ABSTRACT

TYRONE, BLYTHE ERYN. How Men Talk About Street Harassment. (Under the direction of Dr. Joann Keyton).

Street harassment is an everyday problem that disproportionately affects women, causing them significant emotional and psychological distress and restricts their movements in public spaces. Researchers have expressed a need for more research on street harassment, but the lack of a universally acknowledged definition of street harassment has complicated these efforts. Most previous research on street harassment has focused on women’s attitudes toward and perceptions of street harassment, though men primarily perpetrate street harassment. Activists have recognized the importance of recruiting men as allies against street harassment. Thus, this study seeks to determine how men identify and talk about interactions between men and women in public spaces in order to better understand if and how they identify instances of street harassment. Five all-male focus groups ($N = 26$) were conducted using video stimuli depicting interactions between a man and a woman in a public space. Participants’ responses to the videos suggest street harassment exists on a spectrum, and that some behaviors are worse than others. Participants agreed that the neutral video is acceptable and that the following video is unacceptable, but that the behaviors in the staring, wolf-whistle, and catcalling videos represent a grey area where they could not universally agree on the level of acceptability, and that there were certain contexts in which the behaviors might actually be appropriate. Though none of the men used the term street harassment to describe the behaviors exhibited in the video stimuli until the moderator introduced the term into the conversations, their descriptions and opinions of the behaviors are valuable in determining what methods may be effective in communicating with men to combat street harassment.
How Men Talk About Street Harassment

by
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CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Gender-based street harassment (hereafter referred to as street harassment) can be difficult to identify, which makes it challenging to define, study, and, thus, prevent (Logan, 2015). Often, the responsibility of determining what is and what is not street harassment lies with the victim after an incident has already occurred. As a result, street harassment research is scattered across disciplines under a variety of names and behaviors such as street hassling (West, 1987), street remarks (Kissling, 1991), public harassment (Gardner, 1995), sexual terrorism (Nielsen, 2002), girl watching (Quinn, 2002), stranger harassment (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), and catcalling (Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). Because the term street harassment seems to be the most encompassing term used by many researchers that often includes the previously mentioned behaviors (Kissling, 1991; Logan, 2015), that is the term used for this research.

To a witness, an instance of street harassment might appear to be a harmless comment from one stranger to another in passing, but in reality street harassment has lasting consequences. Many women who have been targets of street harassment often feel forced to stay home rather than enter public spaces, while others experience shame, anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, and other distresses (Livingston, 2015; Logan, 2015). Psychological problems are not the only ones; how a woman responds to street harassment can sometimes mean the difference between life and death (Culp-Ressler, 2014; Feis, 2014; “Fubu-clad man,” 2013; “Mass shooting kills mother of three,” 2014). In some countries,
such as Brazil and Japan, street harassment has become so problematic for women in public spaces that female-only transportation options exist (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

Researchers have expressed that there is a dearth of research on street harassment and that more is needed (Bowman, 1993; Darnell & Cook, 2009; Kissling, 1991; Logan, 2015; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). According to Logan (2015), policymakers and activists seeking to stop street harassment would benefit from knowing more about how factors such as race, gender, and sexual orientation affect perceptions of and resistance to street harassment.

Shereen El Feki, a co-author of a report on masculinity in the Middle East and North Africa that included street harassment, noted that, “We know quite a lot about women and girls but [relatively little] about men and boys” (Gharib, 2017, ¶ 5). Because most research has focused on women’s attitudes about street harassment but men’s attitudes and perceptions have been overlooked, men are the focus of this study. Social activists have recognized the importance of including men in the conversation about sexual violence; this study is an attempt to start the conversation (Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015; Male Allies, n.d.; Safer: NYC, 2016).

This paper will first present a review of the current literature on street harassment to establish what is already known about this communication phenomenon. Second, a detailed description of the methodology used for this study – all-male focus groups using video stimuli followed by a thematic analysis of the data – will be provided. Third, the results from the study will be reviewed to determine the answer to the research question. Finally, a
discussion will explore the implications of this research, make suggestions for future research, and address the limitations of this study.

CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review

The earliest documented example of street harassment appears to be 1875, as documented by Bowman (1993). However, it is only in recent history that women have publicly decried street harassment en masse and that researchers have addressed street harassment. Since the 1970s, women have been speaking out on the violence against them, with sexual assault, harassment, and domestic violence often overshadowing street harassment (Bowman, 1993; Logan, 2015). Bowman (1993) speculated that the combination of more women working and an economic recession in the 1970s and 1980s that put many men out of work and thus on the street where they would harass women more often highlighted the need for change and brought street harassment to light. Kissling (1991) claimed that research on street harassment then lost momentum, possibly because of lingering attitudes that women were being “too sensitive” (p. 456). Other reasons street harassment research may have slowed was because men underestimated or refused to accept the frequency and consequences of street harassment (Kissling, 1991; Nielsen, 2002; Quinn, 2002), and many researchers simply considered it too trivial or innocuous to study (di Leonardo, 1981; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Bowman (1993) notes that lawmakers, through their inaction, have not viewed street harassment as a problem worthy of their attention. However, recent media attention and nonprofit organizations dedicated to stopping street
harassment have pushed the issue back to the forefront of both the public’s and many researcher’s minds (Logan, 2015).

Though research on street harassment rose from sexual harassment research, the two phenomena are different. Sexual harassment is defined by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission as:

“Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment” (Facts About Sexual Harassment, 2009).

By these parameters, sexual harassment only occurs in the workplace, whereas street harassment occurs in public spaces. As a violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, sexual harassment is illegal (Facts About Sexual Harassment, 2009). Street harassment is not, though some forms of street harassment are illegal in some states to different degrees (Hagerty, n.d.). Sexual harassment is often perpetrated by someone the victim knows, such as a supervisor or coworker; street harassment is perpetrated by a stranger.

Because street harassment has not been codified into law like sexual harassment, it has many definitions, both from academic scholars (Logan, 2015; Nielsen, 2002; Davidson, et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008) as well as nonprofit organizations committed to combatting street harassment, such as Stop Street Harassment (Definitions, 2015) and the Brooklyn Movement Center (Anti-Street Harassment, 2014). The lack of a single, clear
definition presents a challenge to the study of street harassment as well as the application of solutions to the problem (Definitions, 2015). Themes, however, can be drawn from the existing popular and scholarly literature.

**Who Street Harassment Involves**

Generally, victims of street harassment are women of all ages and ethnicities (Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2014; Logan, 2015; Nielsen, 2002). According to Kearl (2014), 65% of U.S. women have experienced street harassment, while an Oxygen/Markle (2014) survey found that 87% of U.S. women ages 18 to 64 have experienced street harassment. Nielsen (2002) found that 100% of women interviewed declared that they had experienced street harassment at some point. While men can experience street harassment, they are less likely to experience it frequently or at all (Kearl, 2014; Nielsen, 2002). Previous research has not declared whether street harassment happens more often when women travel alone. Though many women report feeling safer when walking with someone (Kearl, 2014), that does not necessarily mean they are not still harassed.

Nielsen (2002) also asserted that all historically oppressed groups, such as people of color and homosexuals, experience street harassment more often, regardless of gender. The rate at which people of color report experiencing street harassment in general is higher than that of whites, though street harassment does affect women of all races more than men (Chen, 1997; Kearl, 2014).

All forms of street harassment – whether motivated by perceived gender, race, or sexual orientation – are primarily perpetrated by men (Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2014;
Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). For the purpose of empirical research, this study is concerned with street harassment committed by men against women.

**Key Features of Street Harassment**

Street harassment refers to a range of nonverbal behaviors, such as staring, whistling, following, and sexual gestures; verbal communication such as catcalls, greetings, and vulgar, threatening, sexist, or rude comments; and physically aggressive acts such as groping and following (Anti-Street Harassment, 2014; Bowman, 1993; Darnell & Cook, 2009; Kearl, 2014; Kissling, 1991). A study by Lenton et al. (1999) discovered that 90% of 2,000 surveyed women experienced at least one incident of street harassment that was sexual in nature (Davidson et al., 2006). According to a 2014 survey of 1,000 U.S. women, 57% had experienced verbal street harassment and 41% had experienced physically aggressive street harassment (Kearl, 2014). Of those physically aggressive experiences, 23% of women had experienced sexual touching and 20% had been followed (Kearl, 2014). A separate survey of 4,872 U.S. women under 40-years-old found that 77% had been followed and about 50% had been groped or fondled in public (Livingston, 2015). The Brooklyn Movement Center developed a spectrum of street harassment behaviors that is organized according to an intensity score they assigned to each type of act, with “non-aggressive verbal” instances such as greetings scored with a 1 and “groping” scored with a 10 (Street Harassment Spectrum, 2013).

Multiple studies on street harassment reveal it is a common and frequent occurrence. Eighty-six percent of women in Kearl’s (2014) study reported that they had experienced
street harassment more than once. Nielsen (2002) found that 61% of women heard sexually suggestive speech daily or often. Street harassment’s commonality may – ironically – be one of the reasons it is so understudied (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Beyond academia, street harassment has become so normalized that it has been addressed in popular culture such as television shows (Atencio & Benz, 2015) and web comics (Ellis, 2016). In 2013, the organization Hollaback! partnered with the New York City Council to develop a phone app that would allow women to report instances of street harassment and see where other reports had been made so they could avoid areas of high instances of street harassment (Ohikuare, 2013).

Like sexual harassment, street harassment has a contextual identification (Keyton & Rhodes, 1997). Street harassment occurs in public spaces (Bowman, 1993; Darnell & Cook, 2009; Davidson et al., 2016; Nielsen, 2002). Street harassment occurs in places that are busy and populated as well as isolated areas when no one else is around (Davidson et al., 2016; Livingston, 2015). It occurs in-person, as opposed to online or through other communication channels (Bowman, 1993), typically in more urban areas, as opposed to urban or suburban areas where people tend to know each other (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). It may also occur in more domestic spaces, such as grocery and department stores as women go about their everyday activities (Bowman, 1993). Miller (2007) claimed that street harassment is more prevalent in poorer neighborhoods where more people are out of work and therefore have more free time to spend out in public where they can harass women that pass by.
Fairchild and Rudman (2008) explicitly mention bars in their definition of *stranger harassment*, but it is important to recognize that bars are a commonly accepted location where people go to approach and meet new people. Weber, Goodboy, and Cayanus (2010) used a bar as the setting for their research on flirting competence, assuming a bar was a common location for such interactions to occur. This does not mean that gendered harassment does not occur in bars, or that people in bars are always open to social interactions, but bars are unique social environments that do not cleanly fit most street harassment definitions.

Another key feature of street harassment is that it occurs between at least two people who do not know each other (Bowman, 1993; Darnell & Cook, 2009; Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kissling, 1991; Stop Street Harassment, 2015). Because no previous relationship between the street harassers and their targets exists, victims have no way of knowing whether or not their harasser is a real threat (Kissling, 1991).

Although a minority of women are not bothered and may even be flattered by some forms of street harassment (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1995; Kissling, 1991), many women feel that street harassment is an invasion of their privacy as well as rude and embarrassing (Kissling, 1991). When viewed as a form of uncivil communication, it is worth noting that street harassment is not necessarily strategic but may arise when norms are in transition or are not broadly understood (Lane & McCourt, 2013), which may also help explain why street harassment occurs in the first place.
A number of definitions note that in no way do victims intentionally invite street harassment (Brooklyn Movement Center, 2016; Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Stop Street Harassment, 2015). A legal definition states that harassment is “continued unwanted and annoying actions of one party or a group” (Burton’s Legal Thesaurus, 2007, ¶1).

Victims usually passively respond to street harassment by pretending to ignore it, freezing up, attempting to avoid the harasser, or putting on a blank expression, as opposed to active strategies such as confronting the harasser or reporting the incident to law enforcement (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Gruber, 1989; Logan, 2015). According to Nielsen’s (2002) research, 42% of women said they chose to ignore street harassment because they were afraid of what might happen if they responded to the harasser. Similarly, Kearl (2014) found that 68% of women feared the situation would escalate to something more dangerous if they were to respond. When they did respond, 31% reported that they verbally told their harasser to stop or to back off (Kearl, 2014).

**Explanations for Why Street Harassment Occurs**

Street harassment is symptomatic of a patriarchal culture that oppresses women and other minority groups (Logan, 2015). It is just one way traditional power imbalances between men and women are reproduced on a daily basis. Street harassment is a form of micro-aggression that reproduces stereotypes and reinforces power relationships (Sue, 2010).

Though limited, previous research on men has mainly focused on those who commit street harassment and their motivations for doing so. Some men admitted they did it to anger,
objectify, and humiliate women, while others claimed they were bored, wanted
acknowledgment, or to compliment women (Benard & Schlaffer, 1984; Kissling, 1991).
Some men claimed that women were “asking for it” by dressing a certain way – and some
women agreed (Kissling, 1991, p. 452). An international study conducted by Promundo and
U.N. Women asked men in the Middle East and North Africa about their street harassing
habits (El Feki et al., 2017). They found that up to 90% of male respondents who admitted to
harassing women on the street did it for fun while two-thirds to three-fourths (ranges differed
by country) harassed women for dressing provocatively (El Feki et al., 2017).

Sometimes street harassment is a way that men police sexuality, with some men
engaging in “lesbian baiting” in order to shame lesbians for being sexually unavailable to
men (Damiano, 1999). Though street harassment may serve as a way for men to bond
through gendered play, men do recognize that activities like girl watching are used as power
moves by other men when obviously done for all to see (Quinn, 2002). According to Whatule
(2000), “American men are socialized to show strength, to be in control of a situation, and to
be competent and self-reliant” (p. 425). Women’s own strength, control, competence, and
self-reliance may threaten that masculine image. Other researchers assert that the main
function of street harassment is to remind women and minority groups of their inferior social
position and keep them there (Bowman, 1993; Kissling, 1991).

When men are with peers that are more likely to commit street harassment, they may
participate as a form of male bonding or to protect their masculine image (Quinn, 2002;
Thirty-eight percent of women reported they had experienced at least one instance of street harassment from a group of men (Kearl, 2014). Generally, U.S. men who admitted to committing street harassment did not seem to think their behavior was detrimental to the women they were harassing; in fact, they believed it is a normal and accepted activity (Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). This reflects a common finding in sexual harassment research: men usually find acceptable behaviors that women find unacceptable (Dougherty, 2006; Nielsen, 2002; Pryor, 1997; Thacker & Gohmann, 1993; Quinn, 2002). It is important to note that, like sexual harassment, street harassment is a behavior that “some people do some of the time” (Pryor et al., 1995, p. 69). That is to say, not every man commits street harassment, and those who do will not necessarily do it every chance they get.

**Why Study Street Harassment**

The immediate effects of street harassment include annoyance, embarrassment, anger, and a sense of helplessness (Bowman, 1993). Many women report changing their behaviors – taking different routes home, not going out at night, avoiding certain areas – in order to feel safer (Bowman, 1993). Kearl (2014) found that, as a result of their experiences with street harassment, 47% of women assess their surroundings more, 31% travel with others, and 4% have quit their jobs or moved out of their homes in order to avoid persistent street harassment. The long term and severe effects of street harassment include fear of rape, self-objectification (which correlates to depression and eating disorders), and increased anxiety (Bowman, 1993; Davidson et al., 2016; Kissling, 1991; Nielsen, 2006;). Fear of rape is not
unfounded as some men who intend to commit sexual violence will use street harassment as a way to test potential victims to see how likely they are to fight back (Bowman, 1993). Ultimately, all forms of street harassment create a hostile environment that limits women’s mobility, denying them the freedom to fully participate in society (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kissling, 1991; Nielsen, 2002).

**Research Question**

Researchers and anti-street harassment organizations have expressed the importance of recruiting men as allies in the fight against street harassment. Most previous research has focused on women’s attitudes toward street harassment, and recent research has explored why and how men commit street harassment. However, if activists want to engage men in the fight against this everyday problem, a better understanding of what average men think about street harassment is needed. Because there is no widely accepted, standardized, or legal definition of street harassment from which to work, this study takes a step back and frames instances of gender-based street harassment as interactions between men and women in public spaces. Thus, this study sought to answer the following research question:

**RQ:** How do men identify and talk about interactions between a man and a woman who are strangers in a public space?

Whether men identify any behaviors as street harassment would indicate how familiar men may be with the concept and could help inform how researchers approach the topic of street harassment in the future. Understanding how men interpret these interactions – which, it is
worth remembering, are not always considered harassment even by women – may also help activists communicate with and recruit men as allies.

CHAPTER 3 – Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were 26 males aged 20 to 50 living in a medium-sized city in the Southeastern United States. Demographic data were not collected directly from the participants due to the sensitive nature of the study. Instead, the moderator estimated the age and ethnicity of the participants as 23 white/Caucasian participants, two Indian or Middle Eastern participants, and one Latino participant. Of these participants, 15 of them appeared to be 20 to 30 years old, and 11 of them appeared to be 30 to 45 years old.

Participants were recruited for the study through online activities including (a) posting to social media accounts and pages to which the researcher had access; (b) emailing leaders of university student organizations such as clubs and Greek organizations, and local churches and community organizations; (c) posting to online forums dedicated to the city and nearby towns; (d) messaging organizers of local Meetup.com groups; (e) emailing professors at nearby universities; and (f) sharing notice of the study with the researcher’s personal network. The study was described to participants as seeking to “better understand men and women’s interactions in public spaces.”

Participation in this study was voluntary. To join the study, participants were asked to indicate their preference for date and location of participation on an online sign-up form.
Participants were given a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation at the end of each focus group session.

**Procedures**

Five all-male focus group sessions (4, 5, or 6 participants each) were conducted by a male moderator. Focus groups allow researchers to observe and record interactions among participants that would not be otherwise accessible through one-on-one interviews or would be nearly impossible to obtain through field observation (Dougherty, 2006). One-on-one interviews were considered, but interviews would eliminate the possibility for natural discussion and debate among men about the topic.

The moderator had previous experience conducting focus groups. A practice focus group session with two male associates of the researcher but who were unknown to the moderator was conducted to familiarize the moderator with the technical equipment and focus group guide. The researcher, who is female, was not physically present during the focus group sessions, following the guidelines for conducting research with men by Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001).

As they entered the room, participants were provided refreshments as well as pen and paper to take notes during the focus group session. The moderator began each focus group with an icebreaker question about their favorite local restaurants to make participants more comfortable talking in the group setting. The icebreaker discussion was not recorded. After the participants had introduced themselves to each other, the moderator turned on the audio recorder and began the session.
Each focus group session was audio-recorded on two digital recorders placed on the table in front of the participants, about one foot away from each other to better capture audio from participants sitting at opposite ends of the table. The audio files were then transferred to a computer and transcribed verbatim by the researcher using the ExpressScribe software application.

The moderator followed a focus group guide (Appendix A) prepared by the researcher. The focus group guide had five main questions with suggested supporting and exploratory questions the moderator could use to stimulate conversation among participants. The moderator followed the focus group guide as instructed, only asking additional questions when participants brought up topics of interest to the researcher, such as the role of context and gender in interactions in public spaces. The moderator was instructed to ask Questions 4 and 5 (Appendix A) at any time during the discussion if the participants organically mentioned the phrase street harassment. However, no participant mentioned street harassment; thus, the moderator asked Questions 4 and 5 in the order they appeared in the focus group guide (Appendix A). Each focus group session lasted about 60 to 75 minutes in total.

The moderator began the discussion by asking the participants to talk about how they behave when they are in public spaces and how they expect other people to behave in public spaces. Next, he asked them to talk about how they interact with women, or have seen other men interacting with women, in public spaces. Across the focus group sessions, this discussion ranged from 12:10 to 27:53 minutes.
The next section of the focus group guide (Appendix A) instructed the moderator to show the participants a series of five short videos depicting a man and a woman interacting in a public space. Following the example set by Weber et al. (2010) in their research on flirting behavior, the videos were used to stimulate feedback and conversation during the focus group. After each video was shown, the participants were asked to write down what they saw in the video. Once they were done writing, the moderator would ask a participant to share what they wrote and discuss what they saw with the rest of the group. Each discussion lasted about 5 to 10 minutes. This process was repeated after each video. Data saturation was deemed to have occurred with the fifth data collection session, as no new statements, comments, or opinions were being expressed (Bowen, 2008).

**Video Stimuli**

The videos were motivated by a viral video from 2014 (which was created for the nonprofit organization Hollaback!) that depicted a woman experiencing many instances of street harassment over 10 hours of walking through New York City (Bliss, 2014) and a spectrum of street harassment behaviors determined by the Brooklyn Movement Center (Street Harassment Spectrum, 2013). The researcher wrote a script and storyboarded the behaviors for each video, and hired two professional actors to portray the male and female characters. White male and female actors were used so as not to introduce opinions of interracial or non-heterosexual conduct in public. This study was concerned about men’s perceptions of street harassing behaviors, so the researcher attempted to eliminate any factors...
that might distract from that conversation. The videos were filmed in a downtown urban area. The researcher filmed and edited the videos.

To validate that the video captured the desired purpose, each video was shown to three nonparticipant males and three females for review (all aged 20 to 40 years old with varying professional backgrounds); minor edits were made based on their feedback. Overall, the women who viewed the videos agreed that they depicted realistic examples of street harassment that they had seen or experienced, and felt that the woman in the video reacted in a normal and expected way. The men made a few minor suggestions which were taken into consideration in making the final edits, but the researcher was more concerned that the women confirmed the videos were accurate since men’s responses would be the focus of data collection. The men’s responses were mainly used to edit out distracting or unnecessary footage, such as the male actor’s entrance into one of the videos.

The first video (Appendix B, Figure 1) showed a man (hereafter referred to as “the man”), about 30 years old, wearing a coat, hat, and sunglasses entering the scene from the left. He alternated looking at his phone and his surroundings, appearing lost. He gestured to an approaching woman to stop her. She was also about 30 years old, and was wearing a coat and sunglasses (hereafter referred to as “the woman”). She entered the scene from the right. At 0:05 he said, “Excuse me. Do you know where the bus stop is?” while pointing at his phone. At 0:07 she said, “Oh yeah, it’s that way,” pointing in the direction she came from. At 0:08 he said, “Thank you,” appearing relieved, and they both continued in the directions they were originally headed. This video was 11 seconds long. The researcher created this video to
show an example of a neutral and appropriate interaction. Stop Street Harassment includes “asking for directions” as an example of an appropriate reason to talk to a stranger (How to Talk to Women, n.d.). Hereafter, this video is referred to as the neutral video.

The second video (Appendix B, Figure 2) showed the man crossing the street into the scene from the right. He was looking at his phone, and stopped on the street corner. At 0:06 he looked up as he heard footsteps. At 0:07 he smiled and leaned his torso back a little bit, as if he was enjoying the view. At 0:08 the woman entered the scene from the left, and crossed the street. Her face was not visible at any point in the video, and a viewer would be unable to tell if she reacted to the man in any way. She did not stop or say anything to him, or appear to even look at him. He continued smiling and watching her until she exited the scene at 0:09, when he then shifted his body so he could continue to watch her walk away. He continued watching her until the end of the video at 0:13. The researcher intentionally directed this video so that viewers are unable to determine if the woman reacted to the man or noticed him in any way. Hereafter, this video is referred to as the staring video.

The third video (Appendix B, Figure 3) opened with the man leaning against the wall of a building, looking at his phone. He looked up as he heard footsteps. As the woman entered the scene from the right at 0:02, he wolf-whistled at her. She ignored him and continued walking out of frame. At 0:03 he turned his head, keeping his shoulders and back against the wall, to watch her as she walked away, slightly smiling until the end of the video at 0:04. Hereafter, this video is referred to as the wolf-whistle video.
The fourth video (Appendix B, Figure 4) opened with the man leaning against the wall of a building, looking at his phone. The woman was already in the scene about 20 yards in the background walking toward the man. At 0:02 he looked at her as she approached and said, “Hey, beautiful” while smiling as she passed him at 0:03. She looked at him as he spoke to her, but she did not respond and continued walking. Just before the video ended at 0:07, he went back to looking at his phone. Hereafter, this video is referred to as the *catcalling* video.

The fifth video (Appendix B, Figure 5) opened with the man leaning against the wall of a building, looking at his phone. At 0:04 he looked up as he heard footsteps. At 0:05, as the woman passed him, he left his relaxed position on the wall and approached her from behind, coming up around her on her right. He asked, “Can I walk with you?” at 0:07. The woman quickly glanced at him as he spoke, did not respond, and continued walking at a quicker pace. He followed her closely. After they exited the frame, he said, “Come on” in a pleading tone at 0:08. This video was 10 seconds long. Hereafter, this video is referred to as the *following* video.

After the video discussions, the moderator asked the group if they had ever heard the phrase *street harassment* and what they thought it meant (Appendix A). Finally, the moderator asked them to share any personal experiences they had with or any observations of street harassment (Appendix A). It should be noted that the second focus group session ran out of time and were unable to respond to the fifth question, but participants did share personal stories and examples earlier in the discussion while responding to the video stimuli.
Data Analysis Procedures

The researcher analyzed the focus group transcriptions using thematic analysis (Keyton, 2015). First, the researcher listened to the focus group recordings without taking any notes. Second, the researcher transcribed the focus group recordings verbatim, taking informal notes during this process. Third, the researcher read through the transcriptions, annotating phrases or quotes of interest. Fourth, the researcher developed a coding scheme based on the initial notes and annotations. The categories in the coding scheme were developed based on recurring ideas, repeated words and phrases, and the forcefulness (or lack thereof) with which participants made or defended ideas. Finally, the researcher re-read the focus group transcriptions, annotating quotes using colors and symbols that correlated to the coding scheme.

CHAPTER 4 – Results

Before data collection began on participants’ responses to the video stimuli, the moderator led a discussion about behavior in public spaces. He first asked the participants to describe how they behave in public spaces. Overall, the participants agreed with one another that when they are in public they tend to keep to themselves and are mainly concerned about completing their errands. They expect strangers to behave similarly and leave them alone; further, some explained that they are suspicious of strangers who approach them as they assume that strangers have ulterior motives. However, all participants did agree with one another that there are times when it is acceptable to approach strangers or for strangers to approach them, such as to express a shared interest (e.g., commenting on a sports team t-
shirt), needing help (e.g., asking for directions), or sharing an experience (e.g., witnessing something and commenting on it to someone nearby). However, they qualified that these interactions should not last any longer than necessary and that the stranger should acknowledge and understand conversational cues that indicate the interaction should conclude. Some participants also noted that there are regional differences in expectations for public behavior, often citing the Southern United States as an area where it is more acceptable to speak to strangers in comparison to the Northeastern United States.

When interacting with women in public spaces, the participants admitted there were ways they changed their behavior. They said they tended to use less “crass” language and were more deferential to women (e.g., letting them go first to reach an item in the grocery store aisle). They also explained that they do things to come off as “less threatening” to avoid making women “uncomfortable” and “avoid misunderstandings,” such as women thinking the men are flirting with them. One participant (FG3P5) described how, when running, he tried to make noise or say something when passing a woman from behind, saying, “Not that I’m an intimidating looking guy but I don’t want that to be any kind of issue.”

The data show that men claim to behave differently around women in public spaces so as not to offend or frighten them. To answer the research question, how do men identify and talk about interactions between a man and a woman who are strangers in a public space, a grey area exists where men are unsure of what behaviors may or may not be acceptable. Though they never condoned the harassing behaviors that four of the stimuli videos
exhibited, some of the men claimed there were contexts in which the behaviors would be acceptable.

**Neutral Video**

The first video (Appendix B, Figure 1) showed a man stopping a woman on the street to ask her for directions to a bus stop. She told him which direction the bus stop was, he thanked her, and they each continued going in the directions they were originally headed.

Because the participants knew they were in a research study, some indicated that they were looking for something abnormal in the video but were unable to find anything. Only one participant (FG2P1) suggested that the man in the video was suspicious, noting that he might be a “terrorist,” but that participant explained that he had worked in counterintelligence. Other participants disagreed that there was anything wrong with the man’s behavior in the video. In general, they described the interaction depicted in the first video as “normal,” “polite,” and “quick,” and did not think he had any hidden motive beyond finding the bus stop.

**Normal.** In both their written responses after viewing the stimuli and during the focus group conversation, participants agreed that the first video (see Figure 1) portrayed a “normal” interaction. Participants’ written responses included “everyday” and “generic.” The participants commented that the interaction “didn’t seem super out of the ordinary” (FG3P2) and one claimed, “I’ve had that interaction” (FG4P4).
Polite. The participants said that both the man and the woman in the video were “polite.” Some of their written comments included that it was a “short and polite, direct interaction” and that “both seemed polite.”

Quick. Matching their previously stated criteria for what constitutes an appropriate interaction with a stranger in public, the participants commonly observed that the interaction in the first video did not last too long, writing that it was a “quick innocuous convo [sic],” a “short interaction,” and “efficient.”

Motivation. The participants did not report the man had any ulterior motives. They believed that his only incentive was to get to the bus stop, and that, “It didn’t seem like he picked her for any reason other than she was there” (FG1P5).

Staring Video

The second video (Appendix B, Figure 2) shows the man clearly staring at the woman as she passes. He does not say anything to her, and she does not say anything to him. He watches her until the end of the scene, turning his body to do so.

Descriptors some participants used in their written responses to describe the man’s behavior were less negative such as “harmless,” “cliché,” “complimentary,” and “gazing.” However, other participants used more negative words like “lusting,” “letcherous [sic],” “disrespectful,” “sexual predator,” “aggressive,” and “leering.”

Though no participants condoned the man’s behavior, they did claim that staring at or watching a woman they find attractive is acceptable as long as she does not see them doing it. One participant explained:
“I thought it was pretty creepy just the way he like smiled and looked at her butt, but I mean there’s definitely times where you can look at somebody and be like, wow, you’re attractive, which is fine. I think everyone does it, but like I guess the way you do it” (FG1P5) (The participant emphasized “way” and trailed off at the end, indicating that he was asking a question and seeking approval from the group).

Participants argued that the attractiveness of the person doing the staring was an important factor, with one participant saying, “the line between creepy and flirty is your [the man’s] attractiveness. Like, if she found him attractive as well . . . it wouldn’t have been as off-putting” (FG1P5). There was no indication in the video whether or not the woman found the man attractive.

During the focus group discussion, participants described the man’s behavior as “creepy” and “obvious,” and they labeled his actions as “checking her out.” The participants did not offer any definitive motivations for the man’s behavior, though most agreed that the man wanted the woman to see him checking her out.

**Checking her out.** The phrase participants most often used to describe the man’s behavior in the staring video was “checking her out.” When pressed to clarify by the moderator, the participants explained that they meant the man thought the woman was attractive. They said his behavior was common, commenting, “I’ve seen so many guys do it” (FG3P1); one participant alleged he had seen it that day during lunchtime (FG4P3).

**Creepy.** The descriptor “creepy” was prevalent throughout the discussions about videos 2 through 5, but it was most frequently mentioned during the second video discussion.
The participants explained that what made the interaction creepy were the man’s facial expression, the way he turned his body as she walked past, and that he stared for too long. One participant said, “I’m not going so far as to say it’s sexual harassment or anything. I think that might be taking it too far, but it is definitely, I think it fits the term creepy pretty well” (FG3P1).

**Obvious.** An important factor that the participants identified as the line between appropriate or not was how obvious they perceived the man’s behavior to be. Participants stated that the man was intentionally being obvious so the woman would see him (“He wanted her to know that he was looking; it was really obvious.” (FG2P1)), and they believed that if the woman noticed the man staring at her, she might feel uncomfortable.

**Motivation.** Though the overall consensus was that the man wanted the woman to see him staring at her, the participants were unsure of why he was doing it so they offered multiple suggestions. Some participants tried to justify the man’s behavior and hypothesized that he might be trying to compliment the woman, but lacks the social skills or self-awareness to do so appropriately. One participant said, “It seems to me that could be his interpretation of his own behavior is like, yeah I’m checking you out because you’re hot. That’s a compliment” (FG5P3). Another participant claimed that the man was objectifying the woman, and that he stared to “derive pleasure from her, as like an object” (FG3P3). Many participants agreed that the man was staring for his own purposes and that a response from the woman was not expected. That same participant went on to say later in his discussion session, “There’s a power dynamic implied that he was clearly flexing” (FG3P3). This
observation supports Sue’s (2010) claim that street-harassment reinforces power relationships and Whatule’s (2000) assertion that American men are socialized to assert strength. Some participants said they could not derive motivation because they could not relate to the man and claimed they would never act how he did.

**Wolf-Whistle Video**

In the third video (Appendix B, Figure 3), the man is leaning against the wall of a building, looking at his phone. He looks up as the woman approaches him and wolf-whistles at her. She ignores him and continues walking.

In their written responses, participants used descriptors such as “creepy,” “rude,” “invasive,” “unwarranted,” and “inappropriate.” However, one participant did write that the behavior in the third video was “less threatening” and “somehow less creepy, slightly” than the staring in the second video.

An observation from the discussion was that the participants were more familiar with wolf-whistling and similar behaviors when men are in a group as opposed to alone, like the man in the videos. They explained that, if a man does it while he’s with a group, it is more of a performance for other men as opposed to intentionally harassing the woman. If the woman responds, the group might “get a kick out of it” (FG3P1). Another participant explained that he perceived this type of behavior as “more innocent” (FG2P5) when the man is with a group of friends because they will keep him in check and he will not want to act or do anything weird or creepy in front of them because they will make fun of him. So when directed at an
audience of male friends, it is to entertain or show off as opposed to making the woman uncomfortable.

It was typically at this point of the discussion that the participants began noting how common they thought this behavior was. Their opinions were mixed, with some doubting its frequency (“I’ve never seen it in person” (FG2P4)) while others did not deny that it happens but did not have personal experiences to draw upon to make claims to its frequency (“It surprises me that it really happens” (FG3P3) and “probably happens a good bit” (FG4P3)). For those participants that gave personal examples and believed it was common, they usually saw men yelling at or speaking to women as opposed to wolf-whistling at them.

During the discussion for the third video, participants identified the wolf-whistle as “catcalling,” which is a common term used when describing or talking about street harassment (Logan, 2015). They described the behavior as “cliché” and outdated. Regarding the man’s motivation, the dominant idea was that he wanted to get her attention and a reaction but is not looking to engage in a conversation or pursue a relationship with the woman. Though there had not been much agreement regarding how inappropriate the staring behavior was in the second video, there was greater agreement among participants that the wolf-whistling behavior in the third video was unacceptable.

**Catcalling.** Though “whistling” was a common descriptor for the man’s behavior, “catcalling” was nearly as common and a much more notable term for the purpose of this research. Though the phrase *street harassment* never came up organically in any of the conversations, catcalling is synonymous, and a majority of participants in every focus group
identified the wolf-whistling behavior as catcalling. One participant said, “This is the classic catcalling, but still rude and inappropriate” (FG5P2). Another participant described the man’s behavior as “literally a nonverbal or another way of saying, ‘I want to f*** you’” (FG3P1).

**Cliché.** Though the term “cliché” was only mentioned a few times, it is an appropriate term to categorize their shared attitude that the wolf-whistle is unoriginal and stereotypical. The participants generally compared the wolf-whistle to stereotypes and characters they had seen in movies or on television, such as construction workers or cartoon characters, suggesting that they did not have many real-world experiences with the wolf-whistle to draw from. One participant noted, “I’ve never seen it in person. It’s always been through TV shows or old movies or things of that nature” (FG2P4).

**Outdated.** Whether or not they had seen it in person, the phrases participants used to describe the behavior indicate that they considered the wolf-whistle to be an *outdated* behavior. One participant conceded that it “might have worked in the fifties or something a long time ago. I think this is not socially acceptable today” (FG1P1). Another participant described the wolf-whistle as “an a**hole move in 2017” (FG4P5), implying that social norms and etiquette have changed over time so the wolf-whistle has fallen out of acceptable use.

**Motivation.** Generally, they asserted the man was trying to get the woman’s attention and solicit some kind of reaction. One participant compared the third video to the second:

“His trying to solicit a response by whistling . . . I think that’s different from the second one where he didn’t say anything. He wanted his body language to say
something [in the second video] but here he is actively, he’s being a little more aggressive” (FG2P2)

Many participants noted that the man wanted some kind of reaction, positive or negative, such as a slap to the face, because he wanted recognition or validation. Similar to the second video, the participants struggled to identify an underlying motivation because they could not relate to the actor in the video.

**Catcalling Video**

In the fourth video (Appendix B, Figure 4), when the woman walks past the man he says, “Hey, beautiful” while smiling. She looks at him as he speaks to her, but she does not respond and continues walking.

The participants suggested there were reasons other than of an ulterior motive for why the man might think his behavior in the fourth video was acceptable. A few speculated that he might have a mental or social disorder, such as autism or antisocial personality disorder. Others stated that his upbringing could be to blame, suggesting that people who act like the man in the fourth video are following an example set for them by family members or influential men in their lives.

The participants did not deny that this approach is completely ineffective, and they identified two variables that made the difference between the man’s behavior in the fourth video coming off as acceptable flirting or unacceptable catcalling. First, they again brought up the importance of attraction, claiming that if the woman thought he was attractive then she might have responded or felt differently about him. One participant said, “If the delivery was
improved and the guy was much more attractive . . . meant it a little more genuinely, like
maybe that would have worked” (FG1P1). Second, the participants often claimed that if the
man were at a bar as opposed to on the street, walking up to a woman and starting off with
“hey beautiful” would not only be normal, but that the woman might even respond positively.
In fact, one participant claimed that he had met a former girlfriend by approaching her at a
bar and saying, “Hey beautiful, can I buy you a drink?” (FG3P1). Every time the moderator
asked participants to consider a context that any of the behaviors exhibited in any of the
videos might be expected or accepted, they always mentioned a bar as a common social
setting where people should expect to be approached. There was some disagreement, though,
as some participants claimed that even in a bar there are certain social cues, like maintained
eye contact, that should be observed before approaching a stranger. The participants also
mentioned that people go to bars for different reasons, so not everyone is fair game to be hit
on. They did universally agree that setting and context are crucial factors when approaching
strangers for any reason, but that this behavior in the context and environment of this video
was inappropriate.

The participants agreed that this video was a more accurate representation of the type
of catcalling they had seen and were familiar with. Many of the participants had previously
given examples that were similar to the behavior shown in this video during their discussion
of the third video. Thus, one category of thought was how “common” catcalling like that
shown in the fourth video is. Another major descriptor was that the man was
“complimenting” the woman, though none of the participants found his behavior acceptable or effective. Their thoughts on motivation for this behavior were varied.

Common. Because this behavior was so similar to what they had already described in their conversation after the third video, they did not discuss this video as much but they did affirm that this video depicted behavior they believe was much more “common.” One participant said, “I’ve definitely seen this happen a lot” (FG4P2). Another participant even suggested that it is so common that it is almost normal, explaining that the woman would find this interaction less creepy than that shown in the previous video because “it happens, so it’s not kind of a weird behavior” (FG1P1).

Complimenting. Many of the participants described the man’s behavior as “complimenting” or at least that the man thought he was complimenting her. Some said he was behaving inappropriately, but that he was using acceptable, complimentary language, as opposed to something crude or overtly sexual like “hey legs” (FG5P4) to disguise his intent. Some participants described his behavior as a type of a trap so he does not appear threatening and seems more sensitive than he really is.

Motivation. There were three main reasons that participants reported the man would say “hey beautiful” to a woman he seemingly does not know. First, some of them thought he might simply be incompetently flirting with her in hopes of a positive response, such as getting a date or starting a conversation. One participant described this is “pathetic, because this is the absolute wrong way to do anything as far as interacting with anyone to get a sincere response” (FG2P4). Another wondered, “How many people have catcalled a woman,
and then they went on a date with them? I don’t know if that’s literally ever happened between two people that are sane. So like, I assume that’s the goal, but I just don’t get the logic” (FG3P2).

Second, most participants thought he was doing it to get some kind of response. They again brought up the idea that if his friends were around, he’d be doing it to get a response from them, but otherwise he wants a response from the woman he is targeting. Even if that response is negative, such as her feeling uncomfortable or “weirded [sic] out” by him, or neutral, like just getting her to look at him, as the woman in the video did, then he has accomplished his goal. Third, and similar to the second motivation, some participants thought he was doing it just to do it, without caring whether or not she responded. One participant defended this idea by noting that the man “doesn’t even wait to see what the reaction is” (FG2P6). Another participant suggested that if she had said something back “he wouldn’t know what to do” (FG1P6).

Following Video

In the fifth video (Appendix B, Figure 5), as the woman passes the man, he approaches her from behind and asks, “Can I walk with you?” The woman quickly glances at him, does not respond, and continues walking at a quicker pace. He follows her closely. After they exit the scene, he says, “Come on” in a pleading tone.

The participants did relate to the woman in the video and they shared personal experiences of times when they had been followed by a stranger or heard stories from women they knew who had been followed. One participant shared that in Las Vegas, it is common
for vendors to follow men on the street to try and convince them to come inside strip clubs (FG3P3). Others said the behavior in the video was similar to what they had seen outside of bars when men would follow drunk women and offer to take them to their cars, or to what female friends of theirs had told them they had experienced.

Discussions about the fifth video often included parameters within which the men felt they or someone should intervene (“That was the one where I felt like I would step in.” – FG3P2). They identified that the man following her presented a physical and “imminent” danger that required some kind of response from observers that the previous interactions lacked. The most common response was to “keep an eye on it,” as the participants were concerned that actually approaching the man would only escalate the situation and put both them and the woman in danger. However, if the woman was someone they knew, they said they would be more likely to intervene. If they did intervene, their preferred option would be to help the woman get away from the man or make her feel safer, as opposed to confronting the man directly.

Without prompting from the moderator, two of the groups hypothesized that if the genders were reversed, the situation would not be as threatening. They said they would assume the woman was trying to sell them something, asking for money, or was a prostitute. They explained that because they are generally stronger than women the physical threat present in the video for the woman would be absent for them if the situation were flipped. They agreed that they would still be uncomfortable and that it would not be acceptable, but that “men perceive women as less threatening than women perceive men” (FG1P5).
The participants identified the man’s behavior in the fifth video as “harassment,” described it as “threatening,” and were especially concerned about the invasion of “personal space.” They did not identify what his motivation was but unanimously agreed that his behavior was suspicious and that they would be uncomfortable if they were in the woman’s position.

**Harassment.** Similar to how they labeled the wolf-whistle and “hey beautiful” as catcalling, the men labeled the behavior in this video as “harassment,” with some comparing it to “sexual harassment.” One participant explained:

“It takes away a degree of like her agency to conduct her day in the way that she wants to, right? Like, as soon as you ignore other people’s wishes, and what they want and what they perceive to be normal social interaction it can become harassment I think” (FG1P6).

The participants mentioned that there are right ways to approach strangers but the behavior in the fifth video was wrong; if a person needs to approach or even walk with a stranger they should apologize and explain why. One example a participant gave was how a woman sat down at his table at a bar and explained that she was trying to get a man to leave her alone. She did not sit down with him without an excuse.

**Threatening.** All participants felt that, in comparison to the previous videos, the behavior in the fifth video was the most “threatening.” One participant said, “It was the only one I really saw as aggressive. The other ones were passive. Like, aggressively passive but this one was just aggressive physically” (FG4P1). The participants highlighted the fact that,
because this interaction had become physical (as opposed to the man letting the woman just walk by), and since he continued to try and get her to respond, this behavior was too aggressive and was a threat to the woman’s safety.

**Personal space.** Related to the physical threat, the participants said that part of what made the interaction inappropriate and threatening was that the man got too close to the woman. The phrase “personal space” appeared the most often in their written responses. One participant observed, “There’s this very obvious social norm that everyone here was aware of... and he just violated it” (FG5P3). They explained that, because he was flouting a commonly understood social norm, it was impossible to know what other norms or rules he might not follow.

**Motivation.** The participants were largely in agreement that they did not know what the man was hoping to achieve in this video but they all agreed that it was not good. One participant said, “You don’t know what he wants or what he’s trying to get out of it” (FG2P4). Another claimed that because the man gave no explanation for why he wanted to walk with her, “you don’t know what their [the man’s] intentions are, you assume the worst” (FG1P5). Participants observed that in the previous videos there were more cues as to what his motivations were, but in the fifth video it was ambiguous enough that the man could be a mugger or a murderer. One participant did suggest that it was a “power play,” and that the man was doing it to prove, “I can get in your personal space... what are you going to do about it?” (FG4P3).
CHAPTER 5 - Discussion

This study sought to determine how men identify and talk about interactions between men and women in public spaces. Having men respond to a series of videos helps in creating a better understanding of what behaviors men do and do not identify as street harassment to inform future efforts to stop gender-based street harassment, which is primarily perpetrated by men (Bowman, 1993; Kearl, 2014; Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010). Though none of the men used the term street harassment to describe the behaviors exhibited in the video stimuli until the moderator introduced the term into the conversations, their descriptions and opinions of the behaviors are valuable in determining what methods may be effective in communicating with men to combat street harassment.

In their conversations before viewing the video stimuli, the participants’ admission that they adjust their behavior in public spaces when interacting with women suggested that they conform to stereotypical gender roles (i.e., women do not use vulgar language, so they should not do so around women). However, most of their adjustments were actually indicative of their awareness of the challenges that women disproportionately endure when traversing public spaces, such as street harassment and sexual assault (Walters et al., 2013). In fact, some of the phrases the participants used during this portion of the focus group session were surprising, such as “male gaze” and “mansplaining,” signifying that the men were aware of and engaged with current women’s social issues. Encouragingly, a quick search revealed that the term mansplaining has recently been used in multiple popular magazines targeted at men including Esquire, GQ, and Men’s Fitness. Other magazines, such
as *Men’s Health* and *Maxim*, either had not used the term or used it satirically. Searching for the phrase male gaze yielded too many unrelated results to compare.

During the video stimuli discussion, participants described the behavior in the *neutral* video as a good example of a normal, appropriate behavior in public spaces. This finding confirmed that there are some ways that men and women can interact in public spaces that are acceptable according to the participants of this study.

Their varied interpretations of the *staring* video revealed how differently they viewed and judged the man’s behavior, suggesting this form of street harassment is more normalized. Mainly they articulated that staring was acceptable as long as it is done so that the target is unaware the staring is happening.

They identified the wolf-whistling behavior in the *wolf-whistling video* as *catcalling*, which was unexpected, as the researcher anticipated the term would come up during the fourth video. The primary reason that participants gave for describing the wolf-whistling behavior as unacceptable was that it was an outdated and ineffective way to flirt, though their written responses did show that some participants found wolf-whistling offensive to the woman.

The participants talked about how familiar the behavior in the *catcalling* video was, giving many personal witness accounts as well as sharing stories they have heard from friends and family. Participants did not unanimously decry this behavior as wholly unacceptable. Though they did not think it was an effective or respectful way to interact with a woman a man finds attractive, they did not identify that this behavior can actually be
frightening or threatening to women. Their claims might have been different had the man used vulgar language or threatened the woman, and some participants did note this. In fact, some participants described the man’s behavior as a type of a trap so he does not appear threatening and seems more sensitive than he really is. This observation supports recent research that suggests male catcallers intentionally use non-sexual language so they can claim that they were just innocently greeting a woman as opposed to harassing her (Silva, 2017).

The participants unanimously affirmed that the behavior in the following video was completely unacceptable. Because the participants had made justifications for the man’s motivations and social skills in the previous videos, the moderator pressed them to clarify why they found the fifth video so definitively unacceptable. They explained that once the interaction became physical (i.e., the man physically following the woman as opposed to remaining in one place) they perceived a threat and the behavior was completely unacceptable from that point forward.

Overall, there was little agreement about which behaviors depicted in the videos constituted street harassment. Most participants agreed that street harassment existed on a spectrum, and that some behaviors were worse than others. They agreed that the neutral video was acceptable and that the following video was unacceptable, but that the behaviors in the second, third, and fourth videos represented a grey area where they could not universally agree on the level of acceptability, and that there were certain contexts in which the behaviors might actually be appropriate. Some of the factors that commonly came up in whether a
behavior was acceptable was how “creepy” they found it, or if the interaction seemed sexually charged. There was some disagreement in one group about whether or not a behavior could be considered harassment if the victim is unaware it occurred. These findings reflect the current literature (Logan 2015), as there is no universally accepted definition of street harassment that is used by all researchers. As demonstrated in the sexual harassment literature (Keyton, 1996), researchers have developed a shared understanding of the phenomenon which is based on the legal definition. That becomes the point from which their research starts. However, street harassment generally remains a cultural problem rather than a legal one. The more extreme behaviors sometimes categorized as street harassment - such as groping, flashing, assault, stalking, and hate crimes - are illegal in some states, but they are not illegal in all states, nor are they classified the same or prosecuted to the same degree in those states (Hagerty, n.d.). A good next step for activists might be to try and advocate for more consistent legislation regarding these offenses in states where prosecution is weak or nonexistent. The data from this study suggest that continuing to effect cultural changes to combat those behaviors seen as more offensive would be successful.

The moderator was instructed to encourage the participants to discuss more in depth both the importance of context of the interaction and intervention methods, either if they arose organically or if an opportunity arose to question the participants on those topics. The participants agreed with one another that context and environment were important factors when determining whether the behaviors exhibited in the videos could be considered appropriate. They consistently suggested that some of the behaviors, such as the wolf-whistle
or “hey beautiful,” would not only be accepted in a bar, but effective. They also noted that they might judge the behavior differently if the videos took place at nighttime or if there were more people around. Another setting that was suggested the behavior might be accepted in was at a party. Basically, the participants claimed that behaviors that are viewed as offensive or harassing when enacted between strangers in public spaces become less so when performed in what they considered as more social spaces. So the content of the interactions was not wholly offensive, but the context influenced how they were interpreted.

Though the moderator frequently asked the participants if they would intervene during any of the situations, the participants asserted that someone should do something in response to the man following the woman in the final video. When pressed if they would intervene and what they would do if so, they typically said that they would watch to see if the man did anything other than follow the woman. If so, they said they would either intervene, usually by offering to escort the woman to safety as opposed to confronting the man, or they would call the police. The participants were very concerned about safety, both their own and the woman’s. Most participants expressed that they would not want to fight the man, but some claimed that if they had a group of friends to back them up in a fight they might be more likely to confront him with violence. However, during the other scenarios depicted in the staring, wolf-whistling, and catcalling videos, they explained that if they were to confront the man, they would do so with humor so as to help diffuse the situation while trying to avoid provoking him to react in a violent or defensive manner. The moderator also asked them if they thought the woman should have responded differently. In general, the participants
agreed that any woman in similar situations should respond however she feels is appropriate, but they also expressed that they hoped she – sometimes referring specifically to female family and friends – would do whatever afforded her the most safety. When Nielsen (2002) asked how they would respond to street harassment, women similarly expressed that they feared escalation and making the situation more dangerous.

Two of the focus groups did discuss what should be done in response to the behaviors in the videos on a societal scale. Though many participants were aware that women often experience interactions similar to those depicted in the videos, they were wary of the suggestions that laws could be used to address the issue. Using education as a solution was suggested by one participant and supported by others in his group (FG3P4). Although the participants were socially aware enough to understand that street harassment is an issue, they did not indicate that they had any awareness of the many serious effects street harassment does have on women who experience it (Logan, 2015). It is possible that if they were more educated about the topic they might be more amenable to the idea of putting laws in place to address certain behaviors, especially since they strongly asserted that the following behavior was completely unacceptable and threatening. However, they did not claim that even this behavior should actually be illegal; they were more concerned that it was indicative that something illegal was about to happen. This aligns with Bowman’s (1993) observation that some men who intend to commit sexual violence use street harassment as a way to test potential victims to see how likely they are to fight back.
Though some of the participants reported having seen behaviors similar to what was portrayed in the stimuli videos, many of them repeated anecdotes that were shared with them by female family members, friends, and significant others. This suggests that an effective method of educating men about women’s experiences is for women to discuss their concerns and perceived threats with the men in the lives. Previous research on the effectiveness of documentaries about street harassment revealed that such methods for educating men about the significance of street harassment was ineffective (Darnell & Cook, 2009), but it is possible that women talking about street harassment to men they know could be a successful solution to preventing some men from committing street harassment. Additionally, despite the fact that the documentary seemingly failed to make male viewers more empathetic toward street harassment victims, many of the participants in this study mentioned or agreed that they had seen a viral video on the Internet that had influenced their views on street harassment. Through their descriptions, it was clear that the video the participants were referring to was the YouTube video “10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman,” which has received over 44.9 million views as of September 26, 2017 (Bliss, 2014). Thus, continuing to create engaging content that reaches mainstream audiences is another tactic activists should consider taking to educate people about and combat street harassment.

Though some participants had heard the term street harassment, it was only introduced into the conversations by the moderator. Interestingly, catcalling was a familiar term to the participants of this study, so activists might consider using that phrase when
talking about street harassment to men in the future instead of centering their messaging around the phrase *street harassment*.

**Theoretical Implications**

Because street harassment and sexual harassment have important conceptual and relational differences, theories regarding sexual harassment do not easily translate to the study of street harassment. There have been no previously developed theories specifically addressing street harassment, nor is there a theoretical statement of harassment in general. Catharine McKinnon’s (1979) *theory of sexual harassment of adult women* is a move in the right direction, but is not general enough to explain street harassment. There are many theories relevant to sexual harassment (Pina, Gannon, & Saunders, 2009), some of which may be applicable to street harassment, but none explicitly about harassment. A general theory of harassment to include sexual, street, and other forms of gender-based harassment would be incredibly valuable in understanding why and how people harass other people. This study focused on a specific type of gender-motivated harassment that occurs routinely and in public. The way the participants in this study identified - or failed to identify - what behaviors constituted harassment provide a starting point for understanding how observers perceive harassment.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study did have some important limitations. First, only five focus sessions were conducted; however, data saturation was achieved.
Second, the majority of participants ($N = 23$) appeared to be white or were white passing, and were sampled from the same geographical location (metropolitan area in the Southeast US). It is possible that participants with different regional, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds would talk differently about street harassment. An explanation for the lack of racial and attitudinal diversity may be because the study was conducted in a county that voted Democrat in the 2016 presidential election (2016 North Carolina Presidential Election Results, 2016) and in a city with a majority white population (Raleigh Demographics, 2017). The sessions were conducted at and near a large university, which is also predominately white (Students, n.d.), and sought participants primarily using the Internet. These demographics and recruitment methods could have increased the odds of recruiting mainly white, progressive participants. The researcher did attempt to diversify participant demographics by reaching out to leaders of organizations with minority or presumed conservative members, such as churches, fraternities, and athletic clubs.

Third, unless they freely admitted to engaging in street harassment, there was no way of knowing whether the participants have harassed women in any context before. Because the purpose of the study was to hear from men about their perceptions of, experiences with, and reactions to street harassment, participants were not asked if they engaged in street harassment to ensure a conversational environment for data collection.

Lastly, though some of the participants admitted they had performed some behaviors similar to those shown in the videos when they were younger, none of the participants actually admitted that they thought the behaviors in the videos were acceptable. Other studies
have had participants who willingly admitted to harassing women on the street, but those perspectives were missing in this study and likely would have greatly affected the focus group discussions if they had been present. It is possible that some of the participants actually felt the behaviors were acceptable but sensed that the other men in the group did not approve of them so they conformed their responses to match those of the majority.

Street harassment is ripe for additional research. Future research might include experimental designs to test whether different reactions from the female target of street harassment, the ethnicities and/or apparent genders of the actors in different combinations, or different environmental factors have an effect on focus group discussions.

Additionally, much work has been done to gather women’s thoughts and testimonials regarding street harassment, but to the researcher’s knowledge no study has attempted to show examples of street harassment to women to determine how women talk about different types of street harassment behaviors. The researcher and the three female video reviewers claimed that all except the neutral video were inappropriate, so the results seem consistent with the literature on sexual harassment that men find more behaviors acceptable (Dougherty, 2006; Nielsen, 2002; Pryor, 1997; Thacker & Gohmann, 1993; Quinn, 2002), but future research is required to confirm this assessment. Also, research on women’s responses to viewing instances of street harassment could reveal what types of behaviors women find most threatening so activists would know what behaviors to prioritize in their efforts to stop street harassment.
For future research that recreates instances of street harassment, it should be noted that participants in this study consistently claimed that the man’s sunglasses made his expression hard to interpret. The researcher chose for the male to wear sunglasses to focus participants’ attention on the physical behaviors and verbal communication.
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APPENDICES
Appendix A

Focus Group Guide

Thank you for joining us today. I am going to ask you a few questions about how men and women interact in public spaces, show you a few short videos that I would like to hear your thoughts on, and we’ll discuss what you all think.

1. When you’re in public spaces, like walking down the street or riding a bus, how would you describe your behavior? What do you do?
   a. Do you talk to other people much? What do you say to them, or why do you talk to them?
   b. How do you expect others to behave?

2. Thinking of the interactions between men and women in public spaces – how would you describe that behavior?

3. Proceed to show the vignettes, in numerical order. For each vignette shown, ask:
   a. Take a moment to write down what you saw.
   b. Now, please describe to the group what you saw.
   c. Have you witnessed this type of behavior before?
   d. If you were to describe this type of behavior to others, what labels would you use?
   e. Could press to understand what they think the man was trying to achieve and how the woman felt.

Depending on responses for questions 1 through 3, the following questions may be used:

4. Have you heard the phrase “street harassment?”
   a. See if they have any natural reactions to it.
   b. Ask what they think it means
   c. Do they even think it exists?
   d. What are some behaviors that would identify as street harassment?
   e. Were there behaviors in the videos that you would label as street harassment?

5. Can you think of a specific time you witnessed an incident you consider street harassment?
   a. Who was harassing whom? (press for details)
   b. Where did you see this? (context/environment)
   c. Did you intervene at all? Did you feel like you should have?
Appendix B

Figure 1. Screenshot from Video #1 - *neutral* video

![Figure 1](video1_screenshot.jpg)

Figure 2. Screenshot from Video #2 - *staring* video

![Figure 2](video2_screenshot.jpg)
Figure 3. Screenshot from Video #3 - *wolf-whistle* video

Figure 4. Screenshot from Video #4 - *catcalling* video
Figure 5. Screenshot from Video #5 - following video