



‘Merely a Compliment’? Community Perceptions of Street Harassment in Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

Community attitudes towards sexual and gender-based violence play a central role in normalising, excusing and minimising perpetrators’ actions, as well as fostering a violence-supportive culture. However, we currently know little regarding how members of the community understand or perceive ‘everyday’ or seemingly ‘minor’ forms of harassment and intrusion, such as street-based harassment, with most research focusing on sexual assault and rape. To address this gap, we conducted a mixed-methods, vignette-based survey with members of the community in Melbourne, Australia. The survey examined participants’ perceptions of five scenarios depicting incidents that might constitute street harassment, including the extent to which participants viewed the scenarios as harmful, complimentary or in breach of social norms, and who bore responsibility for the incident. Findings suggest that participants typically held progressive understandings of harassment, but they nonetheless drew on victim-blaming or minimising discourses at times. In closing, we consider the implications for future research and primary prevention work.

Keywords: Street harassment; community perceptions; intersectionality; masculinity; victim-blame.

Introduction

Community attitudes towards sexual and gender-based violence play a central role in normalising, excusing and minimising the actions of perpetrators, as well as fostering a violence-supportive culture. Decades of research has illustrated that a large minority of the population hold inaccurate beliefs about gendered violence, though these attitudes are slowly improving over time (Webster et al. 2018). Research on community attitudes has typically focused on stereotypically ‘serious’ iterations of gendered violence, such as rape and intimate partner violence. We know comparatively little as to how members of the public understand or perceive ‘everyday’ or seemingly ‘minor’ forms of harassment and intrusion.

This absence of research is concerning given that street harassment is a routine experience for many people. Recent Australian studies have shown that approximately 87% of young women have experienced street harassment at least once in their lifetime (It’s Not a Compliment 2021; Johnson and Bennett 2015). Public harassment that targets people because of their actual or perceived race, sexuality and gender diversity is also common, although this remains less thoroughly researched (Kearl 2014). While such encounters are frequently dismissed as ‘trivial’ or ‘complimentary’, their harms are well documented (Bastomski and Smith 2017; Lenton et al. 1999). Street harassment can also be understood as part of a cultural backdrop that facilitates and enables more stereotypically serious forms of violence.

Given the prevalence and well-documented impacts of street harassment, it is imperative to investigate how members of the public understand this phenomenon. To develop some initial insights into public perceptions of street harassment, we conducted an exploratory vignette-based survey investigating the extent to which participants believed that the fictional scenarios constituted harassment, whether the scenarios were harmful to the recipient, and how participants attributed responsibility.



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Before examining the norms underpinning participants' views on each scenario, we situate our study within the literature on street harassment and community perceptions of gender-based violence. Findings from our survey suggest that participants drew on diverse and, at times, contradictory understandings of street harassment. In closing, we consider the implications for prevention and education initiatives.

Street Harassment

The term street harassment pertains to a broad range of intrusions occurring in public or semipublic space such as shopping centres, public transport, recreational spaces and the street (Vera-Gray 2016). Although there is a degree of ambiguity surrounding the scope of behaviours that constitute street harassment, common examples include speech acts, winking, staring, wolf-whistling, following another person, unsolicited touching, and car-horn honking (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021; Logan 2015). To date, most research surrounding street harassment has focused on sexualised, gender-based harassment perpetrated by male harassers towards white, heterosexual, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgender women (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021). However, intersectional feminist studies have highlighted that people experience harassment in relation to other elements of positionality, including disability, sexuality, gender identity, class, body size and race (Kearl 2014; Mason-Bish and Zempi 2019).

A wealth of literature reveals the multiple and complex harms caused by street harassment. This includes physical symptoms, such as sweating, increased heart rate, shaking, and physical injury (Laniya 2005). Victims may also experience psychological harms, including avoiding particular places, a decreased sense of safety, and engaging in extensive 'safety work' or protective strategies to avoid further harassment (Johnson and Bennett 2015; Kearl 2010; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). Harassment may contribute to negative affective and emotional states, such as fear, anger, distress, and feelings of violation (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017; Kissling 1991; Laniya 2005). Other studies have documented the potential for harassment to exacerbate self-objectification and internalised bodily policing, as well as negatively impacting self-esteem (Fairchild and Rudman 2008; Laniya 2005; Logan 2015). However, as later discussed, whether harassment is encountered as harmful is also shaped by context.

As reflected in Liz Kelly's (1988) continuum model, street harassment can be understood as a form of sexual and gender-based violence, and this understanding has informed much of the research on street harassment to date. Seen through an intersectional lens, street harassment is also a manifestation of interlocking structural forms of oppression, such as ableism, homophobia, cisnormativity, racism and classism (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021). Drawing from Fiona Vera-Gray's (2016) 'stranger intrusion' model, regardless of the perpetrator's intent or how street harassment is subjectively experienced by a target, street harassment represents a disruption to the victim's individual subjectivity and erasure of their personhood. The harms associated with street harassment may also be cumulative in nature (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017; Kelly 1988; Vera-Gray 2016). Repeated exposure to actual or anticipated harassment within a sociohistorical context of entrenched structural violence can exacerbate harm, which accumulates in the body over time (Ahmed 2017).

Minimisation and Public Attitudes

Despite the substantial body of research highlighting the harms of street harassment, it has frequently been trivialised, minimised and normalised within the broader community (Bailey 2017; Bowman 1993; Davis 1994; Gardner 1995; Simões and Silveirinha 2019; Spaccatini et al. 2019). We acknowledge that street harassment encompasses a broad, fluid and contextually contingent range of experiences, and that to some extent, minimisation depends on the precise form of harassment in question. Nonetheless, street harassment has typically not been included in state definitions of behaviour that meets the threshold of criminal or civil harm¹ and is rarely, if ever, responded to by the police or criminal legal system (Fileborn 2017). Though this is slowly changing (Fileborn 2022), minimisation and trivialisation also occur through the 'invalidation' of (particularly) women's experiences of sexual and gender-based violence as 'nothing' (Radford and Kelly 1990). This invalidation includes myths and misperceptions pertaining to 'real rape', which exclude all but the most egregious manifestations of sexual violence as constituting harm (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021).

Other iterations of harassment—such as commands to 'smile'—are seemingly acceptable forms of public interaction when viewed in isolation (Bailey 2016; Fileborn and O'Neill 2021; Vera-Gray and Fileborn 2018). These 'everyday' forms of harm and intrusion are rarely reflected in dominant discursive framings of 'real' violence (Kelly 1988; Vera-Gray 2016). Such discursive framing renders street harassment virtually 'unspeakable' or recognisable as a form of harm. This 'unspeakability' is encapsulated in Deidre Davis's (1994) conceptualisation of Black women's experiences of harassment as *The Harm That Has No Name*. Yet, since the mid-2000s onwards, activist groups such as Our Streets Now, Stop Street Harassment, and Right to Be (formally Hollaback!) have been agitating for change, disrupting the perception of harassment as 'trivial' or 'complimentary' (Desborough 2018; Fileborn 2022; Loney-Howes et al. 2021). Contemporary discursive constructions of street harassment are, therefore, actively contested and evolving.

To date, only a small body of work has explored how members of the public perceive street harassment. Kimberly Fairchild's (2010) influential contribution demonstrated that perceptions of street harassment are context dependent. Factors including the perceived attractiveness of the harasser, the harasser's age, the victim being alone, location, and time of day were all associated with whether an incident is encountered as fearful or enjoyable. Incidents that were perpetrated by an older harasser, at night and when the victim was alone were identified as fear-inducing. Fairchild's work also found gendered differences in assessment of harm, with men interpreting harassment as 'less negative emotionally' (210) and more likely to believe that the target of harassment would 'brush off the harassment as benign and harmless' (209). More recent work by Spaccatini et al. (2019) found that participants believed that an incident of harassment was less severe when it occurred at a house party compared to on the street. Greater blame was assigned to the recipient when she was perceived as being more 'provocative, sexy, alluring, sensual, [or] seductive' (817). Finally, Simões and Silveirinha's (2019) analysis of comments on social media posts for articles discussing street harassment from the Facebook pages of three national Portuguese news media outlets provides further weight to the notion that street harassment is routinely trivialised. While the media sources predominantly framed street harassment as a form of *systemic deviant behaviour* and gender-based violence, reader comments positioned harassment as a *non-issue* and, to a lesser extent, engaged in overt victim-blaming (9).

It is important to understand how members of the public perceive street harassment. Public attitudes can have follow-through effects for whether individuals disclose their experiences, the response they receive if they do disclose them (Fileborn 2019), as well as for the ongoing normalisation and minimisation of street harassment as a form of harm. We know from the broader literature on sexual and gender-based violence that community attitudes can play a significant role in perpetuating rape myths and misconceptions that excuse the actions of perpetrators, blame survivors for their experiences, and construct narrow boundaries around what counts as 'real rape'. Gender has consistently been found to shape adherence to these myths and misconceptions, with men more likely to hold such beliefs (Webster et al. 2018).

Tackling these inaccurate beliefs represents a core facet of gender-based violence prevention policy and practice, as these attitudes constitute part of the backdrop on which sexual and gender-based violence occurs (Webster et al. 2018). Thus, there is a clear need to identify how members of the public understand and perceive street harassment, and the extent to which their perceptions are mired in misconceptions and stereotypes about the harm of this behaviour. While the studies discussed above provide valuable insights into public perceptions of street harassment, there are still considerable gaps in this research that require exploration. Notably, these studies have all considered street harassment occurring within a heteronormative context—that is, with a (presumably) cisgender, heterosexual male harasser, and a female target. Additionally, to the best of our knowledge, no research has examined perceptions of public harassment targeting factors such as race, religion and sexuality.

Methods

To address this gap in the literature, we undertook an exploratory, mixed-methods survey to examine how members of the public perceive street harassment. The aims of this study were to:

- explore how participants perceive the harms of street harassment, and the extent to which these harms are minimised or dismissed
- examine how intersectional considerations shape perceptions of street harassment.

An intersectional feminist methodology informed our study (Crenshaw 1991). This emphasised the multiple, interrelated and overlapping elements of identity that may impact experiences and perceptions of harassment. Utilising a mixed-methods survey containing both quantitative and qualitative components hosted on the Qualtrics online platform, we employed fictional vignettes to gain insights into participants' perceptions of street harassment. Vignettes allow for the assessment of values and attitudes, particularly in relation to sensitive topics, as they circumvent the disclosure of potentially distressing personal experiences (Bieneck 2009; Pryor 2004). This was significant in the context of street harassment, which may be a source of trauma for some participants. Prior to the commencement of the study, participants were informed of the topics addressed and the potentially distressing nature of the study. This study received approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee.

The survey comprised five vignettes detailing typical scenarios of street harassment in relation to different intersectional positions (see Appendix 1). These fictional vignettes were developed based on experiences of harassment documented on online activist sites, such as *It's Not A Compliment* and *Cutecatcalls*. The vignettes were intentionally brief to allow participants the freedom to project their own reflections and interpretations onto the scenarios, which we aimed to capture in the open-text response question described below. For each vignette, participants were invited to respond to six five-point Likert-scale questions, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, regarding the extent to which they believed the incident depicted: (1)

constituted harassment; (2) was harmful to the recipient; (3) was unwanted by the recipient; (4) was complimentary to the recipient; (5) that the recipient was responsible for what happened; and (6) whether the incident contravened on social norms. This was followed by an open-text response question asking participants to explain the reasoning for their Likert-scale responses.

Participants

The two recruitment criteria for the survey were that participants lived in Melbourne, Australia, and were aged 18 years or older. We recruited participants via convenience sampling through advertisements on social media sites. This included a series of paid Facebook advertisements, with some directed towards the general population and others targeting demographic groups with lower response rates (men and individuals aged 40 years and older). The sample comprised 228 participants who were predominantly heterosexual, (non-Indigenous) Australian, highly educated, young, female and employed full-time. We provide an overview of participant demographics in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of survey participants

<i>Variable (N = 288)</i>	<i>Number and percentage responses²</i>
Gender identity	
Male	65 (23%)
Female	137 (48%)
Non-binary	12 (4%)
Gender diverse (transgender woman, non-binary demigendered ambonec, ³ gender fluid, gender queer, non-binary abrogender, ⁴ gender identity differs from identity assigned at birth)	10 (3%)
Sexual orientation	
Lesbian/Gay ⁵	23 (8%)
Bisexual	41 (14%)
Heterosexual	127 (44%)
Queer	12 (4%)
Sexually diverse (pansexual, ⁶ asexual, unsure, variosexual, ⁷ cross-oriented, ⁸ multisexual, ⁹ demisexual ¹⁰)	20 (7%)
Ethnicity or cultural background	
Australian (non-Indigenous)	152 (53%)
Asian	28 (10%)
Middle Eastern, African, American, Aboriginal/Indigenous person, European, New Zealander	13 (5%)
Highest educational attainment	
Secondary school certificate	28 (10%)
Tertiary qualification	110 (38%)
Postgraduate qualification	88 (30%)
Employment status	
Unemployed	37 (13%)
Casual	44 (15%)
Part-time	50 (17%)
Full-time	91 (32%)
Full-time carer	4 (1%)
Age	
Mean	35.14
Standard deviation	12.79
Range	18–73

Data Analysis

We analysed the quantitative data generated through the fixed-response items using IBM SPSS Statistics to generate median values for each Likert scale question. Negatively worded items were reverse coded for consistency and comparability. Standard coding should be read as a median value of 1 = least (column title) and a median value of 5 = most (column title). Reverse coded items should be read as a median value of 1 = most (column title) to a median value of 5 = least (column title). We further analysed the qualitative data obtained through the open-response items using content analysis. This analysis used both inductive and deductive approaches to identify themes across the dataset, focusing on the ways participants understood the harms of street harassment.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

The median values generated to illustrate participants' most frequent response to the Likert scale questions following each vignette are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Table of median values (Mdn)

Vignette ¹¹	Wanted (Mdn)	Complimentary (Mdn)	In breach of social norms* (Mdn)	Harmful* (Mdn)	Responsible (Mdn)	Harassment* (Mdn)
Vignette 1	1	1	2	2	1	1
Vignette 2	1	1	1	1	1	1
Vignette 3	1	3	2	3	1	3
Vignette 4	1	1	1	1	1	1
Vignette 5	1	1	1	1	1	1

Note: *Reverse coded (reverse coded columns should be read in reverse: i.e., a median value of 1 = most harassment; median value of 5 = least harassment).

Vignette 1

Vignette 1 detailed a man's sexualised verbal harassment targeting a femme-presenting individual. Table 2 illustrates that this scenario was perceived as unwanted by the victim (Mdn = 1) and uncomplimentary (Mdn = 1); the victim was not responsabilised (Mdn = 1), and the interaction was interpreted as harassment overall (Mdn = 1). However, it was only understood as somewhat in breach of social norms (Mdn = 2) and moderately harmful to the victim (Mdn = 2).

Vignette 2

Vignette 2 depicted a man engaging in racist verbal street harassment towards an Asian woman. In sum, Table 2 shows that the interaction was interpreted as unwanted (Mdn = 1) and not complimentary to the victim (Mdn = 1). The scenario was understood as breaching social norms (Mdn = 1) and as harmful (Mdn = 1). The victim was not seen as responsible (Mdn = 1), and the interaction was perceived as harassment (Mdn = 1).

Vignette 3

Vignette 3 described sexual verbal harassment perpetrated by a woman in which the target was a man. Table 2 demonstrates that this interaction was understood by participants as unwanted (Mdn = 1), and the victim was not believed to be responsible (Mdn = 1). However, the interaction was not understood to significantly breach social norms (Mdn = 2). Rather, it was seen as somewhat complimentary (Mdn = 3), not harmful (Mdn = 3), and was not interpreted as harassment (Mdn = 3).

Vignette 4

Vignette 4 depicted homophobic verbal street harassment from a man targeting another man and his boyfriend. Table 2 reflects that this incident was understood as unwanted by the victim (Mdn = 1), uncomplimentary (Mdn = 1), and in breach of social

norms (Mdn = 1), and was seen as being the most harmful to the victim compared to the other scenarios (Mdn = 1). Participants understood the victim in this vignette as the least responsible for their experience of harassment (Mdn = 1), and the scenario was further interpreted as the most harassing overall (Mdn = 1).

Vignette 5

Vignette 5 detailed Islamophobic verbal harassment from a man directed towards a Muslim woman wearing a veil. Across responses, Table 2 shows that this interaction was perceived as the most unwanted of the scenarios (Mdn = 1), uncomplimentary to the victim (Mdn = 1), in breach of social norms (Mdn = 1), and harmful to the victim (Mdn = 1). The victim was not interpreted as being responsible (Mdn = 1), and the interaction was understood as harassment (Mdn = 1).

Results from the quantitative analysis suggest that, with the exception of Vignette 3—in which the target was a white, non-disabled, heterosexual cisgender man—participants generally perceived the incidents portrayed in each vignette as unwanted, not complimentary, harmful to the recipient, and in breach of social norms. Moreover, participants assigned low levels of responsibility to the recipient in each vignette. Overall, this suggests that participants held what could be considered progressive views of street harassment, with limited evidence of minimisation or normalisation of these behaviours. However, these findings are complicated by the responses to an open-text question asking participants to explain their responses to the Likert-scale survey items. While participants' open-text responses still demonstrated a progressive understanding of harassment overall, in some cases they displayed uncertainty or outright adherence to rape myths and victim-blaming attitudes. In the following sections, we examine the dominant themes underpinning participants' understandings of harm.

Qualitative Findings

Naming the Harm

Power

Participants drew on a range of discursive positions in articulating why they viewed the vignettes as depicting harmful and unwanted incidents. A common theme across the responses was the role of power and power differentials. Participants drew implicitly on feminist understandings of street harassment as a manifestation of unequal power relations (e.g., Bowman 1993; Crouch 2009; Kissling 1991; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020) and as a means of (re)-enforcing and reproducing the gendered, racial and heteronormative dynamics of public spaces (Fileborn 2021; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). For example, participants often referenced homophobia and anti-queer violence in their responses to Vignette 4, which depicted an act of homophobic harassment:

Homophobia ... causes people to feel unsafe and like they are not accepted. (26 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)¹²

Knowing that there have been queer people assaulted for their identities, this situation would have been quite scary for John. (21 years, cisgender woman, pansexual)

The first comment touches on the role of homophobia in establishing belonging in public space: homophobic abuse (or the *potential* for such abuse to occur) functions to both symbolically and literally exclude non-heteronormative expressions of sexuality from the public sphere. Here, homophobic harassment reifies public space as heteronormative by positioning same-sex desire as 'other'. Further, such harassment can result in same-sex-attracted people feeling reluctant or unable to openly express their sexuality in public space, such as by holding hands with or kissing a partner (Fileborn 2021). In turn, this (re)produces public space as heteronormative. The comment from the second participant places homophobic harassment within a broader historical context: this incident is harmful not only for its individual qualities, but also because it is situated within a longer history of homophobic violence. The homophobic comment comes to signify a legacy of violence, with the underlying potential for verbal abuse to boil over into physical violence.

Similarly, one participant highlighted the importance of historical (and contemporary) political context in understanding the harms of Islamophobic harassment, reflecting that 'this is a pretty aggressive move on his part given the wider cultural issue of Islamophobia', in response to Vignette 5 (30 years, cisgender woman, bisexual). These comments highlight the importance of viewing harassment contextually, rather than as isolated, individual incidents. Experiences and histories of violence, abuse and discrimination are lived alongside one another, compounding over time and shaping how future incidents are experienced (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017). The participant's comment in relation to Vignette 4 implies a hierarchy of violence, with the incident positioned as scary *because of* the potential to escalate to physical violence. As we discuss later, participants frequently constructed hierarchical understandings of harassment and violence.

Entitlement and Control

Another major theme in participants' responses described street harassment as being harmful because it is mired in a sense of entitlement over others in public space. This theme overlaps with power—given that entitlement can be understood as an individual expression of power over others—while the previous section focused on power at a structural level. In this reading of harassment, participants constructed harm as a form of over-determination (Vera-Gray and Fileborn 2018): the recipient is positioned as a *being-for-others* in public space, with their own wants, needs and desires rendered irrelevant (see also Kissling 1991; Tuerkheimer 1997). This theme was often apparent in comments relating to Vignette 1, depicting a man commenting on a femme-presenting individual, and Vignette 5, depicting a man commenting on a woman wearing a niqab:

The man feels entitled to not only have an opinion about a stranger on the street, he also feels entitled to voice it. ... Being objectified and assessed by a man (a member of the dominant paradigm) is harmful to the woman. (45 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

What men are actually demanding is that women remember they are subject to & at the mercy of male entitlement and violence. (28 years, non-cisgender man, gay)

The second quotation illustrates the *communicative* function of harassment, with these 'minor intrusions' working to remind women (and other oppressed groups) of the potential for 'bigger' acts of violence. Participants commonly drew on notions of consent and objectification when discussing the vignettes. As the first comment suggests, remarking on someone's appearance is not inherently problematic. Rather, at issue is the fact that such comments have been made in a context where they were not *invited*. Thus, the recipient is treated as an object on which men can project their own desires—or, as one participant put it, 'being viewed as a sum of parts rather than a unique individual' (30 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual). Collectively, these comments suggest that the recipient of harassment becomes something less than fully human: their subjectivity is temporarily denied (Cahill 2001; Vera-Gray and Fileborn 2018). Another participant expressed this in their comments that 'all of the recipients were just targeted as stereotypes rather than being spoken to as an individual, with a name, their own agenda and needs' (61 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual).

Other participants articulated this harm in relation to the recipient's lack of agency, freedom or autonomy. While these comments overlap with the notion of a perpetrator *imposing* their desires onto the recipient, they differed when emphasising how they impinge on the individual rights of the recipient. In these comments, the harms of harassment are positioned in relation to the impediment on the recipient's *right to choose* how they dress, behave or express their religion, gender and sexuality in public space:

[The] man is assuming that his opinion matters more than Hannah's religious freedom and her bodily autonomy as a woman. (44 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

Everyone should be able to express who they love without the risk of violence. (33 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

Another participant raised the fact that street harassment often results in recipients changing their behaviour and limiting their movements through public spaces:

I find this behaviour harmful because it may impact Jane's perceptions of her safety in the city, it may also prevent her from walking alone, thus limiting her ability to get from A to B. (26 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

Notably, in this framing, the harm of harassment lies not only in the incident itself, but also for its *future* potential to restrict freedom and autonomy. This suggests that the harms of an incident are not fixed or predetermined, but rather may come into being over time. In this sense, the harms of harassment are unknowable—they are always emergent, contingent and predicated on a state of futurity.

'I Think It's Wrong, But ...'

Although most participants did not personally condone harassing behaviours, they indicated that street harassment may be accepted conduct within broader Australian social norms. Participants acknowledged that given the high prevalence and normalisation of street harassment, it may be deemed acceptable by both victims and perpetrators:

It's totally wrong, but unfortunately this behaviour IS the norm. (32 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

The behaviour is undesirable, and would breach norms in my immediate social circle, but I have less faith in Australia more broadly. (37 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

While social norms conducive to harassment were raised by most participants to signify that their own perspective departed from a perceived norm, a minority indicated that the normalisation of harassment was also likely to reduce the harm experienced by victims:

In some cases, rightly or wrongly, women can find this cheering or flattering, and there are attitudes that normalize and reinforce this as a normative experience. (47 years, cisgender woman, bisexual)

In other words, these comments suggest that the broader cultural normalisation of harassment may shape the lived experiences of victims and perpetrators—though we do not suggest that there is any particular way that people who experience such behaviour *should* feel. The construction of harassment as ‘complimentary’ and ‘normal’ may, in turn, shape and delimit the ability of recipients to articulate or label the harms of these experiences. Harm is brought into being through the interaction between this discursive construction and the materiality of an encounter. Likewise, positioning harassment as normative may prevent the initiator from understanding or perceiving their actions as (potentially) harmful, as this behaviour is largely socially condoned.

Context

Immediate Context

Past research has highlighted the plethora of harms associated with street harassment victimisation (e.g., Fileborn and O’Neill 2021; Logan 2015). However, academic literature also acknowledges that some individuals subjectively experience street harassment as benign, jocular or even complimentary (Bailey 2017; Kelly and Radford 1990). Whether an incident is encountered as harmful or complimentary is shaped, at least in part, by a range of contextual factors (Fairchild 2010). Participants identified several factors relating to the immediate context of the interaction, which they saw as mitigating the harm experienced by victims of harassment. For example:

Depends a lot on the context ... how threatening is she when she asks; what sort of tone does she use; whereabouts they are. (23 years, cisgender man, gay)

If the man was attractive to Jane and not threatening she may have enjoyed the affirmation of the effort she put into her appearance. On the other hand, she might also have found it threatening and/or offensive. (65 years, cisgender man, gay)

In line with Fairchild (2010), our findings reflect that contextual factors may impact the perceived harmfulness of harassing behaviours. The factors most frequently expressed by participants as influencing whether an interaction would constitute harassment included the persistence and manner with which the perpetrator pursued the victim. Participants’ comments on context bring to the fore tension surrounding conflicting experiential, emotional and affective responses to street harassment. They highlight that depending on the specific nature of the interaction, street harassment has the potential to be experienced as harmful, pleasurable, or even an interplay between the two. However, as outlined, irrespective of the immediate context or how complimentary an interaction may seem, street harassment can be understood as a form of imposition and intrusion (Vera-Gray 2016), if not violence.

Hierarchies of Harm and Seriousness

In discussing the contextual nature of street harassment, some participants drew on hierarchies of harm and seriousness to construct the vignettes as ‘not harmful’. In these responses, participants utilised discursive constructions of violence as bounded and discrete: An action is either violence or not violence, and these categories are immutable and mutually exclusive. Moreover, different iterations of violence can be ordered according to their inherent harm. In doing so, street harassment was positioned firmly outside the boundaries of harmful behaviour:

To label this harassment constitutes a massive stretch ... he’s complimented her when she’s clearly made an effort to look really great. (21 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

Other participants indicated that the vignettes had not sufficiently crossed a ‘line’ that would render the incidents harmful:

I don’t find that a compliment even if it wasn’t wanted to be harassment, it doesn’t seem persistent, aggressive or forceful. (25 years, cisgender man, bisexual)

It's rude and a bit crass, but I do not think it crosses the line of 'harassment'. (49 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

Another participant felt that the recipient in Vignette 1 would have been 'annoyed' rather than 'harmed' by her experience (48 years, cisgender woman, lesbian). For the first participant quoted here, 'real' harassment required the use of persistence, aggression or excessive force. Mere comments alone were deemed insufficient to cause harm. For the second participant, it is unclear what would be required to transform the incident from 'rude and crass' to a form of harassment, though there is a clear boundary drawn between the two. However, as previous research has shown, seemingly 'complimentary' encounters can and do cause harm. Moreover, these comments ignore the cumulative effect of harassment. While these individual encounters may not cause significant harm, the weight of repeated incidents over time can result in these 'compliments' being experienced as harmful (Ahmed 2017; Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017).

Minimising Harm

Some participants drew on discursive constructions of harassment as 'complimentary' in nature and as a normal, if not desirable, component of heterosexual interactions. Rather than representing a potentially harmful, unwanted or intrusive experience, the vignettes were reconfigured by these participants as wanted and affirmative encounters:

Many women find wolf whistles to be highly complementary and as an affirmation of the care and attention they have expended on their attention. Generally speaking, those who rile against such attention are in fact jealous that they have not received such complements. Another example of women being told how they should feel in a certain situation by less attractive women. (Cisgender man, heterosexual)¹³

This participant frames harassment as a form of 'feminist overreach', in this instance motivated by the alleged unattractiveness and, hence, jealousy of the two authors of this paper. That said, it is important to acknowledge that some women *do* experience some forms of street harassment as complimentary or welcome encounters (Fairchild 2010) or are ambivalent about the experience. For example, a wolf-whistle might be interpreted as *both* a form of flattery and an unwelcome intrusion.

For another participant, the distinction between harassment and a 'compliment' lay in the initiator's intent:

The intent behind the behaviour is unlikely to be to harass, and I've seen a scenario like this where the woman was in the distance walking towards me and was facing away from the men when they whistled. She was grinning from ear to ear. (58 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

While in this scenario the recipient appeared to appreciate the encounter, this framing defines harassment through the perpetrator's intent, rather than the actual harm or lived experience of the recipient, for whom these 'compliments' may also be encountered as a routine intrusion. Thus, provided the initiator does not *intend* to cause harm, and they deliver their comments using a veneer of respect and politeness (as discussed in the previous section), it is assumed that no harm has occurred. However, without ascertaining some form of consent to the interaction first, the initiator has no way of knowing ahead of time whether their remarks will be experienced as welcome flattery or an unwanted intrusion. Further, as Bailey (2016, 2017) contends, these seemingly 'complimentary' remarks breach social norms by imposing a level of intimacy that is not otherwise tolerated between strangers; it positions recipients as 'open persons' (drawing on Goffman's terminology) who may be approached and commented on in public by those in positions of power.

Doing Masculinity

Another discursive position participants used to negate the harms of street harassment was the biological and essentialist framing of masculinity. This is the belief that cisgender men are biologically predetermined to engage in sexually objectifying, dominating or (hetero)sexually aggressive behaviours. Street harassment was normalised and naturalised as the product of a timeless, universal male essence, as reflected across a minority of responses:

This just seems like a man who can't handle testosterone encountering an attractive lady. ... Remember, if men didn't have such intensely powerful sex drives enhanced by testosterone, they wouldn't have enough incentive to put in the decades of disciplined hard work it takes to become attractive to women and reproduce. (23 years, cisgender man)
Males often have to source the attention of women, which results in this behaviour in a desperate attempt at a mating ritual ... due to natural instincts have encouraged this behaviour. (Cisgender man, heterosexual)

In constructing this way of 'doing' masculinity as an innate, physiological quality, these participants did not hold the perpetrator accountable for their actions. Rather, the perpetrators' hormonal, biological and psychological 'masculinity' was assumed to have taken precedence over volition and self-regulation. This positioning of cisgender men as physically incapable of

moderating their behaviour because they are biologically predetermined to dominate and exert power over others obscures the role of culture and socialisation in the production of masculinity. Resultantly, harassment is constructed as inevitable and immutable—an inescapable reality of biology.

A queer feminist perspective brings into question the assumption of an innate masculinity. Rather than an essential, stable, unchanging category, masculinity is a fluid, dynamic and multifarious identity that is constructed, asserted and maintained through the performance of gender (Connell 2005). As such, street harassment is not a direct consequence of being ‘male’, but may be recognised as a mechanism by which hegemonic masculinities are *performed* through the assertion of power over others in public space. ‘Doing’ hegemonic masculinities through street harassment may involve the performance of (hetero)sexual availability and a perceived valorisation of sexual conquest.

Victimisation and Masculinity

Another component of the relationship between masculinity and street harassment is the minimisation of harm experienced by cisgender, heterosexual men. Within the responses to our survey, minimisation of harassment was most apparent in responses to Vignette 3, depicting a cisgender, heterosexual man being harassed by a woman. For many participants, this vignette represented a different dynamic of structural power compared to the others. Participants frequently commented that the man in Vignette 3 was unlikely to have been harmed by his experience, given his (presumed) position of power relative to the woman who approached him:

I’m not sure making a request is harassment particularly in this power dynamic where men have capacity to exit safely without risk or injury unlike woman. (39 years, non-binary, queer)

Societal context is very important—realistically this woman likely poses no danger and could easily be dismissed by the man without threat to his own safety (which is different if the roles were reversed). (20 years, non-binary, queer)

As articulated by participants, in a society organised by structural patriarchy, (white) cisgender, heterosexual men have not been systemically oppressed on account of their gender, or subjected to the symbolic and physical violence experienced by cisgender women and gender-diverse people (though we do not suggest that *all* cisgender women have been oppressed in the same ways or to the same extent). Because of this, as one participant explained, ‘no man would feel threatened by this action because they do not have the same frame of reference that women do of having to be wary of men on the street’ (25 years, cisgender man, heterosexual). As such, participants believed there was a substantially different dynamic of power between the interlocutors when compared to other forms of harassment. Participants also commonly referred to the recipient’s physical strength and suggested the scenario was unlikely to escalate into more ‘serious’ iterations of violence, as he would be capable of defending himself (which also perpetuated the hierarchies of violence myth discussed earlier). Collectively, these factors meant that the male recipient’s lived experience was likely to be qualitatively different to that of women and other marginalised communities, and he was less likely to experience harm as a result. These are important observations; however, these comments nonetheless delimit the ways in which cisgender, heterosexual men are permitted to experience, articulate and report their experiences of harassment. Further, these views reproduce myths and misconceptions relating to men and sexual violence. Some participants further minimised men’s experiences of harassment through the assertion that ‘real men’ are not harmed by harassment or would even be welcoming of sexual advances from a woman stranger:

Most men are egotistical, so Gavin probably took this as a compliment but if he is tired, maybe he just wanted to get home. (48 years, cisgender woman, lesbian)

If Gavin feels hurt or harmed by this interaction or feels harassed, he is an oversensitive boy—not a man. (44 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

These comments reflect a dissonance between constructions of masculinity as ‘tough’, ‘dominating’ and unemotional in contrast to assumptions around victimhood as ‘weak’, ‘passive’ and ‘feminine’. The incongruous position of male victimhood as ‘weak’, ‘unmanly’ or even ‘effeminate’ positions male victimisation as an impossibility, obscuring men’s experiences and denying a language to express harm when it does occur. Such discourse perpetuates and reinforces a narrow vision of masculinity and contributes to male rape myths and misconceptions (Braun et al. 2009; Davies and Rogers 2006; Javaid 2018).

Individual Responsibility

Responsibility for Reactions

Some participants responsibilised victims for the emotional, affective and physical harms they incurred due to harassment. This neoliberal narrative of ‘individual responsibility’ places a demand on the victim to downplay their experience of harm, while neglecting to hold the perpetrator accountable for their actions or demanding that perpetrators do not engage in harassing behaviours in the first instance. It further suggests that harm results from the *choice* of the victim, rather than emerging from the actions of the perpetrator:

I have taught my daughter that this sort of male behaviour is stupid & clumsy at best and disrespectful at worst but she is only a ‘victim’ of it if she chooses to be—after all they’re just words. ... If Jane is an empowered woman, she will be able to dismiss this guy in a heartbeat. (44 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual)

This could potentially be ‘harmful’ but at the same time, John is an adult and can choose to ignore the words of others. (25 years, cisgender man, bisexual)

These comments implied that harm arose due to some weakness or deficiency within the victim—for example, because they lacked the inner strength, maturity or resilience to ignore or move on from the experience. As one participant repeatedly stated, ‘her emotions are her own responsibility’ (23 years, cisgender man). Although these responses at least acknowledge that harassment may be a negative experience for the victim, the implication that an individual may choose whether they are harmed by violence or not minimises the seriousness of the harm inflicted by street harassment. This constructs victims who do not experience harassment as harmful as ‘mature’ and ‘resilient’, presenting the dismissal of harm as the mark of ‘adulthood’. In contrast, victims who articulate their experience as harm are perceived as ‘weak’ and ‘immature’, and are infantilised as ‘overly sensitive’. In so doing, some participants occluded the complex dynamics of power that underlie harassment, instead reinforcing narrow definitions of harmful behaviour.

Victim-Blaming

A small minority of participants expressed the belief that victims were directly responsible for street harassment. In line with the findings in Spaccatini et al. (2019), participants were more likely to attribute blame to victims who they imagined as presenting themselves in a ‘sexualised’ manner. However, some participants displayed similar attitudes towards victims who were not interpreted as ‘sexualised’, but as soliciting harassment through their deviation from dominant political and cultural identities. Therefore, sexualisation may be just one example of the many ways in which victims are interpreted as ‘drawing attention to themselves’ and, therefore, ‘responsible’ for harassment:

If you make yourself look attractive, you can expect attention from others. ... If you don’t want unwanted attention, try maintaining a lower profile. (50 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

She’s no doubt is well aware of negative perception of religion in general and Islam in particular yet she persists in adorning herself in accordance with its primitive regressive notions. She has no one to blame but herself. (Cisgender man, heterosexual)

I believe that a person’s sexual preferences are none of my business and appreciate people using some discretion in expressing them in public. If they choose not to do so, they are at greater risk of being harassed. (73 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

These comments serve to position the recipients as ‘non-ideal’ victims and, therefore, as responsible for their own victimisation (O’Hara 2012). By assigning blame to the (potential) victim, individuals are held responsible for their own ‘safety’, which is achieved through the performance of ‘safety work’ (Fileborn 2016; Vera-Gray and Kelly 2020). Moreover, the actions and responsibility of the perpetrator are obscured under this framing.

Freedom of Speech

In contrast to our earlier discussion, where participants articulated that street harassment is harmful because it impedes on the rights and freedoms of the recipient, a small number of (mostly male) participants believed that the harasser had a right to freedom of speech in public space. Resultantly, these participants reconfigured feminist responses to street harassment as harming men by impinging on their ‘right’ to express their opinions about strangers in public space:

I wonder how a man can openly express his experience of a beautifully presented woman now that this age old way of expressing it has now become demonised. (73 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

People are entitled to their opinion. (60 years, cisgender man, heterosexual)

Another participant warned that this perceived ‘prohibition’ on public interactions was so dire that ‘if men and women can’t talk to each other about anything, well they will never meet, mate & procreate’ (44 years, cisgender woman, heterosexual).

Across these comments, feminist critique of harassment as harmful behaviour is constructed as a loss—a loss to individual freedom and autonomy, and as a (potential) loss to humankind by restricting our ability to meet (hetero)sexual partners. While these participants tended to treat feminist approaches to street harassment as a form of ‘overreach’, there is clearly a lack of nuance in this framing. For example, as the participant above suggests, critiquing harassment comes to mean that men and women can no longer speak or interact *at all*, rather than expressing a desire for interaction that is ethical and mutually desired. The position of these participants reflects Kimmel’s (2008) concept of aggrieved entitlement: articulating the harms of harassment is itself experienced as a harm or loss for those in a position of power. Progress towards the dismantling of engrained power structures is perversely interpreted as the ‘true’ harm. Arguably, these responses function as a form of backlash to (perceived) feminist progress and aim to re-establish a (perceived) loss of power.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine participants’ perceptions of street-based harassment. The majority of participants in our survey displayed ‘progressive’ attitudes towards street harassment, which reflected intersectional feminist conceptualisations of its forms, functions and harms. The findings further support those of previous studies, which demonstrate the primacy of context in shaping interpretations of interactions in public space (Fairchild 2010). However, context played a dual role in participants’ responses. While context can be central in shaping whether an experience constitutes harassment, participants’ understandings of contextual factors could also operate to minimise and downplay the harms of harassment. Despite the predominantly progressive understandings of harassment, participants’ written responses indicated that a minority nevertheless drew on discourses that construct narrow boundaries of harmful behaviour; blame or responsibilise the victim; reproduce myths and misconceptions about sexual violence; and reinforce hegemonic masculinity.

Our findings present important implications for responses to street harassment and future research. There was limited understanding of the *cumulative* nature of street harassment. Participants often established firm boundaries between what they perceived to be harassment and acceptable behaviour. However, this framing is not supported by research, which instead illustrates that street harassment is highly contextual. Moreover, many participants believed that street harassment was largely normalised in the broader community. Collectively, this presents evidence of misconceptions about the nature and harms of street harassment that could be addressed through both general and targeted educational and awareness-raising campaigns.

While most participants presented ‘progressive’ views of street harassment, it is difficult to determine to what extent this reflected the provision of socially desirable responses, or to what extent these ‘progressive’ views are reflective of broader community attitudes towards street harassment. Indeed, we still know very little about public perceptions of street harassment, and further work is needed to examine this across different contexts of harassment, with a more diverse sample. Nonetheless, as one of the first studies of its kind, and the first within an Australian context, this study provides initial insights and a starting point for further exploration. Our findings point to a clear need to include street harassment within broader efforts to address and prevent gender-based (and other) violence, and to continue to agitate for structural change in relation to the intersecting systems of power underpinning this phenomenon.

Funding and Acknowledgements

This research was supported by funding from the Australian Research Council (DE190100404)

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¹ We acknowledge that sexual harassment in the workplace is regulated through the *Sex Discrimination Act 1984*. While some forms of street harassment may be captured with this Act, or under some sexual offences legislation, on the whole it is fair to say that many forms of street harassment are not subject to any regulation, are difficult to respond to through the legal system, and are responded to poorly when they do fall within the remit of the legal system (Fileborn 2017; Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017).

- ² Some participants chose not to provide answers to certain demographic questions. Hence, not all characteristics add to 100%.
- ³ Simultaneously female, male and neither.
- ⁴ Rapidly fluctuating gender identity.
- ⁵ Identification as lesbian or gay did not necessarily correspond to gender identity.
- ⁶ Attracted to all genders.
- ⁷ This is not a standard term; participants were able to enter their own sexual identities. We believe some respondents utilised terms to intentionally mock gender and sexual diversity, based on the nature of their written survey comments.
- ⁸ Sexual attraction to one gender but romantic attraction to another.
- ⁹ Attraction to more than one gender.
- ¹⁰ Sexual attraction to only individuals with whom they have a close emotional connection.
- ¹¹ Refer to Appendix 1 for an overview of vignettes.
- ¹² Participant quotations are presented verbatim from survey responses. The original spelling, grammar and use of punctuation has been retained.
- ¹³ Some participants did not provide all demographic details.

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