Young women enrolled in Washington state high schools and colleges told WSU researchers that people routinely make sexual comments, both in-person and online, about them and their bodies.

Stacey J.T. Hust, associate professor in WSU’s Edward R. Murrow College of Communication, and Kathleen Boyce Rodgers, associate professor in WSU’s Department of Human Development, talked with more than 100 young men and women from across Washington State about media and their romantic and sexual relationships.

Although Hust and Rodgers talked to adolescents before the start of the #MeToo campaign, the researchers noted that the young women they spoke to shared stories similar to those shared on social media as part of the grassroots campaign. “Even most of our youngest female participants, who were freshmen in high school, had already experienced some form of sexual harassment,” Hust said.

The young women viewed such sexual harassment as normative, Rodgers said. “When these women experienced harassment, they typically disengaged from the situation, whether that meant deleting an online app or avoiding boys in the school hallway. They did not feel comfortable confronting or reporting the harassment because they didn’t think they had the power to change the behavior.”

“Adolescents and young adults identify a pervasive sexual double standard in which boys are rewarded for sexual aggression and girls are shamed for sexual agency,” Rodgers said. “Such gender stereotypes affect how they interpret sexual media content and how they act in their romantic and sexual relationships”, Hust said.

Some of the men Hust and Rodgers spoke with rejected these gender stereotypes, and said they wouldn’t comment on a woman’s body. “Others, however, didn’t seem to understand that such comments could be unwanted,” Rodgers said.

Hust and Rodgers report their findings in a book titled “Scripting Adolescent Romance: Adolescents Talk about Romantic Relationships and Media’s Sexual Scripts. In addition to sexual harassment, the authors share adolescents’ and young adults’ stories related to media, gender stereotypes, virginity, romantic relationships, sexual activity and dating violence.

“We wanted to share our participants’ stories so that parents and practitioners can empower adolescents’ and young adults’ to participate in healthier romantic and sexual relationships” Hust said.