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Title:

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Date:

2023-05-01

Citation:

Hindes, S. & Fileborn, B. (2023). ‘Why did he do it? Because he’s a Fucking Bloke’: Victim Insights into the Perpetration of Street Harassment. British Journal of Criminology, 63 (3), pp.668-686. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azac029>.

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# ‘Why did he do it? Because he’s a fucking bloke’: victim insights into the perpetration of street harassment

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Despite the pervasive nature of street harassment, there is currently little research exploring who perpetrates street harassment and why. Drawing on interviews with Australians who have experienced street harassment, we examine their insights into perpetration. Participants identified individual-level, social/cultural, structural and contextual factors that facilitate street harassment. While existing theoretical explanations of gendered violence help to account for the perpetration of street harassment, these were not sufficient in accounting for participants’ experiences. Participants often drew on gendered, aged, classed and racial stereotypes in their perceptions of perpetrators. We argue that a nuanced understanding of power that accounts for multiple, intersecting forms of marginalisation is needed to understand who perpetrates, as well as who is perceived to perpetrate street harassment.

**KEY WORDS:** street harassment; perpetration; masculinity; gender-based violence

## INTRODUCTION

A flourishing body of work has demonstrated the pervasive and harmful nature of street harassment (Logan 2015; Fileborn and O’Neill 2021).<sup>1</sup> Street harassment comprises routine, often mundane, intrusions including actions such as catcalling, wolf-whistling, prolonged staring, sexualized comments and unwanted touching, alongside more subtle interactions such as imposed, non-sexualized conversation (Logan 2015; Vera-Gray, 2016). Public harassment can include actions that are sexualized and gendered, as well as those driven by homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism and so forth. Thus, an intersectional lens is needed in accounting for the nature and lived experience of street harassment (Crenshaw 1991; Davis, 1994; Fileborn and O’Neill, 2021). The fluid and contextual nature of street harassment contributes towards its normalization and trivialization, with such encounters often constructed as ‘complimentary’, ‘friendly’

1 We use ‘street harassment’, ‘public harassment’ and ‘intrusions’ interchangeably throughout.

or 'flirtatious' in nature (Quinn 2002; Fairchild 2010; Fileborn and O'Neill 2021). While in certain contexts such behaviours may be experienced as welcome (or, at least, ambivalent), the harms of street harassment have been extensively documented (Bastomski and Smith 2017; Vera-Gray 2018). Yet, despite the growth of research in this field in recent years (predominantly focused on the experiences of cis-gender, heterosexual women), we know comparatively little about those who engage<sup>2</sup> in street-based harassment (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021).

Theories of masculinity have offered critical insights into why men perpetuate gender-based violence (Morris and Ratajczak 2019). However, this has primarily been in the context of domestic and sexual violence, with limited research applying theories of masculinity to street harassment. While street harassment can be understood as a manifestation of gender-based violence (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021), this phenomenon also has distinct qualities that warrant a focused analysis. As we note above, at least some iterations of this behaviour are trivialized, normalized and heavily contested as a form of harm. In contrast to other forms of gendered violence, street harassment appears to be predominantly perpetrated by strangers. In the context of this study, racist, homophobic, transphobic and other forms of harassment were included. While theories of masculinities and gendered violence are helpful in making sense of this phenomenon, they are not sufficient to fully account for these diverse experiences.

To contribute towards the limited body of knowledge on perpetrators of street harassment, we examine findings from interviews with 47 individuals who had experienced street harassment in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. Participants' accounts provide vital insights into who perpetrates this behaviour, and the social, cultural and environmental factors that enable harassment to occur. As Clark and Quadara (2010: viii) argue in relation to sexual assault, 'victim/survivors ... provide an important and under-utilised perspective on perpetration', and this logic similarly underpins our work. However, while we aim to centre participants' perspectives and experiences, what actions 'count' as harassment—and, subsequently, *whose* behaviour is seen as a 'problem'—is not neutral. These accounts illuminate the social *production* of street harassment, as much as they inform us about the lived 'reality' of who engages in this behaviour and why. Ultimately, we argue that participants' accounts simultaneously provide much-needed insights into perpetration, while also perpetuating other power relations and inequalities. Further, we contend that theories of masculinity provide a useful, but insufficient, framework for understanding street harassment. In contrast to the quote from a participant, Dave, in the article title, it is *not* just 'because he's a fucking bloke'. Rather, our findings point towards the need for multi-faceted, intersectional and nuanced accounts of perpetration that work alongside theories of masculinity.

## MASCULINITY, GENDER NORMS, GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND INTERSECTIONALITY

Researchers have frequently drawn upon theories of patriarchy and masculinity to understand gender-based violence, with men using violence as a tool to reinforce their dominance and the subordination of women (see Morris and Ratajczak 2019). However, these theories have most often been applied in studies looking at domestic and sexual violence, with masculinities under-theorized in relation to street harassment. Drawing on Connell (2005: 71) and Butler (1990), we understand gender as a complex, fluid and historically situated form of social organization. Gender is not a static identity, but something which is performed and constantly

2 We use terms such as 'engage', 'enact' and 'perpetrate' interchangeably throughout this article. We recognize that 'perpetration' is problematic, as it privileges criminal legal framings of harm. Moreover, many forms of street harassment are not illegal, so a criminal framing does not always reflect the reality of this behaviour. For want of a more direct expression, we continue to use perpetration.

achieved through bodily comportment, discursive acts, social interactions and so forth. The performance of gender is intertwined with other social structures including class, sexuality, race and culture, with multiple and competing constructions of what it means to be a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ at any given time (Butler 1990; Connell 2005).

We draw on Connell’s (2005) concept of hegemonic masculinity to understand the gender practices which reinforce patriarchy through the subordination of women and other men deemed to be lower on the gender hierarchy (such as homosexual men) to maintain the dominant position of (white, able-bodied, cis-gender and heterosexual) men. Hegemonic masculinity refers to the version of masculinity that is valorized and upheld as ‘ideal’ (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). As most men will not inhabit the hegemonic masculine ideal, men may engage in complicit masculinities—where they support and condone hegemonic masculinity, without embodying all its qualities themselves—to reclaim their masculine position (Messerschmidt 1993; Kimmel 2008). Violence towards women in both the public and private spheres is often understood as a mechanism to maintain and reinforce hegemonic masculinity and gendered power structures. Sexual violence is understood as a tool through which men can establish their dominance not only over women but also over other men to attain social status and power (see Fahlberg and Pepper 2016).

Alongside this theory of hegemonic masculinity, attitudes and norms relating to gender and sexuality at the individual, societal and institutional levels can work to normalize and justify gendered violence. For example, that men are dominant in households and relationships and have uncontrollable sexuality (Flood and Pease, 2009). Rape myths also reinforce gendered norms around sexual violence such as that women are ‘asking for it’ through getting drunk or wearing revealing clothing and that men cannot help themselves and are merely responding to women’s sexual invitations (Burt 1980; Franiuk *et al.* 2008). These gendered norms and attitudes are supported in institutional and organizational contexts, and through social networks and peer groups, including participation in homosocial male peer groups which reinforce tolerance for violence against women (DeKeseredy and Schwartz 1993; Flood and Pease 2009). There are also cultural and socioeconomic dimensions to gendered norms. Attitudes towards violence against women vary across different cultures and countries, and lower socioeconomic status and poverty has also been associated with higher risk of intimate partner violence and more accepting attitudes towards violence against women (Flood and Pease 2009). Finally, we take an intersectional lens to our analysis, understanding that street harassment is not simply an issue of men’s violence against women, but the product of intersecting patterns of sexism, racism, classism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia (Crenshaw 1991). We understand that these dimensions interact to shape the experiences of victims of street harassment, but also shape who is perceived to be a perpetrator, as we explore throughout the findings.

## PERPETRATION OF STREET HARASSMENT

Whilst there is a growing body of research exploring experiences of street harassment, there is only limited research on who perpetrates, for what reasons, and what resources are drawn on in facilitating harassment. Research suggests that it is men who most commonly engage in street harassment (Stop Street Harassment 2014). DelGreco *et al.*’s (2021) study with 348 undergraduate students in the United States found that all men they surveyed reported engaging in some form of street harassment, suggesting that it may be normalized for this cohort. Rosenbaum *et al.*’s (2020) study with men in Nepal found that 22% of the 219 respondents admitted to intentionally harassing women in public, with their behaviour aiming to intimidate, shame, terrorize, control or assault. However, several studies have also found evidence that women do engage in

some forms of street harassment (Meza-de-Luna and Garcia-Falconi 2015; Armstrong 2016). Thus, while it seems likely that men disproportionately engage in this behaviour, we must be careful not to use 'gendered' synonymously with 'men.' Rather, there is a need to examine the different power structures and contextual factors that might underpin engagement in this behaviour by men and women (and differences *within* these categories), in addition to gender diverse and non-binary people.

Additionally, studies have found that class and race shape people's perceptions of who is engaging in harassing behaviours, with men from lower socio-economic backgrounds identified as 'more likely' to perpetrate harassment (Dhillon and Bakaya 2014; Alcade 2020). Fileborn's (2016) work on unwanted sexual attention in licensed venues found that participants typically 'othered' perpetrators and believed that this behaviour was disproportionately engaged in by men from different social and cultural backgrounds to themselves, even if this was at odds with their lived experiences. Whilst there is limited research on race and class in terms of who perpetrates, there is clearer evidence to suggest that engaging in street harassment is shaped by sexism, misogyny and adherence to particular masculinities (Fileborn and O'Neill 2021). Henry's (2017) study with self-professed harassers presented five central motivations that led perpetrators to engage in street harassment: normalization, sexual objectification, women's position in society, to punish women, and because the perpetrators believed that they were oppressed—with this final motivation suggesting that men might use harassment as a way of (re)claiming 'lost' power, in line with Kimmel's (2008) concept of aggrieved entitlement (see also Flood, Dragiewicz and Pease 2020; DelGreco *et al.* 2021). Further, men who have strong beliefs about gender roles, conform to traditional notions of masculinity, who are oriented towards social dominance, and have hostile attitudes towards women are more likely to engage in and be tolerant of street harassment (Wessleman and Kelly 2010; Mellon 2013; Walton and Pedersen 2021).

Other studies have found that men who engage in street harassment place blame on women and girls (Henry 2017). For example, in Zeitz and Das' (2018: 1234) study with young men in Mumbai, India one man justified his actions through saying girls had 'loose morals'. Street harassment can subsequently be understood as functioning to police and control the actions of women (and others) in public space, (re)establishing a hierarchical gender order (Crouch 2009; Vera-Gray 2016; Baptist and Coburn 2019; Fileborn 2021a). In contrast, Walton and Pedersen's (2021) study with heterosexual cisgender men found that men who engage in cat-calling primarily do this to express sexual interest and to flirt. They found that most men wanted a friendly reaction from women and hoped that it would be interpreted as a form of flattery, and their intention was not to harm. However, the authors identified tensions between this stated aim, and other attitudes the participants adhered to, such as hostile sexism and tolerance of sexual harassment.

Several studies have illustrated the role that homosociality plays in fostering harassment (Quinn 2002; Grazian 2007; Wesselman and Kelly 2010; Vera-Gray 2016; Baptist and Coburn 2019). Grazian (2007: 222) examined the practice of 'girl hunting' in licensed venues—a collective practice performed by young men whereby they 'aggressively seek out female sexual partners'. Girl hunting, Grazian argues (2007: 222), serves 'as strategies of impression management in which young men sexually objectify women' and as a way of 'doing' masculinity at both the individual and group level. The 'girl hunt' can be understood as a ritual performed by men *for other men* to establish a suitably hegemonic masculinity and group belonging, as much as it relates to any genuine attempt to engage in a casual heterosexual encounter (see also Quinn 2002). Wesselman and Kelly (2010) similarly found that participants were more likely to engage in stranger harassment when in a group, suggesting that street harassment may be engaged in as part of homosocial male-bonding, as well as providing an enhanced sense of

anonymity. Collectively, these studies clearly demonstrate that masculinities, misogyny and sexism play a central role in why men engage in street harassment.

## METHODS

This paper draws on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 47 individuals who had self-defined experiences of street or public harassment in Victoria and New South Wales, Australia. These interviews form a subset of data from a project examining victim-centred justice responses to street harassment conducted by the second named author. Ethics approval was received from the University of Melbourne ethics committee prior to commencing fieldwork. Participants were recruited via paid social media advertisements on Facebook and Instagram, in addition to word of mouth, and advertisements shared by key organizations such as LGBTQ+ community groups and street harassment activist groups. Participants were required to be age 18 and older, live in New South Wales or Victoria, and to have self-defined experiences of street-based harassment, including harassment occurring based on gender, sexuality, racism, homophobia and ableism. Participation was open to people of all genders and sexual orientations. Forty-seven participants were recruited, and an overview of participant demographics is provided in Table 1. All interviews except one were conducted by the second named author over Zoom during 2020, with the remaining interview conducted face to face. Prior to the interview, participants were provided with an overview of the interview themes, and a plain language statement and consent form outlining what the interview would involve, the risks of participation, as well as contact details for relevant support services. Participants were able to indicate prior to the interview

**Table 1.** Overview of participant demographics

| Gender                                      | Sexuality                            |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Cisgender woman <i>n</i> = 32               | Heterosexual <i>n</i> = 24           |
| Cisgender man <i>n</i> = 5                  | Queer <i>n</i> = 6                   |
| Non-binary <i>n</i> = 3                     | Bisexual <i>n</i> = 10               |
| Transmasculine/transgender man <i>n</i> = 2 | Lesbian <i>n</i> = 1                 |
| Transgender woman <i>n</i> = 2              | Homosexual/gay <i>n</i> = 4          |
| Agender <i>n</i> = 2                        | Pansexual/demi-sexual <i>n</i> = 2   |
| Androgynous <i>n</i> = 1                    |                                      |
| Age*                                        | Cultural background**                |
| 18–25, <i>n</i> = 17                        | White <i>n</i> = 35                  |
| 26–30, <i>n</i> = 15                        | Asian <i>n</i> = 3                   |
| 31–35, <i>n</i> = 6                         | African/White <i>n</i> = 1           |
| 36–40, <i>n</i> = 5                         | Indian/Indian-Australia <i>n</i> = 2 |
| 41 + <i>n</i> = 3                           | Filipino <i>n</i> = 2                |
|                                             | South America <i>n</i> = 1           |
|                                             | Hispanic <i>n</i> = 1                |
|                                             | Egyptian/New Zealand <i>n</i> = 1    |
|                                             | White/Indigenous <i>n</i> = 1        |

\* One participant did not provide their age.

\*\* The terminology used here reflects that used by participants.

if there were any topics that they did not want to discuss and were reminded throughout the interview that responses to all questions were optional. For a detailed overview of the project's feminist methodology and ethical protocols, please refer to [Fileborn \(2021b\)](#). Interviews took between 1 and 2 hours to complete and were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Interview recordings were transcribed by an external service provider. Participants were reimbursed with a \$100 gift card in recognition of their time and expertise.

Prior to the interview, participants were invited to complete a Google mapping exercise documenting their experiences of street harassment across their life ([Fileborn 2021b](#)). During each interview, participants were invited by the researcher (the second-named author) to 'talk through their map'. Further questions were asked to encourage participants to reflect on the nature and impact of their experiences (example.g. the types of harassment experienced, locations that harassment typically occurs in), patterns relating to perpetration (e.g. who typically perpetrates harassment, any trends or patterns across their experiences, and why they think people engage in harassment), reporting and disclosure, and their perspectives on justice and potential justice responses to street harassment. In this article, we focus on findings in relation to perpetration.

Both authors conducted the data analysis on perpetration following [Braun and Clarke's \(2021\)](#) approach to thematic analysis. This process involved undertaking an initial reading of each transcript, with tentative notes taken to develop a draft coding scheme. Both authors then coded a selection of transcripts to refine the codes and ensure that we had a shared understanding of the data. Each author then took responsibility for coding half of the transcripts each. Inductive and deductive coding was utilized, with descriptive codes based on core categories in the interview questions (e.g. 'perpetration', 'type of harassment') and themes developed through issues identified in participants' responses (e.g. 'masculinity', 'cultural norms' and 'power').

## FINDINGS

We move on now to examine findings in relation to the perpetration of street harassment. First, we explore *who* was identified as engaging in harassment—including the trends apparent across participants' experiences, and how the identity of harassers was constructed. Next, we consider participants' explanations for *why* people engage in street harassment. Participants' responses were typically nuanced and multi-faceted, often reflecting the ecological model of gender-based violence, which accounts for causal factors across the individual, community and societal levels. Finally, we investigate the environmental and contextual factors that facilitated perpetration, with these often acting in concert with social and structural causes.

### WHO IS PERPETRATING STREET HARASSMENT? 'IT'S ALWAYS MEN'

Participants overwhelmingly—although not exclusively—described experiencing street harassment from men. Indeed, several participants commented that 'it's always men' who engage in street harassment. However, across the interviews, there was not one clear 'type' of man who was more likely to harass. Participants described experiences from men of all ages, socio-economic backgrounds, cultural groups, men alone, men in groups and so forth. For example, Chris (cisgender man, queer, 27). said that his experiences of homophobic harassment were from 'mainly men, groups of men'. In contrast, Frances (cisgender woman, heterosexual, 27) said, 'from my experience it's mainly just been ... individuals'. Similarly, some participants believed that younger men disproportionately engaged in this behaviour, while others commented that older men were more commonly the source of harassment. However, individual participants drew boundaries around the types of men who engaged in harassing behaviours, with there

being clear age, class and cultural dimensions. This suggests that participants’ perspectives on ‘who’ perpetrates likely (and unsurprisingly) reflect their personal experiences of street harassment, and that certain ‘types’ of men held particular salience as being harassers.

Cisgender-women participants, who typically experienced street harassment from a young age, often identified ‘older men’ as harassers. They described harassment from older men as ‘gross’, ‘creepy’ and ‘disgusting’, and would draw upon the age gap to explain why harassment from older men felt threatening and disrespectful. The age gap was often a way for participants to differentiate between harassment that could be perceived as ‘flirtation’ or an otherwise acceptable, wanted form of sexual interaction:

Those guys they would’ve been like almost the age of my dad, and I think like do these men have daughters, like how can they look at somebody the age of their daughter in like a sexualised way? (Kara, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 22)

However, Reilly (cisgender woman, heterosexual, 36) reflected on whether she would have interpreted a particular incident as harassment if the person had been younger and attractive—factors that have been found in other studies to influence perceptions and experiences of street harassment (LaRocca and Kromrey 1999; Fairchild 2010):

What’s interesting, so if this is like someone who you think is quite good looking or something, it’s almost okay, but then if it’s someone who’s like 60 and balding, that suddenly is offensive.

This reflection reiterates the contextual and relational nature of street harassment: the ‘line’ between harassment and flirtation may vary depending on who is engaging in the behaviour, the social and cultural context in which it occurs, and the form the harassment takes. Participants drew on discursive constructions of the sexually deviant ‘creepy old man’ (Sandberg 2016), and social norms pertaining to ‘age appropriate’ relationships to articulate the wrongfulness of these encounters. These discursive positions provided a framework to express the harms of these experiences in an ‘intelligible’ way (Hindes and Fileborn 2020), while simultaneously perpetuating what are arguably ageist attitudes. This is not to discount participants’ experiences nor to suggest that the actions of these men were somehow acceptable. There are also clear power dynamics at play, with these women noting that the ‘power dynamic is even more visible when you’re younger’ (Jen, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 27), with older men also occupying a position of relative power and authority over young women. Rather, these responses provide insight into the production of perpetration: *whose* behaviours are constructed as acceptable/unacceptable, and in what contexts. Notably, while younger men were also identified as engaging in harassment, their actions were almost never described using terms such as ‘creepy’.

The race and culture of men were also drawn on by participants to describe harassers, in particular ‘Middle Eastern’, ‘Arabic’, ‘Latin’ and ‘European’ men. Whilst some participants openly named the race/culture of harassers, others hesitantly named them but acknowledged that they did not want to perpetuate ‘racial profiling’.<sup>3</sup> White men were also described as harassers, and there were classed dimensions to descriptions of white and/or Australian men who harass. In particular ‘tradies’ (i.e. men who work on construction sites) were consistently named by participants as harassers, to the point where some participants described not feeling comfortable walking past construction sites on their everyday routes. However, it is unclear to what extent this reflects the extent participants experiences of harassment from

3 It is worth noting that participants were not explicitly asked to comment on the race/culture of perpetrators during the interviews.

tradies, or their salience as harassers, given they are constructed as archetypal perpetrators of this behaviour. Discussing a construction site that had gone up near her house, Avery said 'as a woman, immediately I associate [that] with street based sexual harassment, *obviously*' (cisgender woman, heterosexual, 29, our emphasis). Another participant, who had identified 'working class men' as the main perpetrators of homophobic harassment reflected on why he might hold such a perspective, especially given 'I go quite quickly past these people, and I don't really get a chance to take a huge look' (Chris, cisgender man, queer, 27). Chris attributed his perception to growing up in a 'fairly working-class environment where homophobia was pretty standard' and questioned whether his perception was 'me ... looking at someone and assessing them from ... a class perspective or how much is that just me associating that kind of speak and behaviour with experiences I've had before'. This suggests that Chris' perceptions of who engages in harassment was shaped through the lens of past experiences, with particular 'types' of men holding salience as perpetrators regardless of whether this is reflective of his more recent experiences.

In contrast to the claim that 'it's always men', a small portion of participants also described being harassed by women. This behaviour was most often described as racist, homophobic, or transphobic abuse, or judgmental stares and comments, rather than being sexual in nature. However, participants typically noted that harassment from women was rare, or constructed it as anomalous. Chris recounted another experience of homophobic abuse from an elderly woman, an encounter he described as 'a pretty funny one':

We were walking hand in hand and walked past an elderly Greek woman who cursed at us and then spat on the floor going kind of like going 'disgusting, disgusting', which was very – was very confronting just because I'd never had that experience before.

There are some tensions apparent in this account, notably that Chris found this encounter to be both 'funny' and 'confronting'. While he did not elaborate further on this when prompted, it is possible that this encounter was constructed as an oddity as older women are rarely, if ever, depicted as perpetrators of harassment or abuse. Indeed, this encounter challenges dominant constructions of older women as frail, meek and compliant, in addition to the construction of perpetrators as almost exclusively being cisgender men. Certainly, we do not wish to overstate the extent to which women engaged in harassment—men were overwhelmingly identified as perpetrators, and this reflects what we know about gendered violence more broadly. Nonetheless, women *did* engage in harassment. Thus, while theories of masculinity are central to understanding the perpetration of harassment, they are not sufficient to account for the full range of participants' experiences.

Without discounting participants' experiences of harassment, our discussion here illustrates that sometimes behaviours may have been experienced as harassment in part because of the age, race, or class of the person engaging them. Likewise, participants' discussions reflect who is front of mind as a perpetrator: these are not 'neutral' reflections on their experiences. Indeed, many participants indicated during the interviews that it was virtually impossible to remember all experiences of harassment, due to its routine, mundane nature. These accounts have been curated for a particular audience, in addition to being shaped by memory and perceptions of 'what counts' as harassment (Fileborn 2021b). These findings therefore present insights into how perpetrators are constructed, with participants' narratives often working to 'other' the men who engaged in harassment, particularly through the reproduction of racial, classed and aged-based power relations. That said, participants were also often highly reflexive, and simultaneously resisted narratives that perpetuated the othering of marginalized men.

## FROM 'LACKING UNDERSTANDING' TO SOMETHING MORE 'DEEP AND SINISTER' - INDIVIDUAL CAUSES FOR ENGAGING IN STREET HARASSMENT

When participants were asked why they thought people engaged in street harassment, many drew on individual-level causes in their explanations. Some participants thought that men lacked understanding that what they are doing is harassment due to their youth, education level, cultural differences and/or a lack of insight into 'what it's like to be a woman' (Pearl, cisgender woman, queer, 35). Under this framing, harassment was attributed to men's genuine misunderstanding of the nature and impacts of their actions which, similarly to participants accounts in [Walton and Pedersen's \(2021\)](#) study, were interpreted as good-natured (if misguided) efforts at flirtation and courtship. Participants' comments often touched on perceived differences in gendered socialisation, arguing that men could not comprehend their behaviour as inappropriate because they would personally be flattered by it, have not been socialized to be fearful of strange men in public and have not routinely experienced harassment:

I think men have quite different experiences and they often think that they'd like to be complimented so that complimenting the woman is a nice thing to do. (Rory, agender, queer, 29)

I don't think they would have put any thought into it... they wouldn't have thought from a recipient perspective like, you know, the woman is obviously not as strong as the men physically that's how we were made, and its nighttime and you know watch the signs if I'm not asking a question to you is it time to stop talking. (Xanthe, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 30)

As the second quote here illustrates, some participants thought that men were misreading their signals, for example if they smiled or were polite to them. This reinforces the idea that there is a 'communication gap' between men and women (or those read as 'woman'), where men misjudge social cues from women, over-perceiving sexual interest ([Coy et al. 2016](#)). However, other participants challenged the idea that men lack understanding or misread signals, saying they thought men knew exactly what they were doing, and that making the recipient feel uncomfortable was part of the aim. As Grant (cisgender man, homosexual, 31) bluntly put it, 'they know they're being dicks'.

Participants drew upon the tactics harassers would use to obscure their identity or minimize the likelihood of being observed by others to suggest that men know what they are doing is wrong:

When they're in a secluded place obviously there's no judgement ... because they probably know what's happening, they probably understand the things they say aren't pretty. (Zara, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28)

Tenesha (cisgender woman, bisexual, 22) pointed to the content and form of much harassment to contest the idea that it could be intended as a 'genuine' but misguided complement, saying 'I don't think they're doing it in order to establish a connection with the person they're harassing ... And I don't think that they're doing it in a way that they could ever consider complimentary either like it's always so vulgar'.

Participants drew on affective and emotive factors and attributed the behaviour to men being bored and just wanting to have fun, suggesting that harassment is simply an everyday way for men to occupy themselves. Women spoke of groups of young men being 'excited' and 'riled up' and engaging in harassment 'for a reaction' or 'for a laugh'. In relation to young men,

a small number of participants drew on biological reasons such as brain development and hormones, reinforcing the idea that men cannot control their behaviour due to their biological makeup:

I think it's got to do with the brain development, I mean they're not really at that mature age to ... understand that what's right and what's wrong. (Sarah, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28)

In other cases, harassers were depicted as possessing some form of 'deficiency', with participants variably describing them as 'stupid' (Helen, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 36), 'uneducated, ignorant ... with a sense of big ego [and] low self-esteem' (Ingrid, cisgender woman, lesbian, 66), 'loser[s]' (Amy, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 20), and 'sorry people who have nothing going for them' (Zara, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28). Implicit here is the idea that men who occupy subordinate forms of masculinity are more likely to engage in harassment. Some participants also identified more 'deep and sinister' reasons for street harassment, such as men harassing for their own sexual gratification, because they knew it would make women feel scared, or because they were 'gross', 'creepy', 'sleazy' and 'feral' types of men.

Collectively, these individual-level narratives worked to excuse and downplay the actions of men as either accidental or unintentional, or functioned to paint harassers as deviant monsters, rather than as an extension of everyday misogyny, sexism and heteronormativity. In some cases, participants' responses construct harassment as a matter of immutable biological traits or deficiencies in individual men. This obscures broader structural issues and facilitates the normalisation of street harassment. Whilst some participants solely adopted this individualistic framing of harassers, these responses were typically in conjunction with some discussion of the cultural and structural drivers that allow street harassment to occur.

### 'IT'S EASY, THERE ARE NO CONCEIVABLE CONSEQUENCES': THE CULTURAL SANCTIONING OF STREET HARASSMENT

Participants viewed street harassment as normalized and culturally acceptable, connecting it to the wider acceptance of gendered violence, and misogynist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes. They also pointed to the culture of silence and believed that this led to a context where street harassment could go on unchallenged, if not encouraged as acceptable masculine behaviour:

You know if someone tells a rape joke to their friends at a bar and no one says that's inappropriate, and it's unacceptable, then they're going to think it's fine to do it next time. (Alex, non-binary, queer, 26)

It's probably been normalised so they've seen a cycle of their Dad or their friends doing it, so they think it's okay to do it as well. (Yasmin, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28)

Some participants also reflected on how this was a context and culturally dependent phenomenon. Some drew on their experiences living or travelling in countries where street harassment was *not* culturally accepted and routinely challenged when it did occur. In turn, they witnessed and experienced little or no street harassment:

I never got harassed like in [country redacted] as far as I can remember because I think the cultural thing... if someone said anything about someone else the other people would protect you ... and I've realised in Australia when I first came in that's not the case. (Xanthe, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 30)

However, participants also drew on experiences living or travelling in countries where (in their view) the culture was more patriarchal and misogynistic. Participants described experiencing greater levels of street harassment, saying that women's behaviour was more heavily policed in these countries and/or it was more culturally acceptable for men to approach women and make sexualized comments.

I don't see that as much in western cultures, and because of that misogyny I do think there's a lot more women are being seen as objects, women are sexualised, women are started at. (Ursula, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 20)

In other contexts, participants believed that some forms street harassment, such as men trying to talk to women on the street or shouting out 'compliments', were viewed as a culturally acceptable way for men to try to flirt and 'pick up', particularly in European countries. Participants acknowledged that these behaviours might be read as flattery or flirting in other cultures, however they experienced them as harassing:

I feel like it was a culture clash, they thought maybe they were trying to flatter me up by talking about me or looking at me ... but it just made me feel so isolated and so creeped out. (Zara, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28)

In contrast to the notion that men from specific cultural groups were more likely to harass, others painted street harassment as a near-universal phenomenon across cultures, with Bridget (cisgender woman, heterosexual, 24) dryly observing that 'men are pretty shit everywhere'. It is difficult to disentangle the role(s) that cultural difference might play in shaping harassment. Certainly, as we noted earlier, there *are* documented cultural differences in adherence to violence supportive norms (Flood and Pease 2009), and it is plausible that this contributes towards cultural differences in the nature, extent and normalization of street harassment. However, it is equally the case that these accounts may be functioning to construct harassment as engaged in by 'other' men who are 'not like us'.

Cultural norms that minimize and excuse men's behaviour also played a role in sanctioning street harassment. For example, this behaviour was described as 'locker room banter' and a case of 'boys will be boys' (Donna, cisgender woman, heterosexual/questioning, 18). Age also played a role here, with participants thinking that older men had outdated and entrenched sexist attitudes. As a result, participants believed that older men may feel more entitled to harass women, and that harassment was more normalized and accepted amongst this cohort. These responses illustrated the ways in which street harassment might be normalized in general across Australian culture, but also how it might be normalized and excused in specific ways for particular groups of men.

Participants pointed to the lack of consequences for street harassment, saying that 'so many men have gotten away with it, they just do it, and nothing happens' (Yasmin, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28). This included a lack of social consequences, as participants rarely experienced bystander intervention (Fileborn 2017), but also a lack of institutional consequences, given that many forms of street harassment are not addressed under criminal legislation in Australia, or are poorly responded to when they are legally sanctioned (Fileborn 2022). This lack of repercussions reinforced harassment as culturally acceptable:

I think sometimes people are motivated by the fact that they are not reprimanded earlier. (Reilly, cisgender woman, heterosexual 36)

As a lesbian it was much more aggressive and that they had the permission to be like that ... almost like the law on their side to that that ... well, society's permission. (Ingrid, cisgender woman, lesbian, 66)

Collectively, participants' accounts demonstrated the role of social, cultural and institutional factors in minimizing and condoning street harassment. The discussion here has also begun to point to the role of masculinities, and we move on to consider this in more detail.

## 'IT'S JUST MEN SORT OF SHOWING THEMSELVES AS THE SUPERIOR GENDER': MASCULINITY, POWER AND STREET HARASSMENT

I think it's very much tied up in that performative masculinity (Alex, non-binary, queer, 26)

The idea that street harassment was a way for men to perform their masculinity was a common theme throughout the interviews. Whilst the last section described the ways in which cultural renderings of masculinity allow street harassment to occur, street harassment was also described as an avenue for reinforcing and performing hegemonic masculinities. Power was a common reason participants identified for why people engage in street harassment and particularly power relating to gender. Jen (cisgender woman, heterosexual, 27) observed that power imbalances were one of the primary factors facilitating street harassment, saying they had never experienced harassment when they felt *they* were in a position of power.

I've never seen or witnessed or experienced street harassment in that situation where I felt like I had the power, it's never been like one guy yelling at 6 friends.

Participants' accounts constructed power as operating in a bifurcated way: harassment could be drawn on to (re)assert power ('I am going to harass her because I am powerful', Georgia, cisgender woman, bisexual, 19); or, used to gain power from a position of (perceived) powerlessness ('They're all men without a lot of power in some part of their life', Parker, non-binary, queer, 42). Some participants understood street harassment as a way for men to 'put women in their place' and keep themselves at the top of the gender hierarchy:

I think it's just men ... showing themselves as the superior gender by ... dehumanising the female gender, I think that's ... where there's ... power (Sarah, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 28)

It's a bit of a power trip to make someone feel small and to make someone feel vulnerable, especially women. I think it's another way of putting women in their place, you know, we can access you at any time, we can objectify you at any time and any place, you're not allowed to feel safe like we are. (Tenesha, cisgender woman, bisexual, 22)

This explanation reflects [Crouch's \(2009: 137\)](#) conceptualisation of street harassment as 'a means of maintaining women's status as subordinate in society' and a mechanism to exclude and/or control women's behaviour in public space, and harassment arguably functions in a similar way in relation to other modes of oppression relating to, for example, race and sexuality (see, e.g. [Davis 1994](#); [Fileborn and O'Neill 2021](#)). Indeed, power was discussed by participants in relation to race, culture and sexuality through the policing of difference in public space. Racist harassment, for example, was viewed as a mechanism to uphold white supremacy and white masculinity.

One thing is like supremacy, so most of the people who've harassed me in my life have been like white men, white boys and you know when the economic and social system that, you know sets out your life, tells you, is like built for you and tells you that you're the best ... you want to uphold that. (River, agender, bisexual, 19)

Dave drew attention to the pressure on men to be hypersexual and treat women as sexual objects, with street harassment providing one avenue to achieve this aspect of hegemonic masculinity:

Young lads are taught at a young age that in order to fulfil the gender role of what men is, is to then have access to as many women as possible, and have no emotional content, no emotional attachment and just see a body and I can touch that because that's mine. (Dave, cisgender man, heterosexual, 29)

As well as men asserting dominance over women, some participants also thought street harassment was a way for men to assert dominance over other men, reinscribing hierarchies of masculinity. This competitiveness between men was described as part of 'male bonding'. Participants spoke about there being a 'herd mentality' amongst groups of men, with them 'egging each other on' when in groups. Harassment was seen as a way for men to bond and show off to each other:

It's a dick measuring contest, it's hey look at me, I can shout out to that lass, and it's alright, and that makes me a fella, that makes me a bloke, and that makes me a bigger bloke than you lads. (Dave, cisgender man, heterosexual, 29)

Such comments align with the concept of homosociality, and the role that the harassment of women (and other men) can play in establishing oneself as suitably 'masculine' to an audience of male peers (Quinn 2002; Grazian 2007; Wesselmann and Kelly 2010). Indeed, participants were acutely aware of the relational aspect of harassment. As Aaron (trans masculine, bisexual, 36, our emphasis) observed, 'it's about being *perceived* to be asserting dominance over the space', while Chris (cisgender man, queer, 27) described harassment from men in cars as 'part of this homosocial bonding ritual'. Others thought that harassing and sexualizing women was a way for men to prove they were not homosexual through the public display of their heterosexuality. This was similarly achieved through degrading and homophobic comments to people who harassers perceived to be LGBTIQ+, casting them as 'othered' to reinforce their heterosexual masculinity.

## ENVIRONMENTAL FACILITATORS AND TOOLS OF HARASSMENT

Participants observed how harassers harnessed contextual and environmental features as tools to enable their behaviour. Commonly identified tools of harassment included anonymity, physical features of the environment, having 'plausible deniability', and the use of communications technology. For example, crowded environments such as public transport or licensed venues meant harassers could stare, get close and inappropriately touch participants without it seeming out of the ordinary to onlookers:

I was on the way to work, yeah and I was standing up and I think it was quite packed [on the train] and then like a guy came up behind me ... and I found it kind of hard to explain too, was because he like rubbed up against me but it wasn't in a way that I could say that's what you're definitely doing. (Nora, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 31)

In this case, the crowded nature of the train in conjunction with unavoidable incidental touch on public transport provided the harasser with plausible deniability about the intent of their actions. Nora said that this ambiguity and subsequent (potential) denial of intent informed her decision not to report the incident to police, suggesting that the various factors underpinning harassment mutually reinforce and co-constitute one another. As public transport draws together large numbers of strangers in a public space, this enabled perpetrators to remain

anonymous, making it difficult if not impossible for participants to attempt to hold the harasser to account. As Neupane and Chesney-Lind (2014) have argued, public transport offers men 'both proximity and anonymity' with 'very little risk of social or legal consequences' (pg. 23). In other cases, a veneer of 'politeness' or 'flirtation' could provide plausible deniability, with the normalization of harassment thus providing a tool for harassers to utilize. This was particularly the case for harassment occurring in licensed venues and other spaces where some forms of sexual interaction were normal, if not desirable, features (see also Fileborn 2016).

These experiences demonstrate how a range of environmental and context-specific features can be taken advantage of by harassers to facilitate and obscure their actions, often working in concert with the broader social and cultural norms discussed earlier in this article. Indeed, the factors driving harassment were often deeply intertwined, and we use the example of car-related harassment to demonstrate how these work alongside each other. We argue that these drivers cannot be viewed in isolation from each other. Rather, street harassment is underpinned by multiple, co-constitutive and entangled structural and environmental causes.

### 'THEY FEEL LIKE THEY CAN GET AWAY WITH IT': THE USE OF CARS AND MOBILITY

An overarching and significant theme was the use of cars and mobility to perpetrate street harassment. Cars were used to threaten, intimidate (such as following and stalking using the car or driving aggressively) and harass (through beeping and yelling from the car). Thus, the affordances of cars could be drawn on for their *communicative* function, with the vehicle itself becoming a mode of harassment in the case of actions such as honking, engine revving and aggressive driving:

Just standing there and having young guys in cars... speed past. So, nothing was ever said but you're like you know it's for your benefit, you know because you're the only person standing on the road and all of a sudden a car decides they're going to start speeding and hoon past. (Fiona, cisgender woman, heterosexual, 31)

Participants recounted many examples of (almost exclusively) men yelling out abuse to women, those who are visibly queer, from a culture different to theirs, or with non-normative bodies (for example, participants discussed harassment relating to visible self-harm scars, and body size):

I got followed by some guys in a ute and it was petrifying [...] they were just driving slowly next to me while I walked and I think that's kind of worse than saying something because then it was like oh my god what is about to happen (Coraline, cisgender woman, bisexual, 28)

The one I get most often is like "faggots" screamed out a window. (Chris, cisgender man, queer, 27)

Balkmar (2014: 168; 2018) observes that cars have 'the capacity to reproduce and express gender', with cars signifying 'masculinity, power, speed and risk' (pg. 167), although they can also be sites of gendered contestation and disruption (see also Bengry-Howell and Griffin 2007; Lumsden 2013). Drawing on assemblage thinking, Balkmar (2014: 168) argues that we must understand the car and human as co-constitutive of one another, with the car forming an 'extension of the (male) body'. Using this framework, we can understand car-based harassment as providing a (literal and figurative) site for the performance of hegemonic masculinity—often in a homosocial way, as participants noted that car-related harassment frequently involved men

in groups. Utilizing the affordances of the car, such as revving the engine or honking the horn, symbolically communicates the 'power, potency, mobility and speed' of the object and its inhabitants (Balkmar 2014: 168). Indeed, this is reflected in Donna's comments above, where the car serves to heighten the perceived power imbalance involved in harassment due to the enhanced mobility and capacity of the man-car assemblage. Engagement in 'risky' driving practices is in and of itself associated with the accomplishment of particular masculinities (Balkmar 2018). The experiences of participants suggest that these driving practices can also serve as a form of homosocial performance (when done in the company of other men), and as a means of reiterating gendered hierarchies in relation to women and men who occupy subordinate masculinities (such as Chris, above).

Participants' thought that cars were used as a tool allowing harassers to quickly escape the situation, affording them anonymity. Certainly, this aligns with Balkmar's (2018: 719) observation that the 'disinhibition and the dehumanizing anonymity afforded by the motor car' can facilitate other forms of driving-related aggression. In turn, car-related harassment was often fleeting and (at times) ambiguous in nature. As with public transport, this made it challenging for participants to take any action to hold perpetrators to account, and several participants discussed futile attempts to ascertain the vehicle license plate number. Likewise, participants felt that being in a car bolstered harasser's actions, as the mobility afforded by cars allowed them to evade the consequences of their actions:

They're much more likely to be rude to me about my scars if they are in a car than if they are on foot, and I really think the reason is if they abuse me on foot then we both have to stand at the pedestrian light awkwardly for 5 minutes. But if they're driving by in a car [and] they're at the light, they can yell horrible things at me and whatever and then they can zoom away (Evelyn, cisgender woman, bisexual, 27)

Participants thought that being harassed by someone in a car increased the power imbalance of the situation as they had the power to follow or hurt you with the car, this consequently increased the fear experienced by some participants when a car was involved:

There's such like a power imbalance, like if you ran — they've got a car, if you try and talk back to them — they can follow you twice as fast as you can run. ...that imbalance makes me... like if they wanted to, they could hurt me, they could. (Donna, cisgender woman, heterosexual/questioning, 18)

Donna's comments reflect what Balkmar (2018: 721) terms 'traffic hierarchies', with Donna, Evelyn and Coraline's position as a pedestrian enhancing the power disparity between them and their harassers. Both Donna and Coraline's comments draw attention to the *potentiality* contained in these interactions. While the fear of escalation or 'something worse' happening has been identified as a component of the harms of street harassment, these participants' comments suggest that such fears may be heightened for car-related harassment, given the enhanced capacity of the human-car hybrid to inflict serious physical injury and violence. These findings reflect and add to those of Feely Hutson and Krueger (2019) who found that the use of transportation such as public transport and owning vehicles provided mobility in public space for harassers to inflict and threaten physical harm, escape, preserve anonymity and pursue their targets. Moreover, the use of cars in the perpetration of harassment illustrates the entanglement between the individual, social/cultural and structural drivers of harassment discussed throughout—these factors are deeply intertwined and co-constitutive.

## CONCLUSION

The impact of gendered norms, gender inequality and hegemonic masculinity are vital to consider in the perpetration of gendered violence. In this article, we have extended this analysis to the perpetration street harassment, which has been under-studied so far. To do this, we drew on interviews with individuals who have experienced street harassment, and their perceptions and understandings of *who* engages in this behaviour and *why*. Participants' experiences and reflections identified a wide range of individual-level, social/cultural and structural factors that they viewed as underpinning the perpetration of street harassment. Additionally, participants highlighted the environmental and contextual tools that perpetrators could harness to facilitate their actions and minimize the likelihood of being held to account. Notably, they identified the culture of silence and acceptance of sexist, racist and homophobic violence and the unwillingness for bystanders and authorities to intervene in this type of behaviour. Drawing on the example of harassment involving cars, we illustrated how these factors are deeply intertwined, and cannot be viewed in isolation from each other.

Whilst gendered norms, gender inequality, hegemonic masculinity and homosociality were central to understanding participants' experiences and perceptions as we explored throughout, we also identified that these frameworks were not *sufficient* in fully accounting for street harassment. This is particularly highlighted by the fact that women (whilst rare) were also identified as perpetrators, as well as harassment also being directed at people due to their race, disability, sexuality and diverse gender. Additionally, whilst participants experienced marginalisation, their responses also worked to actively *reinscribe* systems of power and oppression in their perceptions of street harassment. They often drew on problematic and stereotypical understandings of race, age and class—constructing men who are older, working class and from other cultures engaging in street harassment because they are in some way 'deficient'—whether that be in education, cultural literacy, communication, or biology. As such, participants' perspectives often reflected hierarchies of masculinity, situating men who engaged in this behaviour as occupying a subordinate masculinity. Participants' construction of perpetrators can also be understood as a process of 'othering', with some participants saying they felt unsafe or perceived behaviour as threatening because the person was 'not like them' (as illustrated through the language of deficiency discussed above; Fileborn 2016). Whether this was through constructing them as the 'ethnic other' or 'other' due to being from a lower socioeconomic group, the fear of difference was a key factor in many participants' perceptions of street harassment perpetrators. As we have argued throughout, participants' discussions cannot be understood as neutral or objective accounts, but rather function to actively 'other' some groups, occluding recognition of the full range of (predominantly) men who engage in harassment.

Therefore, our findings highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of power that extends beyond simplistic claims that street harassment is *only* a function of men's oppression of women. Instead, an intersectional and post-structuralist understanding of power posits that we are all differentially located on axis of oppression *and* privilege, with these forces (at least to some extent) relational and context dependent. As hooks (1984: 188) argued, it is the 'Western philosophical notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority that is the root cause of ... all violence between those who dominate and those who are dominated', and we are *all* inculcated to accept and utilize coercion and (where necessary) violent force to maintain control and power (though this is not to suggest that we all have equal *capacity* to utilize coercion and violence). This lens can help us to make sense of the diversity in experiences of street harassment and to understand that people can be implicated in furthering certain forms of oppression, while simultaneously experiencing marginalisation themselves. Whilst it is essential to situate street harassment firmly within the spectrum of men's violence against women, this research also indicates that a holistic approach is required in working towards the prevention of street-based harassment.

There are, of course, attendant limitations to the work presented here. As a qualitative project, these findings are not generalizable or transferable to other contexts. Many participants in the project were politically engaged, and were well versed in concepts relating to gender, intersectionality and structural oppression, so it is unclear to what extent these findings reflect the perspectives of recipients of street harassment more broadly. While this work provides deep insights into an understudied phenomenon, there is clearly more to be done, notably research that engages with those who enact street harassment. Nonetheless, this contribution further builds on the small body of work on the perpetration of street harassment and can begin to inform efforts working towards preventing this under-recognized form of harm.

## FUNDING

This project received funding from the Australian Research Council Discovery Early Career Researcher Award scheme (DP190100404).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their generous and constructive feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript. Thank you to Dr Tully O'Neill and Jess Hardley for their research assistance on this project.

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