental changes that may shape how they are perceived and responded to by others (Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011). During the transition from childhood to adolescence, pubertal maturation involves visible bodily changes, while psychological and social development includes increasing self-consciousness, identity development, autonomy seeking, and greater attention to peer evaluation (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Dahl et al., 2018; Richardson, 2011; Stattin & Skoog, 2018). These changes occur within individuals over time, but adolescents also differ in their timing and pace. Developmental contextualism therefore distinguishes change within individuals over time from differences between individuals in how

they change over time (Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011). For PSH, this distinction is relevant because adolescents of the same chronological age may differ substantially in pubertal maturation, physical appearance, peer orientation, and experience with romantic or sexualised peer interaction.

Developmental timing may be especially relevant when adolescents differ from age-graded expectations. The maturational-deviance, or off-time pubertal-timing, perspective proposes that adolescents whose pubertal development occurs earlier or later than that of their peers may become more socially salient because they differ from what is expected at a particular age (Graber, 2013). In the context of PSH, this should not be interpreted as suggesting that pubertal timing causes harassment. Rather, visible developmental differences may become socially meaningful through how they are noticed, interpreted, and responded to within peer contexts. Developmental timing is therefore relevant not as an isolated individual characteristic, but as part of the relation between adolescents' changing characteristics and their social environments.

Social Responses and Reciprocal Interpretation

The second principle concerns development as an ongoing process of reciprocal interaction. Adolescents interact with peers and adults who bring their own characteristics, beliefs, expectations, and prior experiences into social situations, meaning that the same behaviour may be interpreted and responded to differently depending on who is present and how the interaction is understood (Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011). Applied to PSH, this perspective highlights that unwanted sexualised behaviour does not occur in a social vacuum. Peer and adult responses may become part of the adolescent's subsequent experience of the setting and may shape how similar interactions are interpreted or navigated in the future. Developmental contextualism therefore directs attention not only to the behaviour itself, but also to the reciprocal relation between adolescents and the social environments in which PSH occurs.

Embedded Contexts and Peer Ecologies

The third principle is that development is embedded within social contexts. Developmental contextualism distinguishes between immediate settings in which adolescents participate directly and broader contexts that structure those settings

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011). Immediate contexts include families, peer groups, classrooms, organised activities, and online spaces, while broader contexts include cultural norms, institutional rules, school policies, and social expectations. These contexts shape who adolescents interact with, which behaviours are visible, how often the same people encounter one another, what responses are possible, and whether adults are able or expected to intervene. For PSH, this means that unwanted sexualised behaviours are embedded in social environments that differ in audience, repetition, visibility, and opportunities for response. The same behaviour may therefore take on different implications depending on the context in which it occurs.

Implications for Studying PSH Over Time

A developmental-contextual perspective therefore suggests that PSH should be studied with attention to timing, change, stability, and individual differences. PSH involvement may emerge, increase, stabilise, or decline across adolescence, and adolescents may occupy different roles across situations and over time. Factors such as pubertal timing, appearance, peer support, and gender norms should not be understood as isolated explanations, but in relation to the social contexts in which adolescents develop and interact. Developmental contextualism thus provides a foundation for examining PSH as a phenomenon that unfolds through developmental change and reciprocal person-context processes.

Gendered and Sociocultural Perspectives

Gendered Meanings and Sexual Scripts

Within a developmental-contextual view, gendered and sociocultural perspectives help specify why unwanted sexualised behaviour between peers may carry meanings that are not captured by the behaviour alone. Describing PSH as gendered does not simply mean comparing girls and boys in victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, or associated outcomes. It also means considering how sexualised behaviours are interpreted through norms concerning gender, sexuality, sexual interest, gender expression, and perceived norm conformity. A comment, rumour, gesture, image, or act of unwanted touching may therefore be sexualised because of what is said or done, but gendered because of the expectations it invokes about how adolescents are supposed

to behave, appear, desire, or respond (Conroy, 2013; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Robinson, 2005; Salomon & Brown, 2021).

One way of understanding these expectations is through sexualised gender stereotypes and heterosexual cultural scripts. Sexualised gender stereotypes include assumptions that girls are valued through sexual attractiveness and that boys are expected to direct sexual attention toward girls, while heterosexual scripts concern socially learned expectations about how heterosexual attraction, pursuit, and response should unfold (Jewell & Brown, 2013; Kim et al., 2007; Salomon & Brown, 2021; Ward, 2002). Romantic and sexual interests may become increasingly salient during adolescence, but they are interpreted through expectations about who should initiate attention, who should receive it, what counts as flirting, and what adolescents are expected to tolerate, reject, or reciprocate. Empirical work with early adolescents illustrates this ambiguity: body-related comments may be understood as normal, humorous, positive, or romantically motivated while also being recognised as potentially embarrassing, harmful, or socially consequential (Salomon & Brown, 2021). Gendered and sexual scripts therefore provide one framework for understanding how similar behaviours may acquire different meanings depending on the expectations and social context surrounding them.

Gender Performance and Norm Enforcement

Gendered and sociocultural perspectives are also relevant for understanding behaviours that regulate gender and sexuality more directly. Gender performance theory understands gender not as a fixed personal attribute, but as something repeatedly produced, recognised, and policed through social interaction (Butler, 1988; Pascoe, 2013). In adolescent peer contexts, behaviours such as homophobic name-calling, sexualised insults, and sexualised comments may be used to question whether peers are seen as appropriately masculine, heterosexual, gender-conforming, or sexually respectable (Collier et al., 2013; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Pascoe, 2013; Robinson, 2005). Such behaviours do not necessarily describe the target accurately. Homophobic insults, for example, may function less as statements about a target's actual sexual orientation than as a way of policing masculinity, heterosexuality, or gender conformity (Pascoe, 2013). The fact that such interactions are framed as humour does

not remove their gendered meaning; humour may itself be one way through which gendered and sexual boundaries are reinforced while appearing ordinary or harmless (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021; Robinson, 2005).

Gendered Patterns and Minority Vulnerability

Gendered and sociocultural perspectives also complicate simple assumptions about who is likely to be involved in PSH. A gendered perspective does not require PSH to follow a uniform pattern in which girls are targeted and boys initiate the behaviour. Different forms of PSH may invoke different expectations concerning bodies, sexuality, masculinity, femininity, heterosexuality, and sexual reputation, and may therefore have different meanings depending on the behaviour, peer context, and role involved. The same perspective also draws attention to sexual and gender minority adolescents, because behaviours such as homophobic name-calling, comments about gender expression, and other forms of sexualised peer regulation may draw on norms of heterosexuality and gender conformity (Collier et al., 2013; Pascoe, 2013; Poteat & Espelage, 2007; Robinson, 2005). Adolescents who are, or are perceived to be, outside these norms may therefore be especially exposed to forms of PSH through which sexuality and gender conformity are evaluated or policed.

Implications for the Present Thesis

A gendered and sociocultural perspective therefore provides a conceptual basis for understanding PSH as more than general peer aggression with sexual content. In the present thesis, these perspectives help frame why gender is important to examine and why the meaning and implications of PSH may differ depending on the form of behaviour, the role adolescents occupy, and the peer context in which it occurs. The empirical studies do not directly measure gendered meanings, sexual scripts, or processes of gender norm enforcement. Rather, these perspectives provide an interpretive framework for situating the findings within a literature that understands PSH as sexualised, gendered, and socially interpreted.

Peer Contexts, Social Norms, and Social Learning

Developmental-contextual perspectives locate adolescent development within the everyday settings in which young people interact with others. Within this broader framework, peer contexts are especially important because adolescents spend

substantial time observing one another, negotiating belonging, and responding to each other's behaviour (Brown & Larson, 2009; Richardson, 2011; Steinberg, 2008). In relation to PSH, peer contexts include classrooms, corridors, schoolyards, friendship groups, organised leisure activities, group chats, and online spaces. These contexts are more than physical or digital locations: they shape who is present, who can witness behaviour, how often the same peers interact, what responses are possible, and whether adults are able or expected to intervene. PSH can therefore be understood not only in terms of the adolescent who initiates a behaviour and the adolescent who is targeted, but also in relation to peers and adults whose responses may contribute to how that behaviour is interpreted and treated within the wider social environment.

Social norms theory provides one way of understanding how peer contexts may shape PSH. Cialdini and Trost (1998) distinguish between descriptive norms, referring to perceptions of how common a behaviour is, and injunctive norms, referring to perceptions of whether a behaviour is approved or disapproved of by others. Applied to PSH, descriptive norms concern whether adolescents perceive sexualised comments, rumours, touching, images, or name-calling as common within their peer group, whereas injunctive norms concern whether such behaviours are perceived as accepted, ignored, disapproved of, or likely to be challenged. If PSH is perceived as both common and tolerated, it may come to be understood as part of ordinary peer interaction; consistent peer or adult disapproval may instead mark the behaviour more clearly as unacceptable.

This normative dimension may be particularly relevant during the transition from childhood to adolescence, when peer approval, social comparison, and group belonging become increasingly salient (Brown & Larson, 2009; Steinberg, 2008). Behaviours that attract attention, laughter, or approval may therefore carry different social consequences from behaviours that elicit disapproval or intervention. Empirical work provides some support for the relevance of these normative processes: peer-network characteristics have been associated with adolescents' perpetration of potentially offensive sexual behaviours (Jewell et al., 2015), and adolescents may recognise sexual harassment as harmful while simultaneously interpreting some behaviours as normal, humorous, or romantically motivated (Salomon & Brown, 2021). These findings

illustrate why adolescents' perceptions of what peers commonly do and accept may be relevant for understanding PSH.

Whereas social norms theory describes what adolescents perceive as common or approved, social learning theory helps explain how these perceptions and behavioural expectations may be acquired and maintained. From a social learning perspective, young people learn not only through direct instruction but also by observing how others behave and which behaviours are rewarded, ignored, punished, or modelled by peers and adults (Akers & Jennings, 2019; Bandura, 1977). Applied to PSH, adolescents may learn whether sexualised comments, rumours, touching, images, or name-calling are tolerated or likely to be challenged by observing how others respond. Laughter, attention, approval, or silence may signal that a behaviour is socially acceptable or low-risk, whereas peer disapproval, support for the target, or adult intervention may signal that it is unacceptable. This does not imply that adolescents simply imitate others; rather, peer environments provide information about which behaviours are possible, valued, tolerated, or socially costly within a particular group or setting.

The school-class context is especially relevant because it combines repeated peer interaction with institutional responsibility for safety and intervention. Repeated contact among the same students creates conditions in which shared expectations about acceptable behaviour may develop, while peer and adult responses provide information about whether PSH is tolerated, challenged, or taken seriously (Espelage et al., 2016; Horn & Poteat, 2023; Mulla et al., 2023). From a social norms and social learning perspective, schools can therefore be understood as settings in which peer behaviour and institutional responses jointly contribute to the social meaning and treatment of PSH (Conroy, 2013; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Rahimi & Liston, 2009).

A peer-contextual perspective also helps explain why involvement in PSH need not be organised into fixed victim, perpetrator, and witness positions. Because adolescents participate in the same peer environments across different situations and over time, they may be targeted by PSH in one interaction, witness it in another, engage in it themselves, or remain uninvolved. Role overlap can therefore be understood not only as a measurement issue, but also as a feature of the peer ecology in which PSH

occurs. Adolescents' positions may shift across interactions as they observe, experience, respond to, or participate in sexualised peer behaviour (Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2025; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Valik et al., 2023).

Witnessing is particularly important within a peer-contextual perspective because it connects individual involvement to the wider social environment. Witnesses are not necessarily passive observers: they may reinforce, minimise, challenge, or report the behaviour, or support the target. Their presence also means that PSH can shape the peer context beyond the individuals directly involved. Witnessing may therefore influence how adolescents interpret both the behaviour itself and their own experiences of PSH, making it an important link between individual involvement and broader peer processes (Li & Craig, 2020).

Peer contexts also differ in the conditions they create for how sexualised behaviour is enacted, witnessed, and responded to. School-based PSH typically occurs within repeated, institutionally organised peer settings where adults have responsibility for safety and intervention (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Horn & Poteat, 2023; Lichty & Campbell, 2012), whereas online sexual harassment may involve different conditions of audience, visibility, persistence, circulation, and opportunities for avoidance or intervention (Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Ybarra et al., 2015). These contextual differences provide a theoretical reason to examine school-based and online sexualised victimisation separately, while recognising that online interactions can remain part of adolescents' wider peer ecology.

Together, peer-contextual, social norms, and social learning perspectives provide a theoretical basis for understanding PSH as more than an individual experience. They direct attention to the settings in which PSH occurs, the peers and adults who witness or respond to it, the norms that may make particular behaviours seem ordinary or unacceptable, and the possibility that adolescents may occupy different roles across situations and over time. In the present thesis, these perspectives help motivate attention to victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, role overlap, and differences between school-based and online contexts. The empirical studies do not directly measure full friendship networks, classroom norms, teacher responses, or adult supervision.

Rather, these perspectives provide an interpretive framework for understanding PSH as a peer-relational phenomenon embedded in wider social contexts.

Existing Research on Peer Sexual Harassment

Empirical research has established PSH as a common and potentially harmful form of unwanted sexualised peer behaviour during adolescence, although estimates and findings vary with age, measurement, time frame, behaviour type, and context (Bolduc et al., 2023; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2016; Lei et al., 2020; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Valik et al., 2023). PSH victimisation has also been associated with psychological symptoms, school-related problems, substance use, and behavioural adjustment (Chiodo et al., 2009; Mitchell et al., 2014; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). Building on the conceptual and theoretical perspectives outlined above, this section reviews the empirical literature across five issues central to the thesis: patterns of PSH involvement, developmental patterns of victimisation over time, peer contexts of PSH, gendered patterns and differential vulnerability, and psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions.

Patterns of PSH Involvement: Roles, Prevalence, and Overlap

PSH can involve several roles within the peer group, including victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, and non-involvement. Although these roles are conceptually distinct, empirical research suggests that they are not always separate in adolescents' experiences. The same adolescent may be targeted in one situation, witness PSH in another, and perpetrate PSH in a third, making it important to examine not only the prevalence of individual roles but also overlap between them (Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; McMaster et al., 2002; Valik et al., 2024).

Victimisation has received the most empirical attention in PSH research. Studies in age groups relevant to the present thesis consistently show that substantial

proportions of young people report PSH victimisation, although estimates are not directly comparable because samples, measures, time frames, and contexts differ. In an Australian study of 11- to 19-year-olds, Lei et al. (2020) found that 42.5% of boys and 40.0% of girls reported PSH victimisation during the previous school term. In a Canadian study of 10- to 14-year-olds, Li and Craig (2020) reported past-month victimisation among 38.5% of both boys and girls, compared with 81.8% of gender minority students. Among younger children, Valik et al. (2024) found that 45% of Swedish 10-year-olds reported PSH victimisation. Together, these studies indicate that PSH victimisation is already common from late childhood onward, while also illustrating the variation in estimates associated with age and measurement.

Perpetration has been examined less often than victimisation, and available studies generally report lower prevalence of perpetration than victimisation. In a U.S. study of 11- to 13-year-olds, Rolfe and Schroeder (2020) found that 29.9% of boys and 20.3% of girls reported perpetrating verbal PSH. Stroem et al. (2022) similarly found that 24% of boys and 14% of girls aged 14 to 15 years reported perpetration during the past year. Evidence from younger samples indicates that perpetration is already present in late childhood: Valik et al. (2024) found that 17% of Swedish 10-year-olds reported perpetrating PSH. These estimates should be interpreted cautiously, as adolescents may be less willing to report socially undesirable behaviours or may not recognise their own behaviour as harassment (Bell & Naugle, 2007; Bolduc et al., 2023). Moreover, prevalence estimates cannot show whether perpetration is broadly distributed across adolescents or concentrated among a smaller group who engage in PSH repeatedly.

Witnessing has been examined less often than both victimisation and perpetration, despite evidence that it is a common form of PSH involvement. In a Canadian study of 10- to 14-year-olds, Li and Craig (2020) found that 62.4% of boys, 65.8% of girls, and 81.8% of gender minority students reported witnessing PSH during the previous month. Lichty and Campbell (2012) similarly found that almost all students aged 11 to 15 years in their U.S. sample had witnessed sexual harassment during the school year. More recent Swedish research shows that witnessing is also common in late childhood, with Valik et al. (2024) reporting that 60% of 10-year-olds had witnessed

PSH. Together, these findings suggest that witnessing may be one of the most common forms of involvement in PSH, despite receiving comparatively limited attention in the literature.

The prevalence estimates above show that victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing are each empirically relevant, but they do not indicate whether adolescents occupy only one role. Existing research suggests that PSH involvement is often multi-role. In McMaster et al.'s (2002) study of Canadian adolescents in Grades 6 to 8, 78% of students who reported perpetrating PSH also reported victimisation, and 56% of those who reported victimisation also reported perpetration. Fineran and Bolen (2006) similarly found overlap between victimisation and perpetration in a U.S. high school sample, while Hill and Kearl (2011) reported that most students who perpetrated sexual harassment had also experienced victimisation. Li and Craig (2020) also found strong associations between victimisation and witnessing. Together, these findings suggest that adolescents' involvement in PSH is not always organised into separate victim, perpetrator, and witness roles.

Recent Swedish research provides further evidence that PSH role involvement is already overlapping and dynamic in late childhood. Valik et al. (2024) found that victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing were all present among 10-year-olds, with substantial overlap between roles. Using two-wave longitudinal data from ages 10 to 11, Holmqvist Gattario et al. (2025) found both stability and change in role configurations. Many students remained in similar configurations across time, particularly those already involved in multiple roles, whereas others moved from no involvement into witnessing, victimisation, or combined victim/witness involvement. The authors suggested that witnessing may represent an early form of exposure to PSH that can precede later victimisation, while students who perpetrated PSH often had previous experience as victims, witnesses, or both. Together, these findings indicate that PSH involvement may be multidimensional, overlapping, and developmentally dynamic from an early age.

Overall, existing research shows that PSH involvement cannot be fully understood by examining victimisation alone. Perpetration and witnessing are also empirically relevant, and adolescents may occupy overlapping roles or move between roles over

time. This supports examining PSH as a pattern of peer involvement rather than as a set of mutually exclusive victim, perpetrator, and witness roles.

Developmental Patterns of PSH Victimisation

Although PSH involvement can include multiple and overlapping roles, victimisation is the form of involvement for which continuity and change have been most directly studied. The developmental question is therefore not only whether adolescents report PSH victimisation at a given point in time, but how victimisation unfolds across development: whether it remains low, increases, declines, or persists across the transition from childhood to adolescence.

Addressing this question requires longitudinal evidence, yet such evidence remains limited. Cross-sectional age or grade differences may suggest that PSH victimisation becomes more common or more visible as adolescents grow older, but they cannot show change within the same individuals over time. In their review, Bolduc et al. (2023) noted that only a minority of studies on adolescent sexual harassment victimisation used longitudinal designs, and that studies varied considerably in definitions, behaviours included, time frames, and measurement approaches. These limitations constrain conclusions about when victimisation emerges, whether it persists, and which adolescents experience repeated victimisation.

Existing research nevertheless indicates that PSH victimisation is already present in late childhood and early adolescence, although developmental coverage across this period remains uneven. Some studies have examined sexual harassment victimisation among young people aged approximately 11 to 14 years or in Grades 6 to 8 (e.g., Li & Craig, 2020; McMaster et al., 2002; Schnoll et al., 2015). More recent work has extended attention to younger ages. Valik et al. (2024), for example, found that PSH victimisation was already reported among Swedish 10-year-olds. Hunt et al. (2024), using retrospective population-based data from the Australian Child Maltreatment Study, found that 10.4% of respondents reported PSH during childhood, defined as any experience before age 18, although these data do not identify developmental change across specific ages. Taken together, existing studies show that PSH victimisation can occur before mid-adolescence, but relatively little research has followed

victimisation repeatedly from late childhood into mid-adolescence. This limits knowledge about when victimisation emerges, becomes repeated, or changes across this broader developmental period.

The longitudinal evidence that is available suggests that sexual harassment victimisation does not necessarily represent a transient experience. In a Swedish sample, Zetterström Dahlqvist et al. (2016) found continuity in victimisation across Grades 7 to 9, particularly among girls. Skoog and Kapetanovic (2023) further showed that sexual harassment victimisation and emotional problems may develop in interconnected ways over time. More recently, Wang et al. (2024), using five assessments across two years among adolescents aged 13 to 15 years at baseline, identified distinct developmental trajectories of sexual harassment victimisation, including never/low, moderate/decreasing, and moderate/increasing patterns. Together, these findings indicate substantial heterogeneity in developmental course: victimisation may remain low for many adolescents, while for others it may persist, increase, decline, or co-develop with other developmental difficulties.

Developmental timing may also be associated with PSH victimisation. Empirical studies have linked earlier pubertal timing and more mature physical appearance to a greater likelihood of sexual harassment victimisation in early adolescence (Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). These associations should not be interpreted as indicating that pubertal timing causes harassment. Rather, they are consistent with the possibility that visible developmental differences may become socially salient within peer contexts.

Appearance esteem may also be relevant to PSH victimisation because sexual harassment can involve comments, evaluations, or unwanted attention directed toward adolescents' bodies and appearance. Appearance esteem refers to adolescents' evaluations of and feelings about their body or appearance (Mendelson et al., 2001). Prior longitudinal research from the PRISE project indicates that PSH, appearance esteem, and emotional problems are developmentally related, although the findings do not support a simple pathway in which PSH directly leads to lower appearance esteem over time (Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2024).

Peer social support may also be associated with PSH victimisation. Perceived peer social support refers to adolescents' sense that peers are available as sources of support, belonging, and assistance (Shah et al., 2024; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021). Several studies have linked stronger relational support from peers, parents, teachers, or the broader school context to lower levels of sexual harassment victimisation (Doty et al., 2017; Espelage et al., 2019; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2016). However, findings are not uniform. Apell et al. (2019) found no significant association between perceived social support and high levels of sexual harassment among Finnish adolescents. Taken together, existing research suggests that relational support may be relevant to sexual harassment victimisation, but that associations may depend on how support, harassment, and social context are measured.

Measurement choices also affect what can be concluded about developmental patterns of PSH victimisation. Some studies classify adolescents as victimised if they report at least one experience during a given time frame, whereas others use frequency scores across several behaviours. These approaches capture different aspects of victimisation: any reported victimisation indicates whether PSH victimisation was reported during the measurement period, whereas frequency reflects how often victimisation is reported. Collapsing these dimensions can obscure differences between adolescents who report a single experience and those who report repeated or frequent victimisation. More broadly, studies also differ in the number and type of behaviours assessed, the time frames used, and whether sexual harassment is measured as peer-specific or more general victimisation (Bolduc et al., 2023). Such heterogeneity complicates comparisons across studies and may obscure developmental differences in persistence, repetition, severity, perpetrator, and context.

Despite this growing evidence, relatively little is known about how PSH victimisation develops across the broader transition from late childhood to mid-adolescence. In particular, longitudinal analyses that account for both changes in expected victimisation frequency and the substantial concentration of zero reports may provide a more differentiated account of how PSH unfolds across this period.

Peer Contexts of PSH and Online Sexual Harassment

Peer and social contexts are important for understanding where sexualised victimisation occurs and the conditions under which adolescents experience it. This section focuses particularly on school-based PSH and online sexual harassment. These contexts should be distinguished because they are not always defined or measured in the same way. In the present thesis, school-based PSH refers to unwanted sexualised behaviour between peers in school settings, whereas online sexual harassment is treated as a related but contextually distinct form of sexualised victimisation because online studies do not always establish whether the perpetrator is a peer, a known non-peer, or an unknown person. When peer involvement is established, online sexual harassment can be understood as online PSH. Maintaining this distinction allows differences in social setting, audience, perpetrator, visibility, and possible responses to be examined without treating all forms of sexualised victimisation as equivalent.

School is a central context for PSH because adolescents repeatedly encounter peers within institutionally organised settings. Empirical studies indicate that adolescent sexual harassment occurs across classrooms, hallways, locker rooms, lunchrooms, and other shared school spaces, often in the presence of peers (Espelage et al., 2016; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Young et al., 2009). Because targeted adolescents may continue to encounter the perpetrator, witnesses, and the wider peer group after an incident, school-based PSH can become embedded in ongoing peer relations rather than remain an isolated interaction between two adolescents (Lichty & Campbell, 2012; McMaster et al., 2002; Young et al., 2009).

The school context is also institutional. Schools are not only settings for peer interaction but have responsibilities for students' safety and for responding to harassment. In Sweden, the Discrimination Act requires education providers, when they become aware that a student considers themselves exposed to harassment or sexual harassment in connection with the educational activity, to investigate the circumstances and, where relevant, take reasonable measures to prevent future harassment (Diskrimineringslag, 2008:567, 2 kap. 7 §). Skolverket (2025) similarly describes schools as responsible for preventive work against sexual harassment and other violations, as well as for investigation, action, and follow-up when violations occur.

Adult responses may therefore shape whether sexual harassment is recognised and addressed or minimised as joking, flirting, immaturity, or ordinary peer conflict. Gillander Gådin and Stein (2019) show how sexual harassment in schools may become normalised when responsibility is shifted away from the perpetrator and the school and when the gendered dimensions of the behaviour are not addressed. Horn and Poteat (2023) similarly found that perceived teacher intervention was relevant to how adolescents evaluated sexual harassment.

Sexual harassment may also occur in other structured peer settings, including organised leisure activities (Vertommen et al., 2022). These settings often involve repeated peer contact outside school together with adult supervision, group membership, and expectations about participation. In a three-year longitudinal study of Swedish adolescents, Jaf et al. (2025) found evidence of revictimisation across school and organised activity contexts: adolescents who experienced sexual harassment at school were more likely to report later sexual harassment in organised activities, and vice versa. These findings suggest that sexual harassment may extend across the settings that structure adolescents' everyday peer lives rather than remaining confined to a single context.

Online sexual harassment represents another important context for sexualised victimisation. It may occur through messages, posts, image sharing, group chats, social media platforms, or requests for sexual content, and can include verbal, visual, and image-based behaviours (Franceschi et al., 2024). Unlike school-based PSH, online sexual harassment does not require adolescents to share the same physical space and may occur outside school hours. It may also involve wider or less visible audiences, while digital content can be forwarded, shared, or circulated beyond the original interaction (Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2015). These features may make it difficult for targeted adolescents to know who has seen the material or how far it has circulated, creating different conditions of visibility, persistence, and control than those typically present in school-based settings.

Recent empirical work indicates that online sexual harassment is common in adolescence and forms an important part of young people's social experiences. In a Swedish study, Dahlström et al. (2025) reported that 75% of girls and 51% of boys had

experienced cyber sexual harassment, while 65% of girls and 45% of boys had experienced in-person sexual harassment. Ståhl and Dennhag (2021) similarly found that adolescent sexual harassment occurred across both online and offline contexts. Ramljak et al. (2025) further showed that adolescents differed in how they anticipated responding to online sexual harassment, including blocking the harasser, deleting content, avoiding the perpetrator, confronting the behaviour, or repeating similar behaviours themselves. Together, these studies indicate that online sexual harassment is not a marginal form of victimisation, but a context in which adolescents may encounter sexualised behaviour under different conditions of visibility, circulation, persistence, and response.

These contextual differences are central to the present thesis. By examining school-based PSH and online sexual harassment separately, Study III assesses whether their associations with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions differ across contexts.

Gendered Patterns and Differential Vulnerability

Gender is central to empirical research on PSH, but the evidence does not support a simple pattern in which girls are always victims and boys are always perpetrators. Instead, gender appears to matter in several related ways, including whether adolescents report PSH, which forms they report, which roles they occupy, and how different forms of involvement overlap. This section therefore reviews gendered variation in PSH involvement and differential vulnerability, including vulnerability among sexual and gender minority adolescents, while avoiding the assumption that a single gender pattern applies across all ages, roles, contexts, or behaviours.

Findings on gender differences in sexual harassment victimisation are mixed. Some studies report higher levels among girls, whereas others find similar levels among girls and boys or, in some cases, higher levels among boys, depending on age, context, time frame, and the behaviours included in the measure (Bolduc et al., 2023; Lei et al., 2020; Li & Craig, 2020; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). For example, Li and Craig (2020) found no overall gender difference in past-month victimisation among 10- to 14-year-olds, whereas Dahlström et al. (2025) reported higher levels among

girls than boys for both cyber and in-person sexual harassment. Wood et al. (2026) similarly found higher levels of sexual harassment among girls in late adolescence. Rather than indicating a simple contradiction, these findings suggest that gender differences in victimisation vary according to developmental period, context, measurement, and the specific forms of harassment assessed.

Several studies suggest that girls and boys may report partly different forms of sexual harassment. Girls' victimisation has more often involved sexual comments about the body, sexual rumours, image-based harassment, unwanted touching, and other behaviours targeting the body or sexual reputation (Crowley & Cornell, 2020; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Li & Craig, 2020). Boys' victimisation has more often involved verbal harassment, same-gender harassment, homophobic name-calling, and behaviours that question masculinity or heterosexuality (Espelage et al., 2016; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). These patterns should not be treated as absolute. Li and Craig (2020), for example, found that girls were more likely than boys to report sexual name-calling and sexual comments, but found no gender differences in gender policing, homophobic harassment, sexual rumours, or being shown sexual pictures. Together, these findings suggest that girls and boys do not experience entirely separate forms of harassment, but that the distribution of specific behaviours may differ by gender.

Gender differences are also evident in perpetration. Existing research generally finds higher levels of sexual harassment perpetration among boys than girls, although girls also report perpetrating PSH. Among 11- to 13-year-olds in the United States, Rolfe and Schroeder (2020) found that 29.9% of boys and 20.3% of girls reported perpetrating PSH, while Stroem et al. (2022) found past-year perpetration among 24% of boys and 14% of girls aged 14 to 15 years. More recent research suggests that gender may also be relevant to factors associated with perpetration. Durán-Guerrero et al. (2025), examining offline and online sexual harassment perpetration, found that pro-sexual-harassment attitudes were associated with perpetration among both girls and boys, while some of the emotional processes associated with these behaviours differed by gender. Taken together, these findings suggest that perpetration is gendered but should not be understood as exclusively male.

Gender may also shape overlap between victimisation and perpetration. Fineran and Bolen (2006) found that the two forms of involvement were strongly connected for both girls and boys, but that the pattern differed by gender. Girls who perpetrated sexual harassment were often also victimised, which the authors suggested might reflect retaliation or responses to prior victimisation, whereas boys' perpetration was more strongly associated with histories of victimisation. These findings suggest that gender may matter not only for whether adolescents are involved in PSH, but also for how different roles are connected.

Sexual and gender minority adolescents are particularly important in this literature because binary comparisons between girls and boys do not capture all forms of vulnerability. Bolduc et al. (2023) identified sexual minority status as one of the more consistently supported correlates of sexual harassment victimisation. Mitchell et al. (2014) found elevated rates of sexual harassment among lesbian/queer girls, gay/queer boys, bisexual girls, transgender youth, and gender non-conforming youth, while Li and Craig (2020) found substantially higher victimisation and witnessing among gender minority students than among male- and female-identified students. More recent evidence similarly indicates heightened vulnerability among sexual minority youth, with Wood et al. (2026) finding higher rates of sexual harassment among bisexual/pansexual than heterosexual participants in late adolescence. Research on related forms of sexualised peer victimisation also suggests that vulnerability may intersect with other identity positions. Martin-Storey et al. (2026), for example, found higher levels of slut-shaming among cisgender girls and gender minority students than among cisgender boys, while sexual identity and disability were also relevant correlates. Although slut-shaming is not identical to PSH, these findings illustrate how sexualised peer victimisation may be patterned by gender identity, sexual identity, disability, and norms concerning gender and sexuality.

In the present thesis, gender is treated as a potential source of variation in PSH involvement rather than as a simple background characteristic. The following section considers whether gender may also shape associations between sexual harassment victimisation and psychological and behavioural outcomes.

Psychological Symptoms and Safety-Related Behavioural Restriction

Research on correlates of sexual harassment victimisation has focused primarily on psychological symptoms and adjustment, whereas behavioural correlates that may restrict adolescents' movement, autonomy, or participation have received less attention. In this section, psychological symptoms refer to indicators such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, shame, emotional distress, and psychosomatic complaints, whereas safety-related behavioural restriction refers to self-protective behaviours that may limit adolescents' movement or participation in everyday settings. Considering both domains allows attention to associations with internal psychological experiences as well as with how adolescents navigate their social environments.

A substantial body of research has linked sexual harassment victimisation with poorer psychological adjustment during adolescence. Reported correlates include depressive symptoms, anxiety, shame, psychosomatic symptoms, self-harm, substance use, and poorer school functioning (Chiodo et al., 2009; Dahlqvist et al., 2025; Li & Craig, 2020; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Wood et al., 2026; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). Recent studies continue to support this general pattern. Wood et al. (2026), for example, found that sexual harassment in late adolescence was associated with PTSD symptoms, anxiety, depression, and alcohol use. In a Swedish study, Dahlqvist et al. (2025) found that sexualised victimisation formed part of broader patterns of peer poly-victimisation, with profiles involving sexualised violence associated with higher psychosomatic symptoms, particularly among girls. Together, these findings indicate that sexual harassment victimisation is consistently associated with multiple dimensions of adolescent psychological and behavioural adjustment.

Longitudinal research adds important nuance by showing that associations between sexual harassment victimisation and psychological adjustment may unfold over time and may not be uniformly one-directional. Chiodo et al. (2009) found that peer sexual harassment victimisation predicted later adjustment difficulties, including emotional distress and substance use. In a Swedish longitudinal study, Zetterström Dahlqvist et al. (2016) found that associations between sexual harassment victimisation and depressive symptoms differed by gender and type of harassment. Among

girls, some findings indicated that sexual harassment preceded later depressive symptoms, while others suggested reciprocal associations between victimisation and depressive symptoms. Among boys, depressive symptoms more often preceded later sexual name-calling. Together, these findings suggest that sexual harassment victimisation may be associated with later psychological difficulties, while adolescents experiencing psychological difficulties may also be more likely to report some forms of subsequent harassment. The relation between sexual harassment and psychological symptoms should therefore be understood as potentially developmental, reciprocal, and gendered rather than as uniformly one-directional.

Context may also shape associations between sexual harassment victimisation and psychological symptoms. Ståhl and Dennhag (2021) found that online sexual harassment was associated with anxiety and depressive symptoms among girls but not boys, whereas offline harassment and combined online/offline harassment were associated with symptoms among both girls and boys. Peer context may also be relevant. Li and Craig (2020) found an indirect association between sexual harassment victimisation and depressive symptoms through shame, and that witnessing moderated this pattern among girls: associations between victimisation and shame, and between victimisation and depressive symptoms through shame, were weaker among girls who reported more witnessing. The authors interpreted this as consistent with the possibility that witnessing may help some adolescents contextualise their own victimisation as part of a broader peer environment rather than as something uniquely attributable to themselves. Together, these findings suggest that associations between sexual harassment and psychological symptoms may vary according to both the context in which harassment occurs and the wider peer environment in which it is interpreted.

Although psychological symptoms have received most attention, safety-related behavioural restrictions may capture another dimension of adolescents' experiences associated with sexual harassment victimisation. Restricted freedom of movement refers to self-protective behaviours such as avoiding being alone, planning routes with safety in mind, changing routines, or carrying something for protection (Calogero et al., 2021). Although this construct has mainly been developed in research on sexual objectification and safety anxiety among adults, it is relevant to PSH research because

it shifts attention from psychological distress alone to behavioural restrictions that may limit movement, autonomy, or participation. School-based and online sexualised victimisation may also be difficult to avoid for different reasons: school-based PSH may involve repeated encounters with perpetrators, witnesses, or the wider peer group, whereas online harassment may persist through the forwarding or circulation of messages or images beyond the initial interaction (Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Madigan et al., 2018; McMaster et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2015). However, safety-related behavioural restriction remains under-studied in adolescent PSH research, leaving limited evidence about whether and how it is associated with sexualised victimisation across different contexts.

Gender may also shape associations between sexual harassment victimisation and psychological or behavioural adjustment. Some studies suggest stronger associations with depressive symptoms or distress among girls, while others indicate substantial associations among boys as well (Wood et al., 2026; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). Kaltiala-Heino et al. (2016), for example, found that sexual harassment was associated with emotional and behavioural symptoms among adolescents, with stronger associations among boys than girls in some analyses. Taken together, these findings suggest that gender differences in psychological and behavioural correlates should not be assumed in advance, but examined in relation to the form of victimisation, the context in which it occurs, and the specific outcome considered.

In contrast to psychological symptoms, much less is known about safety-related behavioural restrictions following sexual harassment victimisation, particularly whether these associations differ by gender or context. Examining restricted freedom of movement alongside anxiety may therefore broaden understanding of how sexualised victimisation is associated not only with adolescents' psychological well-being, but also with how they navigate everyday social environments.

Research Gaps

Taken together, the literature reviewed above identifies several gaps in how PSH has been differentiated empirically. These concern patterns of role involvement, developmental change in victimisation, distinctions between school-based PSH and online

sexual harassment, gendered variation, and the relative lack of research on behavioural correlates such as restricted freedom of movement. Addressing these gaps is important because broad measures or aggregate estimates may obscure how adolescents are involved in PSH, how victimisation changes over time, and whether its correlates differ across contexts and groups.

First, more research is needed on patterns of involvement in PSH. Victimisation remains the most frequently studied role, while perpetration and witnessing have received less attention, particularly in younger samples. Although existing research indicates that these roles may overlap and change over time, few studies have examined victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, and non-involvement together across the transition from childhood to adolescence. This limits understanding of whether PSH involvement is best characterised by distinct roles, overlapping role configurations, or movement between roles over time.

Second, more developmental research is needed on PSH victimisation across the transition from childhood to adolescence. Although existing studies indicate that victimisation can begin in late childhood and follow different developmental courses, relatively few have followed adolescents repeatedly across this broader age span. In addition, studies often represent victimisation either as any reported experience or as a frequency score, even though these dimensions answer different questions. Less is known about how developmental patterns of PSH victimisation appear when both variation in frequency and the substantial concentration of zero scores are modelled simultaneously, or whether biological, psychological, and social correlates are associated differently with these features of the distribution.

Third, context remains insufficiently differentiated in parts of the literature. School-based PSH and online sexual harassment are related forms of sexualised victimisation, but they should not be treated as equivalent, particularly because online studies do not always establish whether the perpetrator is a peer. Beyond this conceptual distinction, relatively little is known about whether sexualised victimisation in school-based and online contexts shows similar or different associations with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions.

Fourth, gender is frequently considered in PSH research, but existing findings do not support a single gender pattern across ages, roles, contexts, or behaviours. Gender may be relevant to patterns of involvement as well as to associations between victimisation and psychological or behavioural correlates, while sexual and gender minority adolescents may experience particular vulnerability. More research is therefore needed that treats gender as a potential source of variation in PSH experiences and correlates rather than simply as a background characteristic.

Finally, research on the correlates of sexual harassment victimisation has focused primarily on psychological symptoms, while behavioural correlates have received considerably less attention. Restricted freedom of movement is particularly understudied among adolescents, despite its potential relevance for understanding how sexualised victimisation is associated with everyday safety, autonomy, and participation. Less is therefore known about whether school-based PSH and online sexual harassment are associated with safety-related behavioural restrictions, and whether these associations differ by gender or context.

Taken together, these gaps point to the need for research that treats PSH as a differentiated peer phenomenon across the transition from childhood to adolescence. Specifically, there is a need to examine multiple forms of involvement together, follow victimisation over time, account for both variation in victimisation frequency and the substantial concentration of zero scores, differentiate school-based PSH from online sexual harassment, and examine whether associations with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restriction vary by gender and context.

The Present Thesis

The present thesis addresses these gaps across three empirical studies that build on one another.

Study I examines how adolescents are involved in PSH by analysing victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, and non-involvement together from Grade 4 to Grade 8. This study provides a starting point for the thesis by asking whether PSH involvement is best understood through separate roles or through overlapping patterns of involvement, and whether these patterns remain stable or change over time.

Study II narrows the focus to PSH victimisation and examines its development from Grade 4 to Grade 9. It distinguishes between expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity, and examines whether biological, psychological, and social correlates are associated differently with these two components.

Study III examines whether associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement differ by context and gender. Using cross-sectional data from adolescents in Grades 7 to 9, it compares school-based PSH with online sexual harassment as a separate context of sexualised victimisation.

Taken together, the three studies unpack PSH along three complementary dimensions: patterns of role involvement, developmental patterns of victimisation, and context- and gender-specific associations with psychological and behavioural correlates. In doing so, the thesis examines PSH as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon rather than as a single, uniform form of victimisation.

Summary of Studies

Overall Aim

The overall aim of this thesis is to examine peer sexual harassment during the transition from childhood to adolescence by distinguishing between: (a) adolescents' involvement as victims, perpetrators, witnesses, or uninvolved peers; (b) developmental patterns of PSH victimisation, including variation in expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity; and (c) associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement across school-based and online contexts and between girls and boys.

For conceptual coherence, the three studies are presented in an order that reflects the progression of the thesis rather than the chronological sequence in which the studies were developed.

Design and General Methods

The PRISE Project

The three studies included in this thesis were conducted within the research project Peer Relations In School from an Ecological perspective (PRISE; Skoog et al., 2019). The project received repeated funding from the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (FORTE; grant numbers 2018–00667 and 2021-00480). The funders had no role in the design or reporting of the studies, or in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data. All study procedures were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority (reference numbers 2019–02755 and 2022-04023-01).

PRISE is a school-based longitudinal project following students from late childhood into adolescence. The first phase of the project collected annual data from one cohort of students from Grade 4 through Grade 6. The second phase continued to follow the same cohort from Grade 7 through Grade 9 and also recruited additional students in Grades 7–9. Data collection took place annually from the winter/spring of

2019/2020 through 2024/2025, yielding six waves of data spanning Grades 4 through 9.

Across the PRISE data collections used in this thesis, students were recruited from schools in western Sweden. In the first phase of the project, the original cohort was recruited in Grade 4 from 63 classes across 29 middle schools. In the second phase, the same cohort was followed from Grade 7 through Grade 9, and additional students were recruited; the Grade 7–9 data collections involved students from 98 classes across 11 schools. The participating schools represented a mix of inner-city and suburban areas. Study information for caregivers was provided in multiple languages during the elementary school waves to increase accessibility. From Grade 7 onward, study information was provided in Swedish and English. Participants required sufficient Swedish proficiency to complete the online questionnaire, which means that the experiences of some linguistic minority groups may be underrepresented. Individual-level ethnicity data were not collected.

For students younger than age 15, legal guardians received written study information and consent forms by post. Students whose guardians had provided consent were invited to complete the questionnaire in school. Participants also received verbal information about the study and provided their own assent before answering the questionnaire. From age 15 onward, students provided their own informed consent. Data were collected primarily during regular school hours using online questionnaires administered through Qualtrics. Trained researchers were present during school-based data collection to introduce the study, answer questions, and provide technical support. Students were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could skip questions or stop participating at any time, and that their responses would be treated confidentially. Students who were absent during school-based data collection, or who could not be reached through participating schools, were invited to complete the questionnaire at home. From Grade 7 onward, a multiform planned missingness design was implemented to reduce respondent burden (Graham et al., 2006; Little & Rhemtulla, 2013).

A central measure across the thesis is the Peer Sexual Harassment–Child scale (PSH-C; Valik et al., 2023), which was developed for use with children and younger

adolescents. The PSH-C assesses peer sexual harassment in three roles: victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing. Each role is measured using six items covering verbal, physical, and visual forms of PSH. The PSH-C was administered at every wave and serves as the main measure of school-based PSH in the thesis. Although one item concerns pictures or messages related to nakedness or sex, the PSH-C items were framed as behaviours involving other students during the current school grade and are therefore treated here as part of school-based peer sexual harassment. Additional measures specific to each study are described below.

The three studies use different subsets of the PRISE data because they address different research questions and use different inclusion criteria. Study I uses five waves from the original cohort, spanning Grades 4 through 8, and required data suitable for joint latent transition models across victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing indicators. This meant that the analytic sample was restricted to students with sufficient linked data across the role-specific PSH indicators needed to estimate role configurations and transitions. Study II uses six waves from the original cohort, spanning Grades 4 through 9, but focuses only on victimisation and uses mixed-effects models in person-year format. This allowed students to contribute data for the waves in which they had valid victimisation and covariate data, even if they did not contribute complete information across all roles or all waves. Study III uses cross-sectional data from Grades 7 through 9 and includes both the original cohort and additionally recruited students. For this reason, the analytic sample sizes differ across the three studies.

Study I

Overlap and Transitions in Sexual Harassment Roles: A Five-Year Longitudinal Study from Childhood to Adolescence

Most prior research on PSH has examined victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing separately, with particular emphasis on victimisation. Study I addressed this limitation by examining whether adolescents' involvement in PSH is better understood as overlapping role configurations. The aim of the study was to identify subgroups of PSH involvement defined by victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing, to examine

stability and transitions in these subgroups across Grades 4 through 8, and to examine associations of gender with initial subgroup membership and transitions, and of later-reported sexual minority status with Grade 4 subgroup membership.

Method

Study I used five annual waves of longitudinal data from 372 Swedish students followed from Grade 4 to Grade 8. PSH was assessed at each wave using the full PSH-C, including all 18 role-specific indicators: six items for victimisation, six for perpetration, and six for witnessing. The items were entered as separate ordinal indicators in the analyses rather than combined into sum scores.

Patterns of involvement were analysed using joint latent transition analysis (LTA; Collins & Lanza, 2010). Models with two through five classes were estimated and compared using AIC, BIC, ABIC, classification quality, and substantive interpretability. The joint LTA constrained item-response probabilities to be equal across waves to maintain consistent class definitions. Separate per-wave latent class models were inspected as a descriptive check of whether the same broad class profiles emerged across waves, rather than as a formal test of measurement invariance. Gender was examined in relation to initial class membership and transitions. Later-reported sexual minority status was examined in an exploratory sensitivity analysis of Grade 4 class membership because the subgroup was small. The main LTA models were estimated in R using the LMest package (Bartolucci et al., 2017), and additional latent class models were estimated using the poLCA package (Linzer & Lewis, 2011).

Results

A three-class structure emerged consistently across all five waves. The Low Engagement class showed low involvement across victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing. The Victim-Witness class showed elevated witnessing, moderate victimisation, and low perpetration. The High Engagement class showed elevated involvement across all three roles simultaneously.

The findings showed substantial overlap between roles. Perpetration did not emerge as an isolated role; adolescents with elevated perpetration were also likely to report victimisation and witnessing. Item-level profiles showed that verbal harassment items, especially homophobic and sexualised name-calling, were the clearest

markers separating the classes. Physical harassment was less common but concentrated in the High Engagement class. The visual item concerning pictures or messages related to nakedness or sex showed low levels of perpetration across all classes.

The transition analyses showed both stability and change. Contrary to the expectation that Low Engagement would be the most persistent class, High Engagement showed the greatest stability across the first three grade transitions despite its small size. Low Engagement became substantially less stable between Grades 5 and 7 before recovering by the Grade 7 to 8 transition, while Victim-Witness showed intermediate stability. The greatest instability occurred between Grades 5 and 6, when many students moved from Low Engagement into either Victim-Witness or High Engagement. Between Grades 6 and 7, 24% of students in the Victim-Witness class moved into High Engagement. By the Grade 7 to 8 transition, stability had increased and escalation into High Engagement had become less common.

Gender predicted initial class membership. Boys were more likely than girls to begin in the High Engagement class, while gender did not distinguish membership in the Victim-Witness class. Among students beginning in Low Engagement, girls had higher odds than boys of moving into Victim-Witness rather than remaining in Low Engagement, and lower odds of moving into High Engagement rather than remaining in Low Engagement. In the exploratory sensitivity analysis, later-reported sexual minority status was associated with higher odds of Grade 4 Victim-Witness membership relative to Low Engagement, although this finding should be interpreted cautiously because the subgroup was small. Overall, Study I showed that PSH involvement is better understood through overlapping role configurations than through separate victim, perpetrator, or witness categories, and that Grades 5 through 7 may represent an especially relevant period for movement into more involved patterns.

Study II

Peer Sexual Harassment Victimization Across Grades 4 to 9: Developmental Patterns and Correlates

Study II examined PSH victimisation over time. Although previous research shows that PSH is common in adolescence, less is known about how victimisation develops

from late childhood into adolescence. In addition, PSH victimisation scores often contain a substantial number of zero observations alongside considerable variation in reported frequency. The aim of Study II was to examine developmental patterns of PSH victimisation from Grade 4 through Grade 9 and to investigate whether selected correlates, gender, perceived pubertal timing, appearance esteem, and peer social support, were differently associated with expected PSH frequency and with the propensity for excess zero scores. These correlates were selected to capture gendered, developmental and body-related, psychological, and relational dimensions that prior research and the thesis framework suggest may be relevant for PSH victimisation (Apell et al., 2019; Bolduc et al., 2023; Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2024; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021).

Method

Study II was based on a linked longitudinal dataset of 481 students from the original cohort. The final analytic sample included 404 students contributing 1,930 person-year observations across six annual waves from Grade 4 to Grade 9. PSH victimisation was assessed at each wave using the victimisation subscale of the PSH-C. Perceived pubertal timing was measured with a self-report item asking students to compare their physical development with that of same-gender peers. Appearance esteem was assessed using the Appearance subscale of the Body-Esteem Scale for Adolescents and Adults (BESAA; Mendelson et al., 2001). Peer social support was measured as a time-varying social factor.

PSH victimisation scores were strongly right-skewed and contained many zero values. Study II therefore used zero-inflated negative binomial mixed-effects models, which accommodate both overdispersed count data and an excess of zero scores. The excess-zero component estimated whether observations were more or less likely to belong to an additional zero-generating process, whereas the count component modelled expected PSH frequency scores. Importantly, the count component can itself generate zero scores. The two components should therefore not be interpreted as separating adolescents who did and did not experience PSH, but as modelling different features of the observed frequency distribution.

The models estimated associations between selected correlates and victimisation patterns; they did not test reciprocal effects between PSH victimisation and these correlates over time.

Results

The model-based results indicated that expected PSH frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 and then showed no systematic change from Grade 7 to Grade 9. Over the same periods, the propensity for excess zero scores decreased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 and increased from Grade 7 to Grade 9. Descriptively, the proportion reporting any PSH increased from 44.9% in Grade 4 to 61.0% in Grade 7 and was 51.0% in Grade 9. Mean PSH frequency scores similarly increased from 1.51 in Grade 4 to 2.85 in Grade 7 and were 2.37 in Grade 9. Adolescents also differed in their initial expected PSH frequency and in their rates of change from Grade 4 to Grade 7, indicating that the average developmental pattern did not characterise every adolescent equally.

Gender and perceived pubertal timing were associated with expected PSH frequency at Grade 4, but neither was significantly associated with excess-zero propensity. Girls had lower expected PSH frequency than boys, while adolescents who perceived their pubertal development as earlier or later than their peers had higher expected PSH frequency than those who perceived their development as on time. There was little evidence that these differences in expected frequency changed substantially across grades.

Appearance esteem was associated with both model components. Adolescents with higher average appearance esteem had greater excess-zero propensity and lower expected PSH frequency. On occasions when adolescents reported higher appearance esteem than their own typical level, expected PSH frequency was also lower, although within-person variation in appearance esteem was not significantly associated with excess-zero propensity. Peer social support showed a somewhat different pattern. Higher average peer social support and higher-than-usual support were both associated with greater excess-zero propensity, while only higher-than-usual peer support was associated with modestly lower expected PSH frequency.

Overall, Study II showed that expected PSH frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 before stabilising from Grade 7 to Grade 9, while excess-zero propensity decreased during the earlier period and increased during the later period. It also showed that expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity capture partly different aspects of the developmental distribution of PSH victimisation. Gender, perceived pubertal timing, appearance esteem, and peer social support were associated with these components in different ways.

Study III

Exploring the Link Between Sexual Harassment Victimization and Restricted Freedom of Movement: Unique Associations With Anxiety Across Victimization Contexts and Genders

Study III examined associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement. Previous research has linked sexual harassment victimisation to emotional distress, but less is known about behavioural correlates, such as safety-related strategies adolescents use in everyday life. Restricted freedom of movement refers to self-protective behaviours such as avoiding being alone, planning routes with safety in mind, changing routines, or carrying something for protection. The aim of Study III was to examine whether sexual harassment victimisation was associated with restricted freedom of movement directly and indirectly through anxiety, and whether these associations differed by victimisation context and gender. The study distinguished between school-based PSH and online sexual harassment.

Method

Study III used cross-sectional data from 1,519 Swedish adolescents in Grades 7 through 9. School-based PSH was assessed using items from the PSH-C victimisation subscale. Online sexual harassment was assessed using the Unwanted Sexual Attention subscale from the Online Sexual Victimization Scale (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2015). Anxiety was measured using five items from the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (Spence, 1998). Restricted freedom of movement was measured using items adapted from Calogero et al.'s (2021) scale of safety-related behavioural restriction.

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to evaluate the measurement model for school-based PSH, online sexual harassment, and anxiety. Cronbach's alpha was used

to assess internal consistency. Measurement invariance across gender was tested before estimating group comparisons. The main analysis used structural equation modelling to test a moderated mediation model. The model examined direct associations between sexual harassment victimisation and restricted freedom of movement, as well as indirect associations through anxiety. Separate pathways were estimated for boys and girls using multi-group analysis. The analyses were conducted in R using weighted least squares mean and variance adjusted estimation. Because Study III was cross-sectional, indirect effects were interpreted as indirect associations rather than as evidence of temporal or causal pathways.

Results

For both girls and boys, sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement were positively associated. Girls reported higher levels of anxiety and more restricted freedom of movement than boys. Boys reported more school-based PSH, whereas girls reported more online sexual harassment.

The moderated mediation model showed distinct context- and gender-specific patterns. School-based PSH was associated with higher anxiety among girls, but not among boys. Online sexual harassment was associated with higher anxiety among boys, but not among girls. Anxiety was associated with more restricted freedom of movement for both boys and girls.

Indirect associations between sexual harassment victimisation and restricted freedom of movement through anxiety were found for school-based PSH among girls and for online sexual harassment among boys. In addition, direct associations were found between school-based PSH and restricted freedom of movement among boys, and between online sexual harassment and restricted freedom of movement among girls.

Overall, Study III showed that sexual harassment victimisation was associated with adolescents' safety-related behavioural restriction, but that the pattern of associations differed by context and gender. The findings suggest that school-based and online sexual harassment should be distinguished analytically, while also being understood as related forms of victimisation within adolescents' broader peer lives.

Discussion

The overall aim of this thesis was to examine peer sexual harassment (PSH) during the transition from childhood to adolescence by distinguishing between patterns of role involvement, developmental patterns of victimisation, and context- and gender-specific associations with psychological and behavioural correlates. Across three empirical studies, the findings show that PSH should not be treated as a single uniform phenomenon. Adolescents' involvement was organised through overlapping roles rather than entirely separate victim, perpetrator, and witness roles; developmental patterns differed across expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity; and associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement varied across school-based and online contexts and between girls and boys.

The discussion is organised around these three empirical contributions. First, I discuss overlapping involvement in PSH roles. Second, I consider developmental patterns of PSH victimisation, with particular attention to expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity. Third, I examine context- and gender-specific associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement. I then integrate the findings across the three studies and consider their theoretical, methodological, ethical, and practical implications.

Overlapping Involvement in PSH Roles

By examining victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, and non-involvement together, Study I showed that adolescents' involvement in PSH was not organised simply into separate victim, perpetrator, witness, and uninvolved groups. Instead, three recurring configurations were identified: a Low Engagement group, a Victim-Witness group, and a High Engagement group. At Grade 4, Low Engagement was the largest group, but more than one third of adolescents were already classified in either the Victim-Witness or High Engagement group. This indicates that overlapping involvement was already evident in late childhood rather than being limited to isolated cases. The

finding extends earlier work showing substantial overlap between victimisation and perpetration (Fineran & Bolen, 2006; McMaster et al., 2002), as well as more recent work showing that victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing may co-occur from late childhood and change over time (Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2025; Valik et al., 2024).

This role overlap is central to the thesis because it shows why victimisation alone cannot fully capture adolescents' involvement in PSH. Much previous research has focused primarily on victimisation, whereas perpetration and witnessing have received less attention, particularly in younger samples (Bolduc et al., 2023; Valik et al., 2024). Study I adds to this literature by showing that many adolescents involved in PSH occupied more than one role. Witnessing and victimisation were closely connected, while perpetration appeared mainly within a broader pattern of high involvement that also included victimisation and witnessing. Perpetration therefore did not emerge as a separate perpetrator-only configuration. This does not mean that victimisation and perpetration should be treated as equivalent experiences, nor that responsibility for perpetration is reduced by prior or simultaneous victimisation. Rather, the findings show that the organisation of PSH involvement is more complex than a simple division between victims, perpetrators, and witnesses.

The Victim-Witness configuration is especially relevant for understanding PSH as a peer-relational phenomenon. Prior research has shown that witnessing sexual harassment is common among adolescents and, in some studies, more commonly reported than victimisation or perpetration (Li & Craig, 2020; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Valik et al., 2024). Witnessing may indicate that adolescents are situated in peer environments where PSH is visible even when they are not directly targeted in every situation. It may also expose adolescents to how peers and adults respond to PSH, including whether the behaviour is laughed at, ignored, challenged, minimised, or treated as ordinary interaction. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that adolescents' reasoning about sexual harassment includes moral concerns, social pressures, perceived normality, humour, and possible social consequences (Salomon & Brown, 2021). It is also consistent with research showing that teacher intervention is related to adolescents' evaluations of sexual harassment (Horn & Poteat, 2023), and that school responses may contribute to the normalisation of sexual

harassment when adults or institutions fail to address it clearly (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). The clustering of victimisation and witnessing therefore suggests that PSH is embedded in peer settings where adolescents may encounter the behaviour both as targets and as observers of harassment directed at others.

The transition patterns in Study I further suggest that the Victim-Witness configuration may sometimes occupy an intermediate position in broader PSH involvement. High Engagement showed the greatest stability across the first three grade transitions despite its small size, whereas Low Engagement became substantially less stable between Grades 5 and 7 before recovering by the Grade 7 to 8 transition. However, movement into more involved configurations also occurred, particularly between Grades 5 and 7. Some adolescents moved from Low Engagement into the Victim-Witness group, while others moved from Victim-Witness into High Engagement. This does not imply a single developmental sequence that adolescents necessarily follow, but it suggests that Victim-Witness involvement may, for some adolescents, precede broader multi-role involvement in PSH. This interpretation is consistent with Holmqvist Gattario et al. (2025), who found that some students first encountered PSH through witnessing and later became targets themselves. Together, these findings support examining PSH role involvement longitudinally rather than only as a cross-sectional pattern.

The role findings also showed variation by gender and sexual minority status. Boys were more likely than girls to begin in the High Engagement group. Among students beginning in Low Engagement, girls had higher odds than boys of moving into Victim-Witness rather than remaining in Low Engagement, and lower odds of moving into High Engagement rather than remaining in Low Engagement. These findings are consistent with previous research showing higher levels of perpetration among boys, while gender differences in victimisation are more mixed and vary across behaviours, age groups, and contexts (Bolduc et al., 2023; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Rolfe & Schroeder, 2020; Stroem et al., 2022). In exploratory analyses, later-reported sexual minority status was associated with higher odds of Grade 4 Victim-Witness membership relative to Low Engagement, although this finding should be interpreted cautiously because the subgroup was small. This pattern is nevertheless

consistent with previous research identifying sexual and gender minority adolescents as particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and related forms of sexualised peer victimisation (Bolduc et al., 2023; Li & Craig, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2026).

Taken together, Study I contributes to the thesis by showing that PSH involvement is not adequately captured by examining victimisation alone or by assuming fixed role categories. Adolescents may be targeted by PSH, witness PSH directed at others, perpetrate PSH, or remain uninvolved, and these roles may overlap and change over time. This supports a peer-relational understanding of PSH in which involvement is organised within shared social settings rather than through entirely separate groups of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses (Fineran & Bolen, 2006; Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2025; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; McMaster et al., 2002; Valik et al., 2024).

Developmental Patterning of PSH Victimisation

Whereas Study I examined involvement across victimisation, perpetration, witnessing, and non-involvement, Study II narrowed the focus to victimisation over time. This focus was not intended to treat victimisation as the only important role in PSH, but to examine the role for which developmental continuity and change have been most directly studied in previous research (Bolduc et al., 2023; Chiodo et al., 2009; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). Study II followed PSH victimisation from Grade 4 to Grade 9 and modelled two features of the frequency distribution: expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity. The count component captured expected PSH frequency, whereas the excess-zero component captured an additional concentration of zero scores beyond what the count distribution would predict. Importantly, these components should not be interpreted as separating adolescents who did and did not experience PSH.

The findings showed that PSH victimisation was already present in Grade 4 and changed across the transition from childhood to adolescence. Previous PRISE research has similarly shown that PSH is reported among 10-year-olds (Valik et al., 2024), although this should not be treated as an independent replication because the studies draw on the same broader project. Evidence from this age range nevertheless

remains limited. Prior research has linked PSH in early adolescence to appearance-related self-evaluations and emotional problems (Holmqvist Gattario et al., 2024; Lindberg et al., 2007), while broader population-based work indicates that peer sexual harassment can occur before adulthood (Hunt et al., 2024). Other studies beginning in early or middle adolescence suggest that sexual harassment may become more common or more visible as adolescents grow older (McMaster et al., 2002; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Schnoll et al., 2015; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). Study II extends this literature by following victimisation annually from Grade 4 to Grade 9, thereby capturing a broader developmental span from late childhood into mid-adolescence. Studies that begin once adolescence is already underway may miss how victimisation first emerges, remains low, or becomes more frequent during the earlier transition from childhood to adolescence.

The distinction between expected victimisation frequency and excess-zero propensity was especially informative. Studies of PSH often either classify adolescents according to whether they report any victimisation or retain information about the frequency of reported experiences (Bolduc et al., 2023). Study II took a different approach by modelling two features of the frequency distribution simultaneously. The count component captured expected PSH frequency, whereas the excess-zero component captured whether there was an additional concentration of zero scores beyond what the count distribution would predict. These components showed different developmental patterns and different associations with several correlates, indicating that developmental variation in PSH victimisation cannot be fully described by a single frequency parameter alone.

Expected PSH frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 and then stabilised. This pattern is consistent with previous longitudinal research showing that sexual harassment victimisation is not always transient, but may persist, co-develop with emotional problems, or follow different developmental trajectories across adolescence (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). It is also consistent with research linking sexual harassment victimisation to developmental timing, including pubertal timing and more mature physical appearance (Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). However,

the findings should not be interpreted as showing that developmental change itself causes PSH. Rather, they suggest that the developmental and social conditions under which PSH occurs may become increasingly salient during this period. The stabilisation after Grade 7 further indicates that increases in expected victimisation frequency may be concentrated in a particular phase of early adolescence rather than continuing linearly across the observed age span.

Study II also showed that biological, psychological, and social correlates were not associated with the two model components in identical ways. Gender and perceived pubertal timing were associated with expected PSH frequency at Grade 4, but neither was significantly associated with excess-zero propensity. Higher average appearance esteem was associated with lower expected PSH frequency and greater excess-zero propensity, while higher-than-usual appearance esteem was associated with lower expected frequency but not excess-zero propensity. Higher average and higher-than-usual peer social support were both associated with greater excess-zero propensity, whereas only higher-than-usual peer support was associated with modestly lower expected PSH frequency. Together, these findings indicate that correlates may operate differently across the count and excess-zero components.

These patterns are consistent with prior research, but they also qualify it. Earlier pubertal timing, more mature physical appearance, and body-related self-evaluations have all been linked to sexual harassment victimisation or related consequences of unwanted sexualised attention (Lindberg et al., 2007; Petersen & Hyde, 2009; Skoog & Bayram Özdemir, 2016a, 2016b). The present findings suggest that developmental timing and appearance-related factors may be especially relevant to expected victimisation frequency, while appearance esteem also showed a between-person association with excess-zero propensity. Previous research has also linked relational support to sexual harassment victimisation and adjustment, although findings have not been entirely consistent across studies (Apell et al., 2019; Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2021). In Study II, peer social support was most consistently associated with excess-zero propensity, although higher-than-usual peer support was also associated with modestly lower expected PSH frequency.

These interpretations should be treated cautiously because Study II examined associations rather than causal mechanisms. The findings do not show whether peer support protects against PSH, whether PSH undermines perceived peer support, or whether both are shaped by broader peer-group processes. Similarly, the associations with pubertal timing and appearance esteem do not show that bodily development or appearance-related self-evaluations cause PSH. Rather, they indicate that developmental timing, body-related self-evaluation, and peer support were differently associated with expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity. This reinforces the value of modelling these components separately.

Taken together, Study II contributes to the thesis by showing that PSH victimisation is developmentally patterned and cannot be fully understood through a single representation of the outcome. Expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity followed partly different developmental patterns and were associated differently with several correlates. The findings therefore extend previous longitudinal research showing continuity, change, and heterogeneity in sexual harassment victimisation (Skoog & Kapetanovic, 2023; Wang et al., 2024; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016) by following victimisation from late childhood into adolescence and by showing that different features of the frequency distribution may have different developmental correlates.

Context, Gender, and Safety-Related Behavioural Restriction

Study III shifts attention from involvement and developmental patterning to associations between sexual harassment victimisation, psychological symptoms, and safety-related behavioural restrictions. The study examined whether school-based PSH and online sexual harassment were associated with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement among adolescents in Grades 7 to 9, and whether these associations differed by gender. Because Study III was cross-sectional, the findings should be interpreted as patterns of association rather than as evidence that victimisation preceded or caused anxiety or behavioural restriction.

The findings showed that sexual harassment victimisation was associated with both anxiety and restricted freedom of movement, but not in the same way across contexts and genders. School-based PSH was associated with higher anxiety among girls, whereas online sexual harassment was associated with higher anxiety among boys. Anxiety, in turn, was associated with greater restricted freedom of movement for both girls and boys. Indirect associations between victimisation and restricted freedom of movement through anxiety were therefore observed for school-based PSH among girls and for online sexual harassment among boys. Direct associations were also observed between school-based PSH and restricted freedom of movement among boys, and between online sexual harassment and restricted freedom of movement among girls.

These findings extend previous research linking sexual harassment victimisation to psychological symptoms such as anxiety, depressive symptoms, emotional distress, shame, and psychosomatic complaints (Chiodo et al., 2009; Dahlqvist et al., 2025; Li & Craig, 2020; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). They are also consistent with recent work showing that cyber sexual harassment may be associated with more persistent patterns of anxiety and depressive symptoms over time (Lawrence et al., 2025). Study III adds to this literature by examining restricted freedom of movement as a safety-related behavioural correlate of sexual harassment victimisation. Calogero et al. (2021), using primarily adult samples, showed that interpersonal sexual objectification, including unwanted sexual attention, was associated with personal safety anxiety and self-imposed restrictions on movement. Study III extends this line of research to adolescence, but does not directly test the same pathway because it measured general anxiety rather than personal safety anxiety. The findings should therefore be interpreted as showing that sexual harassment victimisation was associated with both anxiety symptoms and safety-related behavioural restriction among adolescents, rather than as a direct test of the personal safety anxiety model.

The context-specific pattern is important because school-based PSH and online sexual harassment are related but not equivalent forms of victimisation. School-based PSH typically occurs among peers in shared school settings where the targeted

adolescent may continue to encounter the perpetrator, witnesses, and wider peer group after an incident (Espelage et al., 2016; Hill & Kearl, 2011; Lichty & Campbell, 2012). Online sexual harassment differs because it does not require physical co-presence, may occur outside school hours, may involve peers, known non-peers, or unknown others, and may involve persistence, circulation, and uncertainty about audience (Franceschi et al., 2024; Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2015). These contextual differences may help explain why associations with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement were not identical across school-based and online victimisation, although Study III did not directly test the mechanisms underlying these differences.

Study III also contributes to the limited literature examining online and offline sexual harassment within the same study. Ståhl and Dennhag (2021) found that online and offline sexual harassment differed in their associations with anxiety and depressive symptoms among Swedish adolescents, although their analyses of online harassment were limited by the small number of adolescents, particularly boys, who reported online victimisation. Study III extends this work by examining school-based PSH and online sexual harassment in a larger adolescent sample and by including restricted freedom of movement as a behavioural correlate. Recent Swedish research on co-occurring cyber and in-person victimisation further supports the importance of distinguishing between forms and contexts of victimisation, as co-occurring bullying and sexual harassment across cyber and in-person contexts has been associated with depressive symptoms among adolescents (Dahlström et al., 2025).

The gender-specific pattern complicates a simple assumption that sexual harassment is always more strongly associated with poorer adjustment among girls than among boys. Girls reported higher levels of anxiety and restricted freedom of movement overall, which is consistent with research showing that sexualised threat and safety concerns are often gendered (Calogero et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). At the same time, boys also showed meaningful associations between victimisation and restricted freedom of movement. In particular, online sexual harassment was associated with higher anxiety among boys, which was in turn associated with greater restricted freedom of movement. This is consistent with research cautioning

against treating boys' sexual harassment victimisation as psychologically inconsequential, even when girls are more frequently targeted by some forms of sexual harassment (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2016; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016).

One possible interpretation is that anxiety was more strongly involved when victimisation occurred in a context that was less common for that gender in this sample. Boys reported more school-based PSH, whereas girls reported more online sexual harassment. Yet the indirect association through anxiety was observed for girls in the school context and for boys in the online context. One possibility is that victimisation in a less common context may be experienced as more unexpected, more difficult to interpret within prevailing peer norms, or more likely to produce a sense of being singled out. School-based verbal harassment among boys may sometimes be normalised as joking or masculinity-policing within peer cultures, even when it remains harmful (Collier et al., 2013; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021). Online sexual harassment of girls may similarly be experienced within digital environments where unwanted sexual attention is described as common or expected (Lunde & Joleby, 2023). However, Study III did not directly assess perceived normality, expectations, social scripts, or the specific behavioural forms of harassment within each context. This interpretation should therefore be treated as tentative and examined in future longitudinal and qualitative research.

The findings also suggest that restricted freedom of movement may be understood as more than a coping strategy. Although safety-oriented behaviours may help adolescents feel more secure, they may also be associated with costs to autonomy, movement, and participation in everyday peer contexts. This interpretation connects Study III to broader work on fear, safety, and mobility, which has shown that perceived risk of sexual violence can shape how people navigate public and semi-public spaces (Pain, 1991; Valentine, 1989). Calogero et al. (2021) similarly conceptualised restricted freedom of movement as a set of safety-oriented behaviours associated with unwanted sexual objectification and personal safety anxiety. Study III therefore positions restricted freedom of movement as a practically and theoretically relevant

behavioural correlate of sexual harassment victimisation, rather than only as an individual coping response.

The findings also connect Study III to the broader thesis argument. Study I showed that PSH involvement is organised through roles that may overlap and change over time, while Study II showed that victimisation is developmentally patterned and should not be reduced to a single indicator. Study III adds that associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement also vary by context and gender. Together, the studies show that differentiation matters not only for how PSH involvement and victimisation are conceptualised, but also for how their psychological and behavioural correlates are understood.

Taken together, Study III contributes to the thesis by showing that sexual harassment victimisation is associated with both psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions, but not uniformly across contexts and genders. The findings do not establish causal pathways and should not be interpreted as showing that sexual harassment necessarily leads to anxiety or restricted freedom of movement. Rather, school-based PSH and online sexual harassment showed different patterns of association with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement among girls and boys. This supports the broader thesis argument that sexual harassment should be examined in relation to both context and gender rather than treated as a uniform exposure with uniform correlates.

Integrating the Findings: PSH as a Differentiated Developmental Peer Phenomenon

Taken together, the three studies support the central argument of this thesis: PSH during the transition from childhood to adolescence is best understood as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon rather than as a single uniform phenomenon. The contribution lies not simply in showing that PSH occurs, changes over time, and is associated with psychological symptoms or behavioural restrictions, but in showing that different conclusions emerge depending on how PSH is differentiated. Study I showed that involvement was organised through overlapping role configurations. Study II showed that expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity followed

partly different developmental patterns and had partly different correlates. Study III showed that associations with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement differed across school-based and online contexts and between girls and boys. Across the thesis, these findings show that role involvement, developmental patterning, context, and gender are important dimensions of how PSH is understood empirically.

A first integrative point is that PSH is embedded in shared peer environments. This is clearest in Study I, where witnessing was not a marginal form of involvement and perpetration rarely appeared in isolation. Adolescents involved in PSH often occupied more than one role, suggesting that PSH is not only something that happens to isolated victims or is carried out by a clearly separate perpetrator group. Rather, it occurs within peer settings where adolescents may observe unwanted sexualised behaviours, be targeted by them, participate in them, or move between these roles over time. This interpretation is consistent with developmental-contextual, peer-relational, social norms, and social learning perspectives, which emphasise repeated interaction, observation of others' behaviour, perceived norms, reinforcement, and responses from peers and adults (Bandura, 1977; Brown & Larson, 2009; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011).

Study II and Study III extend this interpretation in different ways. Study II did not measure peer contexts directly, but its findings suggest that victimisation should not be treated as a fixed individual characteristic. Victimisation changed across school years, and peer social support was most clearly associated with greater excess-zero propensity. These findings point to the relevance of adolescents' relational experiences within the peer group, even when the analysis focuses on victimisation over time. Study III further showed that the context in which sexual harassment occurs matters for its associations with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement. School-based PSH and online sexual harassment differed not only as settings, but also in their patterns of association with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restriction. Together, these findings support the broader theoretical orientation developed in the Introduction: PSH should be understood in relation to developmental timing and the social environments in which adolescents interact, interpret behaviour, and respond to unwanted sexualised experiences.

A second integrative point concerns developmental timing. The thesis focuses on the transition from childhood to adolescence because this is a period in which peer relations, bodily maturation, social evaluation, gender norms, and romantic and sexual interests become increasingly salient (Crone & Dahl, 2012; Dahl et al., 2018; Petersen & Hyde, 2009). The findings suggest that this period matters not only because PSH is already present, but because its patterning changes across these years. Study I showed movement between role configurations over time, while Study II showed that expected victimisation frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 before stabilising. Together, these findings indicate that PSH involvement and victimisation are developmentally patterned rather than static. They therefore caution against reducing PSH to isolated incidents or to a simple expression of immaturity. Although some behaviours may occur in ambiguous peer situations where boundaries, joking, attraction, and status are being negotiated, the longitudinal findings show that PSH can also become repeated and socially embedded across development.

A third integrative point concerns gender. Across the three studies, gender mattered, but not in one uniform way. Boys were more likely to begin in the High Engagement group in Study I and had higher expected PSH frequency than girls in Study II. In Study III, girls reported higher anxiety and restricted freedom of movement overall, while associations between victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement differed by both context and gender. These findings support treating gender as a source of variation in PSH involvement, victimisation, and correlates rather than simply as a background characteristic. They are also consistent with the gendered and sociocultural perspectives developed earlier in the thesis, which emphasise that the meaning of unwanted sexualised behaviour may vary with gender norms, sexuality, sexual reputation, masculinity, femininity, and perceived norm conformity (Conroy, 2013; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Pascoe, 2013; Salomon & Brown, 2021).

A final integrative point is that some of the most informative findings were not simply those that reproduced established patterns in the literature. Previous research already suggested that PSH is common, that victimisation is associated with psychological symptoms, and that gender and context may matter (Bolduc et al., 2023; Chiodo et al., 2009; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021; Zetterström Dahlqvist et al., 2016). More

informative were the specific ways in which these patterns were differentiated across the three studies. In Study I, perpetration did not primarily emerge as a separate perpetrator-only configuration. In Study II, expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity captured partly different aspects of the distribution of victimisation. In Study III, indirect associations through anxiety differed by context and gender, while other associations with restricted freedom of movement were direct. Together, these findings complicate any account of PSH as a single exposure with one developmental pattern and one set of correlates.

Together, the three studies support understanding PSH as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon whose patterning varies across roles, developmental periods, gender, and contexts. This integrated interpretation provides the basis for the theoretical, methodological, ethical, and practical implications discussed in the following sections.

Implications for Theory

The findings have theoretical implications because they show that PSH cannot be adequately understood through a single explanatory lens. The thesis did not set out to test one unified theory of PSH. Instead, it used a layered theoretical orientation in which developmental-contextual, gendered and sociocultural, and peer-contextual perspectives help explain different aspects of the phenomenon. The findings support this approach. Across the three studies, PSH involved developmental change, overlapping role involvement, gendered variation, context-specific patterns, and psychological as well as behavioural correlates. A theoretical account that focuses only on victimisation, perpetration, gender, or psychological symptoms would therefore miss important parts of what the thesis shows.

First, the findings support the value of a developmental-contextual perspective. Studies I and II showed that PSH is not static across the transition from childhood to adolescence. Adolescents moved between role configurations over time, and expected victimisation frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 before stabilising. These findings indicate that theoretical accounts of PSH need to accommodate both stability and change across development. A developmental-contextual perspective is

useful because it directs attention to how biological, psychological, and social development unfolds within adolescents' everyday peer environments, rather than treating age or grade as merely descriptive variables (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lerner, 1991; Richardson, 2011).

Second, the findings suggest that theoretical accounts of PSH need to take role overlap seriously. Study I showed that victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing were analytically distinct but empirically connected. Perpetration was concentrated in the High Engagement group, where victimisation and witnessing were also elevated, and the Victim-Witness group recurred across time. This pattern is difficult to accommodate within theoretical accounts that treat victims, perpetrators, and witnesses as entirely separate groups. Peer-contextual, social norms, and social learning perspectives are useful here because they emphasise that adolescents observe how peers behave, how others respond, which behaviours are laughed at or challenged, and whether adults intervene. From this perspective, overlapping role involvement may reflect not only individual experiences, but also shared peer environments in which unwanted sexualised behaviours become visible, tolerated, resisted, or repeated (Bandura, 1977; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019; Salomon & Brown, 2021).

Third, the findings suggest that developmental theories of PSH need to distinguish between different features of the victimisation distribution. Study II showed that expected PSH frequency and excess-zero propensity were related but not interchangeable. The correlates also differed across these components: gender and perceived pubertal timing were associated with expected PSH frequency at Grade 4 but not with excess-zero propensity, appearance esteem was associated with both components, and peer social support was most consistently associated with excess-zero propensity. Theoretical accounts should therefore specify whether they seek to explain variation in expected victimisation frequency, excess-zero propensity, or developmental change over time, rather than treating PSH victimisation as a single homogeneous outcome.

Fourth, the findings have implications for gendered and sociocultural perspectives on PSH. Across the three studies, gender mattered, but not in a uniform way. Boys

were more likely to begin in the High Engagement group and had higher expected PSH frequency than girls, whereas girls reported higher anxiety and restricted freedom of movement overall. In Study III, associations between victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement also differed by context and gender. These findings support treating gender as more than a demographic control variable, while cautioning against assuming a simple pattern in which girls are always more affected and boys are largely unaffected. Gendered and sociocultural perspectives are useful for interpreting these differences because they draw attention to how unwanted sexualised behaviour may be understood in relation to gender norms, sexuality, sexual reputation, masculinity, femininity, and norm conformity (Conroy, 2013; Gruber & Fineran, 2016; Pascoe, 2013; Salomon & Brown, 2021). However, the studies did not directly measure these meanings or norms, so they should be understood as interpretive frameworks rather than as mechanisms tested in the thesis.

Fifth, Study III suggests that theoretical accounts of PSH should consider behavioural restrictions alongside psychological symptoms. Objectification-oriented perspectives are useful here because they link unwanted sexual attention and sexual objectification to safety anxiety and restrictions on movement (Calogero et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Study III extends this line of thinking into adolescence by showing that sexual harassment victimisation was associated with restricted freedom of movement among both girls and boys, although the pattern differed by context and gender. At the same time, these perspectives address only one part of the broader thesis findings. They are useful for interpreting associations between sexualised victimisation, safety concerns, and behavioural restriction, but are less suited to explaining role overlap, developmental transitions, or differences between school-based and online contexts. Objectification-oriented perspectives are therefore best understood as complementary to the broader developmental, gendered, and peer-contextual framework of the thesis.

Future theoretical work on PSH would benefit from integrating these perspectives more explicitly. Developmental-contextual perspectives help explain why timing, change, and stability matter. Peer-contextual perspectives, including social norms and social learning, help explain why witnessing, role overlap, and responses from peers

and adults are relevant. Gendered and sociocultural perspectives help explain why unwanted sexualised behaviours may carry different meanings depending on gender, sexuality, sexual reputation, and norm conformity. Complementary perspectives on objectification and embodiment may further help explain why sexualised victimisation can be associated with anxiety, safety concerns, and restrictions on movement. The contribution of this thesis is therefore not to replace existing theories, but to show the value of theoretical accounts that can accommodate role involvement, developmental patterning, gendered variation, context, and psychological as well as behavioural correlates.

Overall, the theoretical implication of the thesis is that PSH is best understood as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon. Its patterning changes across development, roles may overlap within shared peer environments, and associations with psychological and behavioural correlates vary by gender and context. Developmental-contextual, gendered and sociocultural, and peer-contextual perspectives therefore provide complementary ways of interpreting different aspects of the findings. This offers a more precise theoretical basis for future research than approaches that treat PSH only as victimisation, only as peer aggression, or only as a mental health risk factor.

Methodological Considerations

Several methodological considerations are important when interpreting the findings of this thesis, including temporal interpretation, self-report, measurement and modelling choices, and generalisability. These considerations clarify the scope of the evidence and the conclusions that can reasonably be drawn from the three studies.

A first consideration concerns the shared data source and generalisability. All three studies draw on the PRISE project, which enabled repeated, age-appropriate assessment of PSH from late childhood into adolescence and provides coherence across the thesis. At the same time, the studies should not be treated as independent replications, as they draw on the same broader Swedish school-based project and partly overlapping samples. Generalisability may therefore be limited to contexts that differ substantially in school organisation, gender norms, digital peer cultures, or

institutional responses to harassment. Participation also depended on school recruitment, parental consent for students under age 15 followed by the students' own consent, and sufficient Swedish proficiency to complete the survey, which may have resulted in some groups being underrepresented.

A second consideration concerns temporal interpretation. Studies I and II used longitudinal data, which made it possible to examine role transitions and victimisation patterns across several school years. However, longitudinal designs do not by themselves establish causality, and the observed associations may still reflect unmeasured confounding or reciprocal processes. Study III requires particular caution because it was cross-sectional. Its indirect associations between sexual harassment victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement should therefore be interpreted as modelled associations rather than as evidence that victimisation temporally preceded or caused anxiety or behavioural restriction.

A third consideration concerns self-report and behaviour-based measurement. Self-report is particularly important for studying PSH because unwantedness is central to the construct, and behaviour-based measures allow adolescents to report concrete experiences without relying on abstract labels such as "sexual harassment" (Hill & Kearl, 2011; McMaster et al., 2002; Valik et al., 2023). At the same time, self-reports may be affected by recall, willingness to disclose, social desirability, and differences in how adolescents interpret sensitive or sexualised behaviours (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). These issues may be especially relevant for perpetration and for behaviours that are normalised or framed as joking. Behaviour-based measures also necessarily capture only selected indicators and cannot fully represent the interactional meanings or peer-contextual circumstances surrounding each incident. Because all three studies relied on adolescent self-report, shared reporting tendencies may also have contributed to observed associations, particularly in Study III where victimisation, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement were measured at the same time (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

A fourth consideration concerns measurement and operationalisation. The PSH-C provided an age-appropriate, behaviour-based measure of PSH across several waves and roles (Valik et al., 2023). This is a strength because children and younger

adolescents may not interpret abstract labels such as “sexual harassment” consistently, whereas behaviour-based items ask about concrete experiences (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Valik et al., 2023). At the same time, behaviour-based measures necessarily define PSH through the indicators they include and cannot fully capture the interactional meanings, circumstances, or peer-contextual processes surrounding each incident.

PSH was also modelled differently across the three studies. In Study I, observed indicators of victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing were used to derive latent role configurations. In Study II, victimisation was modelled using a zero-inflated negative binomial framework that distinguished expected PSH frequency from excess-zero propensity. In Study III, school-based PSH was modelled as a reflective latent construct, where covariance among the items was treated as reflecting an underlying victimisation construct. These approaches imply different assumptions about how specific PSH behaviours relate to the broader construct being estimated. In reflective models, the indicators are treated as manifestations of an underlying construct and are, in principle, expected to be substitutable indicators of that construct. For PSH victimisation, however, experiences such as unwanted touching, sexualised name-calling, or comments about private body parts may instead be understood as experiences that together constitute victimisation, such that their inclusion or exclusion changes what is being measured. This distinction is consequential because fitting a reflective model to a construct that is better understood as a composite can bias associations with other variables even when model fit is acceptable (Bollen & Diamantopoulos, 2017; Moriarity & Slavich, 2025; Rhemtulla et al., 2020). Future PSH research should therefore make its measurement assumptions explicit and justify them in relation to the construct definition and research question.

Measurement is also important for interpreting the context-specific findings in Study III. School-based PSH and online sexual harassment were assessed with different instruments. The school-based measure specified peer harassment in school, whereas the online measure captured unwanted sexual attention online without necessarily identifying whether the perpetrator was a peer, known non-peer, or unknown person. In addition, the item concerning sexual pictures or messages was excluded

from the school-based measure to reduce conceptual overlap with the online harassment measure. These choices were consistent with the conceptual distinction between school-based PSH and online sexual harassment, but they also mean that observed differences may partly reflect differences in item content, perpetrator specification, or measurement framing rather than context alone. The Study III findings should therefore be interpreted as associations with two context-specific operationalisations of sexual harassment victimisation, rather than as a pure test of contextual differences.

Finally, the thesis is limited in what it can say about sexual and gender minority adolescents. Study I included exploratory analyses of sexual minority status, but the subgroup was small and the findings should therefore be interpreted cautiously. In Studies II and III, analyses were limited to adolescents who reported being girls or boys because too few participants reported another gender category to model separately. This is an important limitation given previous evidence that sexual and gender minority adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment and related forms of sexualised peer victimisation (Li & Craig, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2026). Future research therefore requires larger and more inclusive samples that allow sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to be examined directly.

Taken together, these methodological considerations define the scope of the conclusions that can be drawn from the thesis. Future research would benefit from combining longitudinal, qualitative, observational, and peer-network approaches, and from using measurement models that are explicitly aligned with the conceptualisation of PSH and the specific research question being addressed.

Ethical Considerations

The topic of this thesis required particular ethical care because participants were children and adolescents and the surveys included questions about unwanted sexualised behaviours, private body parts, anxiety, safety, and peer experiences. All studies were conducted within the ethical approval for the broader PRISE project, and participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants received information about the study

before data collection and were informed that they could skip questions or stop participating at any time.

A central ethical consideration was how to ask about PSH in a way that was clear and developmentally appropriate for younger participants. The PSH-C uses concrete behavioural descriptions rather than relying on abstract labels such as "sexual harassment" (Valik et al., 2023), which is important because younger participants may not recognise the label even when they have experienced behaviours that fall within the construct. At the same time, questions about private body parts, sexualised language, or unwanted touching are sensitive. The survey therefore clarified that the questions concerned behaviours that occurred against the participant's will or did not feel good.

Another ethical consideration was the possibility that answering the survey could cause discomfort or remind participants of difficult experiences. To reduce this risk, data collection was conducted with trained researchers present, and students were informed that they could contact school health staff if they wanted to talk to someone after participating. The questionnaire was completed confidentially to reduce peer pressure and support honest responding. These procedures were intended to minimise distress while preserving participants' autonomy and privacy.

There is also an ethical rationale for studying PSH in this age group. Avoiding sensitive topics can leave children's and adolescents' experiences under-recognised, particularly when those experiences occur in everyday peer settings. The findings of this thesis show that PSH is already present in late childhood and early adolescence, that adolescents may occupy multiple roles, and that victimisation is associated with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions. Studying these experiences is therefore important for informing developmentally appropriate prevention and support.

The ethical balance in this thesis therefore involved both minimising potential harm during participation and ensuring that young people's experiences of unwanted sexualised peer behaviour could be studied carefully and respectfully.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this thesis have implications for school policy, prevention, and practice, although the studies did not evaluate specific interventions. The implications should therefore be understood as evidence-informed directions rather than as evidence for the effectiveness of particular programmes. Overall, the findings suggest that PSH prevention should begin early, address peer contexts and overlapping roles, distinguish between school-based and online contexts, and remain sensitive to gender without assuming fixed victim and perpetrator groups.

First, prevention efforts should begin before PSH patterns become more established. Study II showed that expected PSH victimisation frequency increased from Grade 4 to Grade 7 before stabilising, while Study I showed movement into more involved role configurations during the middle part of the observed period. These findings suggest that prevention should not wait until mid- or late adolescence. Developmentally appropriate work on consent, respectful peer interaction, sexualised language, digital communication, and interpersonal boundaries should begin during late childhood and early adolescence, when peer norms surrounding bodies, gender, sexuality, status, and belonging are still developing. This implication is consistent with broader prevention research arguing that sexual harassment and related forms of sexualised peer victimisation should be addressed before high school (Brown & Bierfeld, 2023; Espelage et al., 2024).

Second, prevention should address PSH as a peer-contextual and multilevel problem rather than only as an issue involving individual victims and perpetrators. Study I showed that victimisation, perpetration, and witnessing often overlapped, and that perpetration rarely appeared as a separate perpetrator-only pattern. This suggests that prevention should also address the wider peer environment in which adolescents may observe, ignore, reinforce, challenge, or participate in sexualised behaviour. In practice, this includes peer norms and bystander responses to sexualised comments, name-calling, rumours, unwanted touching, and digital harassment. This implication is consistent with research showing that sexual harassment often occurs in the presence of peers and that helpful bystander responses are associated with more positive

prevention-related attitudes and behaviours (Banyard et al., 2021; Lichty & Campbell, 2012).

Third, prevention should be organised and supported at the school level. The thesis did not directly examine teacher responses, school policies, or implementation practices, so the findings cannot establish which school-level strategies are most effective. However, because PSH was present from late childhood, could become repeated, and often occurred within shared peer settings, prevention cannot rest only on individual adolescents. Broader research suggests that visible policies, consistent adult responses, and sustained implementation are important for preventing the normalisation of sexual harassment in schools (Brown et al., 2023; de Lijster et al., 2019; Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). In the Swedish context, this is also consistent with schools' formal responsibility to prevent, investigate, and respond to sexual harassment and other violations (Diskrimineringslag, 2008:567; Skolverket, 2025).

Fourth, prevention should be gender-sensitive without relying on a simple model in which girls are victims and boys are perpetrators. Across the three studies, gender mattered, but not in a uniform way. Boys were more likely to begin in the High Engagement group in Study I and had higher expected PSH frequency than girls in Study II, whereas girls reported higher anxiety and restricted freedom of movement in Study III. Study III also showed that associations between school-based PSH, online sexual harassment, anxiety, and restricted freedom of movement differed by gender. These findings suggest that prevention should be gender-informed while remaining relevant to all adolescents. This includes addressing sexualised and homophobic name-calling, masculinity norms, sexual reputation, bodily vulnerability, online sexual attention, and barriers to help-seeking without assuming fixed gender roles in victimisation or perpetration (Collier et al., 2013; Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2016; Ståhl & Dennhag, 2021).

Fifth, prevention should consider school-based and online contexts together. Study III showed that school-based PSH and online sexual harassment were differently associated with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement among girls and boys. These contexts should therefore not be treated as entirely separate problems. School-based PSH occurs within recurring peer relationships, while online sexual

harassment may extend beyond school hours and involve persistence, circulation, and uncertainty about audience (Madigan et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014; Ybarra et al., 2015). For school practice, this means that online sexual harassment should also be considered when it affects adolescents' peer relations, safety, or participation in school.

Finally, prevention should attend not only to psychological symptoms but also to adolescents' everyday safety, autonomy, and participation. Study III showed that sexual harassment victimisation was associated with restricted freedom of movement, suggesting that PSH may be linked not only to how adolescents feel but also to how they navigate everyday spaces and situations in order to feel safe. Restricted freedom of movement should therefore be considered a relevant behavioural correlate of sexual harassment victimisation and examined further in longitudinal research. This broadens the practical focus from reducing distress alone to also protecting adolescents' ability to participate freely and safely in everyday peer contexts.

Overall, the thesis suggests that PSH prevention should be early, multilevel, peer-contextual, gender-informed, and context-sensitive. At the school level, this requires visible responsibilities and consistent responses; at the peer-group level, attention to norms, witnessing, and group responses; and at the individual level, developmentally appropriate support for consent, boundaries, help-seeking, empathy, and safe intervention. These implications are consistent with intervention research emphasising theoretically grounded programme development, bystander engagement, and the importance of implementation quality and explicit sexual-harassment content (Banyard et al., 2021; de Lijster et al., 2019; Espelage et al., 2024). Ultimately, although PSH occurs between adolescents, responsibility for prevention cannot rest on adolescents alone.

Conclusion

This thesis examined peer sexual harassment during the transition from childhood to adolescence as a differentiated developmental peer phenomenon rather than as a single uniform form of victimisation. Across the three studies, PSH emerged as patterned across roles, developmental time, and contexts of adolescent peer life. The findings

show that it is not enough to ask whether adolescents report PSH or whether PSH is associated with poorer adjustment. A more precise understanding requires attention to how adolescents are involved, how victimisation changes over time, and whether associations with psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions differ by context and gender.

The thesis makes three main contributions. First, it shows that adolescents' involvement in PSH cannot be adequately understood through separate categories of victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. Role involvement often overlapped and changed across school years, supporting a peer-relational understanding of PSH in which unwanted sexualised behaviours are embedded in shared peer settings.

Second, the thesis shows that PSH victimisation is developmentally patterned. Expected PSH frequency increased from late childhood into early adolescence before stabilising, while excess-zero propensity followed a different developmental pattern. These two model components also showed different associations with several correlates, indicating that developmental research should distinguish between different features of the victimisation distribution rather than treating PSH victimisation as a single homogeneous outcome.

Third, the thesis shows that sexual harassment victimisation is associated with both psychological symptoms and safety-related behavioural restrictions, but not uniformly across contexts or genders. School-based PSH and online sexual harassment showed different patterns of association with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement among girls and boys. These findings indicate that the correlates of sexual harassment victimisation depend not only on whether victimisation is reported, but also on the context in which it occurs and the gender of the adolescent.

Taken together, the findings support the central argument of the thesis: PSH during the transition from childhood to adolescence is developmentally situated, gendered, and peer-contextual. It is developmentally situated because role involvement and victimisation change across school years. It is gendered because patterns of involvement, victimisation, and associations with anxiety and restricted freedom of movement differ between girls and boys. It is peer-contextual because PSH occurs within shared social settings where adolescents may occupy different roles, and

because school-based and online contexts create different conditions for how sexualised victimisation is experienced and associated with psychological and behavioural correlates.

The thesis therefore contributes to PSH research by showing why differentiation matters. Treating PSH as a single exposure risks obscuring role overlap, developmental change, variation in victimisation frequency, and context- and gender-specific associations. Future research should therefore use designs and measures that can capture variation across roles, time, contexts, and groups of adolescents. For prevention and practice, the findings support addressing PSH early, within everyday peer environments, and with attention to both school-based and online contexts. Prevention should also avoid fixed assumptions about who occupies victim, perpetrator, or witness roles and consider behavioural restrictions alongside psychological symptoms.

Overall, this thesis shows that PSH is a developmentally meaningful and socially embedded aspect of adolescent peer life. Across the three studies, its patterning varied by role involvement, developmental timing, context, and gender, and sexual harassment victimisation was associated with both psychological symptoms and restricted freedom of movement. Understanding PSH in this differentiated way provides a stronger basis for future research and for prevention and practice that are responsive to the complexity of adolescents' peer experiences.

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