

New pilot study enhances understanding of situational fear

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Welcome message for participation in the City Life chatbot experiment. Credit: Dr Michael Saker, City, University of London

Research from experts at City, University of London's Department of Sociology and Criminology suggests that although women students feel largely safe while on campus, universities have a responsibility that extends beyond campus and encompasses surrounding areas and commuter routes into and out of study areas.

The research, captured the lived experiences of 24 women students at City across a two-week period using a chatbot app, City Life, which was developed for the purposes of the study. The project concluded with a series of semi-structured interviews.

City Life recorded lived experiences both during and outside of university contact hours with the aim of gaining a more situated understanding of fear. Students were given the opportunity to chart their emotions while traveling in and out of university, moving around campus and socializing.

Key findings from the study include:

- For women students, the experience of fear is closely associated with mobility on campus (in effect, moving between buildings). This fear was more pronounced at darker times of day and when there was little company.
- Women students experienced more fear while moving through the wider environment outside of campus. Accordingly, non-campus universities are significant here, as students have greater distances to travel between buildings and locations, as well as more complex public transport routes. Public transport and the sharing of enclosed spaces was also a major factor in students' encountering of fear.
- Students frequently carry expensive equipment, including

laptops, phones and tablets on their person. This generally exacerbated the fear felt by some participants of the study when traveling to and from university.

- City Life made participants more cognisant of their surroundings and how they experienced these surroundings—a sense one participant described as "safety in knowledge".

The study was led by Dr. Michael Saker, Senior Lecturer in Digital Sociology and Societal Change with Dan Mercea, Professor of Digital and Social Change and Dr. Carrie-Anne Myers, Reader in Criminology at City.

Having successfully gathered data and established the feasibility of the chatbot app, the researchers now plan to build a more sophisticated, upscaled system with the aim of rolling out to other institutions and a far wider pool of students.

Dr. Saker said he hoped the feasibility of the study would help upscale the operation and further develop City Life to better comprehend fear of crime, and that this comprehension could be parlayed into more suitable policy.

"High-profile incidents in the news have highlighted the fear many women and women students encounter in their everyday lives," he said.

"Previous research indeed tells us that it prompts them to avoid certain areas and activities which directly and indirectly evoking emotions of fear—such as forgoing evening classes and social activities in favor of traveling home during sociable or lighter hours."

"Our study shows the feasibility of exploring situations of fear using technology such as an app. The next step is to develop our system further and grow it into a more enhanced tool for wider engagement and

awareness."

Professor Mercea commented that the report could help universities understand and mitigate the triggers of fear to improve overall [student](#) experience.

"Students generally carry expensive possessions—laptops, tablets, phones—on their person, while being focused within an area of space. Carrying such items around can evoke a level of fear in itself."

"Although our pilot shows that City's campus is widely regarded as a safe place, universities must recognize the external triggers in their institutional designs and safeguarding initiatives. Doing so will help them provide a more inclusive experience where students can take part in extracurricular activities without the fear of experiencing crime."

Dr. Myers said a study of this kind was highly topical to current trends in higher education.

"The post-Covid environment means students are returning to campus, while a cost of living crisis is forcing many to commute longer distances to their university."

"This increases the likelihood of encountering 'off-campus' fear, such as on train journeys and walking to and from terminals."

"Providing students with the means to report feelings of fear—as our chatbot app did—creates the opportunity for institutions and [local authorities](#) to form a situated understanding of what students see as safer environments."

About the study

City Life is a chatbot app developed by the research team using the FlowXO chatbot software, and distributed using Telegram.

Twenty-four participants used the app over a two-week period, completing eight tasks that pertained to university life and their relationships with the emotion of [fear](#). Participants were women aged between 18 and 40, with a mean age of 25.

More information: Report: openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/29840/

Provided by City University London

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