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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.26262/hjp.v19i1.8362
WORDS THAT PIERCE: DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS OF CATCALLING

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Abstract. The present study aimed to explore the discursive constructions of catcalling in the narratives of women. Catcalling is defined as a form of forced communication directed at strangers in public, both verbal and non-verbal and almost exclusively from men towards women. The content of this forced communication is usually sexual in nature. A qualitative research approach was used for the collection, the processing, and the analyses of the data. Thirty women participated voluntarily in individual semi-structured interviews. A Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was deemed as the most appropriate methodology for portraying the discourses that the participants employed when constructing and interpreting catcalling. In their narratives, they drew upon a discourse on violence against women, which highlights the subordinate position that women occupy in patriarchy. In detail, they discursively constructed catcalls as a “violation of personal space” and as a “threat for sexual assault”. At the same time, they sculpted differentiated subject positions for the perpetrators and for the victims of catcalling. The above findings provide a new understanding of how catcalling relates to misogyny and sex-based discrimination and thus, are crucial for promoting equality between women and men.

Keywords: Catcalling, Feminism, Foucauldian discourse analysis, Spoken sexism

INTRODUCTION

Even though catcalling is not a new phenomenon, it hasn’t received substantial scholarly attention so far. For the most part, it has been examined under the wider spectrum of gender-based harassment and discussed particularly in reference to street harassment or stranger harassment, which in turn are also understudied phenomena (Bowman, 1993; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Gardner, 1980, 1995). Unfortunately, being hollered at in public has been normalized to the point that it is often viewed as something to be tolerated as well as expected (Perry, 2007). However, a strong line of resistance has already begun to emerge. There is a significant number of online platforms dedicated exclusively to the reporting of gender-based harassment incidents that take place in public spaces, including catcalls, such as the Everyday Sexism Project (https://everydaysexism.com), the Stop Street Harassment platform (https://streetharassment.wordpress.com/), Harassment and Assault Reporting platform (https://harpnow.org) and Hollaback (https://www.ihollaback.org). The number of reports that
these platforms receive draw close attention to the prevalence and impacts of such incidents, particularly in the lives of women (Bates, 2014; Fileborn, 2021).

When reviewing the relevant literature on catcalling, it quickly becomes evident that there is still no consensus on a definition, making its study as an autonomous phenomenon an even more challenging task. The intrusion of women’s personal space through unsolicited comments by strangers in public has been given a plethora of characterizations: “stranger harassment” (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), “public harassment” / “street remarks” (Gardner, 1980, 1995), “street harassment” (Bowman, 1993), “men’s intrusions” (Vera-Gray, 2016a), “sexual harassment” / “sexual terrorism” (Kissling, 1991), and “sexist verbal behaviour” (Hitlan et al., 2009), to name a few. Legal scholars, in an effort to advocate for the criminalization of catcalling, have paid closer attention to how it should be defined. For example, a more elaborated definition, referring exclusively to catcalls is provided by Chhun (2011, p. 276):

“...the use of crude language, verbal expression, and non-verbal expression that takes place in public areas such as streets, sidewalks, or bus stops. Examples of catcalling as verbal expression include name-calling, propositioning, wolf-whistles, or comments evaluating physical appearance”.

Despite the lack of a unified terminology, catcalling tends to be conceptualized as verbal and non-verbal cues used by men to comment on the physical appearance of women in a way that objectifies them (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Farmer & Smock Jordan, 2017). It is unsolicited, forced communication that takes place in a variety of public contexts, such as walking down the street or waiting at a bus stop (Chhun, 2011; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). Catcallers are anonymous strangers and the vast majority of them are men while the recipients of catcalls are almost exclusively women (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). Furthermore, catcalling puts the recipient in an unsafe, hostile and offensive situation (Chhun, 2011; Fairchild & Rodman, 2008; Kissling, 1991; Tran, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2016a).

Researching catcalling: What do we truly know so far?

When reviewing the available literature in relation to catcalling, a fundamental and paradoxical issue is almost immediately noted: catcalling has not been overtly researched but, it has subtly been studied. To elaborate, there is a considerable amount of quantitative research that has examined street, public, stranger and sexual harassment, including catcalls, with a focus on the motives of the perpetrators, the consequences on the victims as well as their coping strategies (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Cole et al., 2013; Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Livingston, 2015; MacMillan et al., 2000; Miles-McLean et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2016; Walton & Pedersen, 2021). However, it is important to keep in mind that the available findings are not about catcalling per se but rather about the aforementioned types of harassment on the whole. On top of that, the absence of a definition and the lack of agreement among academics as to what constitutes a catcall, complicate the situation even further. At the same time, some argue that a restrictive definition of catcalls could result in failing to account for more ambiguous instances of catcalling (Vera-Gray, 2016b). All the above highlight the need to examine how catcalling is constructed and
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Experienced as a separate and autonomous phenomenon.

Given the way it has been treated by scholars so far, catcalling can be seen as an amalgam of street, stranger as well as sexual harassment, by simultaneously possessing characteristics of all three. To begin with, catcalls are for the most part sexual in nature, focusing on the physical appearance of women (Bowman, 1993). In fact, this form of unwanted sexual attention has been found to be the most frequently experienced by women (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008), with severe consequences on their mental well-being, including but not limited to self-objectification, depression, anxiety, shame, and fear of rape (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Chhun, 2011; Cole et al., 2013; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Livingston, 2015; MacMillan et al., 2000; Miles-McLean et al., 2015). However, due to its normalization as well as the lack of legal context, catcallers continue to harass women unbothered (Farmer & Smock Jordan, 2017). It is important to note that only recently some countries, like France (Zadeyeh, 2021), have begun to criminalize catcalling. Therefore, it is still unclear to the victims as to whom or how catcallers should be reported.

According to the relevant research, women can construct and label catcalls in several different ways (Bernard & Schlaffer, 1984; di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019; Fairchild, 2010). For the most part, they refer to the experience of being catcalled by men who are unknown to them as terrifying, uncomfortable, and disruptive while portraying themselves as frustrated, appalled, and angered (Fairchild, 2010). They also report catcalls to be restrictive when it comes to their freedom of mobility in public spaces (Ramakrishnan, 2011) while resorting to a variety of coping tactics as preventative measures, including changing their transportation route, avoiding going out, assessing their surroundings and even alter their looks to feel less vulnerable to victimization (Escove, 1998; Farmer & Smock Jordan, 2017; Kearl, 2009). Furthermore, women conceptualize catcalling as more fearful and frightening when it takes place at nighttime, and they are alone (Fairchild, 2010). In addition, they are far less likely to perceive catcalls as compliments in comparison to men (di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019).

Given the above, it is evident that catcalling is mostly experienced as something negative and damaging to the quality of the lives of women. Additionally, relevant research has shown catcalls to endorse sex-based oppression and preserve the patriarchal status quo in favor of men while acting as a form of social control for women (Hand & Sanchez, 2000; Logan, 2015; Vera-Gray, 2016a, 2016b). From that perspective, catcalling constitutes a noteworthy societal issue and rendered deserving of being researched and elaborated as an autonomous practice of harassment against women. In that regard, there is a clear need to shift the focus towards the recipients’ perspective (Kissling, 1991) to explore how catcalling is experienced. For this reason, the present work focuses on how women discursively construct catcalling in their own words, based on their own experiences and beliefs, acknowledging the need for a new insight in relation to this phenomenon, as narrated by its victims.

Post-structuralism and feminist research

Previous research has revealed that when it comes to conceptualizing lived experiences of harassment in general, context and subjectivity play an important part (di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019; Fairchild, 2010; Farmer & Jordan, 2017; Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017; Fileborn &
O’Neill, 2021; McCarty et al., 2014; Vera-Gray, 2016b). Therefore, in recognition of the highly contextual and subjective nature of lived experiences of catcalls, a post-structuralist epistemological position was taken, recognizing them to be subjectively constructed through discourse (Gavey, 1989). Thus, the present study provides the necessary space for diverse and subjective narratives about catcalling to be heard, acknowledging all of them to be of equal value and importance.

At the same time, given the gendered nature of the subject under discussion and in recognition of the systematic oppression of women (Bates, 2014; Beasley, 1999; Weedon, 1999), a feminist perspective was upheld throughout the study, understanding catcalling to be discursively constructed within patriarchal power structures. Furthermore, in feminist research, discourses are acknowledged to actively maintain the power structures of oppression (Gill, 1995). By the same token, catcalls constitute a distinct form of sexist discourse that not only is constructed within patriarchal structures of power but also contributes to their perpetuation. Thus, the present study can offer a new insight as to how catcalling actively relates to the oppression of women by focusing on their subjective discursive constructions.

**Aims of the present study**

The fact that catcalling has been primarily treated as part of various types of harassment and not as a separate phenomenon, creates significant limitations as to what is truly known about it. The present study aimed to overcome these limitations by focusing on the discursive constructions of catcalls as subjectively experienced and narrated by its recipients. By treating catcalling as a distinctive form of spoken sexism, it sought to unveil the discourses from which the women who participated in the study draw upon for constructing it. In addition, emphasis is given to the subject positions that the participants sculp in their narratives.

As mentioned earlier, experiences of harassment have so far been researched using almost exclusively quantitative methods. Be that as it may, the present study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of women, by researching catcalling using a qualitative approach. The ultimate objective was to obtain new knowledge as to how women construct and conceptualize the commonplace phenomenon of publicly receiving unsolicited comments when engaging in everyday activities as simple as walking down the street. This knowledge will provide a new understanding of how catcalling relates to misogyny and sex-based discrimination and thus, it is rendered crucial for promoting equality between women and men.

In addition, it should be noted that during the literature review, no academic research relevant to catcalling was found to have been conducted in Greece. Sadly, Greece ranked once more last in the EU Gender Equality Index 2021, with 52.5 out of 100 points (EIGE, 2021). At the same time, every month a woman is murdered by some member of her family (Kouroutsidou & Kakarouna, 2021). It appears that in comparison with the rest of the EU (EIGE, 2021), Greek women still have many to face challenges when it comes to battling patriarchy while striving for equality. Furthermore, in spite of the emergence of the #metoo movement in Greece, the country’s legislation still fails to sufficiently address issues of harassment (Karagianni & Panagiotou, 2021). For these reasons, the study of catcalling within
the Greek context was deemed essential.

**METHOD**

The overall aims and objectives of the study led to the selection of a qualitative approach, highlighting the importance of a deeper understanding of women’s experiences and personal narratives in relation to catcalls. Additionally, to our knowledge, catcalling has never before been qualitatively researched as a distinctive form of spoken sexism, which also encouraged us to turn to a qualitative method. In detail, a Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) was employed in an attempt to explore the conceptual discursive constructions of catcalling. The main objective was to discover the discourses from which the participants draw upon in their effort to construct and give meaning to catcalling.

It should be noted that the present study is part of the first author’s doctoral thesis on discursive constructions of spoken sexism. In this regard, catcalling was conceptualized as a distinct form of spoken sexism. The study took place at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, between the years 2016-2021.

**Participants and recruitment**

Interviews were conducted with thirty women, aged from 18-45 years old, who had experiences of catcalling (purposive sampling). A small number of initial informants were asked to nominate potential participants through their social networks which led to subsequent snowballing. All participants were adults, living in rural areas of Northern Greece and, their participation was voluntary and pro bono. All of them were able to give their informed consent in writing which was obtained prior to the interviews. Recruitment of participants was continued until data saturation was accomplished, reaching a total number of thirty interviews. When it comes to detailed demographic information, four participants were university students, four were unemployed, and the rest of them were employed. Furthermore, eight participants were in a relationship, ten were single, and the rest of them married. Lastly, seven of them had children.

**Materials**

For the purposes of the study, a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 22 open-ended questions was designed and then piloted. The rationale behind the design of the interview guide was to cover all possible forms of spoken sexism, which was the subject of the first author’s doctoral thesis, including catcalls. Four questions of the interview guide were focused solely on catcalling, aiming at exploring how the participants discursively construct this distinct form of spoken sexism (i.e., *Have you ever been catcalled?, How did you react?, What effect did catcalling have on you?, How would you characterize this experience?*). In addition, informed consent forms were also designed and provided to the participants, containing detailed information about the aims of the study, the procedure, anonymity, protection of sensitive information and voluntary participation. The contact details of the researchers were also clearly
stated on the consent form.

Procedure

All interviews took place in private spaces to ensure as little distractions as possible. Participants were interviewed and asked to speak about their experiences, their views as well as their understanding of catcalling. Prior to the beginning of the interviews, they were informed that they did not have to answer any question that they did not feel comfortable with and that they were able to pause or abort the interview at any time. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed with the participants’ consent. Each interview was then thoroughly read while listening to the recorded audio to ensure accuracy as well as to achieve as much familiarization with the data as possible. A unique alias was assigned to each participant to ensure anonymity.

The transcripts of the interviews were then analyzed following Willig’s (2013) six stages of FDA. The discursive object of the analysis was “catcalling”. At first, the transcripts were read several times and all implicit as well as explicit references to the discursive object were orderly identified. Catcalling was also examined for variability and consistency in the narratives of the participants while writing down any thoughts and ideas that were relevant to the research questions (Willig, 2013). The next step was to locate the discursive constructions of catcalling within wider discourses as well as to explore how the participants positioned themselves and others within them. The identified discourses were examined in terms of subjectivity (i.e., how they were experienced by the participants) and were analyzed with regards their impact on hierarchical structures within patriarchy as well as on social practices. This was followed by a closer inspection of the context whereby the discursive constructions of catcalling were deployed, taking notice of the potential implications on social and political level. Following that, the focus was shifted towards the subject positions that were upheld by the participants in relation to the identified discourses. Last, the relationships between discourses and practices as well as the relationships between discourses and subjectivity were carefully examined, in line with the FDA stages (Willig, 2013).

Reflexivity and transparency

The whole study was designed and conducted in line with the research ethics protocols as defined by the research committee of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. The authors received no financial support from any funding agency for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. In acknowledgement that personal assumptions, interests, beliefs and experiences could potentially influence the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013), thorough consideration was given on the subject of critical reflection, so that the interpretation of the material would not be affected. Additionally, considering that the present paper is part of a doctoral thesis, the main supervisor (second author) offered close guidance and consultation throughout all the stages of the research, especially regarding the identifications of the discourses and subject positions. Alternative ideas and understandings were thoroughly discussed. Consultation was also sought from the doctoral counselling committee and the
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interpretations of certain narratives were adapted accordingly. Furthermore, the results were also discussed with some participants who were asked to give feedback which was particularly encouraging as to the accurate understanding of their experiences in relation to catcalling.

RESULTS

Discourse on violence against women

Without exception, all the women who participated in the present study had been catcalled on numerous occasions in their lives. This paper focuses on two discursive constructions of catcalling for all of which the participants had drawn upon a discourse on violence against women. This discourse verifies the existence of sex-based abuse and points outs the sexist power structures between men and women. Drawing upon such a discourse result in catcalls being understood as violence, as a daily abusive practice against women, deeply embedded and normalized in everyday speech. Participants turned to this discourse on violence against women to discursively construct catcalling as (a) a violation of personal space, with strong implications regarding the sex-based nature of the phenomenon as well as the concept that women’s bodies are public property and thus, men are entitled to make unsolicited comments about them. Following that, participants construct catcalling (b) as a threat for sexual assault, revealing an attempt from the part of the catcallers not only to control women’s sexuality but to also terrorize them sexually. Each discursive construction is presented separately while the subject positions offered in relation to the discourse on violence against women are discussed at the end.

(a) Catcalling as a violation of personal space

The women who participated in the present study discursively constructed catcalling as personal space intrusion, drawing upon a discourse on violence against women. In their narratives, sexist comments are illustrated as invasive tools used for violating their private space. For instance, Iro (aged 35) narrates:

“Iro: It doesn’t concern him; he enters a personal space that he has no right of entering. It is your personal space, what you wear, what you do, how you behave, how you move, how you smile. No one has the right to stop you in the street and speak to you, let alone make a pass at you.
R: How would you describe (she interrupts the researcher)
Iro: Violence (loudly). Violence. They violate my mental tranquility, my mental serenity, they violate it, they violate something that must not be violated, there is no other way I can explain it”.

With significant tension, Iro portrays men as conveyors of catcalling and accuses them of violating her personal space. To elaborate, she illustrates them as entitled intruders who choose to cancel women’s boundaries by catcalling them. In her narrative, men are depicted as believing that they have the right to address unsolicited sexist comments in the street at women. Iro, however, makes it crystal clear that no matter what they believe, men have no such right. In detail, she advocates that no one has the right to dictate how a woman will choose to dress
or to behave. By weaving her narrative in second person, she instills an interactive character in her telling. That could be seen as a call for action addressed to all victims of catcalling: “No one has the right to stop you in the street and speak to you, let alone make a pass at you”.

Furthermore, Iro constructs catcalling as a form of violence, giving emphasis not only to the violation of her personal space but that of her emotional balance too. In her narrative, she portrays catcallers as violators who cancel her psychological tranquility by illustrating herself as being under attack. The repetition of the word violence highlights the consequences of catcalling on an emotional level. For Iro, her personal space is significantly precious and “must not be violated”.

In the following extract, Lyda (aged 26) narrates:

“R: Would you like to give me an example of something you consider to be sexist?
Lyda: What instantly comes to mind, due to the fact that I experience it rather often is catcalling, meaning, in the street “my doll”, “what great tits you have”, meaning that a person of the opposite sex of me, believes that he can violate my personal space. You don’t have the right to address a comment at me which is not welcome, and which is so unimpressive (yelling) and to tell me your opinion about my body or about the sexuality I express or don’t express”.

Catcalling is the first thing that comes to Lyda’s mind when she is asked to speak about what she regards as sexist. In her narrative, she constructs catcalling as a violation of her personal space. When discursively constructing catcalling, Lyda makes sure to highlight the fact that in her experience catcallers are men, thus sculpting them as the main conveyors of this form of street harassment. Once more, men are illustrated as feeling entitled of the right to address sexist comments at a woman in the street.

In her narrative, Lyda offers two examples of catcalls: “my doll”, “what great tits you have”. It is important to note that the focus of both examples is the female body and female sexuality. Within a patriarchal scope, women are fundamentally shamed about their sexuality while men believe they have a right upon the female body, thus canceling women as individual human beings. Sexually charged catcalls appear to have a significant impact on Lyda who weaves the end of her narrative in second person as if addressing catcallers directly: “You don’t have the right to address a comment at me […] and to tell me your opinion about my body or about the sexuality I express or don’t express”. Like Iro, Lyda too illustrates herself as being under attack while depicting men as entitled violators.

(b) Catcalling as a threat for sexual assault

Apart from violation of their personal space, the women who took part in the study discursively constructed catcalling as a threat for sexual assault, drawing once again upon a discourse on violence against women. In detail, they illustrate catcalls as the first step of a looming sexual assault and express fear concerning their physical integrity. For example, Vasiliki (aged 25), narrates:

“Vasiliki: It causes me great discomfort to hear sexual comments that no man would ever hear in the street. They make me feel disgusted as well as giving me sometimes even a sense of helplessness meaning that today it may be a comment but tomorrow, if he comes across me at night at an alley, maybe he would not make just a comment for
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example. Because when you see women as a piece of meat that you can easily make comments to without consequences and without being criticized for it, on the contrary it’s something usual, why would anything prevent you from also doing something more, like for example laying a hand at some point?”

As shown in the above extract, Vasiliki begins her narration by focusing on the emotional impact of catcalls. It is important to note how she implicitly portrays women as the sole victims of catcalling by describing catcalls of sexual nature as something that a man would never hear in the street, highlighting the sex-based nature of the phenomenon under discussion. Attention should also be given to the fact that when Vasiliki speaks of catcalls she presents them as sexual in nature, with a focus once again being the female body and female sexuality.

Furthermore, Vasiliki explicitly expresses her fear concerning what may follow after catcalls. To elaborate, she sculpts catcalling as a threat for sexual assault. In her narrative, men are depicted as entitled conveyors of catcalls who feel free to address sexually charged comments at women in the street. According to Vasiliki’s views, a man that feels entitled to catcall women with no consequences might as well decide to sexually assault them just as easily if the circumstances are advantageous to him. She claims that catcallers view women not as individuals but as a piece of meat, illustrating the complete nullification of women as human beings in their own right and thus resulting in their objectification.

In the last extract, Valeria (aged 28), narrates:

“R: What are your thoughts on catcalling? Would you characterize it too as sexist? 
Valeria: Yes. All of these are related to sexism I believe, all. Uh in general this behaviour in the street, I consider it to be very authoritative from the men’s part. I think they believe that at any given time they can disturb you and that they have the authority to do so. And in addition, catcalling entails the threat for many other things. Depending on the place, the time, etc. They want to create a fear in you, that no matter where you are, no matter where you walk, no matter what time it is, that I, if I want to, I can hurt you. I can just tell you “oi, what’s up, doll” but if I want to, I will rape you. Meaning that catcalling also relates to rape culture”.

When it comes to catcalling, Valeria weaves her narration in relation to two key concepts: male authority and the control of female sexuality. To begin with, she describes catcalling as an authoritative practice from the part of men, aiming at terrorizing women. In this case, men are portrayed as entitled to catcalls as part of their hegemonic position that they have in patriarchal societies. Most importantly, however, apart from being an authoritative practice, Valeria discursively constructs catcalls as a threat of sexual assault. In her narrative catcallers are portrayed as potential rapists while women as potential victims. For Valeria, catcalls can be the first step of a sexual attack. Drawing upon a discourse of violence against women, Valeria makes a clear connection between catcalls and the control of female sexuality through the threat for sexual violence. It is worth noting the connection that she highlights between spoken sexism and rape culture, possibly wanting to show that both are manifestations of men’s power over women.
Subject positions
When discursively constructing catcalling as a *violation of personal space* and as a *threat for sexual assault*, the participants positioned themselves as *helpless* in relation to the discourse on violence against women, while positioning men as *perpetrators*. Thus, they uphold the existing patriarchal structures of power within which they always get the short end of the stick while endorsing the sexist and stereotypical image of “weak” women. This highlights the ongoing existence of women’s oppression within a social system structured in a patriarchal manner that approves and accepts catcalling while endorsing the embedment of misogyny. In this light, catcalling constitutes a dangerous and authoritative practice against women that violates their personal space, threatens their safety, and attempts to control female sexuality and by extension, the female body. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the participants experience this practice as violent and prefer to remain silent rather than confronting the catcaller, given that in their understanding, their physical integrity is being compromised.

Furthermore, by positioning men as *perpetrators*, the participants make it crystal clear that in their experiences all catcallers were men while at the same time they express doubt that any woman would ever catcall a man (or another woman). This highlights the sex-based nature of catcalling with men feeling entitled to not only violate the personal space of women but also to control their sexuality. Men use catcalling to torment and create a precarious environment for women, while endorsing their own hegemonic position in patriarchy.

It is noteworthy that none of the participants constructed catcalling as flirting or as a form of compliment. On the contrary, it is illustrated as a precarious situation which causes them to feel violated and helpless while it can even lead to rape. In addition, the fact that each and every female participant has multiple experiences of catcalling to share, speaks volumes in relation to the prevalence of the phenomenon under discussion.

DISCUSSION
Catcalling can be argued to be the most usual yet nonetheless powerful tool through which sexism and misogyny are perpetrated, reproduced, and preserved. The notion of male entitlement upon female sexuality which leads to women being perceived as mere sexual objects, is reflected in the lexical choices of sexist catcalls, endorsing misogynistic beliefs while legitimizing sex-based oppression (Mills, 2008). This study set out to add to how the victims of catcalling discursively construct this phenomenon and thus, offer a new insight in an attempt to not only understand it better but also put an end to it.

Two discursive constructions of catcalling were identified, deriving from a dominant discourse on violence against women which highlights the abuse, the discrimination, and the ongoing misogyny that women face in patriarchy. To begin with, catcalls were sculpted as a *violation of personal space*. This construction reflects a broader male entitlement which grants men the belief that it is perfectly acceptable for them to catcall a woman they do not know in the middle of the street. This comes as no surprise if one takes into account that historically, men are brought up feeling entitled and free to express themselves and voice their opinions regardless of how other people think or feel (Haines et al., 2016; Prentice & Carranza, 2002). In accordance with the findings of the present study, catcalling a woman is considered a
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privilege of that freedom. This authoritative practice can have grave consequences when it comes to the achievement of equality among men and women given that it alienates women from the public sphere. The participants found themselves helpless, not knowing how to protect or defend their personal space. Their experience was that of a true invasion, against which they are defenseless. They know that men are aware that they can catcall women with literally zero consequences. By sculpting catcalling as a violation, their narratives highlight how catcalls endorse their oppression while reinforcing male entitlement. This finding is in accordance with results from relevant research. Catcalling not only perpetuates the structurally advantageous position that men hold in societies but also strips women of their right to move in public without being judged by them (Gardner, 1980; Vera-Gray, 2016a, 2016b; Wolfson, 1984).

Furthermore, catcalls were sculpted as a threat for sexual assault, shedding light to its menacing nature. Women have historically and cross-culturally been shamed and punished for their sexual desires. Female sexuality and the attempt from the part of men to own it and control it has always been at the core of patriarchy. The participants found themselves exposed, vulnerable and powerless against catcalls, not knowing if the perpetrator would choose to sexually assault them or not. Their experience was that of an actual threat, compromising their physical integrity. In their understanding, men want to have women’s bodies under their control, they want women to know that not only they can address catcalls at them that are sexual in nature but also, they can sexually assault them. By sculpting catcalling as a threat for sexual assault, their narratives reveal how catcalls are used to objectify, own, and threaten women while reinforcing male dominance. These findings are in accordance with the results of other relevant research. By treating women and their sexuality as a commodity which can be bought, owned, and sold, men are able to preserve the existing patriarchal status quo in which women are subordinate (Lerner, 1986; Travis & White, 2000) while endorsing double sexual standards that compromise women’s sexual agency (Rudman et al., 2013). Furthermore, men tend to view “loose” women as sexual prey (Ward, 1988; Rudman et al., 2013), while supporting the idea that sexually liberated women deserve to be raped (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995; Rudman & Mescher, 2012; Ward, 1988).

Catcalling serves as an everyday reminder than women are at all times perceived as sexual objects under the male gaze. Furthermore, it encourages the treatment of women as “sexual objects” rather than human beings which only endorses sexual violence against them. This objectification of the female body is yet another mechanism of male patriarchal control over them (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) which allows men to dominate hierarchical societal structures (Delamater, 1981; Lerner, 1986; Rudman et al., 2013). On the one hand, patriarchy pressures women to be more and more sexual while at the same time, it establishes a strong negative stigma towards women who are sexually active (Conley et al., 2013). In other words, no matter what they do or how they behave, women are always the ones to be blamed and there lies the threat that comes with the catcalls. Patriarchy wants women to be sexual only when it comes to pleasing men. However, if women own and perform their sexuality in accordance with their own desires, being sexually assaulted will be their punishment. In their narratives, the participants clearly showed that they did not feel safe. To them, catcalling is a violation as well as an overhanging threat. Through these discursive constructions, they portray catcalls as an easily accessible form of social and political control of the female body that dictates not
only how women must behave but also flat out threatens their physical integrity.

Even though previous studies about harassment have found it to be context-dependent and subjective (di Gennaro & Ritschel, 2019; Fairchild, 2010; Farmer & Jordan, 2017; Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017; Fileborn & O’Neill, 2021; McCarty et al., 2014; Vera-Gray, 2016b), the same cannot be said about catcalling which in this study was constructed as a violation and a threat by all participants in spite of context. This is a very interesting finding because it shows a strong consistency and unity within the experiences of the participants. The oppressive and discriminatory nature of this distinct form of spoken sexism is highlighted unanimously while contextual and subjective factors appear to play no role as to its discursive conceptualization.

By the same token, it is worth noting that none of the participants constructed catcalls as compliments or flirtations. Unsolicited comments by strange men in the middle of the street are neither appropriate nor desirable. On the contrary, the participants made it clear that catcalling puts them in an unsafe and unnerving position, it constitutes verbal violence and can lead to sexual assault. This finding is in support of the relevant literature suggesting catcalling to encourage the treatment of women as objects, endorsing the increase of sexual violence against them (Chhun, 2011; Stahlberg et al., 2007).

CONCLUSIONS

The present study covered an important gap in the existing literature concerning how catcalling is discursively constructed by women and what these constructions serve. Despite all the hard and valuable work of the feminist movement worldwide, the findings confirm that misogyny and patriarchy are still prevalent in societies. On a daily basis, women are aware that at any time strangers can judge their bodies. The study has succeeded in its endeavor and the discursive constructions that were identified only confirm what women experience on a daily basis: catcalls are used to violate their private space and terrorize them. Catcallers perpetuate sexism, they deepen the structural disadvantage that women face in terms of status and hierarchy while constantly reminding them that they are under the male gaze. Thus, it appears that the issue behind catcalling is men preserving power over women and control them. It is an act of displaying patriarchal dominance.

The fact that all participants without exception had experienced catcalling more than once in their lives verifies its prevalence. However, it is important to keep in mind that the results of this qualitative study concern the experiences of the participants in a given time and space. Therefore, it would be interesting to study this distinct form of spoken sexism using quantitative methods in an effort to get a more accurate information concerning pervasiveness.

Even though women portray themselves as helpless in the face of catcalls, up to this day there is no law in most EU countries to protect them. As a result, their experiences are obscured. Some countries, however, have begun to take action like in France, where catcalling is now illegal (Zadeyeh, 2021). Hopefully more countries will follow France’s example because the resilient nature of sex-based oppression, urgently calls for collective change on a societal level. More sufficient legislation that protects women is of paramount importance when it comes to catcalls. However, the need for such laws only proves how far behind we are in terms of achieving equality between men and women.
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Discursive constructions of catcalling

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