

Reactions to Objectification: Interviews on Emotions Regarding Catcalling

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Abstract

This paper explores the emotions individuals recall when they were catcalled or when witnessing catcalling. Most literature on catcalling portrays the phenomenon negatively, and to see if this was the case with individuals at The Evergreen State College six interviews were conducted. A broad range of emotions were described in each of the interviews. Catcalling is surrounded by ideas about men and women, heteronormativity, and as ideas about these power structures change our emotions about street harassment will as well.

Reactions to Objectification

Individuals all process catcalling differently than others, and their opinions also change from day to day, year to year, situation to situation. But what are some of the many emotions catcalling elicits in those who are the targets or those who witness it? This is what this paper searches for, in the form of interviews of both men and women from places around the US.

Catcalling or verbal harassment on the street is something that almost everyone has experienced or witnessed in their lives, with women being catcalled while men are not sexually objectified by strangers. Individuals often have a variety of feelings surrounding catcalling, often depending on the way that they have experienced the phenomenon. Women who are catcalled at night alone often feel very differently than women who are catcalled in the afternoon next to three friends. For those who were twenty years old when they were first catcalled, the experience can be validating, a casual compliment from a random stranger. If they were first catcalled when they were twelve, the experience can feel much more dangerous. Most people feel unsafe when catcalled, for a variety of reasons. In the article *Street Harassment and the Informal Ghettoization of Women* Bowman explains, "Staring at a stranger is a well-established cultural taboo ... Unlike a man, a woman's role is to be open to the public" (1993, 526). Catcalling usually involves intense staring before commenting, and men ignore the cultural taboo of staring and the stronger taboo of not commenting about a stranger so loudly that they can hear it. Gender inequality is a driving force in the perpetuation of catcalling.

Social situations are a huge influence on the presence of catcalling. The phenomenon is most common in large urban areas and is only absent in small towns and places where women are completely covered and veiled. Bowman theorizes that the absence in small towns is due to the lack of strangers, so catcallers cannot be completely anonymous strangers. In areas where catcalling is common, it increases when there are pictures of seductive women in advertisements on the street (Bowman, 530). Men from all classes, and ages have been known to catcall, at any and all women from the point that they look “womanly” until they are deemed “too old.” Men often have misconceptions about how catcalling makes women feel, believing that only positive emotions occur. Although women are the targets of catcalling, some men were interviewed as well to see what an outsider felt when witnessing street harassment. They were also asked how they thought it felt to be catcalled. In the end, four women and two women were interviewed.

Method

Questions were formed so that broad answers were necessary, and the same questions were asked each time to improve internal validity. Interviews were conducted in classrooms in the library building of The Evergreen State College over two days during lunch hours. Participants were offered a slice of pizza as compensation. Prior to the interview, participants signed an informed consent form. Once they were in the room, they were asked a multiple questions by the interviewer. The list of questions is below.

“Can you tell me about a time when you were catcalled by someone?

If you were not, can you tell me about a time when you witnessed someone else being catcalled?

How did you feel when that happened? What emotions did you have?

What is the first time you can remember being catcalled, or watching someone else be catcalled?

What emotions did this bring up?

Have your feelings regarding catcalling changed as you grew older, or over time?

Have they changed as a result of you learning new information about women's rights?

Is there anything else about this subject you would like to share that we didn't yet cover?"

Participants were then thanked and invited to eat pizza. Informed consent forms and identifying data were destroyed at the end of the quarter.

Results

Overall, the emotions mentioned were mostly negative. However, positive and neutral emotions were also brought up. Forty-two emotions were mentioned throughout the six interviews, and of those emotions seventeen were negative. Five out of forty-two were positive, and nine were coded as neutral. Participants had lived in wide ranges from small towns to big cities. There were four female and two male participants, and interviews ranged in length from four to eight minutes. When each of the six participants were asked about their emotions surrounding catcalling, a wide range of emotions were mentioned by each participant. Some of these emotions had not been anticipated when the interview questions were first being created, like neutral emotions. Once the interviews were analyzed there were three categories that the emotions ranged through. There were positive emotions, neutral emotions, and negative emotions. Below are quotes from each participant which summarized the interviews.

"So I think it would be a position of shock but also like- not like shock of an exploitative manner in the idea of that it's surprising that this thing happened to me today. and I might not tell my friends that it happened but it's still interesting nonetheless."

“Uh..... often just like a little bit uneasy you know I mean I might feel a little bit uneasy if someone yelled my name and I turned around and I knew them you know it’s just surprise with a sort of uneasy surprise.”

“I felt really uncomfortable, sort of like you’re in limbo. You wanna stand up for yourself but you don’t want to give them anything or satisfaction with a response but I feel shitty. Not like, you know honored in any way.”

“When I feel good about myself and someone catcalls me I feel better, and when I feel bad about myself and someone catcalls me I feel dirty and worse.”

“I would say that it probably feels very just.. I don't know if it were me I would probably feel a mixture of fear and intimidation and just general imposition in my space you know.. like I know what it’s like to feel imposition on my space and uncomfortable and also to feel intimidated by someone else. I’m sure it feels.. not very good (laugh).”

“I didn't feel threatened in that situation but I definitely felt disrespected and like not seen um as like a person and objectified and um just disappointed in the way people are sometimes.”

These quotes are organized from neutral emotions to negative. The wide variety shows how we can often feel so differently about this social phenomenon, and all four women participants mentioned that their feelings had changed as they had grown older. Three had been flattered when catcalled for the first time, and as they grew older they had grown to feel much more negative or neutral. One participant had felt negatively at first but grown to find that catcalling often helped her to feel better when she was having a good day.

Participants were often uncomfortable due to the subject matter, and they often had to pause to collect their thoughts. This was shown with long stretches of silence, stuttering and nervous laughter. Many of the women looked to the interviewer for confirmation that their feelings were valid, especially if the emotions brought up were positive associations with catcalling.

Two individuals mentioned that they felt it was a cultural phenomenon that was expressed through men on the street. Many situational factors were mentioned, such as big or small cities, downtown, in public, in the day as opposed to the night time, and one individual mentioned that he felt catcalling no longer occurred with any regularity at all. This could have been due to where the individual was from, as small towns have far less catcalling. Additionally, many of the participants could not recall a time when they witnessed someone else being catcalled. This could be due to the self-focused nature many of us have when we are on the streets, and the ability we have to ignore things we do not feel is necessary to our personal survival.

Discussion

This study was conducted in interviews, and participants knew going into the interview that the topic was catcalling. This could have steered people toward or away from participating and so the results might have been skewed towards people who had stronger feelings regarding the topic. In the future, more questions would be added in an attempt to further probe the emotions that each individual felt. Many people could not remember the first time they had witnessed catcalling, which was a drawback considering that there were questions researching

this. The location was The Evergreen State College which has mainly individuals at the college age of 18-25 years. The students are also mainly White, which means that there cannot be any conclusions drawn about different experiences for non-White individuals surrounding catcalling. Furthermore, there is a large focus on liberal and revolutionary thoughts in the college which could have meant that there were more negative emotions at this college than other places in the country. The study is also very United States centered.

Although this study found that individuals had some positive emotions like feeling flattered when catcalled, the way that men on the street talk at women is damaging. Franke describes sexual harassment, which catcalling is a mild form of as, "...A technology of sexism. It is a disciplinary practice that inscribes, enforces and polices the identities of both harasser and victim according to a system that envisions women as feminine, heterosexual objects and men as masculine, heterosexual objects (1997 693)." Catcalling is directly related to the sexism and heteronormativity that is inherent in United States culture. Without these two societal norms leading to the sexual objectification of women, catcalling would not exist. Heterosexual men believe that they can impose their ideas on a woman who they do not know, and although feelings can differ from individual to individual, the deeper meaning behind catcalling as a socially acceptable interaction is decidedly not positive. The emotions that were evoked in each individual when catcalling was mentioned were a large array of positive, negative and neutral emotions. Catcalling also occurs during all times of the day and night, when the catcalled woman is with friends or alone, and when an individual is an adult or a minor. Because of the many times and situations in which a woman can be catcalled, conflicting emotions were brought up consistently. Further studies could be conducted in the lab with more control, and a video of

women being catcalled shown. This would be a situation that was controlled and less individual-centered. Catcalling has many different forms, and the ways that we react are intertwined with our upbringing and exposure to street harassment. However, in order to move into a society where women and other genders are equal with men, the issues surrounding catcalling need to be addressed both in the US and elsewhere.

References

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