

# Everyday Stranger Harassment and Women's Objectification

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**Abstract** The present research suggests that stranger harassment (i.e., experiencing unwanted sexual attention from strangers in public) is a frequent experience for young adult women, and that it has negative implications for their well-being. First, stranger harassment was positively related to self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, *Psychol Women Quart* 21:173–206 1997). This was true for women who coped with stranger harassment using common strategies (passive, self-blame, or benign), but not for women who used an uncommon, active coping strategy (e.g., confronting the harasser). Second, stranger harassment experiences and self-objectification were positively related to women's fear of and perceived risk of rape. Further, women who feared rape were more likely to restrict their freedom of movement. In concert, the findings suggest that stranger harassment may have both direct and indirect negative effects on women's lives, and that it is a phenomenon worthy of future research.

**Keywords** Stranger harassment · Sexual harassment · Self-objectification · Fear of rape

## Introduction

In Margaret Atwood's (1986) novel, *A Handmaid's Tale*, women live in a society in which they are highly protected from men and the male gaze. Although they suffer

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other hellish forms of repression, they nonetheless enjoy the luxury of no longer being leered at by strangers. Stepping from fiction into reality, both the Japanese and Brazilian governments have recently deemed it necessary to take steps to protect women from public harassment by men. As reported by ABC News in June of 2005, the Japanese have designated women-only train cars to be used during rush hours. A Japanese survey revealed that nearly two-thirds of women in their 20s and 30s have been groped while riding the Tokyo trains and subways; the women reported feeling degraded, humiliated, and frightened by the groping (“Japan,” 2005). Likewise, Women’s eNews reported in May of 2006 that women in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil now have the option of riding female-only, pink-striped subway cars during rush hours (Sussman, 2006). These attempts to segregate male and female subway riders are less extreme than the gender segregation found in *A Handmaid’s Tale*, but in all cases the intent is to shield women from being humiliated by men in public places.

The acknowledgment of stranger harassment, and the need to protect women from it, is virtually ignored in the social science and feminist literature. Stranger harassment is the “[sexual] harassment of women in public places by men who are strangers” (Bowman, 1993, p. 519). In other words, stranger harassment is perpetrated by men who are not known to the victim (i.e., not a co-worker, friend, family member, or acquaintance) in public domains such as on the street, in stores, at bars, or on public transportation. While the phenomenon has been defined, it is infrequently studied (cf. Gardner, 1995; MacMillan, Nierobisz, & Welsh, 2000). Why has stranger harassment been overlooked by social science researchers? As Bowman (1993) and Nielsen (2000) suggest in their analyses of stranger harassment from a legal point of view, the study of stranger harassment may be lacking because there is no legal recourse; it is nearly impossible to sue a stranger who disappears in a flash for sexual harassment, and it is likely that few would support laws limiting the freedom of speech in public places. Gardner (1995) goes even further to suggest that stranger harassment is so pervasive that it is a part of the social fabric of public life: “Women... currently experience shouted insults, determined trailing, and pinches and grabs by strange men and [are] fairly certain that no one—not the perpetrator and probably no official—will think anything of note has happened” (p. 4). Thus, stranger harassment may be perceived to be an innocuous part of daily life, and not an important topic for study (Gardner, 1995).

However, as the Japanese and Brazilian examples suggest, stranger harassment may not be so innocuous; in both cases, the harassment experienced by women on the trains required segregating them from men. In view of the multitude of negative effects that sexual harassment has on women (described below), it becomes clear that the gap in the literature considering stranger harassment needs to be filled. In the current research, we take a first step toward a social psychological understanding of stranger harassment.

### Sexual Harassment Versus Stranger Harassment

Over the past 25 years, sexual harassment research has boomed as researchers have sought to define the components of sexual harassment and elaborate its causes and consequences (Gutek & Done, 2001; Pryor & McKinney, 1995; Wiener & Gutek,

1999). To do so, sexual harassment has been commonly parsed into three main components: sexual coercion, gender harassment, and unwanted sexual attention (Gelfand, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 1995). Sexual coercion is the direct request or requirement of sexual acts for job or school related rewards (e.g., promotion or a better grade); this component aligns with the legal conceptualization of *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. Gender harassment involves degradation of women at the group level such as making jokes about women as sex objects or posting pictures of women as sex objects. Unwanted sexual attention involves degradation of women at the individual level, such as treating a woman as a sex object by sending her dirty e-mails, grabbing her inappropriately, or leering at her. Both gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention fall into the legal category of hostile environment sexual harassment. Gelfand et al. (1995) note that while women frequently label sexual coercion as sexual harassment, it is experienced by only 5–10% of samples, making it somewhat rare. Gender harassment is by far the most prevalent, experienced by approximately 50% or more of samples, followed by unwanted sexual attention, experienced by approximately 20–25% of samples.

Unfortunately, many sexual harassment researchers seem to assume that sexual harassment is a phenomenon experienced only in the workplace or at school. One of the most popular measures of sexual harassment is the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald, Gelfand, & Drasgow, 1995a), which asks for respondents' experiences with a variety of behaviors (e.g., "unwanted sexual attention," "told suggestive stories," and "touching in a way that made you feel uncomfortable"). The bulk of behaviors listed in the SEQ can be applied to many situations, but the majority of researchers ask respondents to think about these experiences in the context of the workplace and school. As such, it is difficult to ascertain the prevalence of sexual harassment outside of these locales. Moreover, while researchers examining sex discrimination more broadly have recognized that harassment can occur in a variety of settings (i.e., beyond the workplace and school; e.g., Klonoff & Landrine, 1995; Klonoff, Landrine, & Campbell, 2000; Landrine et al., 1995; Landrine & Klonoff, 1997), they often fail to separate out the effects of being harassed by strangers (as opposed to known perpetrators). For example, Berdahl (2007a) assessed undergraduate students' experiences of sexual harassment using the SEQ. Since the students had little work experience, they were encouraged to consider their experiences in relation to school and time with friends and family. While this study expands the realms of where and with whom sexual harassment can occur, Berdahl does not parse the results based on location or source. However, in more theoretical work, Berdahl (2007b) argues that sexual harassment stems from a need to maintain social status and as such can occur in any situation in which a perpetrator's status is threatened.

In *Passing By: Gender and Public Harassment*, Gardner (1995) provides an empirical focus on stranger harassment as she details the contexts in which stranger harassment takes place, the participants in stranger harassment, the behaviors that are characteristic of stranger harassment, the interpretations people have of stranger harassment, and the strategies employed to avoid stranger harassment. Her evidence stems from information obtained from 506 interviews with 293 women and 213 men. From her qualitative analysis, it is clear that stranger harassment is highly akin

to sexual harassment researchers' conceptualization of unwanted sexual attention. As Bowman (1993) describes it, stranger harassment "includes both verbal and nonverbal behavior, such as wolf-whistles, leers, winks, grabs, pinches, catcalls, and stranger remarks; the remarks are frequently sexual in nature and comment evaluatively on a woman's physical appearance or on her presence in public" (p. 523). The information provided by Gardner (1995) gives the reader a vivid sense of the experience of stranger harassment, but she overlooks the connection between stranger harassment and the established literature on unwanted sexual attention.

To date, MacMillan et al. (2000) provide the only known attempt to document differences between unwanted sexual attention from strangers and known perpetrators. Using data collected in 1993 from a national sample of Canadian women responding to the Violence Against Women Survey (VAWS; Johnson & Sacco, 1995), the authors focused on the data obtained from eight items measuring stranger and non-stranger sexual harassment. The stranger harassment items assessed "whether respondents had ever received an obscene phone call, received unwanted attention (i.e., anything that does not involve touching, such as catcalls, whistling, leering, or blowing kisses), been followed in a manner that frightened them, or experienced an indecent exposure" (p. 310). The items measuring non-stranger sexual harassment represented both *quid pro quo* and hostile environment sexual harassment. Their data show that 85% of the women reported experiencing stranger harassment, with the majority experiencing unwanted sexual attention (e.g., catcalls and leering). By contrast, 51% experienced non-stranger sexual harassment, with only 5% reporting having experienced *quid pro quo* sexual harassment. MacMillan et al.'s (2000) research indicates that stranger harassment may be a more pervasive problem than non-stranger harassment. Moreover, they found that stranger harassment has a more consistent and significant impact on women's fears than non-stranger harassment. Specifically, they noted that, "Stranger harassment reduces feelings of safety while walking alone at night, using public transportation, walking alone in a parking garage, and while home alone at night" (p. 319). MacMillan et al. (2000) were the first to show that stranger harassment is more prevalent than non-stranger sexual harassment, and that it has an impact on women's fears.

### Consequences of Sexual and Stranger Harassment

Since sexual harassment and stranger harassment are conceptually related, they are likely to produce many of the same consequences. Since MacMillan et al. (2000) showed remarkably high rates of stranger harassment, it can be further inferred that stranger harassment may affect more women than sexual harassment. The work of Louise Fitzgerald and her colleagues (Fitzgerald, Drasgow, Hulin, Gelfand, Magley, 1997; Glomb et al., 1997; Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald, & DeNardo, 1999; Schneider, Swan, & Fitzgerald, 1997) is among the most prominent for investigating the outcomes of sexual harassment. In their model of the antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment, Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow (1995b) propose that sexual harassment results in decreased job satisfaction and physical well-being. In addition, tests of their model suggest that sexual harassment has a negative impact on

psychological outcomes; women who experienced low, moderate, and high levels of sexual harassment showed more negative psychological outcomes than women who experienced no sexual harassment (Schneider et al., 1997). Furthermore, Schneider et al. (1997) found that experiencing harassment has negative outcomes for women even if they do not label the events as sexual harassment. This finding was also supported by research that investigated the outcomes of self-labeling (Magley et al., 1999); specifically, the researchers found no differences in negative outcomes between women who labeled their experiences sexual harassment and women who did not label them as such. Thus, sexual harassment negatively impacts women's psychological well-being whether the harassment is mild or severe, labeled or not labeled. Unfortunately, while the sexual harassment research indicates negative psychological outcomes for women, it is unclear whether decreased psychological well-being refers to depression, anxiety, or some other mental health disorders. For example, Magley et al. (1999) used the Mental Health Index to assess psychological well-being. The Mental Health Index includes measures of depression, anxiety, and positive affect. However, the researchers used different variations of the index in their different samples, and did not separate depression and anxiety (combined as psychological distress). Moreover, no research on sexual harassment has examined self-objectification as a consequence, which has been linked to depression (e.g., Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004) and thus may account for some of the negative psychological outcomes. Additionally, sexual harassment research has not explored potentially significant consequences such as women's increased fear of rape or voluntarily restricting their movements. The present research on stranger harassment was designed to address these gaps in the harassment literature relating to self-objectification, fear of rape, and restriction of movement.

### *Objectification*

Sexual objectification is a clear component of both sexual harassment and stranger harassment. In both cases, women are treated as objects to be looked at and touched, and not as intelligent human beings. The main tenet of self-objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) is that the human body is not merely a biological system, but that “bodies exist within social and cultural contexts, and hence are also constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses” (p. 174). In American culture, women's bodies are constantly and consistently regarded as sexual objects through pornography, the mass media, and advertising. The unwanted sexual attention experienced in both sexual harassment and stranger harassment is another example of women being regarded as sexual objects. Despite the diversity of mechanisms through which sexual objectification can occur (e.g., pornography, advertising, and stranger harassment), “the common thread running through all forms of sexual objectification is the experience of being treated as a body (or collection of body parts) valued predominantly for its use to (or consumption by) others” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 174).

Self-objectification theory, as proposed by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), provides a framework for understanding the psychological experience of sexual

objectification. They argue that this experience is uniquely female and can lead to mental health problems. For Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), the consequences of objectification arise when the woman begins to objectify herself (i.e., self-objectify). Repeated exposure to sexual objectification increases the likelihood that women will objectify themselves. This leads women to regard themselves as mere sex objects, to experience body shame, and to chronically monitor their external appearance (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Prior research shows that self-objectification is positively correlated with negative outcomes, including depression and disordered eating (e.g., Greenleaf, 2005; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). In the present research, we hypothesized that women who experience greater amounts of stranger harassment will be more likely to self-objectify. As such, it is a first attempt to test unwanted sexual attention (in the form of stranger harassment) as a predictor of self-objectification.

### *Fear of Rape and Restriction of Movement*

The limited work on stranger harassment (MacMillan et al., 2000) suggests that it may increase women's fear of rape and therefore their willingness to limit their freedom of movement (e.g., Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Swim et al., 1998).

In the present research, we hypothesized that women would fear sexual assault to the extent they reported being harassed in public by strangers. Research on the fear of rape among women suggests that women are more fearful of stranger rape than acquaintance rape, even though most women recognize that stranger rape is much less prevalent than acquaintance rape (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997). Research on sex differences in perception of danger and fear of victimization, such as murder or robbery, consistently illustrate that women are more fearful than men, although men are much more likely to be victims of crime than women (Ferraro, 1996; Harris & Miller, 2000). Ferraro's (1996) "shadow of sexual assault" hypothesis suggests that women are more fearful overall because the fear of rape permeates their fear of other victimizations. Since, for women, rape is a potential outcome of any face-to-face victimization, it may be a primary source of anxiety. In support of this hypothesis, Ferraro (1996) found that women's fear of rape predicted their fear of other personal crimes (e.g., murder, burglary). Fisher and Sloan (2003) replicated Ferraro's (1996) work finding that the fear of rape did indeed shadow other fears of victimization for women.

Similarly, Harris and Miller (2000) discovered that women, compared with men, are consistently more fearful of ambiguously dangerous situations involving men. They suggest that women's higher fear of victimization may stem from daily experiences of minor victimizations, which are likely to be ignored because of their non-criminal nature. Although they did not test this hypothesis, they specifically posited that the experience of "stares, whistles, condescending behavior, being interrupted when speaking, and harassment at work" socializes women to be more fearful and more perceptive of danger (Harris & Miller, 2000, p. 857). When taken

together with Ferraro's (1996) and Fisher and Sloan's (2003) research, this suggests that stranger harassment may increase women's fear of rape, as well as their perceived risk of rape.

Finally, the fear of rape literature suggests that women typically alter their behaviors by limiting how, when, and where they travel to protect themselves from rape (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Krahe, 2005; Warr, 1985). By avoiding walking alone at night or specific places (e.g., parking garages; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997), women voluntarily restrict their freedom to move about in the world. Similarly, Swim, Cohen, and Hyers (1998) note that women's tendency to avoid sites of sexual harassment restricts their freedom of movement. Thus, in addition to fear of rape, we predicted that women's voluntary restriction of movement would be a consequence of stranger harassment.

### Coping with Stranger Harassment

Research on women's responses to sexual harassment suggests that the majority of women are likely to use passive, non-assertive coping strategies. Gruber's (1989) review of the literature found that less than 20% of women use assertive or active coping strategies. Women typically respond to harassment by ignoring it or attempting to avoid the harasser (see also Magley, 2002). Less frequently, women may cope with harassment by reporting or confronting the perpetrator, engaging in self-blame, or by perceiving the harassment to be a compliment or benign (Fitzgerald, 1990). While it is likely that many of the coping strategies used by women who are sexually harassed are similar to the strategies used by women who are stranger harassed (e.g., ignoring it), there may also be differences (e.g., there are no laws specifically against stranger harassment, so it is unclear to whom a stranger harasser would be reported).

For our purposes, we borrowed items from the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ; Fitzgerald, 1990) that seemed most pertinent to stranger harassment and excluded items more descriptive of sexual harassment (e.g., "I filed a grievance," and "I told a supervisor or department head"). It was predicted that women who endorsed the active coping items (e.g., "I let him know I did not like what he was doing") would experience less objectification than women who endorsed the passive items (e.g., "I pretended nothing was happening") or who engaged in self-blame (e.g., "I realized I had probably brought it on myself"). In rejecting the harassment through active coping strategies, it is thought that these women will also be rejecting the objectified view of their bodies, thus limiting their self-objectification; on the other hand, women employing passive or self-blame strategies are not actively fighting the objectified view of their body and thus may be more likely to internalize the objectification. Finally, we had competing predictions about women who responded to stranger harassment as though it were benign (e.g., "I considered it flattering"). On the one hand, it was possible that these women would not be adversely affected by stranger harassment. On the other hand, women who perceived stranger harassment to be a compliment or innocuous might be already highly self-objectified. In essence, their response might reflect society's

view of stranger harassment as something women should “expect” by virtue of their gender. If so, these women should show high levels of objectification depending on the frequency of stranger harassment.

## Summary and Hypotheses

Women’s experiences of sexual harassment in public places (i.e., stranger harassment) is an area of research that has been ignored by traditional sexual harassment research. Stranger harassment shares many common themes with sexual harassment, most specifically the component of unwanted sexual attention. However, stranger harassment is unique from sexual harassment in that it is perpetrated by strangers (as opposed to co-workers, teachers, or peers) and that it takes place in public domains such as on the street, in stores, and in bars (as opposed to the office or school).

The current research investigates the prevalence and hypothesized outcomes of stranger harassment, as well as potential moderators of stranger harassment’s consequences. First, we sought to determine the frequency of stranger harassment experiences in a sample of female college students. Second, we predicted that frequent experiences with stranger harassment would lead to increased levels of self-objectification. Third, we expected that stranger harassment would positively predict women’s fear of sexual assault and perceived risk of rape and, therefore, voluntary restriction of movement.

However, we also hypothesized that women’s coping behaviors would moderate the relationship between stranger harassment and objectification. First, we expected that women who responded actively to stranger harassment (e.g., by confronting the harasser) would buffer themselves from self-objectification. Second, we predicted that women who responded passively (e.g., by ignoring the harassment) or who engaged in self-blame would be more likely to self-objectify with more experiences of stranger harassment. Finally, although women who viewed stranger harassment as benign might not be affected by their experiences, we suspected they might show high levels of objectification if their responses reflect being co-opted by society’s view that women should expect to be sexually objectified.

## Method

### Participants

Female volunteers ( $N = 228$ ) participated in exchange for partial credit toward their Introductory Psychology research participation requirement. About 44% (101) were White, 33% (75) were Asian, 8% (18) were Latina, 7% (16) were Black, and the remaining 8% reported another ethnicity. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29, with a mean age of 19.3 years old. The majority (97%) reported being exclusively heterosexual.

## Measures

### *Stranger Harassment*

Experiences with stranger harassment were assessed using a modified version of the Sexual Experiences Questionnaire (SEQ; Fitzgerald et al., 1995a). Participants were first asked whether they had ever experienced nine different behaviors from strangers; these behaviors ranged in severity (e.g., “Have you ever experienced unwanted sexual attention or interaction from a stranger?”; “Have you ever experienced catcalls, whistles, or stares from a stranger?”; “Have you ever experienced direct or explicit pressure to cooperate sexually from a stranger?”; and “Have you ever experienced direct or forceful fondling or grabbing from a stranger?”). Table 1 shows the items. Participants then responded to the same behaviors in terms of frequency (1 = *once*; 2 = *once a month*; 3 = *2–4 times per month*; 4 = *every few days*; 5 = *every day*).

Following this, participants were instructed to think about how they typically respond to the experiences described above and to rate statements about potential reactions on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all descriptive*) to 7 (*extremely descriptive*). The reactions were selected from the Coping with Harassment Questionnaire (CHQ; Fitzgerald, 1990) to reflect active coping (e.g., “I talked to someone about what happened”), passive coping (e.g., “I just ‘blew it off’ and acted like I did not care”), self-blame (e.g., “I realized he probably would not have done it if I had looked or dressed differently”) or treating harassment as benign or inconsequential (e.g., “I figured he must really like me,” and “I treated it as a joke”). Table 5 provides the items for each subscale.

### *Objectification*

Self-objectification was measured using McKinley and Hyde’s (1996) Objectified Body Consciousness Scale (OBCS). The OBCS is comprised of three subscales (surveillance, body shame, and control beliefs) to which participants respond on

**Table 1** Reported frequency (in percent) of women’s stranger harassment experiences

	Once a month	Twice a month	Every few days or more
Catcalls, whistles, or stares	32.0	33.3	30.9
Unwanted sexual attention	40.8	24.1	14.5
Crude or offensive sexual jokes	37.3	25.9	11.4
Sexist remarks or behaviors	40.8	22.4	11.4
Seductive remarks or “come ons”	30.0	24.6	15.8
Unwanted touching or stroking	36.0	11.4	2.7
Subtle pressure to cooperate sexually	30.3	6.1	8.1
Direct pressure to cooperate sexually	25.9	5.3	1.3
Forceful fondling or grabbing	26.3	4.8	1.3

scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). For the current study, only the body surveillance and body shame scales were used, consistent with prior research (Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglana, 2002; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). The surveillance subscale assesses concern with body appearance over functioning (e.g., “I often worry about whether the clothes I am wearing make me look good,” and “I am more concerned with how my body looks than with what it can do”). The body shame subscale assesses how respondents feel about their bodies’ imperfections (e.g., “When I am not the size I think I should be, I feel ashamed”; “When I cannot control my weight, I feel like something must be wrong with me”). Both subscales showed adequate internal consistency (surveillance  $\alpha = .86$ ; shame  $\alpha = .87$ ). As in past research, the body surveillance and body shame scales were significantly correlated ( $r = .50$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Thus, they were averaged to form the Self-Objectification Index ( $\alpha = .88$ ).

### *Fear and Risk of Rape*

Women reported their fear of being raped by a stranger and an acquaintance on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all afraid*) to 10 (*very afraid*). Specifically, the items read, “How afraid are you of being raped by a stranger [acquaintance]?” They also responded to two items assessing perceived risk of being raped on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all likely*) to 10 (*very likely*). These items were, “How likely is it that you will be raped by a stranger [acquaintance]?” Fear of rape by a stranger and an acquaintance were highly related,  $r(226) = .67$ ,  $p < .001$ , as were the likelihood measures,  $r(226) = .50$ ,  $p < .001$ . They were subsequently combined to form the fear of rape and risk of rape indexes, respectively. The subsequent indexes were modestly related,  $r(226) = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ .

### *Restriction of Movement*

Women also responded to 10 items designed to assess restriction of movement, on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Sample items include “I feel safe walking around campus alone at night,” “I would not feel comfortable walking alone in the city at night,” and “If I need to go out of my house at night, I often try to have a male friend accompany me.” Reliability analyses suggested removing two items (“I try to avoid certain places at night,” and “I feel as safe with a group of girlfriends as I do with a male companion even at night”). The 8-item scale showed adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .71$ ).

### Procedure

Participants were escorted to private cubicles equipped with a desktop PC. The experimenter administered the instructions and informed consent and started a computer program for the participants. Participants completed the measures in the order described above. Items were presented randomly within each measure. Participants were then asked to report their age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. At

the conclusion of the study, participants were thanked for their participation and fully debriefed.

## Results

### Prevalence of Stranger Harassment

Table 1 displays women's reported frequencies of stranger harassment experiences. The first two items ("catcalls, whistles, or stares" and "unwanted sexual attention") were reported to be experienced once a month by 32% and 40% of the sample, respectively. Strikingly, 31% reported experiencing "catcalls, whistles, or stares" from strangers every few days or more. Over one-third of participants reported hearing offensive sexual jokes or sexist remarks from strangers once a month. In addition, 36% reported being the victim of unwanted touching or stroking once a month. These results support Gardner's (1995) assertion that stranger harassment is a common experience for many women. It should also be noted that the final three items in Table 1 ("subtle pressure to cooperate sexually," "direct pressure to cooperate sexually," and "forceful fondling") represent the most extreme harassing behaviors from strangers and can be characterized as sexual coercion or assault. Remarkably, over a quarter of the sample reported experiencing these types of sexual coercion once a month.

To analyze experiences of stranger harassment in relation to self-objectification, fear of rape, risk of rape, and restriction of movement, the Stranger Harassment Index (SHI) was created. The SHI was computed by multiplying the respondents' yes/no responses to experiencing the 9 types of stranger harassment (coded as 1 or 0) by their reported frequency of occurrence (ranging from 1 to 5). The results were factor analyzed using a principle components analysis and varimax rotation. As can be seen in Table 2, two factors emerged. The first consists mainly of verbal stranger harassment, while the second consists of sexual pressure from strangers. Combining these items separately yielded sufficient reliabilities ( $\alpha = .85$  for verbal,  $\alpha = .75$  for sexual pressure). The two factors correlated well,  $r(226) = .54, p < .001$ . We therefore combined the two factors to form the SHI ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the SHI and all of the study's measures.

### Consequences of Stranger Harassment

Table 4 presents the correlations among the measures. As hypothesized, experiences of stranger harassment were significantly related to self-objectification,  $r(226) = .16, p = .01$ . Thus, women reported greater body surveillance and shame depending on their experiences of stranger harassment. In addition, stranger harassment was marginally related to fear of rape,  $r(226) = .12, p = .07$ , and reliably related to perceived risk of rape,  $r(226) = .25, p < .001$ .

Unexpectedly, Table 4 shows a negligible correlation between the SHI and the restriction of movement scale,  $r(226) = -.10, n.s.$  Thus, our hypothesized relationship between stranger harassment and women's willingness to curb

**Table 2** Factor analysis of the stranger harassment index

Factor	Question	Loading factor 1	Loading factor 2
Verbal <sup>a</sup>	Crude and offensive sexual remarks, jokes, or actions from a stranger.	.78	.21
	Seductive behavior, remarks, or “come ons” from a stranger.	.77	.27
	Catcalls, whistles, or stares from a stranger.	.76	.09
	Sexist remarks or behaviors from a stranger.	.71	.16
	Unwanted sexual attention or interaction from a stranger.	.70	.27
Sexual pressure <sup>b</sup>	Direct or explicit pressure to cooperate sexually from a stranger.	.06	.82
	Subtle pressure or coercion to cooperate sexually from a stranger.	.21	.75
	Direct or forceful fondling or grabbing from a stranger.	.22	.71
	Unwanted touching, stroking, or hugging from a stranger.	.41	.61

*Note:* Items factor analyzed were responses to each question (Have you ever experienced...?) multiplied by the frequency of the experience

<sup>a</sup> Eigenvalue = 4.55, variance = 45.55%, and  $\alpha = .83$

<sup>b</sup> Eigenvalue = 1.27, variance = 14.17%, and  $\alpha = .75$

**Table 3** Descriptive statistics

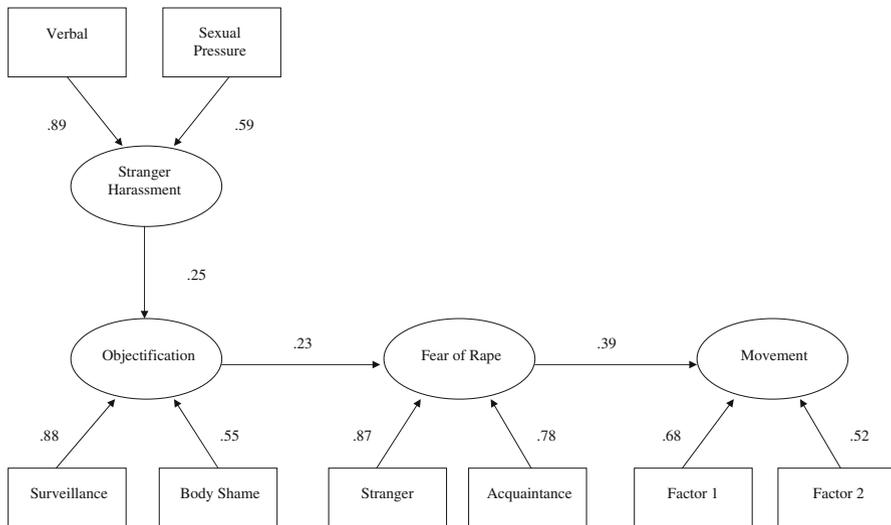
	Mean	Standard deviation
Stranger harassment index	13.96	7.18
Self-objectification	4.04	1.00
Fear of rape	7.84	2.43
Risk of rape	3.18	1.87
Restriction of movement	4.16	.95
<i>Coping responses</i>		
Passive	4.01	1.54
Self-blame	2.77	1.34
Benign	2.72	1.15
Active	3.36	1.49

**Table 4** Correlations among measures

	Stranger harassment	Self-objectification	Fear of rape	Risk of rape
Self-objectification	.16*			
Fear of rape	.12	.17*		
Risk of rape	.25**	.25**	.17*	
Restriction of Movement	-.10	.12	.31**	.06

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

their movements was not supported. However, consistent with past research, women who feared rape were more likely to restrict their movements,  $r(226) = .31$ ,  $p < .001$  (Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997; Krahe, 2005; Warr, 1985). Moreover,



**Fig. 1** Standardized beta coefficients are shown. All coefficients are significant at  $p < .05$ . The  $R^2$  for objectification, fear of rape, and restriction of movement were .06, .05, and .16, respectively

self-objectification was related to both fear of rape and perceived likelihood of being raped, both  $r_s(226) > .17$ ,  $p_s < .05$ . The pattern shown in Table 4 suggests that stranger harassment may have an indirect effect on women's fear of rape (through increased self-objectification). As a result, stranger harassment may have an indirect effect on women's freedom of movement (through the link between objectification and increased fear of rape).

To test these possibilities and provide an overall picture of our results, we conducted a structural equation analysis. To create a latent stranger harassment variable, we used the two factors described above (verbal and sexual pressure). To create a latent self-objectification variable, we used the surveillance and shame subscales; for fear of rape, we used the two items that assessed fear of stranger rape and fear of acquaintance rape. Finally, restriction of movement was factor analyzed and the results used in the SEM.<sup>1</sup> The model is shown in Fig. 1. Testing the hypothesized structural model provided a good fit to the data,  $\chi^2(12, N = 228) = 19.64$ ,  $p = .07$ . Indices of fit were good (CFI = .95, GFI = .97, and RMSEA = .05). No modification indices exceeded 4.51. A test of a model that added a direct path from stranger harassment to fear of rape revealed little change in the fit indices, but the coefficient was weak ( $\beta = .09$ ,  $ns$ ).

### Coping with Harassment

To assess whether our data adequately captured multiple coping with harassment strategies, we conducted a principle components factor analysis, using varimax

<sup>1</sup> The two factors that emerged had eigenvalues greater than 1.00 and accounted for 51% of the variance, but they were not conceptually illuminating.

**Table 5** Factor analysis of the coping with stranger harassment scale

Factor	Question	Loading
Passive <sup>a</sup>	I just “blew it off” and acted like I did not care.	.80
	I just let it go.	.80
	I just ignored the whole thing.	.78
	I did not do anything.	.77
	I acted like I did not notice.	.75
	I tried to forget the whole thing.	.74
Self-blame <sup>b</sup>	I pretended nothing was happening.	.73
	I realized that I had probably brought it on myself.	.83
	I blamed myself for what happened.	.81
	I realized he probably would not have done it if I had dressed differently.	.70
Benign <sup>c</sup>	I felt stupid for letting myself get into the situation.	.67
	I considered it flattering.	.75
	I assumed he meant well.	.75
	I figured he must really like me.	.67
	I assumed he was trying to be funny.	.62
Active <sup>d</sup>	I treated it as a joke.	.58
	I let him know I did not like what he was doing.	.85
	I let him know how I felt about what he was doing.	.82
	I talked to someone about what happened.	.63
	I reported him.	.46

<sup>a</sup> Eigenvalue = 5.76, variance = 27.43%, and  $\alpha = .90$

<sup>b</sup> Eigenvalue = 3.63, variance = 17.30%, and  $\alpha = .77$

<sup>c</sup> Eigenvalue = 1.68, variance = 7.98%, and  $\alpha = .75$

<sup>d</sup> Eigenvalue = 1.51, variance = 7.20%, and  $\alpha = .74$

rotation. This analysis revealed the expected four factors (each with eigenvalues greater than one), which we labeled passive, self-blame, benign, and active (see Table 5). We averaged the appropriate items to form four subscales; each showed adequate reliability (all  $\alpha$ s > .73). Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics for each subscale. Paired sample *t*-tests showed that women were more likely to report passive coping strategies compared with active, self-blame, and benign, all  $t$ s(227) > 3.87,  $p$ s < .01. Thus, as with sexual harassment, women were more likely to respond passively rather than actively to stranger harassment (e.g., Gruber, 1989; Magley, 2002).

### Objectification

Our next set of analyses tested support for the hypothesis that women’s coping strategies would moderate their levels of self-objectification in response to stranger harassment. Since women reported how they coped with stranger harassment, support for this prediction would be shown by main effects in regression analyses (e.g., if you coped passively, you might objectify), but it was also possible that

**Table 6** Predicting objectification from coping strategies and stranger harassment

Measure	$\beta$	$t$	$p$	$R^2$
<i>Passive</i>	.27	4.32	.001	.11
Stranger Harassment	.16	2.48	.014	
Stranger harassment $\times$ Passive	.06	.88	.378	
<i>Self-blame</i>	.17	2.61	.010	.07
Stranger harassment	.14	2.14	.030	
Stranger harassment $\times$ Self-blame	.11	1.72	.086	
<i>Benign</i>	.14	2.14	.030	.08
Stranger harassment	.16	2.41	.010	
Stranger harassment $\times$ Benign	-.08	1.23	.220	
<i>Active</i>	-.08	1.23	.217	.06
Stranger harassment	.15	2.23	.026	
Stranger harassment $\times$ Active	-.15	2.22	.027	

stranger harassment would interact with coping (e.g., higher levels of harassment, in tandem with passivity, might lead to greater objectification). Table 6 presents the results. As can be seen, results support our hypotheses that women who responded either passively or with self-blame to stranger harassment would self-objectify, both  $\beta$ s  $> .16$ ,  $ps < .01$ . Moreover, benign coping strategies were positively related to objectification,  $\beta = .14$ ,  $p < .05$ . Thus, viewing stranger harassment as innocuous or complimentary does not protect women from self-objectification. Finally, active coping did not show a main effect but instead interacted with stranger harassment such that the more women were harassed and responded actively, the less they self-objectified,  $\beta = -.15$ ,  $p < .05$ . In sum, non-active coping strategies predicted self-objectification, and these effects did not depend on how many types of harassment they experienced, or how often they occurred. By contrast, active coping depended on harassment level to dampen its effects on this consequence.

### *Fear of Rape and Restriction of Movement*

Although we did not have a priori predictions concerning coping strategies and the remaining outcome variables, Table 7 shows some intuitive relationships. First,

**Table 7** Correlations with coping responses

	Passive	Self-blame	Benign	Active
<i>Outcome</i>				
Objectification Index	.28**	.21**	.15*	-.07
Fear of rape	-.02	-.04	-.14*	.05
Risk of rape	.01	.13*	.08	-.01
Restriction in movement	-.04	.03	-.18**	-.05
Stranger harassment index	.05	.10	.08	.16*

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$

benign responses were negatively related to fear of rape and restriction of movement, suggesting that viewing stranger harassment as innocuous protects women from fears of being victimized (and therefore, they feel freer to move about in public). Second, self-blame, which may reflect the need for an internal locus of control, was positively linked to fear of rape, suggesting that it may not be an effective means of increasing women's perceived sense of control. Finally, the bottom row of Table 7 shows that increased frequency of stranger harassment was associated with using active strategies. Thus, women may become more confrontational the more they are harassed and, as the regression analysis suggests, if that strategy is used often, it may protect them from self-objectification.

## Discussion

The present findings represent a first step toward a social psychological analysis of stranger harassment. We found relatively high prevalence rates of stranger harassment for female college students. Approximately 41% reported experiencing unwanted sexual attention from strangers at least once a month, including sexist remarks or seductive “come ons,” and nearly one-third reported harassment consisting of catcalls, whistles, or stares. In fact, 31% of our sample reported experiencing catcalls, whistles, and stares every few days or more. Moreover, over a quarter of our sample suffered experiences akin to sexual coercion or assault (e.g., forceful grabbing) at least once a month. These data support treating stranger harassment as a significant form of humiliation and indignity that targets women and is likely to undermine the quality of their lives. In essence, stranger harassment turns public spaces into an everyday hostile environment for women.

With respect to the consequences of stranger harassment, we predicted (and found) that it would positively predict women's self-objectification. Although our data cannot speak to causality, this finding suggests that one potential source of women's self-objectification may be their experiences with stranger harassment. Self-objectification reflects emphasizing the body's appearance over its function, and feeling ashamed of a less than ideal body. A large literature suggests that self-objectification predicts negative outcomes in women, including depression and disordered eating (e.g., Greenleaf, 2005; Harrison & Fredrickson, 2003; Muehlenkamp & Saris-Baglama, 2002; Muehlenkamp et al., 2005; Slater & Tiggemann, 2002; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tiggemann & Slater, 2001). As a result, it is conceivable that stranger harassment indirectly promotes psychological and behavioral problems in women, through its link to self-objectification.

Moreover, as expected, women's coping responses to stranger harassment were significantly related to self-objectification. First, active coping interacted with stranger harassment to predict less objectification. Thus, women who experience greater harassment and acknowledge the behavior as inappropriate by confronting or reporting the harasser, or talking the experience over with a friend, may be able to resist feeling sexually objectified. Second, women who responded passively (e.g., by ignoring or denying the harassment) reported feeling self-objectified. Since passive strategies were more prevalent than active (or any other type) of coping, the

likelihood of women feeling objectified by stranger harassment is high. Third, self-blame responses were also positively related to self-objectification. As predicted, women who viewed the harassment as their own fault (i.e., as something they could have avoided) also reported feeling self-objectified. Finally, coping with harassment by viewing it as benign, innocuous, or complimentary was also positively related to self-objectification. By coping with the harassment as though it was a form of flattery (or “no big deal”), women may be capitulating to being sexually objectified. Even if they enjoy the attention from men, being objectified by others can lead to self-objectifying (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) which, as noted above, predicts serious outcomes in women such as depression and disordered eating.

We also predicted that stranger harassment would be positively related to women’s fears of victimization and voluntary restriction of movement. However, with the exception of perceived risk of rape, our hypotheses were not supported. Nonetheless, the structural model suggested that stranger harassment may have indirect effects on fear of rape (through self-objectification) and restriction of movement (through fear of rape). Although past research has found that women who feared rape were more likely to curb their movements (e.g., to avoid going out alone at night; Hickman & Muehlenhard, 1997), we extended these findings to include stranger harassment and self-objectification as potential antecedents of victimization fears.

### Limitations and Future Directions

One of the main limitations of the current research is that the sample consisted of college-aged women. It is quite possible that young women are more likely to experience stranger harassment than older women. However, MacMillan et al. (2000) found that 85% of Canadian women reported stranger harassment, suggesting that youth may not be a significant factor. Nonetheless, their research included behaviors that we did not assess (e.g., obscene phone calls), which may be experienced regardless of age. Thus, future research is necessary to lend confidence to the generalizability of our findings.

Another limitation is that the current research did not address the issue of where the harassment took place. While it is theorized that stranger harassment can occur in public places ranging from the street to stores to public transit, the unique characteristics of a college campus may present different “public” experiences than the average woman faces. For example, college women may be more likely to attend parties at fraternities or bars that allow for more harassment opportunities. A follow-up study is underway to ascertain some of the specifics about where stranger harassment is experienced on a college campus. In addition, evidence from Gardner (1995) suggests that women in metropolitan areas are more susceptible to harassment than women in suburban and rural areas. Future research needs to address the specifics of where stranger harassment is most frequent for a variety of settings.

The present research also suggests the need for further investigation of the link between objectification and sexual harassment. It seems likely that if women who are harassed by strangers experience self-objectification, women harassed by known

perpetrators (e.g., in the workplace or school) may also suffer a similar outcome. Moreover, self-objectification and sexual harassment have been independently linked to negative psychological outcomes (e.g., depression and anxiety; Fitzgerald, et al., 1997; Fitzgerald et al., 1995a; Fitzgerald et al. 1995b). Thus, future work should test the possibility that self-objectification may serve to mediate the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological dysfunction. Additionally, the current research assumes that the negative consequences of stranger harassment will be similar to the negative consequences of sexual harassment (i.e., decreased psychological well-being). Future research should directly assess the relationship of depression and anxiety to experiences of stranger harassment.

Further, women's strategies for coping with stranger harassment should be further investigated. For example, passive and self-blame responses may reflect women's gender role socialization (e.g., to avoid confrontation and blaming others), whereas active strategies may require more agency. Future research should explore a likely connection between women's acceptance of gender roles or stereotypes and their use of passive (versus active) strategies. Since passive and self-blame strategies were linked to self-objectification, future work may reveal a vicious cycle whereby women are taught to ignore or fault themselves for harassment, which then makes them more vulnerable to experiencing its negative effects. Results for self-blame were particularly poignant in this regard, as self-blame was related to perceived risk of rape. Although women who viewed stranger harassment as benign or complimentary were less likely to fear rape and restrict their movements, they also reported greater self-objectification. Feeling flattered by sexual attention from strangers may reflect women's acceptance of sexual objectification as normative—something women should expect from men as positive reinforcement (e.g., for being attractive). In this respect, stranger harassment may be similar in function to benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 2001), in which women are praised for being a “good woman” but which actually has a pernicious influence by making them feel weak. Future research should examine whether women who respond to stranger harassment as though it were a compliment are also likely to be benevolent sexists.

## Conclusion

Despite the wealth of sexual harassment research, women's analogous experience of public harassment by strangers has been largely ignored. The present findings suggest that stranger harassment is a remarkably common occurrence for many women, and that common means of coping with it may lead to increased self-objectification. Since self-objectification has negative consequences for women (e.g., depression and eating disorders), stranger harassment may be a serious form of discrimination. Moreover, through its link to objectification, stranger harassment may have indirect consequences that decrease the quality of women's lives, such as increased fear of rape and restriction of movement. Overall, stranger harassment appears to be a frequent and significant experience for women and therefore is deserving of future research designed to more fully elaborate the experience and its consequences.

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