

# Sexual Harassment on Chat Reference: Prevalence, Impact, and the Role of Organizations

Samantha Kannegiser and Julie Hunter

Over 100 chat providers in academic libraries were surveyed in a premier study measuring experiences of sexual harassment among library workers providing online chat reference. The anonymous survey measured the prevalence and frequency of 11 sexual harassment behaviors across three sexual harassment dimensions: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. The study also examined chat providers' responses to harassment, the impact of harassment, and the role their organizations played in how they responded. Of our 119 respondents, 61.3% experienced at least one sexual harassment behavior on chat reference within the last 5 years. Responses to harassment were influenced by the existence of organizational policies on how to handle harassment and whether organizations were having open discussions about harassment on chat.

## Introduction

Sexual harassment may be most simply defined through a legal lens, via the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) statement which specifies that behaviors including “‘sexual harassment’ or unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature” become illegal when they are “so frequent or severe that it creates a hostile or offensive work environment.”<sup>1</sup> Research expands this definition to understand sexual harassment as a psychological construct with negative effects, even when the behaviors do not meet the legal thresholds of frequency or severity to be prohibited.<sup>2</sup> A subset of the sexual harassment literature focuses on third-party sexual harassment, or customer sexual harassment, which recognizes that workers in service positions are harassed by their customers or patrons and are more vulnerable to harassment because of the power imbalance between service providers and customers.<sup>3</sup> The effects of experiencing third-party sexual harassment are similar to the effects of other types of workplace harassment; namely, lower job and health satisfaction and increased psychological stress.<sup>4</sup>

Library workers, like other frontline service workers, have reported experiencing sexual harassment at work by colleagues and supervisors, as well as third-party sexual harassment by patrons.<sup>5</sup> While library work is often done in person, library reference work is increasingly

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supported via online services such as chat reference. There is a dearth of literature on third-party sexual harassment experienced by service workers in an online environment, but online sexual harassment follows the same patterns of in-person harassment.<sup>6</sup> Our study investigates the experiences of sexual harassment of chat providers on library chat reference.

## Literature Review

Research into sexual harassment is rooted in the workplace, primarily among co-workers and with a focus on the prevalence, consequences, and antecedents of workplace sexual harassment. Findings on the prevalence of workplace sexual harassment vary depending on study methodology, but overall they show that sexual harassment persists in the workplace and women are more likely to be victims.<sup>7</sup> The negative consequences of sexual harassment, including health, occupational, and psychological outcomes, are consistently reported.<sup>8</sup> Predictably, antecedents of harassment are shown to include organizational characteristics and workplace climate.<sup>9</sup> In the absence of clear organizational policies on sexual harassment, management is more likely to ignore the behavior;<sup>10</sup> and the degree to which an organization tolerates sexual harassment is a reliable predictor of whether sexual harassment occurs in the workplace.<sup>11</sup> This suggests that organizational changes would lessen or eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace.

### *Third-Party Sexual Harassment*

Most studies of sexual harassment focus on sexual harassment among colleagues in the workplace. That being said, there is research on a subset of workplace sexual harassment called third-party sexual harassment, also referred to as customer sexual harassment and patron perpetrated sexual harassment. Seen often in service industries such as retail and hospitality, this harassment is perpetrated by a customer or patron against an employee.

Situational and organizational factors can determine whether third-party sexual harassment occurs. Like other forms of sexual harassment, an organization's tolerance of customer harassment is a reliable antecedent to whether harassment occurs.<sup>12</sup> A customer or client with some level of power over the employee and a high-pressure service environment can both encourage sexual harassment.<sup>13</sup> The gendering of service work can amplify sexual harassment as it often requires predominantly female staff to "exert maximum efforts to make the time customers spend in the organization pleasant, and to satisfy their needs."<sup>14</sup> Service providers often view caring for customers, clients, or patrons as part of their job responsibilities, making it "difficult for employees to draw a clear line between the type of customer behaviour they would be expected to manage as part of the job and behaviour that was inappropriate, creating ambiguity about how to define, interpret and respond to customer sexual harassment."<sup>15</sup>

Common responses to third-party sexual harassment are reporting to a supervisor, avoidance behaviors, confronting the harasser directly, changing personal behaviors, or seeking support from colleagues.<sup>16</sup> Dismissing incidents of harassment altogether is most common.<sup>17</sup> Because organizational change is not available to them and third-party sexual harassment is so often ignored or silenced in the service sector, victims will employ coping strategies on an individual level.<sup>18</sup> Harassed employees use the interpersonal skills and emotional labor necessary in client-facing service positions to diffuse the harassing encounter and pacify the client or customer.<sup>19</sup> Collective coping is also common. Employees who experience harassment discuss it in an effort to regain power in the situation, reconstructing the harassment

as something that happens throughout the workplace rather than something for which they were personally targeted.<sup>20</sup> Attempting to gain control over the situation, although sometimes illusory, can help prevent some of the negative emotional effects of sexual harassment.<sup>21</sup>

### *Sexual Harassment in Libraries*

Service is often considered the essence of librarianship for librarians; and librarians “will go above and beyond to meet these needs with high-quality services based in the core values of librarianship.”<sup>22</sup> Library workers, especially those who interact with patrons as part of their job responsibilities, are susceptible to third-party sexual harassment. Service interactions often require emotional labor, compelling workers to prioritize a patron’s emotional needs over their own.<sup>23</sup> This expectation of emotional labor is also found in library professional guidelines such as the Reference & User Services Association “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers.”<sup>24</sup> In a close reading of the *Guidelines*, Emmelhainz et al. concluded that the professional guidelines for reference work explicitly require emotional labor of reference librarians, making them solely responsible for creating a “successful” reference interaction by managing their patron’s feelings.<sup>25</sup> This prioritization of a patron’s emotions over their own makes them vulnerable to receiving third-party sexual harassment, but also constrains their ability to resist or confront that harassment, a situation “further compounded by intersectional aspects of library workers’ identity, such as race and class, that make them additionally vulnerable to sexual harassment.”<sup>26</sup>

Research into sexual harassment in libraries has not specifically focused on third-party sexual harassment, but rather the overall experiences of library workers in the workplace. Research into this issue began with an often cited, informal 1993 survey in which 78 percent of female librarians reported being sexually harassed while at work.<sup>27</sup> Publications by librarians openly discussing sexual harassment of library workers coincided with the 2017 #MeToo and #TimesUp movements,<sup>28</sup> including an anecdotal survey from *BookRiot* that collected over 250 responses from library workers sharing their stories of harassment in the library.<sup>29</sup> More recently, formal research into academic libraries found that 77.4 percent of survey respondents, of which there were over 600, had experienced sexual harassment in the library.<sup>30</sup> Another 2021 study focused on sexual harassment of library workers at a specific university library and found that 54 percent of workers across 10 campuses experienced or observed sexual harassment at work.<sup>31</sup> These studies primarily analyzed harassment occurring in physical spaces exhibited by both colleagues and patrons.

### *Online Sexual Harassment in the Workplace*

Online sexual harassment, also called cyber sexual harassment, is an often-overlooked form of workplace harassment, but it has harmful effects similar to offline sexual harassment.<sup>32</sup> And much like offline sexual harassment, online sexual harassment takes the form of gender harassment or unwanted sexual attention more frequently than sexual coercion.<sup>33</sup> Barak proposes that there is a higher probability of sexual harassment online due to the situational components of the internet, including online disinhibition, the ability to be anonymous, the ability to easily escape by logging off, and the lack of legal repercussions for cyber sexual harassment.<sup>34</sup>

Cyber sexual harassment of library workers is not well studied. However, anecdotal discussions of handling unruly patrons online suggest tactics like “keeping calm” and “communicating with [patrons]” before “[inviting] them to leave” when the behavior cannot be redirected.<sup>35</sup>

## Research Questions

Based on this review of the literature, we developed 4 research questions:

1. What is the prevalence of sexual harassment on chat reference?
2. How do chat providers respond to sexual harassment on chat reference and what influences their decisions?
3. What effects do institutional policies, or lack thereof, have on chat providers who experience sexual harassment?
4. What impact does sexual harassment have on chat providers' attitudes or behaviors when providing chat?

## Methods

Sexual harassment has been widely studied over the years with a variety of methods. But the most widely used method is the Sexual Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) developed by Louise Fitzgerald in 1988.<sup>36</sup> This survey instrument is primarily used to study sexual harassment in the workplace. Originally, it asked questions about five dimensions of sexual harassment: gender harassment, seductive behavior, sexual bribery, sexual coercion, and sexual assault.<sup>37</sup> A revised version of the survey reduced this to three dimensions, asking questions about specific sexual harassment behaviors related to gender discrimination, unwanted sexual advances, and sexual coercion. Fitzgerald et al. defined these terms as:

- Gender discrimination: "a broad range of verbal and nonverbal behaviors not aimed at sexual cooperation but that convey insulting, hostile, and degrading attitudes about women;"<sup>38</sup>
- Unwanted sexual advances: "a wide range of verbal and nonverbal behavior that is offensive, unwanted, and unreciprocated;"<sup>39</sup>
- Sexual coercion: "extortion of sexual cooperation."<sup>40</sup>

Other surveys found in the literature focused separately on either sexual harassment occurring broadly online or sexual harassment within libraries.<sup>41</sup>

We used the SEQ and other surveys as inspiration to design a survey instrument (Appendix A) that met the unique needs of the environment we wanted to study, sexual harassment occurring online in library chat reference. Specifically, our survey asked questions about the types of sexual harassment behaviors experienced in a virtual library environment. We also asked respondents how their chat reference was staffed and how their organizations handled reports of harassment. The survey was primarily quantitative, but we asked two open-ended questions. One asked participants to elaborate on the factors that influenced their responses to harassment. The other asked respondents to discuss how experiences of sexual harassment impacted their work on chat reference.

Our sample consisted of chat providers working in academic libraries who were at least 18 years of age. Because this was a convenience sample recruited via academic listservs, social media, and word of mouth, our results cannot be generalized to the entire population of chat providers in academic libraries. Therefore, we applied a descriptive statistical analysis to all quantitative questions. To analyze our two qualitative questions, we used a thematic analysis, by which we separately labeled text responses to generate a common list of themes and then used the list of themes to individually code the responses. We compared our initial rounds of coding to identify and discuss any discrepancies before finalizing the analysis.

This survey received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Rutgers University and Western Connecticut State University.

## Results and Discussion

### *Demographics*

There were 123 respondents to the survey. Of those, 119 usable responses were from academic library workers who completed the online consent form and the survey. Our respondents aligned with the demographics of librarianship, with a majority being White and female between 25 and 54 years of age. Specifically, 86% of respondents were female, 14% male, and less than 1% were non-binary. Our respondents were White (86%), Hispanic (4%), Black or African American (3%), Native American (1%), and Asian Pacific Islander (2%), and 4% declined to answer or identified as Other. We asked participants to identify their general age (18–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–54, 55–64, 65–74, 75+). Most respondents, 84%, were between the ages of 25–54 with each of these decades representing at 25–30%. Subsequent discussion will focus on the 119 usable responses.

### *Institutional Characteristics*

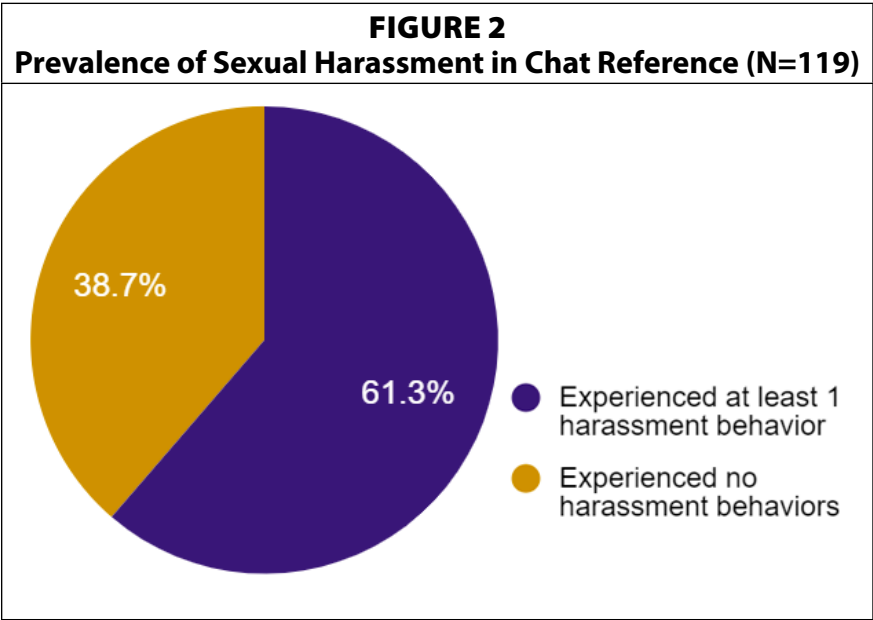
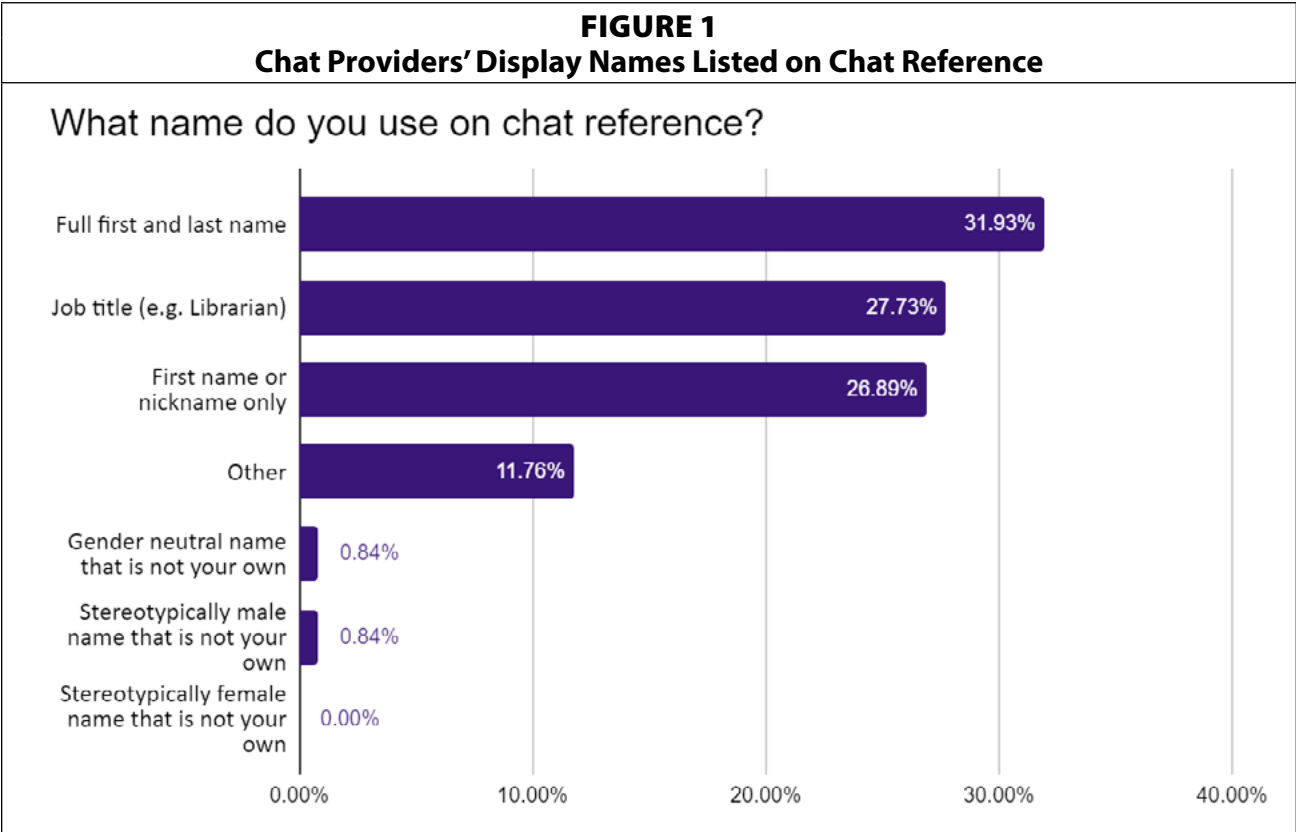
All respondents worked in academic libraries, with one respondent also working in a public library and another recently retired from an academic library. Most libraries staffed chat with only library employees (81.36%,  $n=96$ ), .85% ( $n=1$ ) staffed with a third-party service, and 17.8% ( $n=21$ ) used a mix of both library employees and a third-party service, explaining that the third-party service or cooperative service covered nights, weekends, and overnight shifts. One respondent did not answer the question. Most organizations, 94.12% ( $n=112$ ), did not restrict who can access the chat service, while 5% ( $n=6$ ) restricted access to chat reference to only institutional affiliates. One respondent was unsure of whether restrictions existed.

Participants were most likely to staff chat between 1 and 10 hours a week. Three respondents (2.5%) were not currently staffing chat on a weekly basis, 82 (68.9%) staffed chat between 1 and 10 hours weekly, 20 (16.67%) held between 11 and 20 reference hours weekly, and 14 respondents (11.67%) staffed chat more than 20 hours per week. There was an equitable split between respondents who had 5 years or less experience staffing chat reference and those who had 6 years or more.

Chat reference operators generally did not share personally identifiable information with chat users. The majority of respondents, 79% ( $n=94$ ) did not make a profile photo of themselves visible to patrons on chat reference. Respondents displayed a variety of names on chat reference, ranging from a full first and last name to completely anonymous (see figure 1). For the 11.76% ( $n=14$ ) that answered Other, half reported using either the title of the service, the library's name, or listing no display name at all. Other responses included using only initials or using a mix of initials and first or last names (i.e., J. Smith or John S.). One respondent commented that they changed their display name to a stereotypically male name after experiencing harassment.

### *Prevalence of Sexual Harassment*

The majority of respondents, 61 percent ( $n=73$ ), experienced at least one sexual harassment behavior (figure 2). Interestingly, of these 73 respondents who reported experiencing at least one harassing behavior, only 44 believed that they had been harassed during a chat interaction. Although this aligns with findings from other studies, this disconnect needs further investigation.<sup>42</sup> We received comments implying that some harassment is expected for those working in service positions or within our society. It's possible that not every respondent considers the harassing behaviors to be sexual harassment, despite how it is defined in the literature.



Respondents selected the frequency with which they experienced one of the 11 sexual harassment behaviors we asked about in the survey, ranging from 0 times to more than 5 times, over the previous 5 years. Results showed that many of our 119 respondents experienced sexual harassment at least 1–2 times between 2015 and 2020 (table 1).

Consistent with the larger body of sexual harassment research, gender harassment was the most

experienced dimension of sexual harassment. While the dimension unwanted sexual attention was less common overall, unwanted seductive behavior and unwanted discussion of personal matters were both behaviors in this dimension that were significantly experienced. Sexual coercion was minimally experienced.

The most common behavior of sexual harassment occurring on chat was unwanted discussion of personal matters. Crude or offensive remarks came in second, closely followed by chat providers feeling they were treated differently due to their perceived gender. Unwanted

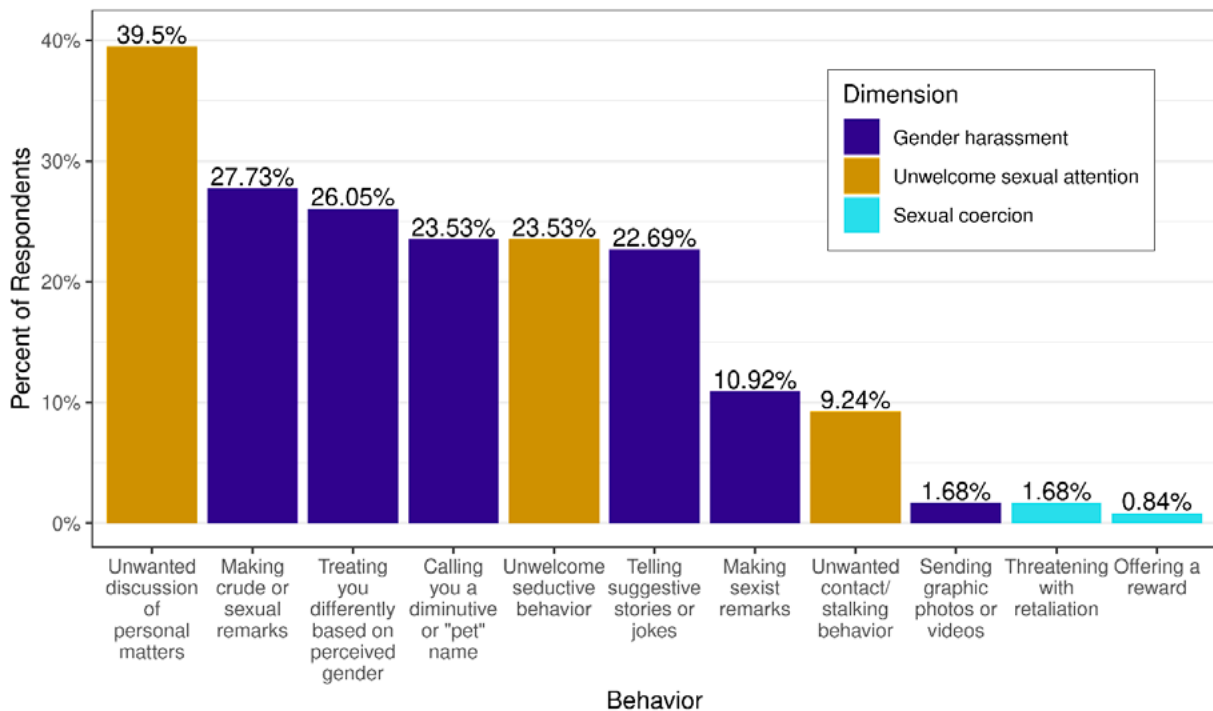
**TABLE 1**  
**Frequency and Type of Sexual Harassment Behaviors Experienced from 2015 to 2020**  
**(N=119)**

Dimension	Behavior	0x	1–2x	3–5x	>5x
Gender Harassment	Telling suggestive stories or jokes	92	19	6	2
	Sending graphic photos or videos	116	2	0	0
	Making crude or sexual remarks	84	21	7	5
	Making sexist remarks	105	9	2	2
	Treating you differently based on perceived gender	85	16	9	6
	Calling you a diminutive or “pet” name	90	12	10	6
Unwanted Sexual Advances/Attention	Unwelcome seductive behavior	90	21	7	0
	Unwanted contact/stalking behavior	106	10	0	1
	Unwanted discussion of personal matters	71	34	9	4
Sexual Coercion	Offering a reward for sexual cooperation	117	1	0	0
	Threatening with retaliation for lack of sexual cooperation	116	1	1	0

seductive behavior, which includes asking for a date or for personal contact information and being called a diminutive or “pet” name were also commonly experienced behaviors. Figure 3 shows the percentage of affirmative experiences of sexual harassment.

The prevalence of gender harassment confirms what other studies of sexual harassment have concluded—gender harassment is considered less severe than other forms of sexual harassment, such as sexual coercion, but is experienced more frequently.<sup>43</sup> The lessened sever-

**FIGURE 3**  
**Prevalence of Experiences of Each Sexual Harassment Behavior, 223 Responses**

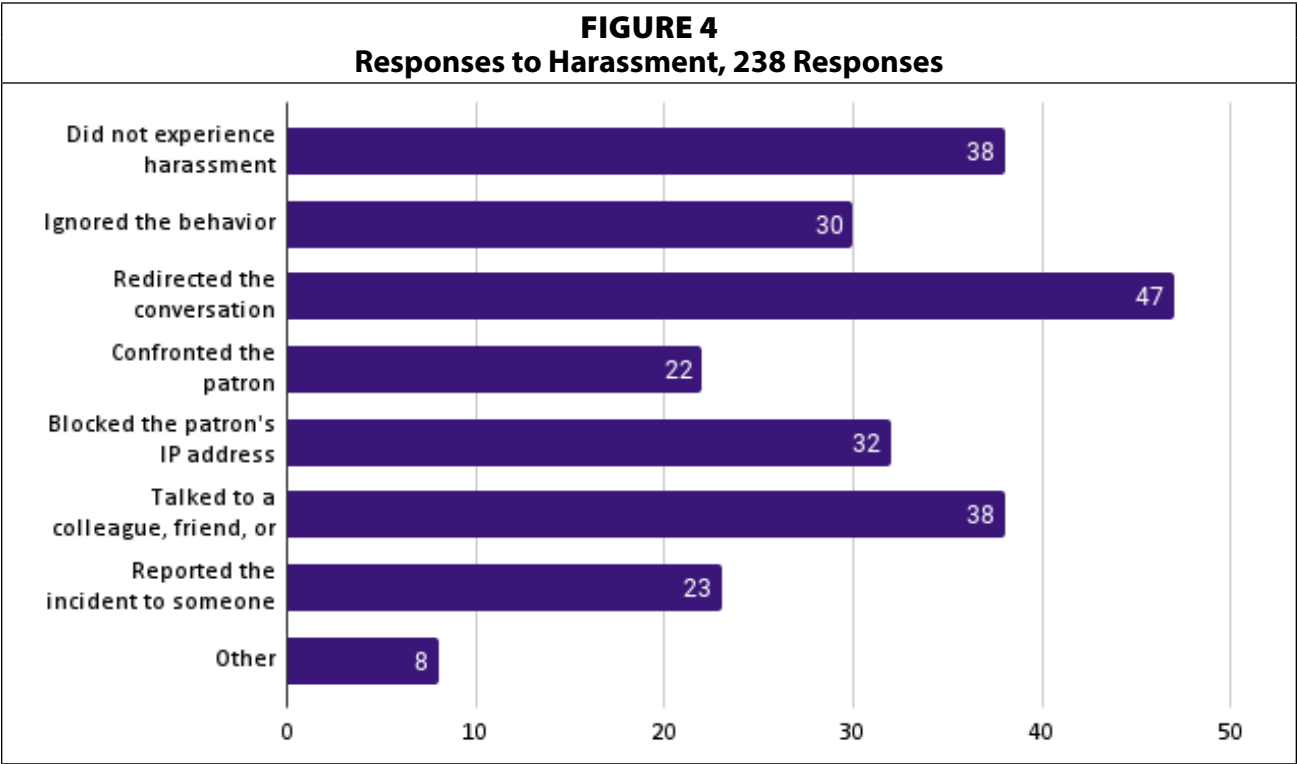


ity does not mean it makes less of an impact on the person being harassed, especially when considering the frequency of the harassment. This is an especially important consideration as libraries are increasingly offering virtual reference services and staffing chat reference services with students.<sup>44</sup>

Gender harassment is the most frequent form of harassment experienced in frontline service work.<sup>45</sup> Librarianship is a service-oriented and largely female profession. Professional expectations of service are often entrenched in gendered ideas of emotional labor, burdening reference providers with the responsibility of not only supplying information but of managing their own and their patron’s emotions.<sup>46</sup> The obligation to prioritize a patron’s needs over one’s own makes chat providers more susceptible to sexual harassment as the patron holds power in the interaction.

*Responses to Sexual Harassment*

There are many ways that one can respond to sexual harassment, and we found that often chat operators used multiple techniques to handle such a situation, both during and after the occurrence. Our 119 participants shared 238 responses on how they reacted to harassing behavior (figure 4).



Overall, participants responded in more passive ways to harassment. The most common response was to redirect the patron back to the reference interaction. We received many comments from participants about wanting to continue to provide good service even in the face of harassment, and redirection was the primary technique used to do so. This is partially explained by the type of harassment experienced. Respondents frequently mentioned that an inappropriate question or comment was easier to disregard than acknowledge. This is not to say that redirecting an inappropriate conversation is an incorrect response, as often chat



providers are able to subtly correct a patron's behavior and continue providing reference service, but it is worth questioning how the frequency of "less severe" sexual harassment, experienced over a long period of time, leads to feelings of resignation that harassment is a part of library reference work, as some of our survey participants stated.

Ignoring the behavior, blocking the patron's IP address, and talking to a colleague, peer, or friend were also common responses to harassing behavior. The least common responses to harassment were the more direct ones—confronting the patron about their behaviors or reporting the harassment to someone of authority.

We received 60 responses to an open-ended question asking participants to elaborate on the factors that influenced their responses to harassment. Thematic analysis of their explanations uncovered the following themes.

### *Service Mindset*

Chat providers are acutely aware of the service expectations in a reference interaction. A service mindset is encouraged in library professional values and reference service guidelines, and while it is an integral aspect of the profession, it is also a potential explanation for the passive responses to sexual harassment on chat reference.<sup>47</sup> Respondents frequently mentioned their desire to remain professional and provide good service, even when patrons exhibited harmful behaviors.

Giving patrons the benefit of doubt allowed providers to redirect conversations to "[help] them with their academic issue," "maintain a reference interview," and "remain professional since chat transcripts are saved." This pacification of harassing patrons using interpersonal skills and emotional labor in order to perform professional duties is similar to actions taken by service providers in other frontline positions.<sup>48</sup> Respondents consistently performed the emotional labor of considering and managing the harassing patrons' perspectives and needs. When receiving harassing comments, chat providers considered the assumed identity of the patron—potentially "middle or high school students," "a bored kid," or someone who assumed the provider was "not a real person." They made attempts to understand *why* the patron was harassing them in order to continue providing service. Respondents who tried empathizing with harassing patrons mentioned dealing with the behavior "somewhat gently," giving them a "chance to be corrected," and "not making assumptions" about the patron's intentions.

Other times, the desire to continue providing good service was done with a sense of resignation that harassment was expected, and little could be done to avoid it. Societal expectations of harassment were commonly mentioned along with a desire to remain professional and provide service. Harassment online is so "normalized in our culture" that "to ignore it was... best."

We found that respondents ignored harassing behaviors if they believed that direct responses on their part "might cause the patron to react more poorly," or because they were so used to harassment in their lives that something "would need to change societally, systemically...for me to feel less uncomfortable confronting the patron than I do by simply ignoring it."

It should be noted that while sometimes efforts to combat harassment with good service were successful (i.e., patrons allowed themselves to be redirected or understood that their behavior was unwelcome), others had less fortunate experiences with patrons continuing to harass despite attempts to ignore or redirect the behavior. Once this escalation happened, chat providers employed more direct techniques such as blocking IP addresses or directly asking the patron to change their behavior before continuing the interaction.

*Role of Colleagues*

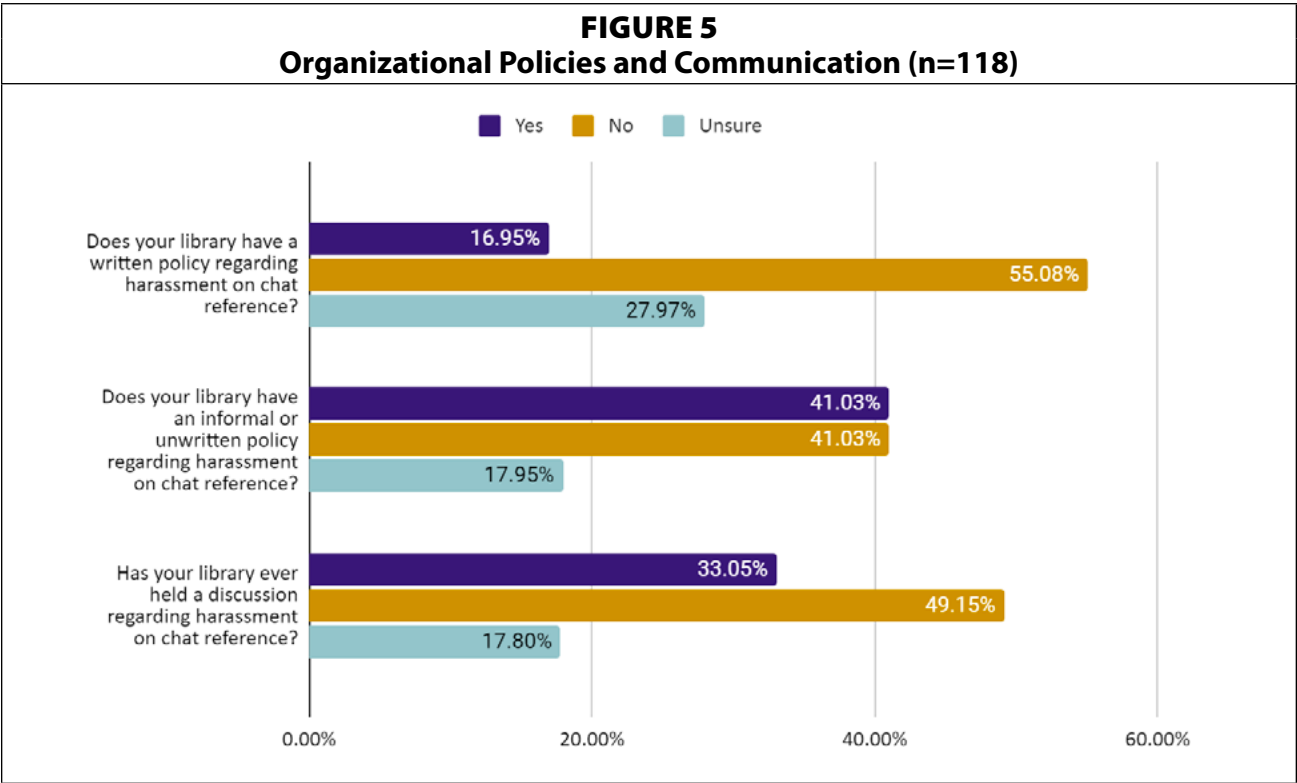
Relationships with colleagues were a major factor in how chat providers responded to harassment. Respondents reported harassment via official and unofficial channels partly because they desired to protect their colleagues from similar harassment. Other times, respondents relied on colleagues to offer sympathy, advice, and commiseration as a way of handling the aftermath of harassment. Participants mentioned having a “close community of chat staffers” where experiences could be shared since everyone “generally share[d] similar ones.” Informing colleagues of harassment was not done to problem solve, but to “commiserate” and warn them “to be on the lookout” so they would not “be shocked if something similar happened to them.”

*Organizational Impact*

In addition to their feelings of professional duty and obligation to their colleagues, respondents’ reactions were frequently influenced by their organization’s policies, or lack thereof, on sexual harassment. Reflecting on direct confrontation or action, respondents feared repercussions from either the harassing patron or from library administration. Those chat providers, unconfident in their organization’s support, who were required to use their real names and/or photos on chat feared that the patron could/would seek them out for further harassment, potentially in person. Many providers were also aware that because chat transcripts are saved and accessible to administration and colleagues, they may be “roped into a formal reporting procedure” or “told off for being aggressive,” reinforcing the concept that the customers’ needs should be prioritized over their own—under any circumstance.

*Effects of Institutional Policies*

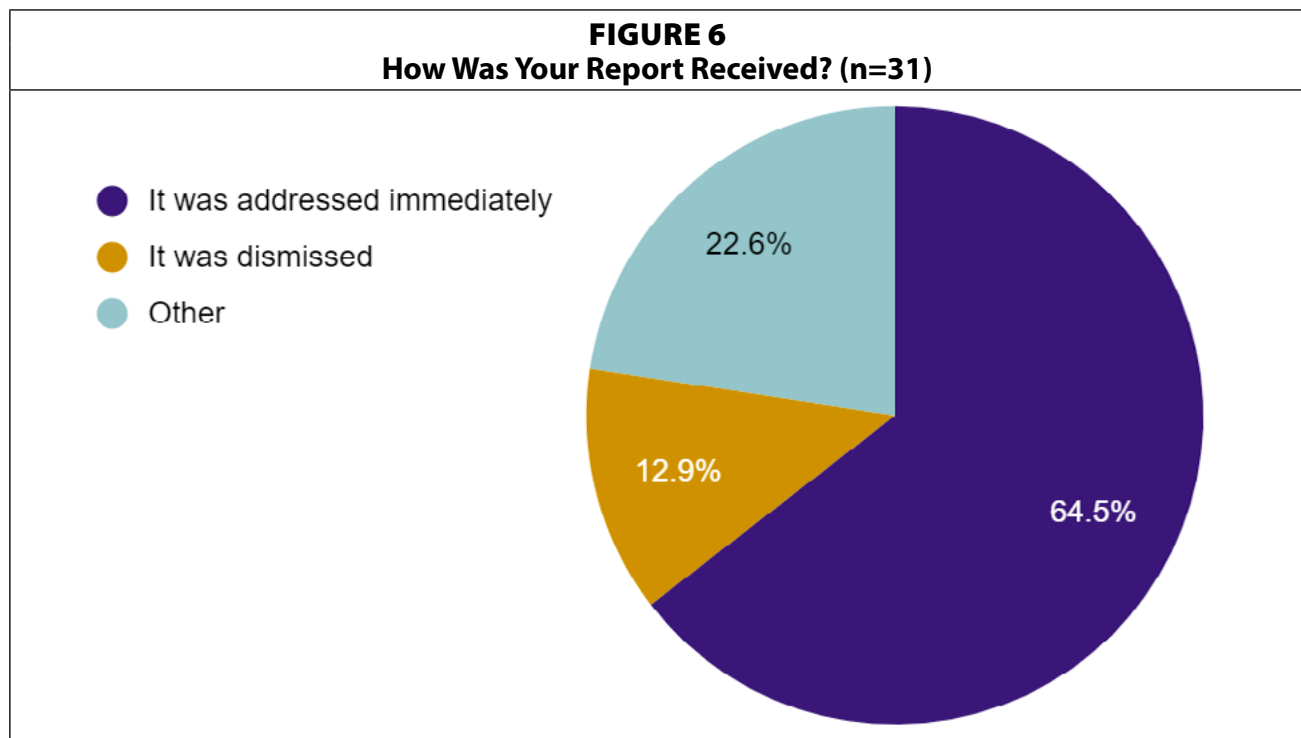
Fifty-five percent of respondents (n=65) reported their organizations did not have a formal,



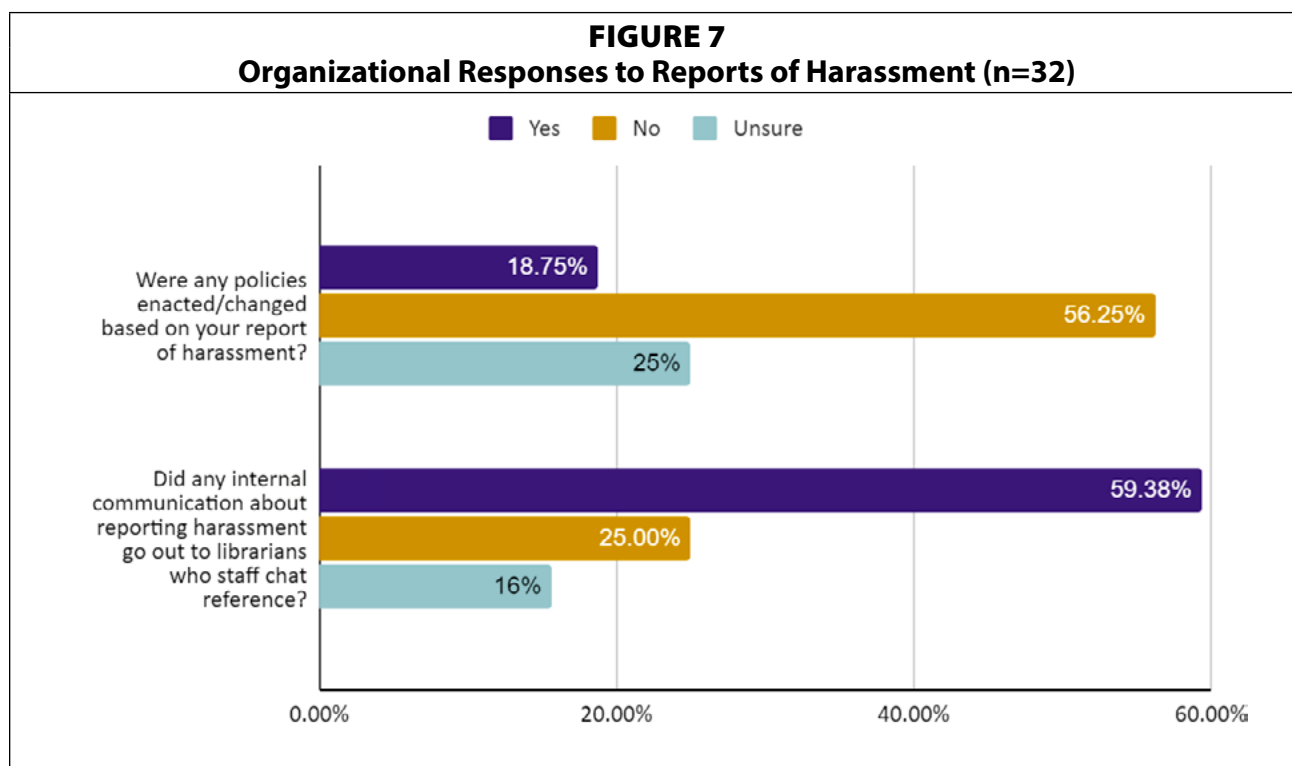
written policy for handling harassment, and many respondents (n=58) reported that their libraries had never discussed harassment on chat (figure 5). Although it was more common to have an informal policy for dealing with harassing patrons on chat, over 77% of respondents were clear on whom to report harassment on chat.

Nearly 28% (n=33) of 118 respondents reported sexual harassment on chat to someone in authority. Interestingly, two of the 33 respondents answered that they *had* reported chat harassment to someone in authority, but they did *not* experience any of the sexual harassment behaviors we had asked about in the survey. We do not have a definitive explanation for that discrepancy, but it is possible the respondents either reported harassment they witnessed another chat provider experiencing or they reported sexual harassment behaviors that we did not include in our study.

Of the 33 respondents that reported harassment to someone in authority, 31 responded with how that report was received. Reports were addressed immediately in 64.52% of cases (figure 6).



For those that elaborated on answering "other," the common theme was that although their report was acknowledged or addressed, there was little the respondents expected to be done. When police or campus security were called, employees were vaguely advised to take "safety precautions." In other cases, supervisors listened to complaints but ultimately dismissed the harassing behaviors as "to be expected." Some comments alluded to blocking the patron's IP address as a way of handling the harassment. In one instance, the chat providers drafted their own policy for handling chat harassment after initial reports were dismissed by supervisors. Acknowledging that harassment can happen in chat reference and teaching techniques for handling it in the moment, as well as steps to take after it has happened, could better prepare those who will be staffing chat reference.



Other organizational responses to reports of harassment were to change policies or send out internal communications (figure 7). Communicating with employees that harassment had occurred was the most common response.

Organizational policies and communication about sexual harassment, specifically on chat reference, greatly determined how providers reacted to harassment and whether they reported it. In open-ended responses, participants expressed that having a clear reporting structure, instructions for how to handle harassment, and supervisors who discussed harassment on chat were all factors in whether they reported harassment when it happened. Participants who had a positive reporting experience elaborated that their organizations held meetings, encouraged discussion among employees, developed and hosted training on handling harassment, implemented generic identifiers for all those staffing chat as a protective measure, and developed policies and/or canned messages in direct response to harassing behavior. Some respondents mentioned feeling empowered to employ different techniques when harassed, such as closing a chat or telling a patron to stop, because options had been discussed prior to experiencing the harassment. For those who were able to reflect on providing chat reference at different organizations, jobs with admin support or positions at institutions that had a culture of respect seemed to ease chat providers' concerns about potentially experiencing sexual harassment in virtual reference. In other words, even if they had experienced sexual harassment in a prior position, moving to an institution that supported staff and encouraged respectful behavior allowed providers to feel comfortable staffing chat once again.

### *Impact of Harassment on Chat Providers*

Of the 73 respondents who experienced sexual harassment on chat, 78% (n=57) reported that it did not make them hesitant to staff chat reference. However, experiencing harassment did have an impact on how they provided chat reference. Forty-one participants responded to

an open-ended question asking how sexual harassment on chat reference had impacted them and their work. Their comments centered around behavioral changes and practical techniques for avoiding and handling sexual harassment.

Harassment commonly impacted chat providers emotions while staffing chat. Respondents repeatedly mentioned feeling “wary,” “anxious,” “shaken up,” “cautious,” “always on guard,” “skeptical,” “guarded,” and “reluctant” during chat interactions. Although we only asked how harassment impacted the providers themselves, respondents often followed up with concerns for how their new wariness of chat patrons may affect patron experience with the library. This desire to provide good service in chat reference, despite harassment, was apparent throughout the comments.

*“I try not to let these experiences impact reference, though. I want to be helpful, empathetic, and understanding.”*

*“My first job...I experienced harassment somewhat frequently...I...haven’t experienced any harassment [at my current job]. It makes me much quicker to be friendly/warm towards patrons on chat when I’m not worried that such a tone will be taken as welcoming harassment.”*

*“I would imagine this has a negative effect on some patrons who are new to the library...as I am hesitant and distracted by my concerns about possibly being harassed.”*

*“I might be a little less ‘warm’ or ‘chatty’ in how I greet and interact with a person...but I always try to stay professional.”*

After having experienced sexual harassment, providers were more likely to employ more direct actions to avoid or stop subsequent attempts. Most commonly, respondents commented that they would simply end chats and block patrons who exhibited unruly behavior. They experienced “less hesitation about ending a chat with a user who is harassing,” have “block[ed] IP addresses...several times,” are “more quick to stifle an unruly or inappropriate patron,” and will “shut down chat immediately if [they] feel questions asked are inappropriate.” Other providers mentioned using the tools available in the chat platform to disguise their identities as a protective measure. This included changing display names on chat to a job title, such as “librarian,” or to a male-sounding or gender-neutral name, and/or removing any identifying profile photos. In line with this, some respondents were hesitant to give their name or email within the chat unless they could confirm the identity of the patron.

There was an overall sense in the survey responses that the level of sexual harassment experienced on chat differed from in-person experiences because of the disconnect that technology provides. The perceived level and frequency of harassment was a factor in how chat providers reported being impacted by harassment. That being said, harassment did impact chat providers. Once providers experienced harassment, they were plagued with feelings of wariness in future chat interactions. A major concern among respondents was that this wariness also impacted the level of service they were providing to patrons. Consistently, providers mentioned the desire to remain professional and provide good service, regardless of how their patron is behaving.

## Limitations

This exploratory study has several limitations. In recruiting participants, we were clear that this survey asked about experiences of sexual harassment and included contact information for support services for participants. While this was an intentional choice meant to protect participants who might be uncomfortable taking a survey about sexual harassment, it could have also led to a self-selecting population of survey participants who experienced sexual harassment. Additionally, we recruited participants via academic listservs and did not employ random sampling, and so our results cannot be generalized to the broader population of library workers. Lastly, the demographic makeup of our respondents was largely white and female, and while this is representative of the demographics of the profession, this study does not account for the myriad ways in which intersecting identities, such as race and sexuality, compound experiences of harassment.

## Conclusion

We found that chat reference providers are experiencing sexual harassment on chat, primarily in the dimensions of gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention. Participants were more likely to respond to harassment passively by redirecting a conversation, seeking support from colleagues, or ignoring the behavior altogether. Responses to harassment were influenced by three factors: a service mindset—in which chat providers desired to provide quality reference service despite harassment; relationships with colleagues—to protect or support them; and organizational support—whether their organization had held discussions or training about harassment on chat or if harassment was believed to be tolerated.

Chat providers were not hesitant to staff chat reference after experiencing harassment. But the experiences did have an emotional impact, making them more wary and anxious in future interactions as well as more likely to respond directly to harassment in subsequent experiences.

Most organizations did not have explicit policies or conversations about harassment on chat reference, but responded to reports of harassment informally, often with internal communication. Formal policies or documentation for responding to sexual harassment on chat reference are lacking, but chat providers appreciated both formal and informal communication around the issue.

Sexual harassment on chat reference may be less frequent than harassment experienced in person, but it is no less important to acknowledge. Addressing harassment in virtual spaces is particularly relevant now as libraries pivoted to online services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Chat providers, like all workers, deserve safe working environments with explicit and enforceable policies in place. Sexual harassment policies should specify the inclusion of virtual working environments, especially those where employees are interacting with patrons. Clear guidelines for reporting sexual harassment behaviors perpetrated by patrons in an online environment are necessary and should include expectations of how reports will be handled. Additionally, there is a need for training of chat providers on how harassment occurs online, how it can differ from in-person harassment, and specific strategies that the provider may use in the moment. Our respondents outlined a spectrum of responses from the proactive and service-oriented, such as using an alias and redirecting a conversation, to the more direct and safety-focused, such as blocking an IP address. Depending on the level of harassment experienced and comfort level of the employee, these and other methods are

useful tools for navigating online harassment. Above all, creating and reinforcing an environment that protects and supports employees who have experienced harassment is essential.

### **Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank James Adams for his assistance with data visualization software.

## Appendix A

Q1 What is your gender?

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Q2 What is your age?

- ☐ 18–24
- ☐ 25–34
- ☐ 35–44
- ☐ 45–54
- ☐ 55–64
- ☐ 65–74
- ☐ 75 years or older

Q3 What is your race?

- ☐ White
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Native American or American Indian
- ☐ Asian / Pacific Islander
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other:

Q4 At what type of library do you work?

- ☐ Public Library
- ☐ Academic Library
- ☐ Other

Q5 How is your library's chat reference service staffed?

- ☐ By your library's employees
- ☐ By a third-party service
- ☐ Other

Q6 Who can access your library's chat reference service?

- ☐ Only those affiliated with the institution or community
- ☐ There are no restrictions on who can access the service
- ☐ Unknown
- ☐ Other

Q7 On average, how many hours a week do you personally staff chat reference?

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1–5
- ☐ 6–10
- ☐ 11–20
- ☐ More than 20



Q8 How many years of experience do you have staffing chat reference?

- ☐ Less than 1
- ☐ 1–5
- ☐ 6–10
- ☐ More than 10

Q9 Do you believe you have experienced harassment on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q10 Do you feel you have ever been treated differently on chat reference due to your perceived gender? (e.g. favored, ignored, or slighted)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q11 Within the last 5 years, how often have you experienced the following harassing behaviors from patrons on chat reference?

	0 times	1–2 times	3–5 times	More than 5 times
Telling suggestive stories or jokes	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sending graphic photos or videos	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Making crude or sexual remarks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Making sexist remarks (e.g. Is there a man I could talk to about this?)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Treating you differently due to your perceived gender (e.g. favored, ignored, or slighted)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Called you a diminutive or “pet” name (e.g. sweetheart)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unwelcome seductive behavior (e.g. asking to meet in person or on a date)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unwanted contact/stalking behaviors (e.g. Patron you chatted with then came to the physical library looking for you or found you on social media and made contact)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Unwanted discussion of personal matters (e.g. a patron telling you about their personal life or asking you about yours)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Offering a reward for sexual cooperation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Threatening with retaliation for lack of sexual cooperation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q12 If you experienced any of the harassing behaviors described in the previous question, how did you respond to the behaviors? Check all that apply.

- ☐ I have not experienced any of the harassment behaviors described.
- ☐ Ignored the behavior
- ☐ Redirected the conversation
- ☐ Confronted the person/asked them to stop
- ☐ Blocked the patron's IP address
- ☐ Talked to a colleague, peer, or friend about the experience
- ☐ Reported the incident to someone in authority
- ☐ Other:

Q13 What factors influenced your decision to respond how you did?

Q14 Is a photo of you visible to patrons on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q15 What name do you use on chat reference?

- ☐ Full first and last name
- ☐ First name or nickname only
- ☐ Gender neutral name that is not your own
- ☐ Stereotypically male name that is not your own
- ☐ Stereotypically female name that is not your own
- ☐ Job title (e.g. Librarian or Reference Librarian)
- ☐ Other

Q16 Does your library have the ability to block IP addresses of patrons on chat?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q17 Have you used the block function or reported a patron to someone who could use the block function?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q18 Does your library have a written policy regarding harassment on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q19 Does your library have an informal or unwritten policy regarding harassment on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q20 Has your library ever held a discussion regarding harassment on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q21 Does your library provide canned messages to send to patrons behaving inappropriately on chat?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q22 Is it clear to whom you would report an incidence of harassment on chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q23 Have you ever reported harassment on chat reference to someone in authority?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Q24 How was your report received?

- ☐ It was addressed immediately
- ☐ It was dismissed
- ☐ Other:

Q25 Were any policies enacted/changed based on your report of harassment?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q26 Did any internal communication about reporting harassment go out to librarians who staff chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

Q27 If you have experienced any of the harassment behaviors described above, did the experience make you hesitant to staff chat reference?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I did not experience any harassment behaviors.

Q28 Has the experience had an impact on how you provide chat reference? If yes, please explain:

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### **Notes**

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