**Abstract**

Street harassment is a common everyday occurrence, yet little academic attention has been paid to how it affects those engaged in outdoor recreation. This study critically explores street harassment experienced and managed by runners in London. Data was collected through an online survey and one-to-one interviews. A total of 121 runners across 26 London boroughs completed the survey, with seven women and two men taking part in follow-up interviews. Transcripts and survey responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The survey results showed that 84% of women and 50% of men have experienced some form of street harassment while running in London. Five themes were identified: *Running into Trouble, I am Afraid of Men, The Cost of Safety, Silencing Myself* and *It’s Not Me, It’s You.* These themes illustrate the complexities contained in the experience of street harassment, the impact it has on runners and how they try to manage it. This study highlights a pressing need for a shift in cultural and political attitudes towards the issue of street harassment.

**Keywords:** Women, Gender, Geography, Goffman, Urban, Outdoor Recreation

**Introduction**

Anecdotal evidence suggests that street harassment is a widespread issue experienced by many (especially female) runners (Commons 2017; Driscoll 2017; Malin 2020; McGuire 2018, 2019; Vine 2017). For example, a recent survey conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) by popular magazine *Runners’ World* identified that 27% of women have been followed, 13% have been sexually propositioned, and 5% have been grabbed, groped, or otherwise physically assaulted while running (Scarr and Hamilton 2017). Yet, systematic academic research in this space is notably lacking (Logan 2015; Osmond and Woodcock 2015); it is an “underexplored phenomenon” (Gimlin, 2010, p. 280). Given that outdoor exercise is associated with a range of health and wellbeing benefits (Lee et al. 2017; Szabo and Abraham 2013) and running is considered particularly accessible since it requires little in the way of specialist equipment, skill, or experience (Hitchings and Latham 2017), examining the impact of street harassment as a potential barrier to this form of outdoor recreation is warranted. Echoing Gimlin (2010) who reported that among the various forms of problematic behaviour in society, consideration of the harassment runners experience by state and local governments is noticeably absent and, “… to ignore the harassment targeted at any group is to blind ourselves to the active discrimination that we still tolerate and that all individuals, independent of age, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, commit in public places” (p. 281).

One of the first and few scholars to explore public harassment experienced by runners was Greg Smith (1997, 2001). Drawing from Ervin Goffman’s (1963) concept of *civil inattention* (p. 83)–a rule which enjoins persons in public spaces to notice others but not to make them an object of special interest–and following an ethnographic analysis of runners’ experiences as well as his own, Smith’s ground-breaking research illustrated various forms of street harassment. Termed a *gradient of harassment*, from minor inconveniences to substantial episodes, Smith provided examples of street remarks (e.g., heckling, verbal abuse) and physical assault (e.g., grabbed, spat on, pushed, beaten up) experienced by runners, with each form breaching the civil inattention rule that Goffman proposed would ensure the mainstay of social orderliness and felt security in public places. For example, a woman runner aged 35 reported, “Young people are the worst, teenage types. When they’re on their own they’re no problem; it’s when they’re in groups of two or more they feel the need to pass comments as you run past. Often it’s just ‘Look at the state of that’ or ‘Look at them tits’ or ‘Look at that bum’ or things like that” (p. 170). Examples such as these provide an illustration of breaches of civility (Goffman, 1963), which have resurfaced in more contemporary research (Gimlin, 2010; Roper, 2016; Wesley & Gaarder, 2004). Civil inattention is clearly not a given.

To explain these forms of harassment in public places, Smith (1997) drew on Goffman’s notion of frame and social openness. It was argued that running is an ‘open activity’ (Goffman, 1974) contained within a frame that removes the serious selves of participants and onlookers to outside the frame, thereby allowing for behaviour that could otherwise be considered inappropriate. Put another way, the running frame commits the runner to an unserious self, they are ‘out of role’, and playful activity that is voluntarily entered into by participants, and as such verbal remarks and physical acts experienced by runners should be treated as something unserious (e.g., a taunt or tease). However, this argument can be challenged. For instance, it does not explain why certain people are more likely to experience breaches of civility. For instance, men report feeling more assured, confident, and robust when running, while women are more cautious about running after dark, more disciplined about where they go running (e.g., they would only run off-road when running with someone else) and feel they must ‘dress down’ to run in public to avoid unnecessary attention (Smith, 1997; Wesley and Gaarder, 2004). Clearly, street harassment has a gendered dimension (cf. Tuerkheimer 1997; Vera-Gray 2016), which resonates with feminist geographers who argue that public spaces and activities are *gendered* (Valentine 1990; Pain 1991; McDowell, 1998). Furthermore, Gimlin (2010) argued that Smith’s explanation can only apply to *some* groups of runners (i.e., unserious runners). For example, it does not explain why *serious* runners who are *not* engaging in *unserious* activity are harassed. For instance, Morris (2021) recently wrote about how leading female runners have spoken out about the abuse and harassment they experience when they are training out on the streets and in parks. Lastly, to interpret all verbal remarks and physical acts as *unserious* is to miss the point; it is after all, *harassment*.

Building upon Greg Smith’s pioneering research and drawing on her own empirical work of runners’ experiences of non-physical abuse as well as her own, Debra Gimlin (2010) argued that harassment can also be explained in relation to ideologies of class (e.g., harassment from young working-class ‘chavs’), gender (e.g., female and male physical appearances and how they misalign with feminine and masculine ideals, men’s sexist and proprietary attitudes towards women), and the bodily form that running takes. To elaborate on the latter point, running entails a “very public display of exertion – panting, red face and look of tiredness” (Gimlin, 2010, p. 278). Drawing on Goffman’s (1963) descriptions of “body idiom” (p. 33) and “overinvolvement” (p. 60), Gimlin argued that the bodily form of running displays expressions and gestures deemed inappropriate in public encounters (e.g., “panting”, “soaked in sweat”); thus, it violates the conventional body idiom expected in public spaces. That said, it is important to also recognise that some runners do appear they are engaging in an ‘effortless’ form of activity (cf. Dreyer & Dreyer, 2009). Nonetheless, Gimlin argues that the body idiom of public running signals an unacceptable degree of “involvement” in the activity and the self, and, by implication, a lack of commitment to the social encounter (e.g., *ignoring* onlookers); it is this *excessive* self-involvement that merits breaches of civil inattention. Indeed, Gimlin reported, “… individuals who harass public runners may well feel justified in doing so, given that their own (uncivil) behaviour actually mimics common notions regarding *legitimate* breaches of inattention” (p. 280). Yet, despite extending our theorising about runners’ experiences of harassment, Gimlin reports, “… the account provided here remains necessarily incomplete, not least because of the relatively narrow range of data available for analysis” (p. 280). She also argued that future researchers need to contextualise and consider the national setting of their research, as there is likely to be variations in the experiences of harassment *within* and *across* nations (Gimlin, 2010).

Building upon Greg Smith’s (1996, 2001) and Debra Gimlin’s (2010) pioneering research and drawing from Goffman’s (1963, 1967, 1971) sociological work concerning behaviour in public spaces, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the dearth of research in this space by providing a contextualised understanding of runners’ experiences of street harassment in London. Our rationale for exploring London is threefold: (a) researchers have not yet explored London as a context for street harassment experienced by runners; (b) the first author has experienced street harassment in London, which provided the motive to investigate this phenomena and context; and (c) London may provide an information-rich context, especially given that street harassment is more common in urban areas and cities due to the high population density (Fraser, Viswanath, and MacLean 2017). Specifically, the aims of this study are to explore the experience of street harassment in London, the impact it has on runners and how they try to manage it. For the purposes of this study, street harassment is defined as verbal and non-verbal acts by a stranger in a public place, including pinching, slapping, inappropriate touching, shouted remarks, vulgarity, ogling and stalking (Gardener 1995), which is intended to be inclusive in terms of capturing different forms of harassment across *all* runners in public (Mason-Bish and Zempi 2019).

**Method**

**Philosophical Beliefs and Sampling**

This study was underpinned by interpretivism, adopting a relativist ontology (e.g. reality is multiple, created and mind-dependent) and a subjectivist epistemology (e.g. knowledge is constructed and subjective). Following procedural ethical approval from University’s Ethics Committee, criterion and maximum variation sampling were used to recruit participants. Criterion sampling was used to recruit participants who lived in London, were aged 18 years and older, and who had been running on average at least twice a week for the past six months. Building upon these criterions, maximum variation was also chosen to enhance the study’s reach and potential generalizability (i.e., naturalistic generalization, transferability; Smith, 2018). Characteristics accounted for were gender, age, ethnicity, and Borough of residence.

One hundred and twenty-one runners participated in the study, 69% of which were female and 31% were male. Participants ranged in age from 23–58 with a mean age of 32 years (SD = 7.28). Over half of survey respondents (60%) had been running for more than 5 years, with a majority (57%) running between 3–4 times a week. Residents from 26 out of 32 London Boroughs participated. Nine participants (seven women and two men) took part in the second round of data collection (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Interview Participants’ Demographics (names are pseudonyms)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Adam | James | Rachel | Claire | Faiza | Emily | Morgan | Hanna | Sophie |
| Age | 32 | 27 | 37 | 25 | 33 | 27 | 24 | 26 | 28 |
| Gender | M | M | F | F | F | F | F | F | F |
| Ethnicity | White | White | Mixed – White/ Asian | White | African Arab/ Muslim | White | Black | White Jewish | White |
| Area of  London | North | West | East | East | North-  West | South-West | South | South | South |
| Running  Experience | 5+ years | 5+ years | 5+ years | 3–5 years | 5+ | 3-5 years | 1-3 years | 3-5 years | 3-5 years |
| Weekly Runs | 6+ | 5 | 2 or less | 5 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 3 | 6+ |

**Procedure and Data Collection**

Participants who met the sampling criteria were recruited through social media, including Instagram and Facebook, as well as email and word of mouth. For example, the first author contacted several ethnic minorities and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) running clubs in London via email inviting them to take part in the research. A mixed (qualitative dominated) online survey was selected as the initial method for data collection due to its broad scope and potential to capture the breadth of runners’ experiences across Boroughs in London (Terry and Braun 2017). The survey started with questions on their running background, with subsequent questions inviting them to share potential experiences of street harassment while running in London. To build upon and complement the *breadth* of experiences from the survey, the authors then make an informed decision to use semi-structured follow-up interviews to provide *depth* to the qualitative dataset (Janghorban et al. 2014). This method of data collection provided the participants with the freedom to discuss their experiences, while also allowing the researcher the opportunity to explore further any areas of interest which were identified from the survey (Sparkes and Smith 2014). Prospective interviewees that had indicated a willingness to take part in a follow-up interview were contacted via email; however, not all took up the invitation and no reason was provided. Due to the Covid–19 pandemic, all interviews were conducted virtually, with six interviews taking place over Zoom and the remaining three over the telephone. For the purposes of this study, an interview guide was developed including questions such as, “Have you observed much street harassment in London?”, “Can you tell me of your experiences of street harassment while running?”, “What impact (if any) have these experiences had on you?”, and “How do you respond to this harassment?” Questions encouraged runners to story their experiences and probes were used to clarify understanding and elicit more information. The interviews, which lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. All participants’ names were changed to protect their anonymity.

**Data Analysis**

A reflexive thematic analysis (TA) was used to construct themes from the qualitative dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). This method of data analysis was chosen due to its flexibility; it enabled us to analyse the data inductively (e.g., new experiences), deductively (e.g., guided by previous research), critically (e.g., questioning social norms), and reflexively (e.g., considering our position within the study). The process of doing the reflexive TA involved six phases, which was fluid and recursive rather than rigid and structured (Braun & Clarke, 2019). The first phase–data familiarisation through the process of immersion–entailed forming ideas about patterns in the data by reading and re-reading the surveys and transcripts and listening and re-listening to the interviews. This phase was done independently by both authors. In the second phase, codes (i.e., segments of data that appear interesting to the authors) were constructed from the dataset that were interpreted as meaningful and relevant to the study. Both authors did the first three interviews separately and then discussed them collectively. The first author did the remaining analysis herself. In the third phase, the codes were clustered together to develop themes (i.e., “patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept”; Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593). The aim of this active and generative process of interpreting meaning from the codes was to develop themes of *shared* meaning that ‘say something’ about the data relevant to the research question (Braun et al., 2016). Specifically, this phase entailed going back and forth with the previous phases (e.g., further data immersion), comparing and contrasting with previous research (e.g., Smith, 1997, 2001), and exploring other fields of research of relevance (e.g., Valentine 1990; Pain 1991; McDowell, 1998).

In the fourth phases–reviewing and refining the themes–a collaborative and reflexive approach was taken between the authors to develop a richer more nuanced reading of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Here, the co-author acted as a “critical-friend” to the first author to challenge her construction of the themes. Specifically, the the first author presented her interpretations of the data on a regular basis to the co-authors who provided a sounding board to encourage reflection upon, and exploration of, alternative explanations and interpretations. As part of this process of critical dialogue, the first author was required to make a defendable case that the available data supported her interpretations. In the fifth phase, themes were defined to ‘capture’ the essence of each theme (e.g., to show each theme’s scope and boundaries) and to clarify how each theme fits into the overall ‘story’ of the research, in relation to the purpose of the research. Finally, the sixth phase involved writing up the report (i.e., this study). To do this, we aimed to provide a concise, logical, coherent, non-repetitive, and interesting account of the story (Braun et al., 2016).

**Methodological Rigor**

Guided by a relativist approach (Sparkes and Smith 2009), the reader is encouraged to use the following indicators to judge the quality of this study: merit of the topic (e.g., significance and timeliness), credibility (e.g., thick description), sincerity (e.g., transparency), a significant contribution, as well as overall coherence of the work (Sparkes and Smith 2014). Aligning with these quality indicators, three techniques were used to enhance the study’s methodological rigor (Smith and McGannon 2017). First, the researcher kept a reflexive journal detailing her reasoning, judgement and emotional reactions during the research process (Russel and Kelly 2002; Smith 1999). Reflexivity can be defined as the process of continual, critical self-evaluation of the researcher’s positionality and how this may affect the research process and outcome (Bradbury-Jones 2007; Guillemin and Gillam 2004; Pillow 2003). Given the first author’s previous direct and indirect experiences of street harassment in London, this reflexivity was deemed critical throughout the research process. Thus, the research was motivated not just by her personal experiences of street harassment, but also those of friends and clubmates who had shared similar incidences. These experiences motivated the first author to want to understand and explain forms of street harassment, as well as explore ways to bring about positive change to prevent street harassment. Yet, while the first author’s position as an “insider” aided in recruiting and developing rapport with participants and meant the researcher was more sensitised to certain dimensions of the data (Kacen and Chaitin 2006; Padgett 2008), they also carried the risk of blurring boundaries; the imposition of a researcher’s own values, beliefs, and perceptions (Drake 2010). It was therefore necessary for the researcher to repeatedly reflect on how her presence was shaping the conversation to ensure interviewees were not led inappropriately (Berger 2015).

To further enhance the study’s methodological rigor, the researcher presented her interpretations of the data to the co-author, who acted as a ‘critical friend’ and encouraged further reflexivity by challenging her construction of knowledge (Smith and McGannon 2016). As part of this process of critical dialogue, the first author was required to make a defendable case that the available data supported her interpretations. Moreover, external reflections were sought from a London running club who did not participate in the original data collection phases to evidence the generalisability of the study (Wadey and Day, 2016). The researcher presented the findings via a virtual focus group, inviting participants to discuss their reaction to the data (Tracy 2010). Many participants expressed surprise over the prevalence and severity of street harassment in London. While female participants found that the themes resonated with their own experiences, male participants reflected on their previously largely unrecognised ‘privilege’ of being able to run relatively unencumbered.

**Results and Discussion**

Although five main themes were identified, these did overlap, reflecting the complexity and interconnectedness of runners’ experiences. The first theme, *Running into Trouble,* provides an overview of the different forms of harassment and their frequency*.* The second theme, *I am Afraid of Men,* aims to situate female runners’ experiences of harassment within a broader context. The third theme, *The Cost of Safety,* reflects the choices between personal freedom and safety which women frequently have to make. The fourth theme, *Silencing Myself,* identifies the difficulties female runners face in deciding how to respond to street harassment. The fifth theme, *It’s Not Me; It’s You,* examines the ways in which runners make sense of street harassment.

**Running into Trouble**

This theme captures the forms and frequency of street harassment in London. Overall, 84% of female survey respondents reported having experienced some form of street harassment while running in London compared with 50% of male respondents. Aligning with some examples of street remarks from previous research (e.g., Gimlin 2010; Smith 1997) that illustrate the breach in the civil inattention rule that Goffman (1963) proposed would ensure the mainstay of social orderliness, participants described a range of experiences, among the most common of which were catcalls (e.g., “yummy”, “hey sexy”), propositioning, the use of crude language or name calling (e.g., “bitch”, “slut”), as well as non-verbal expressions including wolf-whistles, leers, winks and other physical gestures both by individual and groups of men on the street as well as from passing traffic. For instance, one female runner writes:

I used to get catcalls like ‘Hey sexy’ when I was a teenager jogging to the gym, or even kerb-crawling as I jogged on the pavement in Hackney. Now it's more ‘smile’ or if I'm running in the city, men have tried to high-five me as I go by which they don't do to male runners.

Another survey respondent explains, “[I’ve] been shouted at and been called names ‘hello baby’, ‘hey princess’, ‘mama come to me’. I don’t think I’ve been for a run without having a horn tooted at me”. In addition, several female participants also reported having been mocked for not being “fast enough” as well as being “body-shamed” while running, which included derogatory comments on their body shape, being told to “run to McDonalds and eat a burger”, or being ridiculed and, extending previous research, filmed without their consent (cf. Carman 2018). Given the contemporary feminine ideals of slenderness (e.g., Grogan 2010), accusations of ‘fatness’ from the harassers appeared to create a justification for the harassment (Gimlin 2010). Yet, thin bodies are not necessarily protected, instead attracting harassment for perhaps failing to conform to appropriate gender displays by noy being “feminine enough.” As Goffman (1963) remarked in his research on behaviour in public places, perceived improprieties of appearance can make ‘permissible’ breaches of civil inattention.

**Figure 1.** Survey results on prevalence of street harassment amongst runners in London.

Whilst by far the most common, catcalls and other microaggressions are not the only forms of harassment that female runners experience. Thus, participants also reported having been groped or otherwise physically assaulted while running. These experiences included survey respondents saying: “I’ve been grabbed from behind while running”, “A man ran up behind me and smacked me on my behind”, “I have had someone grab my arm. I’ve had someone slap my arse as I ran past a pub”, “Once I was running up [the] high street and a few men gathered together and started spitting on me”. Moreover, several participants reported that men had exposed their genitals to them, a behaviour commonly known as ‘flashing’. Likewise, 30% of female participants reported having been followed by somebody either on foot or in a car and these encounters were often experienced as particularly intimidating. One survey respondent writes:

Often cars slow down, and I sometimes think I’m paranoid. This once happened to me late at night on a residential road, a man pulled up next to me and shouts ‘what’s up beautiful’ and continued to follow me in his car until I told him to fuck off and whether that actually works for him.

Similarly, Morgan describes:

I had an incident a couple of weeks ago when I was running with my dog and a guy was in his car and he was following me and he was like, ‘I really like what you’re wearing’, but I tried to just listen through my headphones and not reacting and then he kept driving next to me for about a minute, he was just like ‘oh I really want your number, can we talk, blah blah’.

These examples illuminate the diversity and novel (e.g., filming without consent) forms of street harassment in London, which, aligning with Smith’s (1997, 2001) *gradient of harassment*, range from microaggressions to physical violence. Interpreting these forms of harassment, we would argue that many of them are *gendered* (cf. Smith 1997; Gimlin 2010). To elaborate, female participants reported that the harassment they experienced came overwhelmingly, if not exclusively from men (or boys). As one female survey respondent writes: “I am trying to recall whether I have ever received harassment from a non-man but nothing springs to mind; all harassment that I can recall has been from a man or groups of men”. To explain why more women experienced breaches of civility than men, we would disagree with Goffman’s (1963) emphasis on *role violation* as a cause of the incivility (i.e., women are caught ‘out of role’ and are being reprimanded for it with public comments; for a historical review of gender and place, see McDowell 1998). Rather our interpretations resonate with Gardner’s (1995) work on gender and public harassment, which suggests these examples of gender harassment *on* women *by* men reflect male privilege and how our participants were not necessarily targeted as ‘runners’, but instead as members of a socially disadvantaged group. This male privilege resonates with Smith’s (1997) confessional tale of researching street harassment with males and females:

Women tended to grasp the purpose of the research very quickly, while a number of men needed somewhat more elaborate explanations of its aims and ostensive illustration of topics of interest. Even after the interview has been formally concluded, some men retained a faintly bemused and quizzical air, expressing puzzlement about exactly what I was after (p. 75).

Yet, it is important to recognise that some of the male runners did report experiences of harassment. However, in contrast with the females, the male participants largely used gender-neutral language such as “person”, “people”, “cyclist” or “stranger” in their description of the incident. That said, a few male survey participants did describe being harassed and receiving “inappropriate comments from men and women”. James described being harassed by a group of male builders during his training session: “I was getting heckled about all sorts of different things, every single lap. Like wolf whistled and shouted at.” Another male participant reported his experiences of being harassed by males and females: “Most of it was commenting on my legs - generally positively - noting the length of my shorts and commenting on my overall physical appearance. Mostly by other men - I live in an area with lots of LBGT people - but also by women.” But unlike the female participants, the men reported interpreting these remarks as “humorous” or “flattering” rather than intimidating or degrading. However, the frequency of these remarks experienced by men was in stark contrast to the female participants. One female survey respondent wrote “I've experienced some kind of unwanted comment or look nearly every time I've been running in London over the past 8 years”, while another said “Sadly I reckon one out of my three runs a week get me unwanted attention and harassment” and a third wrote “I experience some form of unwanted attention on about 80% of runs”. Similarly, Claire describes being harassed numerous times during a single run:

I think in that 5k run I got like eight, seven or eight different people either trying to talk to me, like one guy um people just sometimes think they, if they like position themselves in your running route and kinda try and like block you […] so I think one or two people did that and then there was just a few other random comments or noises […] and there was like a group of young guys on the other side of the street as I’m running this way and they were singing a song at me.

By contrast, as noted above, 50% of male participants reported never having experienced any harassment while running in London, while those that had reported this occurred “maybe two or three times maximum over hundreds and hundreds of runs in London” or “maybe once every two or three months I’ll get shouted at”. Clearly, the harassment experienced by runners in London appears to be influenced by gender, especially regarding the frequency and type of harassment experienced and how they are interpreted by runners.

**I am Afraid of Men**

Extending previous research on runner harassment by Smith (1997, 2001), this theme accounts for the broader context in which female runners’ experiences of street harassment are situated; it considers both the participants prior experiences of harassment as well as the broader social context, which includes knowledge of violence against women through media reports and the stories that circulate in social exchanges (cf. Gardner 1995; McDowell 1998; Wilson 1992). To elaborate, during the interview one participant disclosed her experience of sexual assault, and two other interviewees shared their experience of being mugged in London with the perpetrator using violence against them. Claire spoke about how these experiences have impacted her:

[Men] don’t understand power structures and how it makes me feel as a woman having a man talk to me on the street when I like have been attacked by one, you know what I mean, it’s like people who haven’t experienced it don’t understand, or like maybe it’s just anyone who’s not a woman doesn’t understand [...] that actually any man talking to you on the street can be perceived as a threat even if they’re saying something really nice because of like previous experiences that you’ve had.

Similarly, a survey respondent wrote why she does not feel safe running in London, “Because of my experiences, not just as a runner, but as a woman out after dark. I have been groped before in the street after a night out, even with friends present.” It is estimated that in the UK, 1-in-4 women will experience domestic violence and 1-in-5 will experience sexual assault during her lifetime (Home Office 2019). Not only can the experience of trauma have a substantial impact on a person’s psychological and physical health (Silver et al. 2018), but it can also fundamentally disrupt victims’ assumptions about themselves, the world, and others, shattering their sense of safety (Janoff-Bulman 1995). For runners who have been the victim of crime, street harassment can potentially be *retraumatising* (Graham-Kevan et al. 2015). Moreover, street harassment may in itself be considered an insidious trauma, the devaluing of an individual’s social status because of a characteristic of their identity (Root 1992), in this case gender, which can manifest as an ongoing fear of violence by men (Gordon and Riger 1989). Consequently, feminists have proposed a broader conceptualisation of *systemic trauma* emphasising the broader social and cultural factors in which sexual harassment is embedded (Fitzgerald 2017; Wasco 2003).

Even where participants had not personally been victimised, they often carried knowledge of violence against women (i.e., vicarious trauma; cf. Schauben and Frazier 1995). Many mentioned witnessing other women being harassed or hearing stories from friends or acquaintances. One survey respondent wrote, “I [have been] avoiding running at night for a very long time after a friend was followed and grabbed at night”. Adam also wrote:

I feel like night time London lacks well-lit areas to run at night which is a big issue–more for females–but especially in areas like the canal, they’re ideal places to run but they’re so poorly lit and I know someone who’s been sexually assaulted whilst running along the canal.

In addition, some participants were also deeply impacted by news reporting about violence against women. Rachel says:

Recently there was a horrible case of two sisters who were in a park in North London ... and that’s particularly sad because it was two, you know, adult women and they were together so it just - I think things like that will feed the notion of these spaces are not safe for women to be alone … I think they come from messages that have been sent from when we were very, very young but then I realised that that recent news story just reinforces that notion that was already there.

Such stories contribute to what Valentine (1992) terms a ‘geography of fear’, the gendered construction of public space as not safe for women (Wesley and Gaarder 2004). Indeed, like Rachel, many of the female participants reported receiving safety admonitions from an early age, including cautions such as, “a ponytail could be easy to grab”, “get a taxi home instead of walking at night”, “headphones make you an easy target”. This lends support to the argument of feminist scholars that, in general, women have not been taught to be comfortable in public spaces, with the private, domestic realm instead being implicitly considered the feminine domain (Bynum 1992; Duncan 1996; Rich 1986), even though statistically, violence against women is far more prevalent in the domestic as opposed to the public sphere (McDowell, 1998; Mellgren and Ivert 2018; Young 2006).

**The Cost of Safety**

Aligning with feminist geographers who argue that public spaces and activities are gendered (Valentine 1990; Pain 1991; McDowell, 1998), the notion of “felt insecurity in public spaces” (Goffman, 1977, p. 327), and Smith’s (1997) research of running harassment, this theme reflects the ways in which female runners curtail or restrict their freedom to enhance their subjective sense of safety. For example, some female participants limited when or where they run, with some even missing runs as a result. Morgan says:

It has made me reaffirm and reconsider when I run, what times I run, but it’s also made me consider things that are – not stopping running but limiting how much I run, and that’s basically for my own welfare and mental wellbeing.

However, others went even further to avoid certain places even when it caused them considerable inconvenience to do so. For instance, James explains about his partner:

There’s a load of builders that … are quite aggressive and intimidating and either like heckle her or wolf whistle her or shout at her or something. I see her changing her behaviour like the direction we go, the run we go on when we go together or if we set off together and then split, then she will get me to stay with her until we get past that bit or we’ll go deliberately a different route so that we avoid it.

Consistent with Smith (1997, 2001) who reported how darkness can conceal threats and danger, running at night was something that many of the female participants tried to avoid, citing safety concerns. Hanna says:

I wouldn’t feel safe enough to go out [running] on my own at night. I don’t know why day and night makes such a difference considering I’ve had experiences during the day as well, but I would never go out at night for a run because I don’t feel safe.

Her fears were echoed by many of the other women, who cited a diminished ability to ‘detect danger’ and a concern that there may be ‘little or no help coming’. These concerns echo those voiced by participants in Roper’s (2016) study, who argues that darkness has consistently been associated with greater safety concerns for women (cf. Jorgensen, Ellis and Ruddell 2013; Valentine 1989), including an increased sense of vulnerability because of the reduced visibility. While this is less of an issue during summertime, safety fears could lead to women missing runs during winter when daylight hours are very limited. One survey respondent explains, “I stopped running in winter / after 6pm and joined a gym to run on a boring treadmill instead. If I am not running with friends at night, I avoid it and save it for daytime runs on the weekend instead of after work”. Yet, while most research participants were from affluent middle-class backgrounds, it is important to recognise that not all women will necessarily be able to afford a gym membership. Likewise, not all runners necessarily have a social circle of like-minded friends to run with, meaning some women could be forced to stop running during the winter months. None of the male participants mentioned taking any safety precautions before heading out for a run.

Another strategy used by the participants to enhance their sense of safety and avoid harassment was to change their clothing (cf. Fuller 2021), which appears to be a gendered activity (cf. Gimlin 2010; Smith 1997). This strategy used by the female participants included covering up to some degree even in hot weather and wearing leggings instead of shorts, as these were perceived to lead to increasing objectification and unwanted attention by men. Thus, one survey respondent writes about the street harassment she received: “It made me feel less comfortable when running and put me off wanting to go out on my own, I felt self-conscious running past groups of men and preferred to cover up more - wearing long tops and leggings, instead of shorts and tight vests.” However, covering-up is not always effective in deterring harassment as Faiza’s example demonstrates:

I run covered up, top to bottom, you know, like I wear a headscarf and yes you wear running tights and running tops, and tights are tight, but you know they’re comfortable, and you do get comments. I think twice about what I wear when I go out running, like I’m not gonna lie […] you should be able to wear whatever you want when you’re out there but people will say whatever they wanna say.

Additionally, participants often consciously or subconsciously adopted a range of other behaviours to enhance their sense of safety, including letting someone know where they are going and when they will be back, running with their dog or a training partner, running without headphones to be more alert of potential dangers, carrying their mobile phone, or carrying their keys as a makeshift weapon. Emily explains:

When I’m running with my friends I don’t have to be looking every time a person walks towards me and like wondering you know you ask yourself the question, is it safe for me to be running so close to that person or do I need to move away? When you’re running by yourself and it’s dark I’m very aware of who’s walking towards you for example […] if I’m running somewhere it’s dark and there’s like a man on his own walking towards me I probably give him a wide birth.

This example captures women’s dilemma in being unable to identify which encounter with a stranger may lead to harm and therefore the need to consider every encounter as potentially dangerous (Bowman 1993; Thompson 1994). Kelly (1988) was the first to conceptualise these and other strategies as ‘safety work’. Gardner (1995) found that out of all these behaviours, the one that women most engaged in related to being ‘on guard’ in public, especially when alone. However, such safety work ultimately comes at a cost for women as it demands both their time and energy and ultimately detracts from the *enjoyment* and *pleasure* of physical activity (cf. Phoenix and Orr 2015). However, not all the females surveyed and interviewed reported changing their behaviour to enhance their sense of safety. They reported *resisting* the urge to change. For instance, one survey participant writes, “Initially I thought I’m going to change my route to work then realised I’m not changing what I do for *anyone*”. Similarly, Claire says:

I don’t feel like I should have to change my behaviour, you know when people say something like, ‘oh get a taxi home from the tube after’ and I’m not getting a taxi for like a 10-minute walk, you know, if some people wanna do that whatever that’s fine, but I feel like I don’t wanna have to change my behaviour to like protect myself.

**Silencing Myself**

This theme reflects how runners choose to respond (or not respond) to street harassment. Previous research has found that female runners rarely respond to street harassment (Roper 2016) but did not elaborate on the reasons behind this silence. Below, Hanna’s statement demonstrates some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of ‘calling-out’ harassment:

It’s not every day that I’m feeling brave enough to actually point out someone’s behaviour to them and um I don’t always feel like I don’t have the energy for it. And I’m also like it shouldn’t be my responsibility. However, there’s been loads of times when I have confronted someone–it’s very draining for me–I would have to go home and like give myself a lot of space if I were to do that. But yeah, I don’t always have it in me to um to say anything, which is worse for me because it ends up sort of internalising cause I don’t have any kind of outlet for um processing that experience.

Confronting her harasser enabled Hanna to *regain* a sense of agency over the interaction and stand up for herself and others to resist and challenge patriarchy (cf. Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005), which in turn protected her from internalising the experience. These finding supports previous research, which also suggests that responding to street harassment can help to reduce its emotional impact (Fileborn and Vera-Gray 2017; Fleetwood 2019). At the same time, calling out harassment can also take a physical and psychological strain, which might explain why the main strategy used by the female and male participants was to *ignore* the harasser. However, unlike Smith (1997) who explained this avoidance by drawing on Goffman’s (1963) notion of frame and social openness, the participants in our study reported that they used this strategy because of safety fears, largely the resounding fear of escalation from street remarks to physical violence. Thus, Faiza explains:

Sometimes it’s good to walk away from things because you don’t know what’s gonna happen next […] There’s that fear as well of like should I say something or should I just pretend I didn’t hear anything and just go on because they are in a car and you’re on road on your feet so what’s gonna happen. It’s that fear of you don’t know what they’re gonna do, whether they’re gonna drive off or if it’s more than one person are they gonna come out and run after me and harass me further, it’s that fear of it turning into a physical altercation as well and you don’t want that to happen.

Many participants voiced frustration over their inability to respond without potentially compromising their personal safety, while others expressed a desire to respond but said they felt uncertain about what the ‘right’ thing to say or do was. Since women are often socialised into being ‘nice’ from an early age, they may find it particularly challenging to show anger and be openly confrontational (Esacove 2010). At the same time, there was also an ongoing concern that failure to confront harassers could perpetuate the continued normalisation of street harassment. In contrast, the male runners surveyed were often not afraid to ‘throw something verbal back’ indicating they were not subject to the same safety fears. This is further supported by the results, which showed that on the whole male participants felt much safer running in London, with 45% stating they felt “very safe” (compared to 18% of women), and only 8% feeling either “very unsafe” or “somewhat unsafe” (compared to 23% of women).

**It’s Not Me, It’s You**

This theme reflects the ways in which participants attempted to make sense of their experiences of street harassment while running, often fluctuating between internalisation and externalisation. Thus, many women reported questioning their role in the harassment and wondering whether they had ‘done something wrong’ to provoke the harassment. For instance, Rachel recounts:

The comment he said, what it was something like ‘yummy’ but it just really made me feel quite gross and that was when I did start thinking, ‘Am I wearing something inappropriate, like what-what is it?’ and it shouldn’t have been a reflection of me and something I internalised but I definitely did think that [...] I think it just really made me feel um gross and I was gonna say dirty, but it’s not that I felt dirty, it’s just the way that someone looked at me and their interpretation to then say that.

Likewise, Hanna explains:

It made me feel unsafe and um kind of [pause] like kind of, I don’t know, ashamed um but I’m not sure what of because [pause] um I knew that I hadn’t done anything wrong, but I also felt kind of dirty.

Extending previous research on running harassment (Gimlin, 2010; Smith, 1997), feeling “gross”, “dirty”, or “ashamed” were commonly experienced reactions to catcalling and other street harassment, and like Rachel many participants questioned whether their choice of running attire was appropriate or could have some way been seen to justify the unwanted attention. This finding is perhaps not surprising considering the continuing prevalence of ‘rape culture’, a set of general cultural beliefs defending men’s violence against women (Phipps et al. 2018), which includes victim blaming and is often exemplified by questions such as ‘what was she wearing?’ (Lasher 2016). Internalised victim blaming is also reflected in the fact that some participants accepted responsibility for their harassment. For example, “I should not have run down there” (Saunders et al. 2016). Moreover, drawing on objectification theory (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997), researchers have suggested that the experience of street harassment might lead to an increase in self-objectification (Davidson, Gervais and Sherd 2015) and related negative consequences such as increased body surveillance and body shame (Fairchild and Rudman 2008).

While on the one hand previous research has found that runners may look for the source of harassment in their own behaviour and characteristics (Gimlin 2010), the results of the current study also highlight how some runners locate the cause of the harassment in the harasser. Thus, Faiza explains, “Because I work in mental health services and I know what to do and kinda like how to talk myself out of it – it’s kinda like their fault not mine – it’s them that have horrible thoughts not me, and I continue on doing what I’m doing cuz this doesn’t define who I am and what I’m doing.” Even then, for Faiza and other participants this tension between internalisation and externalisation often persisted for a prolonged period as they continued to ruminate about the incident. However, when sharing their experiences with friends or on social media, this made it easier for participants to accept that the harassment was not their fault. Put another way, women and their allies can collectively challenge the structural sources of male privilege (Staggenborg and Taylor 2005). Interestingly, this internalisation and externalisation was not solely limited to female participants. In his interview, James talks about the verbal harassment he received from some workmen:

It just sort of made me wonder what, like what I was doing that prompted that behaviour, but I mean obviously like in the sort of rational thinking process it had nothing to do with me, at all. Like it’s someone else being insecure and doing that, it’s got nothing to do with me whatsoever, but it did make me feel like, probably, the fair way to characterise it would be like angry, confused.

**Conclusion**

This study is original in that it aimed to explore whether runners in London experience street harassment, the nature of that harassment, how it affects those who are subject to it, and how they try to manage it. The findings from which extend, support, and challenge the preliminary research in this emerging field of research (Gimlin 2010; Smith 1997). The study extends research by providing a context-specific understanding into the prevalence of street harassment or breaches of civil inattention (Goffman, 1963) experienced by runners across the majority of Boroughs in London. For example, our survey had identified that 84% of female and 50% of male survey respondents living in London reported having experienced street harassment while running in London (e.g., street remarks, physical violence). Clearly, this is a problematic behaviour in our society that warrants consideration by London Councils. It also extends the literature in terms identifying novel forms of street harassment which have not been identified in previous literature, such as filming people exercising without their consent, as well as identifying the critical importance of considering the broader context *beyond* running-related experiences. Indeed, violence against women is more prevalent in the domestic as opposed to the public sphere (McDowell, 1998; Mellgren and Ivert 2018; Young 2006) and it was identified in this study how these experiences can impact and pose a barrier to women engaging in physical activity. It is important, therefore, that future sport, exercise, and health science researchers consider the broader context of violence and abuse against women and how we can learn and build upon previous research in this area, as well as from other disciplines including psychology, sociology, criminology, feminist, and media studies (cf. Fuller, 2021). The findings from this study also supports and resonates with previous research findings by Greg Smith (1997) and Debra Gimlin (2010), which highlight a lack of change in public attitudes and how the issue of street harassment remain a *critical* and *timely* issue decades later. Furthermore, we would argue that Goffman’s (1963) research on civil inattention provides a useful theoretical backdrop to research on running harassment; however, we would argue that some aspects are perhaps somewhat outdated (e.g., Goffman’s emphasis on role *violation* as a cause of the incivility) and how future researchers would do well to consider other bodies of research some such as feminist geography, especially given that our findings would suggest that public spaces and activities are *gendered* (Valentine 1990; Pain 1991; McDowell, 1998). Given the dearth of research in this space, however, we hope our study provides a ‘spring-board’ for other researchers to study and theorise about running harassment in diverse ways, as well as being open to novel methods of data collection (e.g., running interviews, digital methods, video diaries).

Despite the strengths of our study, there was some limitations that warrant consideration. Although our study sought to improve on the lack of participant diversity in this area of research, this was only partially successful. While one-third of interviewees identified as part of an ethnic/racialised minority, many survey respondents (80%) were white. These figures might reflect a lack of diversity in running more generally (England Athletics 2018), but also highlight short comings in the recruitment process. Although the first author contacted several ethnic minority running clubs via email inviting them to take part in the research, no responses were received. Furthermore, the authors relied on social media due to Covid-19 restrictions of research, which might have impacted the sample characteristics. Future researchers should therefore seek to enhance the scope of their sample, especially considering the role of *intersectionality* (Choo and Ferree 2009; Fogg-Davis 2006; Kearl 2010; Logan 2015; Nielsen 2006). Similarly, it is recommended that future researchers continue to build upon our understanding of males’ experiences of street harassment by identifying a purposive sample of men who have experienced street harassment. Traditionally, street harassment has often been framed as a female issue, which is unhelpful not only since men *can* and *do* experience it as well, but also since the overwhelming number of perpetrators of street harassment are men. Therefore, any attempts to solve the issue will need to address and include men. Recognising the need to change the narrative around gendered-based violence, some researchers have begun to focus on how *men* and *boys* can be successfully engaged in the prevention of harassment and violence (Flood 2018; Katz 2006).

This study has shown that street harassment is a significant issue in London. Experiences of objectification, vulnerability, fear and shame resulting from street harassment create barriers to participation in outdoor activities (Lee et al. 2017; Wesley and Gaarder 2004). This study calls for a fundamental cultural change, moving beyond neoliberalist attitudes characterising street harassment as an individual issue, and instead finally recognising it as the serious harm that it is with a political will to address the problem. Potential practical approaches which warrant further consideration include: (a) public awareness campaigns, similar to that initiated by Transport for London to draw attention to, and encourage reporting of, sexual harassment on public transport (Mayor of London 2019); (b) criminalisation of certain forms of street harassment, both to serve as a deterrent and to drive a shift in cultural attitudes towards such behaviour, as has already been done in France, Portugal and Belgium (Bates 2016; Blyth 2014; Wilsher 2019); and (c) promoting awareness of the need to facilitate personal safety and accessibility within the urban planning regime, through measures such as better street lighting (Sweet and Ortiz Escalante 2010). However, it is unlikely that such strategies will be much more than a ‘quick fix’ if the underlying issues of violence against women are not also addressed. Thus, feminists have long highlighted the deeply rooted misogyny which remains pervasive in contemporary culture and society (Bates 2020; Vera-Gray 2018). From television shows and books which are awash with problematic rape scenes, from treating violence against women as a useful plot device (Bufkin and Eschholz 2000; Ferreday 2015; Haskell and Dargis 2016) to the sexist language used by senior politicians (Sunderland 2020), these structures are complicit in legitimising male violence by dehumanising women (Burrell 2020). While it is acknowledged that such a shift in cultural and political attitudes will not be quick or easy to achieve, it is nonetheless overdue.

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