Catcalling

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When I walk down the street at night, I jump from lamp post to lamp post, lingering in the light just a half second more before stepping back into the shadows. My keys are looped between each finger, a pink pepper spray clenched in white fists and sweaty palms. Chin up, arms crossed. Loud steps and careful ears on a street I’ve walked ten times before. And when his voice, their voices, and the hum of a car engine slowing behind me are heard, I’m ready. I know I’m ready because I have always been ready, preparing and practicing and waiting because if it hasn’t happened yet, it will eventually.

I brace myself, waiting for a hand on the shoulder. But instead, “Heyyy baby!” echoes with my footsteps. “I just want to get to know you” follows me down the block. I am stalked by pleas for my smile and skirt and skin, begging to get to know me but never asking my name. I am fourteen years old, walking to a friend’s house from tennis practice, and reminding myself that next time, I’ll just go home.

By their 12th birthday, nearly one in four girls in the United States will be sexually harassed—by age 17, this rate skyrockets to 85% (Livingston et al. 5). Despite these disturbing statistics, street harassment has been swept under the rug for decades. This abuse is experienced daily by millions of victims across the globe but is seemingly forgotten in the midst of bigger, louder problems.

However, with the eruption of the #MeToo movement, a newfound awareness for these offenses has swept the United States. Men and women across the nation are encouraging one another to report, follow through, and bring justice to the perpetrators of sexual harassment and assault. While legal vigilance and increased support systems have drastically decreased tolerance for sexual assault, street harassment continues to fly under the radar as a momentary and insignificant attack. In this regard the every-day impacts, long-term psychological harm, and fear of physical violence inflicted through catcalling are similarly discounted. What few have come to realize is that to truly change our society’s propensity to excuse this behavior, we must first come to understand why it is inexcusable in the first place. Only by doing so will the necessary steps be taken to improve the safety and security of women in the public sphere.

Pushing past its ambiguity in both definition and execution, at the true core of street harassment is sexual objectification. While people of all genders and backgrounds fall victim to this treatment, historically, women are the primary target (Laniya). Sexual objectification—its roots deeply planted in society—is a substantial driving
force behind gender oppression in all forms, from systemic sexism to violence against women. Despite its leading role on the world stage, few truly understand its parameters. Sexual objectification is defined as the isolation of a woman’s body or body parts from her whole and complex being, treated as objects with the intention of looking at, desiring, or touching them (Fredrickson and Roberts 201). The implementation of this objectification is revealed daily on a global scale, ranging from an unbreaking gaze to sexual harassment to rape. Its reach is ever expanding as advertisements, music videos, movies, and pornography turn women into objects for a man’s personal use. Social media platforms know no shame; girls and women are told with every photoshopped image that their bodies will never be enough. Further, the boys who grow up consuming these images go on to objectify women who do not meet their unrealistic expectations.

The damaging nature of sexual objectification is clear, yet so often ignored and even argued against by those who, for the most part, have never experienced it before. Many will argue that in its mildest forms—promiscuous hamburger advertisements and unexpected comments on appearance in the street—minimal harm is done. In a blog published by The New York Times, readers were invited to comment their opinion about catcalling on the street, to which such statements as, “I think it is perfectly fine for a man to compliment a woman, that’s just a guy’s way of saying that you look good, there is no difference if calling out or walking up to the girl other than showing confidence” were submitted (Schulten). What this comment, posted under the pseudonym “Will,” neglected to consider was that the fleeting nature of “compliments” yelled from across the street deny women any means of counteraction. By “showing confidence,” men are forcing passivisity onto the recipients of their words, who, with little chance to even see their commentator, are left feeling degraded and powerless.

Even those with a basic comprehension of the unwanted nature of catcalls can be oblivious or skeptical of the damage they instill. This lack of understanding is unsurprising as most men have limited personal experience with street harassment. In a survey conducted backing the #MeToo movement, a mere 14% of men reported that someone ever whistled, honked, made kissy noises, “pssst” sounds, or stared aggressively at them in a public place (Stop Street Harassment 17). Of the women in the survey, 65% reported to have experienced the same. The disparity between these groups similarly explains the inconsistency with which street harassment is discussed and treated. Thus, for men like “Will,” catcalling is seen as a compliment rather than a man’s failure to control his inappropriate burst of sexual desire.

However, it is hopefully safe to assume that most men recognize the indecency of such behavior. It is this lack of experience and conversation, rather than a lack of empathy, that prevents them from truly understanding the harm behind such interactions. When affected personally, however, the true impact of catcalling is revealed with a clarity impossible to recreate in an academic paper. I witnessed this myself just a few years ago. After winning a water polo tournament earlier that morning, my dad and I excitedly discussed plans for the day as we walked a few blocks down the road for a pancake brunch. Our walk was abruptly interrupted by a man sitting on the sidewalk who unashamedly called out “Nice!” as I walked by. Ignoring him, I continued walking; my dad, from whom I have never heard a harsh word in my life, promptly turned around and spoke several, appropriately expressed, harsh words. After spending years ignoring such comments, my dad’s immediate reaction not only impacted his perspective of catcalling, but demonstrated to me that perhaps this behavior was far more harmful than I had previously believed.
While many, including myself, have been taught that the everyday impacts of street harassment are seemingly negligible, the unspoken consequences of this crime are extensive. When nearly 5,000 women were asked about their catcalling experiences in the United States, 85% reported that they chose to take a different route home or to their destination to avoid being catcalled (Livingston et al. 9). The significance of this is often underestimated; nearly nine out of ten women have walked an extra block, paid for a taxi, inconvenienced their lives, in fear of the man “just complimenting them” across the street. Seventy percent of women have canceled their plans for a social outing to avoid being harassed. They are denied time with friends and family, time no longer worth fighting the lingering eyes and grabbing words for. Seven percent of women in the study reported that because of street harassment, they packed up their things, sold their homes, and left (Livingston et. al 9).

In addition to changing their lifestyles, street harassment also forces women to change their appearance. In the United States, 66% of women have changed their outfit in fear of being catcalled on the streets (Livingston et. al 9). Unfortunately, due to common stereotypes many may read this statistic as evidence of a correlation between clothing and sexual harassment. In reality, this assumption is unsubstantiated; the likelihood of a woman being sexually harassed has virtually no correlation to her outfit. If, however, this social construct is entertained, then one would have no reason to suspect that sexual harassment could occur in Egypt—where 96% of women report wearing some form of head covering and modest clothing in accordance to Islamic and cultural standards (Moaddel 54). However, according to a 2013 report published by The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, 99.3% of Egyptian women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetime (United Nations 6). These women, the majority of whom conform to one of the more traditionally conservative cultures in the world, are being sexually harassed at levels unimaginable in the United States, where we blame women for what they are wearing. While it is clear that some choices of clothing attract more attention than others, regardless of whether a woman is wearing a burqa or a bikini, no outfit gives a man permission to inappropriately comment on her appearance. The abuses endured by women on the street not only force them to change their everyday routine, but often push them off the streets entirely.

By nature, sexual objectification and street harassment exclude women from public spaces, infringing on their rights as equal citizens of the state to men (Laniya). To avoid harassment, women often feel confined to travel only when accompanied by a man, establishing a social system where men negotiate the terms of female mobility in public space. This perpetuates a culture of female relegation to the home and further enforces the marginalization of women in modern society (Laniya). The sometimes drastic steps women have to take to avoid being catcalled should be evidence enough to demonstrate to perpetrators that it is unwanted. Even if their intention was to flatter the individual, these one-size-fits-all comments are tailored to evoke emotion from as many women as possible and thus are more about asserting power than initiating friendship (Goodwin).

It is impossible to deny: when women are forced to reshape, replan, and restart their lives they are no longer victims of a faceless crime, but prisoners in their own homes, held captive by the disregard of those with the power to free them.

In this regard, women are left with an unshakable self doubt before they can even recognize its cause. According to the objectification theory, with constant exposure to
sexually objectifying experiences, women are socialized to adopt society’s perspective of the female body as their own. Research has linked this internalization to mental health issues such as disordered eating and reduced productivity (Fredrickson and Roberts 186). Unsurprisingly, sexual objectification drastically increases self-monitoring, fostering long-term feelings of shame and anxiety and often leading to depression in girls as young as 12 (Szymanski and Henning 48).

But perhaps even more relevant today, young women are facing a new kind of harassment taking over technology by swarm. While catcalls and unwanted compliments echo down the streets, the same perpetrators are now granted access to permeate into the homes and infiltrate the personal lives of women through social media and technology. All too similarly, these harmful and unsolicited messages—and often images—are brushed off as discrete and isolated events. During my first year of middle school, I vividly remember getting off the school bus and feeling sick to my stomach after receiving an unexpected explicit photograph of one of my peers. After cautiously deciding to confide in a friend, I received little sympathy as she laughed it off and asserted that “he must like you.” Regardless of how many peers may advise their friends to let it go, the psychological repercussions of these non-consensual interactions remain firmly planted in the victims’ subconscious.

In addition to harming a woman's emotional and mental health, street harassment infringes upon her independent identity (Laniya). Unwanted comments in public spaces are based on the assumption that a woman is constantly open and welcoming of a man’s opinion, invading her sense of privacy by asserting dominance over her. For example, when a woman is commanded to “smile” by a man, she is being silently forced to comply for his emotional satisfaction while entirely disregarding her own emotions in fear of further harassment (Laniya). Regardless of the perpetrator’s intention, comments one would consider flattering become sinister when expressed in such inappropriate circumstances. In an online discussion of street harassment, one woman commented, “Imagine if someone just walked into your apartment and complimented you on how nice it was. Chances are you would be more offended by his intrusion than flattered by his compliment” (Laniya).

When you are sexually objectified, your worth is diminished to the appearance and sexual capabilities of your body. You become a product to be used, consumed, and discarded; strangers assess your value with the same confidence expressed when they leave reviews on a new purchase. When you are reduced to a display for the valuation of male eyes, accomplishments and self-worth are left behind as you become inescapably powerless, “powerless to prevent it, powerless to counteract it, powerless to transcend your own physiology” (Goodwin). And when the only emotions you associate with your sexuality are humiliation and shame, your fear of unwanted judgement is left behind in terror of something much darker.

Though catcalls may occur in a matter of seconds, these remarks open up a gateway to violence and sexual aggression. The nature of street harassment itself reminds women that responding to sexual harassment may prove more dangerous than accepting it in the face of potential violence. Those who respond and experience violence are often met with claims they were “asking for it,” perpetuating a victim-blaming response and justification. This mindset mirrors the dynamics of rape culture, that a woman’s objections have little power over the desires of her assailant. That being said, the opposite choice offers similarly grim options as ignoring the sexual conduct
often results in heightened reactions and even threats from the perpetrator. When catcalled, women are trapped by fear of enraging him, unable to confront and unable to ignore the harassment (Laniya).

Men who hear of these interactions may find this fear difficult to understand because of their unfamiliarity with it. Additionally, the majority of men in the United States are neither participating in nor intentionally perpetuating street harassment, thus excluding them from the narrative. Most importantly, however, as the dominant group in a gender-oriented culture, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment are far less prevalent and thus, less feared by men. Meanwhile, the pervasive sex-power dynamic in our society provides women with daily reminders of their role as victims, rather than equals, to their male counterparts in the public realm. In Ellison v. Brady—a landmark case surrounding sexual harassment in the workplace—the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals recognized that women who suffer from mild forms of sexual harassment “may understandably worry whether a harasser’s conduct is merely a prelude to violent sexual assault.” They then went on to clarify that men may view such experiences “in a vacuum without a full appreciation of the social setting or underlying threat of violence” (Laniya). In a historically male-dominated society, sexual harassment is not an isolated event, but a terrifying reflection of the threatening and potentially violent power that men have asserted over women for generations.

Unfortunately, this fear of sexual violence is too often actualized in women’s reality. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, one in six women will suffer rape or attempted rape at least once in their lifetime (Morgan and Kena). This alarming statistic, discussed and debated incessantly, instills a similarly incessant fear in women’s minds that experiencing said harm is nearly inevitable in their lifetime as well. This is not to say that all perpetrators of street harassment have the intention of raping their victims, nor that all victims of street harassment will be raped; rather, it is to say that by perpetuating a culture where the public objectification and harassment of women is excused, little indication is given that the private objectification and harassment of women will be taken seriously. While victims of street harassment recognize that violence against women and sexual assault are far more extreme than catcalling, they also recognize that when unaddressed, both the perpetrators and witnesses of these crimes learn that perhaps in some circumstances, this behavior is acceptable. If unresolved, the lack of conversation surrounding street harassment will allow this problem to persist long into the future.

Thus, individuals with an understanding of street harassment must begin the process of educating the public within their own lives on a daily basis. An impact is only made with the courage to face a problem that seems far too big to tackle. First and foremost, it is crucial that victims of street harassment are given the opportunity to share their story. Rather than encouraging friends and family members to brush off catcalls, taking their stories seriously and pushing them to report will ultimately increase awareness and intolerance for this problem. Additionally, after experiencing or witnessing a catcall, calling the police or appropriate authorities will ultimately lead to the most action and response on the front end of this movement. If actively witnessing sexual harassment, in addition to reporting it, safely responding to the perpetrator with the intent of educating, rather than infuriating, can also provide solace for the victim. Rather than standing by and allowing such behavior to be tolerated, at the very least, acknowledge the inappropriate and harmful comments made to validate the woman’s discomfort and
fear. If unable to respond, resources like the hollaback! app allow for street harassment to be mapped and recorded to help other women avoid it and authorities prevent it (Haparimwi). Raising awareness through social media allows women to hear the stories of others, validate their own experiences, and see the importance of reporting these crimes.

Speaking up about street harassment will allow those with little or no experience to gain an understanding of its pervasive and harmful nature. The upcoming generations will be born into a society where sexual harassment, particularly online, will be as, if not more prevalent than ever before. It is essential that students in grade school, high school, college, and law school are educated as to why they must no longer consider street harassment an inevitable, natural occurrence. Additionally, parents should hold conversations warning against street harassment in the home frequently, teaching their children to fight against the sexual objectification presented to them in the media from such a young age. Their generation, if properly educated, will be the catalyst for changing the culture of sexual objectification that has tormented women in the United States for far too long.

By shifting away from the individual perpetrator and focusing on a culture that perpetuates sexual objectification, the norms that allow for street harassment to persist can be more easily identified in the midst of so many varying experiences. In doing so, this pervasive harm can be addressed from the root rather than the endless list of individual motives behind each occurrence. Street harassment and sexual objectification have been ingrained into our society by a long history of female oppression and sex-based discrimination. However, we now live in a world where women are closer to equality than in any time before. Our next move will be critical in closing the gap; the daily effects, psychological harm, and physical consequences of street harassment must be brought to light to create a future where these crimes are no longer disregarded, but globally acknowledged as unacceptable behaviors of the past. Everyday catcalls, stares, and whistles must come to an end to lay the foundation for a society intolerant to the sexual objectification of women in every and all contexts.

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