The Experiences of Young Heterosexual Men as Victims of Street Harassment

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Although the issue of street harassment has been discussed thoroughly by several researchers, it mainly focused on women as the victims. Little attention has been paid to the opposite sex as such, hence the emergence of this qualitative study. Interviews were conducted to five (5) men between the ages of 20-28 to shed light on street harassment as experienced by heterosexual men - the nature of harassment, how it affected them in all aspects of their personal lives, and the realizations they had after the incident. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes common to their experiences. Findings revealed that women and men experience the same nature of harassment; fear and anger dominated their emotions; empathy towards other victims increased; awareness of the omnipresence of street harassment, and gender bias, are apparent; and street harassment should be treated as a criminal act.

Key Words: men’s experience, heterosexual, gender, victim, street harassment

People around the globe experience harassment one way or another. Street harassment is the most common. This is a constant occurrence for women (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Cook & Darnell, 2009) in majority and some men. Catcalls, whistles, stalking, groping, assault and offensive verbal comments (Thirsk, 2012) are just some of the impediments the victims have to deal with day by day. Many fail to recognize that these actions are considered harassment as they are born to learn that it is a fact of life and adapt to its abusive nature. With reference to this, street harassment is deemed the most ignored form of sexual harassment (Osmond & Woodcock, 2015). United Nations commissioned a survey in the Philippines on February of 2016 and it was found that 3 out 5 (60%) of Filipino women had been victimized (Terrazola, 2016). Stop Street Harassment, a non-profit organization, held a national survey in 2014 in the United States. It was found that 65% of women and 25% of men from 2,000 male and female respondents had been street harassed. Among the percentage of men, 18% had been verbally harassed, 16% had experienced physical aggression, 8% were touched without consent, 7% were stalked, 5% had been flashed and 2% were demanded to do something sexual. Men as victims are not given much attention compared to women as such. This research focuses on the male population and their experiences with street harassment.

Several films and short videos arose regarding street harassment. 10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman, a Youtube video with 43 million hits as of October 2016, depicted the harassment a woman goes through on the streets of New York City. She reportedly received 108 catcalls from different men (Bliss, 2014). Numerous videos emerged afterwards, like 3 Hours of “Harassment” in NYC!, where a man was verbally street harassed over 30 times in a span of 3 hours. Most of his perpetrators were women. This video clip has 11 million views as of October 2016 (Persin, 2014). War Zone, a 1998 documentary film by Maggie Hadleigh-West, shows her confronting the men who harass her on the streets. She also interviewed several women who were victims of this harassment. Having a documentary in 1998 and a 2-minute video in 2014 identifying the same problem shows no change on how the society tackles street harassment.

Quezon City is the first in the country to pass a local ordinance pertaining to street harassment. Penalties like imposing fines of PHP 1,000 to 5,000 or imprisonment for a day to a year can be faced by people making sexual remarks to women in the city (The Philippine Star, 2016). Street harassment, according to Cook and Darnell (2009), is the act of sexual harassment commonly done by strangers in public settings. Paludi & Denmark (2010) mentioned Gardner’s (1995) definition of street harassment as “that group of abuses, harryings, and annoyances characteristic of public places and uniquely facilitated by communication in public” (p.4). A number of authors (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Bowman, 1993, in Ramakrishnan, 2011; Fogg-Davis, 2005; Ilahi, 2008; Paludi & Denmark, 2010; Crouch, 2009) mainly focused on women as the targets of street harassment, and studies where men are victims are limited. Fernández consolidated the words of several authors into one concrete definition of street harassment in her study in 2016. It says, “Although there is no standardization of definition, it includes unwanted verbal and nonverbal behavior such as whistles, leers, winks, grabs, honking,
pinches, flashing or public masturbation, following, sexual assault or rape, sexual name calling, and commenting on a woman’s physical appearance or on her presence in public without the woman’s consent (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kearl, 2014). The comments can range from benign to increasingly vulgar and violent suggestions or threats (Bowman, 1993). The encounter takes place in a public setting such as the street, sidewalk, public transportation, supermarket, and park (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Laniya, 2005). “It happens between strangers in a public place, which at present means there is less legal recourse” (Kearl, 2014, p. 5). (Fernandez, 2016, p. 2-3)

Gender difference is evident in the cases of street harassment. The fact that many researches point to women as the victims in almost all instances and men are seen as the violators of their privacy exhibits the greatness of these differences. There is an insufficient number of researches discussing gender bias among men regardless of the increasing number of cases suggesting so (Brinkman, Isacco, & Rosén, 2015). Men can be the receiving end of the harassment as well, and researches focusing on that are extremely limited. Men experience this incident, too, though a fraction less than of women’s. They are the understudied population of victims (Weiss, 2008). Violators threaten the victims, regardless of sex, their safety, dignity and overall well-being. These victims learned to adapt to this outrageous act, simply because it is implanted on them that it is a fact of life and it is the price to pay for being attractive or existing as female or male. This study intends to recognize the male population as victims of street harassment and their individual encounters. The researcher aims to gain knowledge on their experiences, specifically 1.) the nature of street harassment that occurred, 2.) the influence it had on them in terms of their physical, social, and emotional aspects, and 3.) the acquired realizations post-harassment.

Methodology

Research Design

Qualitative research design is deemed most effective to be utilized in this research, as this study focuses on the lived experiences of the participants involved. The researcher formed themes common to the narratives of the participants through thematic analysis.

Participants

The researcher used purposive sampling technique to determine 5 adult men as participants to this study. All participants met the following inclusion criteria: a) Must be 18-29 years of age, b) Must be heterosexual male, c) Have had first-hand encounters with a street harasser. The age range was determined by the researcher as this was seen as the common age group of victims based on international surveys hosted by Stop Street Harassment. In the survey held in the Philippines in 2016, 88% of women are aged 18-24 when they had first experienced harassment (Terrazola, 2016).

Materials

The researcher used an in-depth and semi-structured one-on-one interview in exploring the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher asked each respondent to thoroughly describe in great detail their experiences, centralizing on what was happening before the incident, what was it like to be victimized, and what happened after. In addition, audio recordings of the interviews which were then translated into transcripts were utilized.

Procedures

Selection of participants was done with the use of purposive sampling. The determination of sample was based on the judgment of the researcher, and to serve the true purpose of the research - find men who had first-hand encounters with a street harasser. Three (3) men were already culled by the researcher and the additional two (2) came from the suggestions of the then-picked participants, thus completing the ideal sample size of five (5) young adult heterosexual men. An extensive interview followed the selection procedure. Scheduling was dictated by the participants and strict compliance was observed by both parties. The interview started off with a briefing by the researcher, giving each participant a summarized idea of what the study is about. Permission to audio-record the whole interview was granted by each participant before starting the data gathering process. It
was then followed by an inquiry about the demographic informations of the participants. A series of open-ended questions were asked by the researcher which the participant answered without any restriction. It is important for the researcher to ask open-ended questions as this encourages the participant to relive and tell their stories in full description (Waters, 2016). In avoiding biases, the researcher put aside her personal knowledge about the topic and the participants to elude any instructive words that may sway the interviewees’ line of thought. In conclusion of each session, the researcher provided the interviewees small tokens of appreciation in partaking in the research.

Data Analysis
Using thematic analysis, “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006), data gathered from the interview were analyzed and organized into themes. Steps mentioned by the author were followed by the researcher to succeed in the study of data. It is important to remember that themes identified were based on relevance to the research questions, hence subjectivity by the researcher was exhibited.

Results and Discussion

Research Problem # 1: What are the nature of street harassment encountered?

Physically harmless harassment
The participants reported different methods of how they were harassed. P1 received a random and unsolicited explicit comment and action from a heterosexual man he passed by while walking in a low-lighted street. He continued walking, though now fast-paced, to get out of the situation and avoid confrontation with the harasser. He said, “I know I should have done something but what was I supposed to do? Punch him? Won’t that just aggravate the situation?” Referring to the study of Dhillon and Bakaya (2014), it showed that fear of escalation was the prime factor on why victims just walk away. The second participant shared the same experience with P1. Only difference was P2 encountered a homosexual man as harasser. He was followed by a homosexual man who proceeded to display inappropriate behavior (rubbing his crotch, sniffing, unwanted comments) when P2 noticed his presence. In response, P2 left the scenario and never returned again.

Insulting and threatening harassment
P3, as opposed to the first two participants, confronted the perpetrator when the latter touched him and his girlfriend maliciously. The participant initially chose to verbally confront the harasser, a heterosexual man, but it escalated to physical assault when P3’s derriere was grabbed. It happened in broad daylight, outside a public building notorious for girls loitering around at night and obnoxious men in the day, as described by the participant in the interview. “He brought that punch to himself. I was willing to let it go for my girlfriend,” said P3, showing no remorse for his action.

Stalking was the form of harassment P4 endured. He was watched for weeks, and was followed home one day. The sun had just risen and this brought a sense of safety to the participant, as narrated in the interview. He didn’t realize that time was not a hindrance for the abuser as he, P4, was still physically pursued. This is in connection of the study of Dhillon and Bakaya in 2014 where results revealed that street harassment mostly happens in broad daylight and in populous places. Confronting his perpetrator was out of the question because fear of getting hurt surfaced, so P4 just paced faster until he was safely inside his home. One traumatic action resulted to days of home confinement for the participant. After a few weeks, the abuser was sent to prison for a different case. The harasser was a married bisexual man. The last participant witnessed a public masturbation by a naked female while looking straight at him. The woman was believed to be homeless as she was sitting on a makeshift bed on the streets. The street harassment occurred late at night on the same place P3 was harassed. Out of fear and disgust, P5 changed his route on the way back home. He provided an assumption similar to Dhillon and Bakaya’s conclusion in 2014.

Research Problem # 2: How did the experience affect them in terms of physical, social, and emotional aspects?

Physical: A Subsequent Change in the Form of Dressing
Only two (2) participants reported change in their physical appearance after the harassment, specifically
on how they dress. P4, who was constantly watched in a communal basketball court and was followed on the streets by the harasser, admitted to having a hard time exposing his body in public as opposed to his old habits of running errands shirtless and changing clothes in the court after each basketball game. In addition, P5 now prefers bottoms that cover his whole legs when going out as these provide him with a greater sense of comfort. A change in the manner of dressing is a common solution many victims rely on. With the belief that dressing up or down is something they can manipulate, a lot resort to a shift in styling in avoidance of unwanted attention on the streets (O’Neill, 2013, and Dhillon and Bakayan, 2014).

Social: Heightened Public Vigilance and Environmental Awareness

Having experienced the harassment and knowing the dangers on the streets, the whole sample individually declaring an increase in social awareness was expected. Each noted how they became sensitive of the people surrounding them and the domain they are in. High alertness in public is the result of the harassment encounter they had and the need for it not to occur again. P2 reported that, “I don’t want anyone to experience what I did so when I see it happening, I’d probably jump in the situation. Not to be a hero or anything, but just to avoid any damage on the victim.” Verbal comments like “Hi, ate. Hi, kuya.” are seen as dangerous as the physical forms of street harassment. These comments are factors to the increase in social awareness. P5 shared, “Di nala ng siya yung simpleng “hi teh”. Iba kasi mararamdaman mo pag andun ka sa sitwasyon na yun. Parang inferior ka, under ka sa kanila, they have power over you. And that’s just by saying specific words, making specific sounds, doing specific actions na for you, nakaka-threaten.” (“It’s not as simple as just a greeting. You would feel something really different in a situation like that. It’s like you’re inferior and beneath them, and they have power over you. And that’s just by saying specific words, making specific sounds, doing specific actions that are threatening for you.”). The ubiquity of street harassment is related to the heightened environmental awareness all participants reported. As the knowledge that street harassment cases had increased and then concluded as common, the participants exhibited high alert on the streets.

Emotional: Shared Fear and Anger

Though interviewed separately, the participants’ reactions to the experience were similar. Feelings of fear and anger were reiterated among the sample. P5 concluded that fear comes with harassment, saying that it is inevitable. He added, “Matatakot ka sa safety mo. Kung makakauri ka bang pareho yung estado ng pag-iisip mo nung umalis ka.” (“You would fear for your safety; if you would be able to go home in the same state of mind as when you left.”) When asked what he felt when grabbed, P3 answered, “Pure anger.” Anger, as it turns out, is a common reaction among the victims (Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001, in Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014). P3 reacted with a punch when his derriere was grabbed by the perpetrator. P2 recognized that gender plays no role in the production of reactions. He shared, “I’m sure we share the same feelings: fear, anger, shock. Being a guy didn’t hinder me from feeling all those.” According to Dhillon and Bakaya (2014), harassment by strangers is highly associated with heightened apprehension about safety. They voiced out that street harassment puts their safety and security at risk, physically and psychologically. What they went through was something they didn’t wish to happen to others, especially the women in their lives. P2 thought of his sister, saying, “I don’t know what I’ll do if it happened to my sister and she got it way worse than me. Or any woman in my life.” P3 shared that he doesn’t let his girlfriend be alone when commuting after their experience. He added, “Mahirap na kasi. Malala na yung nangyari sa kanya, hinipuan na siya. Pano pag mas grabe pa? Ayokong dumating sa puntong ganun tas wala na akong magagawa.” (“You can never know. She was maliciously touched. What if it happens again but much worse? I don’t want to arrive at a point where there’s nothing I can do anymore.”) When safely inside their home, P4 advised his parents not to go out unless the perpetrator leaves. He explained, “I just got scared for my parents. He couldn’t know who they are. He might follow them, too, and lord knows what he’d do.”

Emotional: Empathy

Empathy towards women was greatly exhibited in the interviews. A realization that women go through such harassment daily came upon to the majority of participants. P1 put into account the clothing styles of women, saying that, “Mahirap kung babae ako kasi kailangan ko pa maging mindful sa susuotin ko.” (“It would be hard if I was a woman; I’d have to be mindful of my clothing.”) P2 mentioned that physical appeal is a contributing factor to harassment, but thought that being a guy is easier as males don’t have to change much;
Clothing for example. He defended his argument by saying, “It might seem sexist, but it’s the reality in our society.” In agreement, Fernandez’s research in 2016 showed that women actually change their appearance to prevent harassment. P2’s statement is an addition to the obvious gender differences in the cases of street harassment. Having a number of female friends, hearing street harassment stories for P5 is common. Now that he had a first-hand encounter with a street harasser, his dismissive behavior in the past changed into sorrow. In addition, he said, “Nakakalungkot din na mas mahirap yung sitwasyon para sa mga babae. Pag maganda ka, mababastos ka. Pag maganda katawan mo, mababastos ka. Pag maganda ka manamit, mababastos ka. Pag babae ka, mababastos ka.” (“It’s disheartening that the situation is harder for women. If you’re pretty, you’d be harassed. If you have a desirable body, you’d be harassed. If you dress well, you’d be harassed. If you’re a woman, you’d be harassed.”)

Research Problem # 3: What are the realizations acquired by the participants post-harassment?

A Universal Occurrence
Most participants recognized the omnipresence of street harassment, saying that it happens anywhere. Increased awareness of the issue at hand is a recurring realization the sample thought of after their respective experiences. P4 shared, “Street harassment is everywhere. You can’t trust anyone on the streets. You’ll never know what type of stranger they are.” P2 mentioned that its prevalence is unfortunate. Street harassment as a norm in our society was given point by one participant. This highly coincides with the research of Osmond and Woodcock (2014) which argues that street harassment is a “natural fact of life”. P5 said, “‘Yang street harassment kasi kahit saan nangyayari yan eh. Binabalewala lang natin kasi yan na yung normal. Kasama na yan sa araw-araw nating buhay. Sanay tayong may mga bastos sa kalye.” (“Street harassment occurs anywhere. We just ignore it because we see it as normal; a part of our daily lives. We are accustomed to malicious people on the streets.”)

Recognition as a Criminal Act
The lack of lawful actions regarding street-based harassments in the Philippines is alarming, and the need for legalities is a consolidated suggestion among a few samples. But because it happens in public and the act usually is quick, the chances for undergoing statutory processes are slim (Kearl, 2014, in Fernandez, 2016). P1 mentioned the local ordinance in Quezon City about street harassment, and thought that it should be a national law. He added, “Gusto ko lang magkaroon na ng batas tungkol dito. Gusto ko lang ma-realize ng gobyerno na issue ito.” (“I just want a law about street harassment to be implemented nationwide. I want the government to realize that this is an issue.”) Prior to wanting a national law regarding street harassment, P1 reported small importance the society has for the problem at hand, saying, “‘Yang street harassment hindi naman seryosong issue sa Pinas.” (“This issue of street harassment is not a serious one here in the Philippines.”) The study of O’Neill in 2013 showed that the concept itself of street harassment is vague due to mismatches in the definitions, and the term itself is not commonly used. He argued that submission of laws would be hard because awareness of street harassment is not general. Regarding the police force, P5 thought that they are useless. He commented, “Sana naaasahan natin yung mga police kapag nangyayari yan kaso hindi eh.” (“If only we could trust the police in handling such circumstances, but apparently we cannot.”) Feelings of dissatisfaction toward police efforts were evident in the results of Dhillon and Bakaya’s study in 2014, which exhibits parallelism with the data gathered.

Apparent Gender Bias
Various forms of harassment were encountered by the participants such as explicit comments and actions, groping, public masturbation, and stalking. This goes to show that gender is not a factor in street harassment, as several studies (Weiss, 2008; Javaid, 2015) noted that the same forms were experienced by women. Federal surveys conducted by Meyer and Stemple (2014) displayed that prevalence of sexual victimization among men is similar to that of women. Men just tend to keep their experiences in the dark (Gorris, 2015). The notion that only men can be the vultures and only women are the prey is existing that when faced with harassment, P1’s initial reaction was it would be a hold-up. “I understand that street harassment mostly happens to women, that’s why I thought mananakawan lang ako.” P1 explained. Having a female perpetrator in his experience, P5 acknowledged the fact that anyone can be the harasser and the harassed. He commented, “It just goes to show that anyone can be an abuser. Anyone can be abused on the streets din. Walang pintipiling
gender.” (“It just goes to show that anyone can be an abuser. Anyone can be abused on the streets, too. It chooses no gender.”) His statement supports the study of Blunt (2015) where it was determined that women can be predatory and men can be victimized. P3 shares the same view, saying, “Na-realize ko talaga na pwede to mangyari kung kanino man. Walang sinasanto yung mga ganyang bastos.” (“I realized that it can really happen to anyone. Perverts have no respect for anybody.”)

Conclusion and Recommendation
Street harassment is a negative prevalent occurrence that should not be treated as a social norm. Though the most focused-on group in this subject are the females, it is essential to recognize that the opposite sex encounters it, as well. 5 out of 5 participants reported actions done to them similar to the reports of the women based on surveys. Anyone can be victimized by this type of harassment. Changes post-harassment were reported by the participants. Two (2) stated changes in their physical looks, implying that exposing their bodies publicly is harder now. Socially, the participants disclosed high vigilance in public. The emotional impact street harassment caused the five (5) participants, however, was greatly expressed. They have consolidated feelings of fear and anger, and empathy towards the female victims. Protection was not only directed to themselves, but are extended to their loved ones, hence the want for a national law to be implemented regarding the case at hand. The experiences of young heterosexual men as victims of street harassment is the same as the experiences of women as victims of street harassment. Men’s, in difference, are just not given much light regarding the issue; and if they are so, they are regarded as the harassers. This qualitative research can be used as a step closer to reduce the gender bias in the problems tackled in the society and to illuminate the minorities of each issue. It is highly recommended for future researchers to use this qualitative research to develop a more specific and detailed study that will bring about the hidden nooks of street harassment. Making this problem known will immensely help those who are victimized, and prevent increase its prevalence. Addition of participants is recommended, as well. Future researchers may select a larger sample size to obtain a broader range of results. However, it is highly recommended to gather data through face-face interview. This promotes sincerity and security. A different minority can be subjects for research, too, like the LGBT. Like heterosexual men, members of the LGBT community are not given much highlight as victims of street harassment. Future researches can have them as the sample, and this will further enrich the existing literatures available.

REFERENCES
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