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Public Harassment and Its Impact on Self-Esteem and Self-Objectification

^{*1}Anjali Nenwani and ²Kashyap Rajput

^{*1}Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, ILSASS, CVM University, VVN, Gujarat, India.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, M.S. University, Vadodara, Gujarat, India.

Abstract

This aim of the study was to understand the relationship between self-esteem and self-objectification among the individuals who have experienced Public Harassment. The research sample consists of 203 participants, all females of the age group 18-60 years, belonging majorly from the state of Gujarat. The participants were selected based on the inclusion criteria of being above the age of 18 and at least one experience of Public harassment. The findings revealed a significant negative correlation between street harassment and self-esteem, significant positive correlation between street harassment and self-objectification. The results also suggest that interventions aimed at promoting positive self-esteem and self-worth, as well as reducing self-objectification, could be beneficial in mitigating the negative psychological effects of harassment.

Keywords: Public harassment, self-esteem, self-objectification, self-worth

Introduction

Public Harassment is the gender-based sexual harassment of individuals in public spaces by strangers. Studies have shown that the majority of victims of Public Harassment are women and the perpetrators are men. Public Harassment, also known as “eve-teasing” in India is one of the sexual harassment with the least attention paid to it. This is primarily a form of sexual harassment that consists of unwanted sexual attention, sexual comments, provocative gestures, whistling, indecent exposures, honking, stalking or following, and touching by mostly women from strangers, in public places like parks, streets, buses, and trains. (Public Harassment, n.d.) Public harassment in India is a significant and pervasive issue, with alarming statistics revealing its prevalence. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), over 33,000 cases of sexual harassment were reported in India in 2019 (NCRB, 2019) ^[19]. India was ranked the most dangerous country for women in a Thomson Reuters Foundation survey of 550 experts (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2018). A survey by the International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW) indicated that more than 80% of women in India have experienced some form of sexual harassment in public spaces (ICRW, 2017) ^[14].

Public harassment, a gender-based form of sexual harassment primarily targeting women in public spaces, inflicts a profound and enduring impact on its victims. The psychological toll is substantial, with victims often grappling with anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of their traumatic experiences

(Bhattacharyya, 2015). Beyond mental health repercussions, victims' physical well-being is also jeopardised, as stress and anxiety from public harassment can manifest in physical health issues such as headaches and digestive problems (Reynolds *et al.*, 2015). Emotionally, individuals subjected to public harassment frequently experience profound distress, including feelings of shame, anger, humiliation, and powerlessness, further eroding their self-esteem and emotional well-being (Stop Street Harassment, 2021). Moreover, public harassment restricts victims' mobility, forcing them to alter their daily routines and avoid certain public spaces due to fear or as a protective measure (Sleath & Nazroo, 2018). It contributes to a pervasive culture of gender inequality, where women continue to be disproportionately targeted and denied the basic right to safety and dignity in public environments. Recognizing and addressing these far-reaching consequences is essential to creating a society that fosters gender equality and ensures the well-being of all its members. Exploring the interplay between self-esteem and self-objectification among individuals who have experienced street harassment is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics at play and developing effective interventions.

Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall evaluation and sense of self-worth. It is an important aspect of mental health and well-being, as it affects how individuals perceive themselves and interact with others. (APA, 2017) ^[2] Public harassment can have a significant impact on an individual's self-esteem. A study by Slepian and Ambady (2012) ^[25] found that experiencing racial discrimination in public can lead to

decreased self-esteem in African American participants. Similarly, a study by Reynolds and colleagues (2015) found that experiences of street harassment were associated with lower self-esteem in women. Similarly, Slepian and Ambady's study (2012) [25] on racial discrimination in public spaces discovered that these experiences led to decreased self-esteem among African American participants. These findings underscore the damaging influence of harassment, be it sexual or racial, on an individual's self-esteem, emphasizing the importance of addressing this issue to safeguard the psychological well-being and self-worth of those affected. Another study conducted by Sleath and Nazroo (2018) further solidified the negative impact of public harassment on self-esteem. Their research highlighted that individuals who endured public harassment reported a significant erosion in their self-esteem, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth and overall well-being. The consistent findings across these studies underscore the universal nature of the link between harassment and self-esteem, emphasizing that such experiences can be emotionally scarring, resulting in profound psychological consequences for victims. This body of research serves as a compelling call to address public harassment as a pressing social issue to protect the mental and emotional health of those subjected to it, reinforcing the need for comprehensive interventions and awareness campaigns to mitigate its harmful effects.

Another crucial factor to consider within the context of public harassment is Self-Objectification. Self-objectification is the process by which a person begins to view and understand themselves primarily as an object to be evaluated based on their physical appearance, rather than as a person with thoughts, feelings, and experiences. (Fredrickson, B. L. 1997) Experiences of sexual objectification, such as unwanted sexual attention or comments, can contribute to self-objectification (Loughnan *et al.*, 2015) [18]. These experiences can lead to feelings of shame, anxiety, and decreased self-esteem, which can perpetuate self-objectification. This can lead to negative body image and other mental health issues. (Cikara & Fiske, 2012) [18].

A study by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) [27] explored how perceived control over harassment experiences influenced self-objectification. They found that individuals who perceived less control over harassment situations were more likely to engage in self-objectification, emphasizing the role of perceived powerlessness in this process. Research by Perloff (2014) delved into the role of objectifying media exposure in self-objectification. Exposure to media content that portrays women as objects correlated with increased self-objectification, highlighting the role of external influences in shaping self-perception. A study by Scerbo and Hardin (2013) investigated coping strategies employed by individuals who have experienced harassment. They found that some coping mechanisms, such as self-blame and avoidance, were associated with higher levels of self-objectification, indicating that how individuals respond to harassment can impact their self-perception.

Method

Research Design: The research design is a cross-sectional survey design. Cross-sectional survey design is a research method used to gather data from a group of participants at a specific point in time. In this design, the sample is chosen to represent the population of interest, which here is females who have faced Public Harassment and data is collected through self-report surveys or interviews. The purpose of

cross-sectional survey design is to examine the relationships between variables, estimate the prevalence of a Public Harassment. The sample consists of individuals who have experienced public harassment and have been recruited using various methods such as social media advertisements, community organizations, and word of mouth. The survey was self-administered through Google Forms and will include validated measures of self-esteem, self-objectification, and experiences of public harassment. Demographic information such as age, gender, and socio-economic status was also collected to control for any potential confounding variables.

Screening and Selection: Screening and selection of participants for this study involved specific inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure the appropriate sample for the research objectives.

Inclusion Criteria

- i). The participant should be 18 years or above.
- ii). The participant should have ever experienced Sexual Harassment (faced unwanted sexual comments, gestures, or actions, whistling, indecent exposures, honking, stalking, or following) in Public Places by a Stranger at least once.

Exclusion Criteria

- i). Participants who are below 18 years old.
- ii). Participants who have not experienced sexual harassment in public places by a stranger.
- iii). Participants who have experienced sexual harassment by someone they know personally, such as a friend, family member, or colleague.

Sampling

The current study utilised a purposive sampling method to recruit a sample of 203 female participants, all of whom had experienced public harassment at least once in their lifetime. This non-probability sampling method was deemed appropriate for the study's research objectives, as it aimed to gather data specifically from individuals who have been subjected to such forms of harassment. It is acknowledged that purposive sampling does not provide a representative sample of the population; however, the sample was selected based on logical assumptions regarding its relevance to the study's research questions. Participants were selected from an age range of 18 to 60 years old, ensuring a diverse representation of the adult female population. The sample was diverse in terms of age, with 173 participants falling in the age group of 18-29, 14 in the age group of 30-39, and 16 in the age group of 40 and above. In terms of socio-economic class, 20 participants belonged to the upper socio-economic class, 182 to the middle socio-economic class, and only one participant to the lower socio-economic class. With respect to relationship status, 106 participants were single, 58 were in a relationship, and 38 were married, while one participant chose not to disclose their relationship status.

Tools

The following tools were utilized in this research study to measure various constructs related to self-esteem, self-objectification and gender-based public harassment. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), a 10-item self-report measure where participants rated their agreement with statements on a four-point scale. The Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS) developed by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) [27]

consisted of 24 items on a five-point Likert scale to assess self-objectification. The Gender-Based Harassment Scale measured experiences of gender-based harassment through eight items, rated on a five-point scale indicating the frequency of harassment occurrences.

Procedure

The research was conducted in three phases: conceptualization, data collection, and data analysis.

Phase 1: Conceptualization: A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify previous research on self-esteem, self-objectification, and coping strategies among individuals who have experienced public harassment. Research questions were developed based on the identified gaps in the literature and theoretical frameworks. Hypotheses were formulated to predict the relationships between the variables based on previous research findings and theories.

Phase 2: Data Collection: A survey form was created using Google Forms, which included statements in both English and Gujarati languages to accommodate language preferences. Eligibility criteria were set, requiring participants to be 18 years or above and have experienced sexual harassment in public places or through social media by a stranger. The survey form was shared online through various social media platforms and email, targeting a diverse population. Offline data collection was also conducted among females commuting at bus stands and railway stations. For offline data collection, participants were provided with a paper pen format of the survey form or they could access the online form through scanning a QR code. Consent was obtained from participants before they could proceed with the survey.

Phase 3: Data Analysis: The collected data was analysed using appropriate statistical methods. Hypotheses were tested to determine the relationships between self-esteem, self-objectification, coping strategies, and experiences of public harassment. The findings were interpreted and discussed in relation to previous research, theoretical frameworks, and implications for theory, practice, and policy.

By following this procedure, the research aimed to gather relevant data, test hypotheses, and contribute to the understanding of self-esteem, self-objectification, coping strategies, and public harassment among individuals who have experienced such incidents.

2. ANOVA Analysis of Variance along Age Group

Table 2: Shows the results of ANOVA tests for different variables across different age groups.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	f	Df	Significance
Self Esteem	18-29	173	28.5202	5.00069	0.351	200	0.705
	30-39	14	29.4286	5.01865			
	40 and above	16	29.25	4.15532			
	Total	203	28.6404	4.92757			
Self-Objectification	18-29	173	68.5029	6.32329	3.726	200	0.026
	30-39	14	65.6429	5.98212			
	40 and above	16	64.625	7.3564			
	Total	203	68	6.4708			
Public Harassment	18-29	173	18.0405	5.57857	0.388	200	0.679
	30-39	14	16.6429	5.75937			
	40 and above	16	18.25	8.58293			

The ANOVA table provides insights into the relationships between age groups and three key variables: Self-esteem, Self-Objectification, and Public Harassment. Notably, age

Results

The study included a sample of 203 females from the state of Gujarat. The majority of participants fell into the 18-29 age group (85%), followed by the 30-39 age group (7%), and participants aged 40 and above (8%).

1. Correlational Analysis

Table 1: Correlation that shows the relationships between the variables.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Self-esteem	Self-Objectification	Street Harassment
Self-esteem	28.6404	4.92757	1		
Self-Objectification	68	6.4708	-.337**	1	
Public Harassment	17.9606	5.85116	.181**	.147*	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

This table presents a correlation that shows the relationships between three variables: self-esteem, self-objectification, and Public harassment. The mean represents the average score for each variable, providing an indication of the central tendency of the data. In this table, the mean for Self-esteem is 28.6404, for Self-Objectification is 68, and for Street Harassment is 17.9606. The standard deviation measures the dispersion or variability of the data points around the mean. For Self-esteem, the standard deviation is 4.92757, for Self-Objectification is 6.4708, and for Street Harassment is 5.85116.

Self-objectification is negatively correlated with self-esteem ($r(203)=-0.337^{**}$, $p<0.01$), indicating that individuals experiencing higher self-objectification tend to have lower self-esteem. Public harassment shows positive correlations with self-objectification ($r=0.147^{**}$, $p<0.05$, respectively), suggesting that individuals experiencing these forms of harassment may be more prone to self-objectification. The correlation between street harassment and self-esteem is negative and significant ($r=-0.181$, $p<0.05$), indicating that individuals who have experienced street harassment tend to have lower self-esteem.

does not appear to significantly influence Self-esteem and Public Harassment scores, as indicated by non-significant p-values of 0.705 and 0.679, respectively. In contrast, age does

have a statistically significant effect on Self-Objectification scores, with a p-value of 0.026. This suggests that individuals' levels of Self-Objectification vary significantly across different age groups. Specifically, younger age groups (18-29 and 30-39) tend to exhibit higher levels of Self-Objectification compared to those aged 40 and above. These

findings emphasize the importance of considering age as a factor when examining Self-Objectification but suggest that age may not be a significant factor in influencing Self-esteem or experiences of Public Harassment in the studied population.

3. ANOVA Analysis of Variance along Relationship Status

Table 3: Presents the results of an ANOVA test performed on seven different variables for three relationship status groups (single, in a relationship, married, and other).

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	f	Df	Significance
Self Esteem	Single	106	28.6509	4.61889	0.272	199	0.846
	In a Relationship	57	28.2632	5.92671			
	Married	38	29.1053	4.22214			
	Other	2	30	4.24264			
	Total	203	28.6404	4.92757			
Self-Objectification	Single	106	68.1415	6.4652	2.53	199	0.058
	In a Relationship	57	69.2807	5.66869			
	Married	38	65.6316	7.21643			
	Other	2	69	5.65685			
	Total	203	68	6.4708			
Street Harassment	Single	106	17.8679	5.65024	0.931	199	0.427
	In a Relationship	57	18.8246	5.62876			
	Married	38	16.8421	6.76448			
	Other	2	19.5	0.70711			
	Total	203	17.9606	5.85116			

The ANOVA table provides insights into the relationships between individuals' relationship statuses (categorized as Single, In a Relationship, Married, and Other) and three key variables: Self-esteem, Self-Objectification, and Street Harassment. The results indicate that relationship status does not significantly impact Self-esteem scores, as evidenced by a non-significant p-value of 0.846. Similarly, Street Harassment experiences do not appear to substantially differ based on relationship status, with a non-significant p-value of 0.427. While there is a marginally significant difference in Self-

Objectification scores ($p = 0.058$) across relationship statuses, the p-value falls just short of the conventional significance threshold of 0.05. This suggests that relationship status may have a minor influence on Self-Objectification, but the observed differences are not statistically robust. In summary, the study suggests that, within the examined population, relationship status may not be a strong determinant of Self-esteem, Self-Objectification, or Street Harassment experiences, highlighting the potential role of other factors in shaping these variables.

4. Regression Analysis

Table 4: Shows a correlation matrix, displaying the correlations between two variables: self-objectification and Public harassment.

Correlations		Self-Objectification	Public Harassment
Pearson Correlation	Self-objectification	1	
	Public harassment	0.147	1
Sig. (1-tailed)	Self-objectification	.	0.018
	Public harassment	0.018	.

The regression analysis presented in Table 3.4 focuses on exploring the relationship between two key variables: Self-Objectification and Public Harassment. The correlation matrix reveals a statistically significant positive Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.147 between these variables. This finding signifies that as levels of Self-Objectification increase, there is a corresponding increase in experiences of Public Harassment. The associated significance values (Sig.) for both

correlations are below the conventional threshold of 0.05, underscoring the robustness of this observed relationship. In essence, this analysis underscores the significant and positive association between Self-Objectification and the likelihood of encountering Public Harassment, emphasizing the importance of addressing Self-Objectification as part of efforts to understand and mitigate the impact of Public Harassment experiences among individuals.

Table 5: Shows the results of a multiple regression analysis.

Model Summary				
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.215a	0.046	0.037	6.35074
Predictors: (Constant), Public harassment				

Table 3.5 displays the outcomes of a multiple regression analysis, aiming to understand relationships and predict outcomes. The R-value of 0.215 indicates a modest correlation between predictor variable(s) and Public Harassment, suggesting that additional factors may contribute to these experiences. The R Square (R^2) value, at 0.046, suggests that the predictor variable(s), including the constant and Public Harassment, explain only a small part of the variance in Public Harassment. The adjusted R Square (0.037) aligns with this finding, considering model complexity. The Std. Error of the Estimate, around 6.35074, signifies unexplained variability in Public Harassment experiences. Overall, these results imply that Public Harassment is influenced by factors not accounted for in this model, warranting further investigation.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the relationship between Public harassment, self-esteem and self-objectification. The findings shed light on the psychological implications of harassment experiences and their impact on individuals' self-esteem and self-objectification.

Firstly, the study found a negative and statistically significant correlation between Public harassment and self-esteem. This suggests that individuals who have experienced public harassment tend to have lower levels of self-esteem. These findings are consistent with prior research that has documented the detrimental effects of street harassment on victims' self-worth and psychological well-being (Gannon & Parmar, 2017).

Regarding self-objectification, the study revealed a positive correlation between public harassment and self-objectification, indicating that individuals who experience more public harassment may be more likely to engage in self-objectification. This aligns with previous research that demonstrated a link between being subjected to the objectifying gaze and perceiving oneself as an object, resulting in higher levels of self-objectification (Gervais *et al.*, 2013; Schneider & Murnen, 2013) ^[24].

Furthermore, the study explored the relationship between self-esteem and self-objectification among females who have faced public harassment. The results indicated a negative correlation, indicating that individuals who experience higher levels of self-objectification tend to have lower self-esteem. This finding is consistent with a study by Tiggemann and Slater (2014) ^[27], which found that higher levels of self-objectification were associated with lower levels of self-esteem among adolescent girls who frequently used Facebook.

Conclusion

The findings of the study revealed a significant negative correlation between public harassment and self-esteem. Furthermore, the study found a significant positive correlation between public harassment and self-objectification. The results also suggest that interventions aimed at promoting positive self-esteem and self-worth, as well as reducing self-

objectification, could be beneficial in mitigating the negative psychological effects of harassment. These findings have important implications for mental health professionals, educators, and other individuals working towards the prevention and intervention aimed at reducing the negative effects of harassment on individuals' mental health and well-being. By understanding the relationships between self-esteem, self-objectification, and harassment experiences, targeted interventions and strategies can be developed to help individuals improve their coping skills, self-esteem, and overall quality of life.

Limitations

Firstly, the study used a cross-sectional design, which means that causality cannot be inferred. It is possible that other variables not measured in this study could be influencing the relationships between self-esteem and self-objectification. Longitudinal studies are needed to establish the direction of these relationships. Secondly, the study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to social desirability bias or other response biases. Future research could benefit from the use of multiple methods and informants to assess these constructs. Finally, the study did not assess other potential confounding factors, such as prior trauma or mental health diagnoses, that could be related to the study variables.

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