Examining the immediate and enduring psychological impact of street harassment on women's mental health

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Abstract

Purpose – *Many women report experiences of street harassment during their lifetime. Previous quantitative survey research has shown the variety of ways in which this type of harassment can impact upon a victim's life, including restricting their freedom of movement and fear of further victimisation. The purpose of this study is understand the immediate and enduring psychological impact of street harassment on female victim-survivors.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The present study aims to explore, qualitatively, women's experiences of street harassment through thematic analysis of on 35 online blog posts. Data were collected from the "Stop Street Harassment" website, where women are invited to share their experiences anonymously.*

Findings – *Three main themes were generated from the data. First was the age at which women began to experience street harassment, with recurring early incidents during formative childhood years. Second was the impact that experiences had on their mental health and psychological well-being with feelings of shame, fear, self-loathing, as well as decreased self-esteem and confidence experienced in the immediate aftermath – though the longer-term negative emotions reported were enduring feelings of anger alongside a constant state of anxiety from feelings of vulnerability to further victimisation. The final theme was the modification of behaviour after experiencing street harassment where women choose to avoid walking alone on the streets or consciously changed their clothing choices, to avoid being harassed.*

Originality/value – *This study offers a further qualitative insight into the real-life experience and psychological consequences of street harassment upon survivors' mental health.*

Keywords *Street harassment, Sexualisation, Psychological harm, Anxiety, Self-esteem, Anger, Vulnerability, Behavioural modification, Online blogs*

Paper type *Research paper*

Introduction

Street harassment, sometimes termed gender-based public harassment, can be defined as the experience of receiving verbal and/or non-verbal harassment across a range of public or semi-public locations (Lord, 2009). According to the nonprofit organisation Stop Street Harassment, a website dedicated to ending street harassment worldwide, common behaviours include whistling, sexist slurs, following, groping and sexual assault (Stop Street Harassment, 2020). While some comments aimed at women may be seen as commonplace and innocent compliments lacking intent (Kissling, 1991), the repeated experience of the behaviours above from the same or different individuals can be enduring and feel overwhelming for many women. Despite this, street harassment is arguably difficult to measure due, in part, to the absence of an agreed-upon definition of the term (Vera-Gray, 2016). Similar to coercive and controlling behaviours exercised by abusive individuals against their intimate partners (Conroy *et al.*, 2023), in isolation some behaviours may not appear to be harassment (e.g. sexualised compliments, comments on appearance or attire,

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wolf whistling at an acquaintance/colleague), and for others, it is the nature and extent to which they occur that is problematic. Indeed, the legal position of street harassment in the UK is somewhat unclear. Like other forms of gender-based violence and abuse, there are barriers to disclosure (Lelaurain et al., 2017), victim-survivors of street harassment were unsure that their experiences were illegal, and felt that reporting to the police was futile in that nothing could be done (Fileborn, 2019).

Legal position

In England and Wales, unwanted touching, that is sexual in nature, and occurs without the victim-survivor's consent (and where there is no reasonable belief in consent), is an offence of Sexual Assault under the provisions of the Sexual Offences Act 2003. Threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviours are also considered an offence under the Public Order Act 1986. Similarly, in the USA, many states attempt to combat street harassment using other laws, such as disorderly conduct and public nuisance laws (Stop Street Harassment, 2014b), yet street harassment is not currently a criminalised offence (Arndt, 2018). In the UK, the legal picture is more promising. The UK Government, responding to calls for legal reform from women's campaign groups, based on the experiences of women and girls, has put forward the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Bill (UK Parliament, 2023). Passing through parliament unopposed, the bill is currently being considered in the House of Lords in an effort to allow those convicted of varying forms of street and sexual harassment to be imprisoned for up to two years. The bill covers acts of street harassment such as, catcalling, following someone, blocking someone's path (Home Office, 2022) and leads to the advent of a new offence for causing intentional harassment, alarm or distress to a person in public where the behaviour is because of that person's sex (UK Parliament, 2023).

Prevalence

Reported prevalence rates of street harassment vary widely between studies and locations, due, in part, to definitional differences (Walton and Pedersen, 2021). In the UK, Donnelly and Calogero (2018) study reported that 80% of the UK women had experienced harassment in some form, with 35% reporting experiencing unwanted touching at least once per month. Stop Street Harassment (2014a) report that over 65% of women globally are likely to experience some form of street harassment in their lifetime and recent evidence indicates that the LGBTQ+ community are at an even greater risk (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023). Comparing prevalence rates of harassment and violence in Germany, Portugal and the UK, Bayrakdar and King (2023) found rates were significantly higher in the UK for gay men and trans individuals. Muslim women wearing a hijab or niqab have also reported heightened experiences with street harassment during periods of political tension and unrest, linked by Mason-Bish and Zempi (2019) to Islamophobia. UN Women (2021) reported comparable prevalence to Donnelly and Calogero (2018) and found that most women did not report their experiences to police. The two most frequently cited reasons were that they did not feel their victimisation was serious enough to report (55%), and that reporting was not considered likely to have been any help (45%) (UN Women, 2021).

Consequences of street harassment

Despite a reduction in the stigma around opening up about experiences of street harassment, research continues to find such experiences can cause significant negative impacts on victim-survivor's daily lives (DelGreco and Christensen, 2019). One of the greatest impacts is found to be the way it can restrict women's freedom of movement and daily decisions more widely (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014). In a study examining the economic impact that perceived risk of street harassment has on women's day-to-day choices, young

women were willing to spend an average of £217 per year to take a safer route to university (Borker, 2017). In southern India, adolescent girls have reported skipping school to avoid the harassment they face whilst traveling (Bhagavatheeswaran et al., 2016). Women often choose to travel in a group, or with a male companion (Thompson, 1994), and report actively avoiding the streets at night (Bowman, 1993). Women who limit their mobility as a result of street harassment also report lower perceived social cohesion and self-confidence (Campos et al., 2017). This demonstrates the often-unspoken routine restriction of women's freedom of movement and mobility as a direct consequence of the street harassment they face.

Regarding the mental health consequences of street harassment, survey-based research has found significant associations with anxiety, depression and sleeplessness (DelGreco and Christensen, 2019), reportedly linked to decreased perceptions of personal safety (Davidson et al., 2016). Other negative psychological consequences include, feelings of insecurity and decreased self-esteem (Ali et al., 2015). Adolescent girls also reported greater negative emotions which lasted beyond the immediacy of street harassment incident (Betts et al., 2019), particularly concerning given the age of the victim-survivors (11 to 15 years old) who reported such negative affect in this study. Indeed, many studies indicate that women and girls experience street harassment as early as the age of 11 (Betts et al., 2019; Girlguiding, 2021). In one Mexican study, half (49.8%) of the female participants had experienced street harassment by the age of 11, with women found to experience this harassment 2.65 times more often than males surveyed (Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015). Alongside being more likely to experience street harassment and more likely to experience negative mental health outcomes as a consequence of their victimisation, studies also indicate that the intensity of these mental health consequences (anxiety, depression, sleeplessness) are more severe among young women (DelGreco and Christensen, 2019; Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015). Female adolescents (aged 14–19) exhibit heightened and long-lasting feelings of unsafety as a consequence of street harassment and implement more coping strategies to deal with these feelings than male adolescents (Zani et al., 2001).

Current study

After considering the predominantly quantitative survey-based research evidence around women's experiences of street harassment and reported mental health consequences upon victim-survivors emerging from these studies, the current study aims to further investigate women's experiences of street harassment drawing upon anonymous online blog posts which document their experiences. Internet forum usage among women as a space in which they feel comfortable discussing their sexual victimisation experiences is becoming more prevalent and presents an opportunity to better understand women's experiences of this behaviour, without direct researcher probing. Taking inspiration from other recent studies which have usefully and ethically drawn upon qualitative accounts of victimisation experiences and online blog posts as a source of data from which we can seek to further our understanding of sexual victimisation, the aim of this study is to obtain richer insights into how women experience street harassment and the consequences of these experiences on their mental health and daily lives.

Methodology

Data and design

A qualitative research design, using thematic analysis, was used in an effort to understand victim-survivor's accounts of street harassment and identify any recurring themes and patterns of meaning within them. The data were 35 anonymously written, publicly available, online blog posts sourced from the website of the nonprofit organisation "Stop Street

Harassment". On this website, women are invited to share their experiences of and thoughts about street harassment. Purposive sampling was used in selecting the blog posts in that they were required to feature women's personal experiences of street harassment and any consequences emerging from them. Blog posts that were information-rich in nature were chosen such that qualitative analysis would be possible, without losing the meaning of each individual experience. Very brief blogs or those where a personal experience was not described were excluded from the data set. Examination of such naturally occurring data, unprompted for the purposes of research, is now a powerful mechanism by which attitudes and personal experiences of sexual violence can be understood (Sowersby *et al.*, 2022; Williams *et al.*, 2023).

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen as an appropriate method of analysis for this study, as it allowed for themes to be identified from the data of several women's experiences. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps to thematic analysis were followed. The first step involved familiarisation with the data set and subsequently repeatedly reading over the data. Next, an inductive coding of the data took place highlighting interesting features of the women's experiences across the data set. These codes were collated into potential themes and reviewed to ensure broader representation of the entire data set. Finally, themes were defined and named. As this study aims to explore individuals' subjective experiences, the methods reflect the approach of phenomenological psychology from a critical realist perspective. This approach accepts that the way we gain knowledge from the world is subjective, on a personal level. This is consistent with the topic, as harassment of a sexual nature arguably has a large subjective component (Gutek, 1995).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval from the host institution's university ethics committee was gained prior to the sourcing and analysis of data. British Psychological Society (2021) ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout. Given the examination of publicly visible and freely available blog posts from anonymised online users, it was not necessary or possible to seek consent from the users. To reduce the risk of vicarious trauma, given the nature of the data, the researchers scheduled regular breaks and debriefs during the process of data analysis.

Findings and discussion

Three overall themes were developed which highlight the key issues faced by women as a result of experiencing street harassment. The aim was to explore the impacts of these experiences, to provide further depth and advance upon the existing quantitative literature. In the findings, we choose not to include descriptions of the events but focus instead on our three main themes from the analysis. Firstly, we find many blog posters were very young when they first experienced street harassment. We then report the initial and enduring mental health impact and psychological harms of street harassment and finally, the ways in which blog posters reported modifying their behaviour as a result of experiencing street harassment.

The age at which women begin to experience street harassment

Across the blog posts, women reported experiencing street harassment in their day-to-day lives from a young age. Several authors of the posts stated their age, in years, within their retellings. For example, *"we were 14"* (Blog 4) and *"I was probably around 12"* (Blog 8). Others noted the time in their lives at which the incident occurred, *"A construction worker wolf-whistled at me as I walked to the bus stop to go to school"* (Blog 7). Another way that

this was expressed was by referencing that they were visibly very young in appearance in their descriptions of the incident, *"I was pre-pubescent and still looked very much like a child,"* (Blog 6).

The repeated inclusion of the age of onset in which the posters began to experience street harassment highlights the prevalence of young girls being harassed, given that evidence indicates women experience various forms of sexual harassment in a multitude of contexts (e.g. school, work, public settings, entertainment venues), throughout the duration of their lives (Stewart *et al.*, 2022; Yasegnal, 2023). The blog posters also positioned their age within a narrative about the effect that the harassment incidents had on them at this specific time in their lives, which demonstrates the emotional impact and also makes the incidents they describe more jarring:

> I was disturbed, afraid, and horrified. I was underage, and had very little experience with boys in general, so it hurt even more. (Blog 30)

> I was petrified and extremely scared. I quickly said that I wasn't interested and that I was underage and quickly left. (Blog 13)

Evidence suggests that in the western world, girls begin to experience street harassment from the age of just 11 (Betts *et al.*, 2019; Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015), targeted due to their perceived "availability" (Gruber and Bjorn, 1982). However, after such events, young girls begin to learn early on that many public and private spaces are unsafe for women (Zani *et al.*, 2001). This can have a severe and enduring impact their lives, as was indicated by many of the women in the current analysis. A recent report by the Girlguiding Association surveyed over 400 young women and girls from across the UK and found that 59% of the girls surveyed who were aged 13–16 had experienced some form of sexual harassment (Girlguiding, 2021). According with our findings, one 15-year-old girl said "it happens all the time" when describing her experience of sexual harassment across various contexts (Girlguiding, 2021, p. 3). Population-level prevalence research among young girls aged 9 to 17 in the Eastern Caribbean also found sexual victimisation including harassment was commonly experienced outside the home, in public spaces (Boduszek *et al.*, 2017; Debowska *et al.*, 2018). The next theme discussed describes the impacts of this street harassment on blog posters in the current study.

The impact of street harassment on mental health and psychological well-being

Blog post authors' recurrently discussed the immediate impact that street harassment had on their psychological well-being, specifically, the way that their experiences had made them felt about themselves. The women described how comments made to them in the street had affected their self-concept and esteem, "The comments were demeaning and it made me feel low and dirty" (Blog 1) with another saying, "It makes me feel disgusting and degraded" (Blog 3). One woman goes on to say, "Never before have I felt my self-confidence plummet as much as that moment." (Blog 21).

Indeed, street harassment has been found to have negative correlations on self-esteem (DelGreco and Christensen, 2019) and self-blame (Neville *et al.*, 2004), particularly for women who hold traditional sex-role beliefs (Conroy *et al.*, 2023; Jensen and Gutek, 1982), and this is heightened for those with already decreased self-esteem, who are more likely to blame themselves after being harassed (Saunders *et al.*, 2017).

Feeling scared and emotional after recognising their vulnerability was also a frequent immediate psychological consequence of street harassment. Women described their fear, "he followed me. I was scared. I burst into tears" (Blog 26), "I have felt vulnerable" (Blog 35), with another remarking "a man walking past me muttered some obscenities about me and licked his lips. I felt nervous and scared." (Blog 27).

Prior studies have found that fear experienced immediately during incidents of street harassment is often rooted in fear that the incident may lead to other forms of sexual and physical violence (Donnelly and Calogero, 2018), with the brazen nature of the harassment a key factor in subsequent long-term negative emotional and affective states (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023):

> It was terrifying because even the fact that I was with my mother, father and sister didn't deter him (Blog 6).

Women in the current study also described questioning their actions and responses to the incidents, with one author commenting, "I still don't know if I responded correctly" (Blog 10) and another, "I thought I was overreacting" (Blog 17). This isn't surprising given street harassment's constant dismissal as "trivial" or "insignificant" (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023; Gardner, 1995) and found to be common among female victim-survivors of sexual violence more widely (Lilley *et al.*, 2023). This dismissal, in turn, causes women to doubt the validity of their own experiences (Davis, 1994; Debowska *et al.*, 2021; Sowersby *et al.*, 2022) and account for their own behaviours:

> It made me feel like I was dressed inappropriately and that other people must think I'm a slut. (Blog 16)

> I was wearing something I didn't usually wear (prepping for modelling school), it made me feel like it was my fault. (Blog 29)

The extracts presented so far locate the blog poster's feelings at the time of the incident, but others described the enduring and longer-term psychological harm of incidents of street harassment. One blog poster describes the intensity of the psychological impact of street harassment in terms of their mental health and well-being:

> As of now, I am still in trauma about the street harassment that I had experienced. I cry a lot every time I remember those incidents. (Blog 15)

> I don't know if I need to seek for help from a psychiatrist or someone that could help me. I no longer feel safe and everything that has happened to me is really hurtful. (Blog 15)

This victim-survivor reports feeling traumatised when looking back on their experiences of street harassment and as a result considers her need for some form of psychological support. Others refer to the longer-term emotional consequences associated with their fear, anxiety and anger which have outlasted the initial incident that occurred, "I constantly feel like I'm going to be attacked" (Blog 23), "I feel so angry. Angry that it affects me and even more angry that it's a societal issue that I have to accept" (Blog 25) and "That incident shatters me. It breaks my confidence level" (Blog 9).

This impact highlights that street harassment is not trivial or something to be dismissed and supports existing research that suggests street harassment can result in enduring psychological harm (Carretta and Szymanski, 2020). Indeed, more than 25% of 13- to 16-year-old girls, and 65% of 17- to 18-year-old young women, surveyed in the UK, report that their experiences of harassment have left them feeling scared, anxious and worried (Girlguiding, 2021). In the current study, one woman describes being unable to "let the experience go":

> All the insecurities and fears of being a woman of colour in public washed over me. I struggled with what to do next. It seemed like too small an incident to report or even talk about but I couldn't let the experience go. (Blog 10)

In this extract, the blog poster also reflects on how street harassment intersects with "being a women of colour" in public spaces. In the next theme, we present how posters had modified their behaviour to mitigate the impacts on their safety and mental well-being.

Modifying behaviour as a result of street harassment

As a result of street harassment, and the lasting impacts of incidents, blog post authors reported modifying their behaviour in their day-to-day lives. Women described a dislike of being alone in public spaces as a result of experiencing street harassment commenting, "I don't want to walk alone on the streets" (Blog 5) with others stating they only make essential journeys solo, "Since then I rarely leave the house by myself, except to go to school." (Blog 4).

The author of the following blogs describes an enduring fear of being harassed, "I don't want to walk alone on the streets for the fear of being harassed by a random guy (Blog 18) and another highlights the precautions taken to feel safe, "I carry pepper spray" (Blog 14).

The possession of pepper spray has been found to be a primary safety strategy of fearful women to protect themselves from harm (Linder and Lacy, 2020) as women re-assess their perceptions of safety following an incident of street harassment (Davidson *et al.*, 2016). Many other women choose instead to travel with companions (Thompson, 1994) as an avoidant coping strategy (Neville *et al.*, 2004) or rely on the help of loved ones or bystanders:

> Thankfully I knew people at the restaurant and one of the managers got the creepy guy to leave (Blog 31)

> We had to call our parents to come pick us because we didn't feel safe. (Blog 2)

In addition to how women navigate their environments, some blog posters described modification of their appearance as a consequence of street harassment. With one commenting "I hate that I can't ever just wear pretty things or go out without crap like this happening" (Blog 12). The act of harassing someone based on their looks can be termed sexual objectification. As objectification theory states (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997) and empirical research displays (Fileborn and O'Neill, 2023), this can be incredibly damaging to a victim-survivor's self-concept long term:

> Honestly, I don't wear revealing clothes. I grew up in a conservative family. I don't wear shorts, above the knee dresses and skirts, sleeveless, tube, etc. But no matter how unrevealing the clothes I am wearing, I am not safe from street harassment. (Blog 15)

Indeed, there was a consensus across the blog posts that despite modifying behaviour, women and girls do not feel safe from street harassment, seemingly perceiving the experience of harassment as disappointing but inevitable. This is encapsulated well within blog 24 where the author concludes:

> It wasn't until the #metoo movement gained momentum, and that my friends and myself became statistics, that I realized how f**ked up that expression was and how sick our society truly is. If gender stereotypes continue to be taught and supported by mainstream society, we'll keep living this #metoo nightmare, living the definition of insanity (Blog 24).

Conclusions

The findings from this study align with those from the existing quantitative literature and extend upon what is already known in several important ways. Specifically, our findings reaffirm claims in prior evidence surrounding the young age at which street sexual harassment begins. Much like the larger-scale survey-based research evidence among adolescent girls from the UK (Girlguiding, 2021), Italy (Zani *et al.*, 2001), Mexico (Meza-de-Luna and García-Falconi, 2015) and the USA (DelGreco and Christensen, 2019), many women reported experiencing sexualised street harassment at a very young age. What the current qualitative findings were able to add, however, were how the age at which sexualised street harassment served to intensify and exacerbate the severity of

psychological harms emerging as a consequence of these formative negative experienced. It seems that these early negative experiences appear to contribute to the fostering of longstanding perceptions of fear, vulnerability and an inevitability of street harassment experiences. More broadly, the negative impact street harassment can have on women and girls' mental health was also further evidenced in accordance with findings reported in prior research. Aligned with Fileborn and O'Neill's (2023) conclusions and those reported by Ali *et al.* (2015) and Campos *et al.* (2017), in the immediacy of the incident, strong feelings of fear, vulnerability, self-blame and self-loathing were experienced, as well as decreased self-esteem and self-confidence. Longer-term, women reported negative and enduring emotions including anger, anxiety and constant and consuming fear of future victimisation. This evidence of the long-lasting anxiety and trauma emerging from street harassment incidents, aligns with prior study findings that show varied and often severe mental health outcomes are a consequence of such harassment experiences (Davidson *et al.*, 2016; DelGreco and Christensen, 2019). The totality of such findings seemingly serves to dispel myths surrounding the harmless, playful and "bantered" basis to street harassment behaviour. Indeed, the consequences of enduring psychological harms experienced by women in the current study were almost exclusively some form of behaviour modification including carefully selected clothing choices designed to avoid future unwanted attention, as well as avoiding leaving the home at certain times of day or if unaccompanied. Likewise, there was also some evidence of the importance of bystander intervention of some sort mentioned by many women in the current study, though the presence of others was almost universally accepted as unlikely to avoid future experiences of street harassment. Interestingly, these same behavioural modifications and safety precautions were mentioned in several other prior studies from varied countries, cultures and societies, as well as by women and girls of varied age ranges (Borker, 2017; Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014; Thompson, 1994). This seemingly indicates some form of globalised toolkit of violence avoidance measures that women are required to routinely employ in their lives in an effort to remain safe.

Limitations and future research

As violence against women researchers, the authors recognise that they may inadvertently introduce their own biases and assumptions in researching women's experiences of street harassment. Based on the experience of the research team and procedural steps taken to avoid unconscious bias impacting upon the data selected or subsequent analysis, any biases were perceived to be kept to a minimum. Next, the analysis was concerned with a small number of secondary anonymised street harassment blogs among women who reported their experiences on an NGO website designed to tackle the problem of street harassment. Future research would therefore benefit from seeking to obtain a larger and more diverse online data set of blog posts among survivors of street harassment from varied platforms, and which include the experiences of male survivors, members of the LGBTQ+ community and from diverse ethnic groups. This would allow for a more detailed and meaningful examination of the mental health consequences among populations likely to have an overlapping though unique experience of this type of harassment behaviour.

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