



Unmasking Street Harassment in Spain: Prevalence, Psychological Impact, and the Role of Sexism in Women's Experiences

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Abstract

Street harassment is a widespread problem that affects women from all backgrounds, often leading to negative psychological consequences such as anxiety, depression, and reduced self-worth. Despite the pioneering development of laws protecting women's rights, Spanish culture often normalizes this type of violence against women, and research on this context remains limited. To address this gap, we conducted a cross-sectional study with 245 women in Spain to investigate the occurrence and impact of street harassment on psychological well-being. We used the Street Harassment Assessment Scale, a self-report measure designed to evaluate the prevalence and frequency of street harassment, and explored its association with anxiety, fear of rape, avoidance behavior, self-esteem, and adherence to sexist beliefs. The results showed that 98% of women experienced street harassment, with 80% reporting monthly occurrences. The frequency of street harassment was correlated with increased anxiety, fear of rape and avoidance behavior, and lower self-esteem. Additionally, the results supported the link between the endorsement of sexist ideology and lower identification of events. Collectively, the results underscore the negative impact of street harassment on women's well-being and freedom, highlighting its role as a patriarchal tool that perpetuates female objectification and subordination. An integrative feminist perspective involving various fields, including psychology, public policy, and education, among others, is necessary to create safer environments for women.

Keywords Women · Street Harassment · Violence against Women · Sexual Violence · Mental Health · Sexism · Sexual Objectification · Gender Inequality · Gender Oppression · Spain

Street harassment is a kind of violence against women (United Nations [UN], 2013), widely defined as a set of behaviors directed by men towards women they do not know, in public spaces, and usually involves unwanted sexual assessment or attention; its purpose is not communication, but to intimidate or denigrate women, and so it may

have negative consequences for the targets (e.g., Fairchild, 2023; Gardner, 1995; Kearl, 2014). Arancibia et al. (2017) proposed five key features: (a) it is an interaction between strangers, (b) in public spaces, (c) it is unidirectional, (d) it has sexual connotations that reveal sex-based power relations, and (e) may cause the victim discomfort. Street harassment encompasses a spectrum of behaviors ranging from verbal (such as comments about appearance or sexual remarks) and non-verbal behavior (such as gazing or staring) to physical sexual assault and rape (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022; Gardner, 1995; Kearl, 2010; Sullivan et al., 2010); other examples include whistling, touching, sexual propositions, and exhibitionism.

Instances of street harassment have been divided into different categories in several studies (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Sullivan, 2011), with the most common differentiation between verbal-gestural behavior and behaviors that involve greater invasion of the victim's personal space or

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explicit sexual coercion. Both types of street harassment meet the UN (1993) definition of violence against women. Thus, street harassment from men towards women is about power, not sexuality or romance (DelGreco et al., 2021; Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023), and it is a constant reminder of women's subordination (Gardner, 1995). Street harassment is widely tolerated in Spain (European Commission, 2016; Moya-Garófano et al., 2020, 2021). However, research addressing this phenomenon remains limited; only a few studies have tackled this issue in Spain, with most studies focused on verbal street harassment (Ferrer-Perez et al., 2021; Moya-Garófano et al., 2020, 2021). In addition, specific data on the prevalence and health implications remains scarce. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the prevalence and incidence of a wide range of street harassment behaviors in Spain, while also considering the psychological impact on the women who have experienced it.

Terminology around concepts such as harassment and public spaces can be contentious, as street harassment can be experienced and perpetrated by other groups (Peterson et al., 2023). For example, violence based on sexual orientation is also a significant concern, often manifested in street harassment (Peterson et al., 2023; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Our decision to focus exclusively on women was based on the need for specificity in addressing the unique challenges they face in public spaces. While other groups may experience similar behaviors (e.g., insults or blocking a path in public spaces), the dynamics and motivations underlying such incidents can vary substantially (see Fairchild, 2023, for reflections on terms and definitions around concepts such as street harassment or public spaces).

Prevalence and Frequency of Street Harassment

Despite being a more pervasive experience than harassment by acquaintances (Macmillan et al., 2000), street harassment has received much less attention. Platforms such as *Stop Street Harassment* and *Hollaback!* have collected testimonies for over a decade and warn that all women are potential victims of street harassment (Kearl, 2014; Livingston et al., 2015). In terms of prevalence, one of the first studies was carried out by Gardner (1995) in Indianapolis (USA); it showed that all women (100%) in the sample had experienced harassment by strangers in public spaces. 85% of a Canadian sample reported having experienced some form of street harassment at some point in their life (Macmillan et al., 2000). Approximately two thirds (65%) of women respondents to a national survey in the United States reported that they had suffered street harassment in their lifetime (Kearl, 2014) and the corresponding figure in

a United Kingdom study was approximately 60% (Osmond & Woodcock, 2015). One-year prevalence data are in line with the lifetime prevalence data. Sullivan's (2011) research conducted in Pennsylvania found that 97.5% of women reported that they had experienced street harassment at least once in the past year, and Davidson et al. (2016) observed an annual prevalence of street harassment of 88% in a sample of undergraduate women in Nebraska. Most (99%) of the participants in Lord's (2009) research reported that in the last two years they had been stared at in a way that made them feel uncomfortable.

In addition to its prevalence, street harassment seems to be a frequent experience. In studies by Fairchild and Rudman (2008) and Fairchild (2010), also conducted in the United States, 96.2% of college women and 72.5% of non-college women reported that they were target of compliments, glances or whistles at least once a month, and 31% and 29% experienced such behaviors every few days. These figures are similar to those reported in other studies (69.2% at least once a month; Davidson et al., 2016; 73.5% at least once a month and 46.9% every few days; Saunders et al., 2017). In Manila, the Philippines, 82% experienced street harassment monthly and 40% suffered practically daily harassment (Manalo et al., 2016). Most studies have shown that stares, whistles, and verbal comments are the most frequent forms of harassment (e.g., Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Manalo et al., 2016). Therefore, street harassment is not only experienced by many women, but it is also a recurring issue. In general, research has revealed that street harassment is highly prevalent since most women suffer from it at least once in their lifetime and often daily (Almanza Avendaño et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2010).

Sexism and Maintenance of Female Subordination

Patriarchy can be defined as a social system characterized by male dominance, where men hold authority in most spheres and institutions, which inherently involves the subordination and oppression of women (Varela, 2005). Feminist theories posit that street harassment is a patriarchal tool of social control used to maintain this status quo. Accordingly, a recent study has shown that street harassment seems to be a male control and power strategy (DelGreco et al., 2021). Specifically, the theory of social control (Lenton et al., 1999) argues that street harassment upholds male dominance/privilege in society by keeping women away from public life and power. Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) also suggests that street harassment perpetuates patriarchy by sexually objectifying women under

the assumption that their value lies solely or primarily in their physical appearance, which has serious psychosocial consequences (Roberts et al., 2018). In addition, living in a cultural climate of sexual objectification leads women and girls to internalize this objectifying gaze (self-objectification, i.e., viewing oneself as a mere sexual and subordinate object), which reinforces negative effects and social hierarchy (Roberts et al., 2018; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013). Simó Soler et al. (2023) frame violence against women, including harassment, as a structural violence rooted in the patriarchal culture that is directed at subordinate subjects in a hierarchical social system, resulting in its normalization within society.

Likewise, sexist ideology has been associated with greater acceptance of violence against women. Specifically, women's adherence to sexist beliefs has been related to lower identification of intimate male partner violence (Marques-Fagundes et al., 2015), and to greater tolerance of sexual harassment (Herrera et al., 2018) and sexual violence (Sirvent Garcia del Valle, 2020) among potential female victims. Furthermore, previous research indicates that when women define themselves as feminists, they are more likely to report and confront sexist events (Ayres et al., 2009) and even to engage in women's rights activism (Yoder et al., 2011). Although there is yet no empirical evidence of a direct relationship between sexist attitudes and street harassment, the available data suggest that system-justifying ideologies in women would translate into benign attributions in relation to street harassment (e.g., interpreting behaviors as gallantry and attributing good intentions to the perpetrators; Saunders et al., 2017).

Street Harassment and Psychological Well-Being

Sexist behavior may have a significant impact on women's mental health (Swim et al., 2001). Although there have been studies on the effects of street harassment in other settings, the consequences of street harassment have only recently begun to be studied (Davidson et al., 2016). So far, research has shown that street harassment can also be detrimental to women's health and well-being, and some authors claim that it should be treated as a public health issue (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020). Some of the results concerning its impact on psychological well-being are summarized below.

Anxiety and Fear Reactions

Due to the perception of danger or threat, feeling unprotected may provoke anxiety and fear. There is a positive relationship between anxiety and the frequency with which

a woman experiences street harassment, which implies that street harassment can lead to anxiety when it succeeds in making women feel insecure (Davidson et al., 2016). Although Davidson et al. was the first study specifically to link anxiety to street harassment, previous studies had reported positive relationships between the frequency of street harassment and various negative emotional reactions (Sullivan, 2011). Among other effects, this relationship has also recently been identified in college women (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020). The largest cross-cultural survey of street harassment, conducted by the *Hollaback!* platform, also showed that anxiety, anger, and fear were amongst the most frequent emotional reactions to harassment (Livingston et al., 2015). Several recent studies have demonstrated a direct link between experiences of street harassment and sexual objectification with negative psychological well-being in women, particularly in relation to women's personal safety anxiety (Calogero et al., 2021). In line with this, results from a recent study in Spain showed that most women reacted with anxiety and anger to verbal stranger harassment (Moya-Garófano et al., 2021). It has been observed that from an early age girls and women experience public space as more hostile and insecure than boys and men do (Rodó-de-Zárate & Estivill, 2016) and show a larger relation between fear of sexual victimization, including unwanted physical contact, and fear of crime (Mellgren & Ivert, 2019). Some studies have also found a positive relationship between interpersonal sexual objectification and fear of rape (Calogero et al., 2021; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kearl, 2014).

Behavioral Impact: Mobility Restrictions

There are differences in how women and men access and use public spaces; women's usage of public spaces may be influenced by experiences of male violence (Aguerrri & Delgado, 2016). Research has shown that fear of being raped in public spaces clearly limits women's movements (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Rodó-de-Zárate & Estivill, 2016; Valentine, 1989). Osmond and Woodcock (2015) reviewed several international studies showing the high prevalence of harassment in public spaces and its relationship to women's mobility. Street harassment can lead women to engage in behavioral strategies to avoid harassment that change their daily habits. These changes may include avoiding outdoor places and activities, changing their route, destination, or schedules, not going out at night, walking in a group, going to a gym instead of running on the street, or even leaving work or moving (Calogero et al., 2021; Kearl, 2014; Livingston et al., 2015). It may also involve hypervigilance efforts to identify any possible stranger who could potentially endanger women (Valentine, 1989). These coping

responses have been compared to the avoidant component of agoraphobia (Gardner, 1995; Lord, 2009), a problem that affects women more frequently than men (Bandelow & Michaelis, 2015). Using a measure designed to assess agoraphobia, Lord (2009) found that negative reactions to street harassment were associated with avoidance of places when alone. Indeed, personal safety anxiety has recently been found to be positively related to voluntary mobility restrictions associated with objectifying experiences such as interpersonal sexual objectification (Calogero et al., 2021).

Low Self-Esteem

Another potential effect of street harassment is a decrease in perceived self-worth. There has been little research on this relationship, but some studies have shown that sexist and objectifying behavior can affect women's self-esteem (Choma et al., 2010; Swim et al., 2001). In the large-scale study conducted by the *Hollaback!* platform, it was concluded that reactions to street harassment, such as anger, anxiety, or fear, could have long-term negative consequences, including low self-esteem (Livingston et al., 2015). Negative relationships have been observed between the frequency with which a woman experiences street harassment (Manalo et al., 2016), negative emotions (Lord, 2009), and self-esteem.

The Present Study

The main purpose of this study was to provide more evidence about street harassment in Spain given the limited research on the topic in this country. Therefore, three key socio-cultural factors of the Spanish context should be considered: (1) legislative policy advances in the protection of women's rights, (2) recent increase in strangers' sexual violence, and (3) normalization of violence against women. First, as violence against women has remained a persistent concern within the Spanish feminist movement, (Hepworth, 2023), Spain has been one of the pioneering countries in Europe in developing legislation to ensure equal legal rights between men and women and, especially, to protect victims suffering this violence (e.g., Ley Orgánica 3/2007 [Organic Law 3/2007, of 22nd March, on the Effective Equality of Women and Men], and Ley Orgánica 1/2004 [Organic Law 1/2004, of 28th December, on Comprehensive Protection Measures Against Gender-Based Violence]). Although considered among the most advanced laws of its time, there are several gaps and shortcomings in its application (e.g., continuity of many cases, low conviction rate, or institutional violence; Pastor-Gosálbez et al., 2021). In addition, anti-violence laws have focused on domestic or intimate partner

violence, while others, such as sexual violence or sexist harassment, have taken longer to be addressed (Pastor-Gosálbez et al., 2021).

Secondly, today, there appears to be a cultural and socio-political regression, particularly in terms of attitudes against the advancement of women's rights, likely linked to the rise of extreme right-wing/conservative parties (Bustelo, 2016; Carreras, 2019). The increase in sexual violence observed in Spain in recent years is one of the most concerning aspects (Cereceda Fernández-Oruña et al., 2018). Moreover, there is a high level of social tolerance for the street harassment of women in Spain and victim-blaming is common, both in the general population and in the Spanish judicial system (Delegación del Gobierno para la Violencia de Género, 2018; Simó Soler et al., 2023). Previous research has suggested that Spanish women are less likely to report sexual violence to the authorities when it is perpetrated by non-partners (Pastor-Moreno et al., 2022).

In addition, Spanish language contains a wide variety of popular sayings and proverbs that support the social justification of male structural dominance (Lomotey & Chachu, 2020), normalizing certain forms of violence against women. This encourages “*piropos*” (i.e., unpleasant compliments) from unknown men to women without their desire (Kearl, 2015; Moya-Garófano et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, “*piropos*” is a euphemistic term used to refer to verbal street harassment towards women, which indicates the trivialization of this practice in Spain. Nearly half of the Spanish population (48%) holds the belief that “*piropos*” are acceptable and should not be subject to legal prohibition (European Commission, 2016). Recent anti-feminist discourses emerging in Spain reinforce this normalization, expanding the notion that violence against women is an “ideological invention” (e.g., Spanish manosphere; Carreras, 2019). The new generations in social digital platforms receive these messages, which may represent a setback for the liberation of young Spanish women.

Given this context, the Spanish setting may contribute to the covering up and toleration of sexist attitudes, including the street harassment against women. For all these reasons, little attention may have been given to this phenomenon in the Spanish academic research. Therefore, the main goal of this study was to evaluate the prevalence of street harassment experienced in Spain and explore its potential impact on women's psychological well-being, as observed in other countries. Additionally, this study sought to build knowledge about the connections between sexist ideologies and the reporting of street harassment. Specifically, this study had the following objectives: (1) to describe the phenomenon of street harassment in Spain and explore the different types that may emerge; (2) to assess the lifetime and one-year prevalence and the frequency of street harassment; (3)

to explore the links between the frequency of street harassment experienced, variables related to psychological health (anxiety; fear of rape; avoidance behavior; self-esteem) and sexist attitudes and feminist self-identification; and (4) to assess the contribution of the frequency of street harassment experienced in women's psychological well-being. This study could provide evidence of the social control theory, grounded itself in the theoretical framework of the patriarchy, in this undertheorized Spanish context. In this sense, this research intentionally focuses on women as potential victims to examine street harassment as an expression of sexism and patriarchy as a concrete system of oppression (i.e., male domination/women subordination; Frye,

2000; Varela, 2005). In particular, given the relationships observed in prior research, the present study aims to explore how street harassment could be a tool to maintain female subordination, normalized by sexist ideologies, and causing potential psychological harm (e.g., anxiety and fear) as well as behavioral effects (mobility restrictions) that have a broad impact on women's lives and freedom.

To address these objectives, this study aimed, first, to answer two research questions: (1) What types of street harassment might be differentiated, if any, according to the experiences of women in the Spanish context? and (2) What is the prevalence and frequency of street harassment behaviors experienced by women in Spain? For this purpose, occurrence in the last year and in their lifetime will be considered for prevalence. If different types of street harassment appear, it will be explored if there is any difference in terms of frequency. Secondly, for the association of street harassment with the study variables, the following hypotheses were posed. Regarding psychological well-being variables, the first hypothesis was that the frequency of street harassment experiences would be positively correlated with state anxiety (1a), fear of rape (1b), and avoidance behaviors when alone (1c), and negatively correlated with self-esteem (1d). Concerning sexist ideology, we hypothesized a negative correlation between street harassment frequency and adherence to sexist ideologies (both hostile and benevolent sexism, hypothesis 2a) and a lower report of street harassment frequency in women non-self-identified as a feminist compared to those self-identified as feminist (2b). Finally, we expected that the frequency of street harassment experiences would predict higher levels of anxiety (3a), fear of rape (3b), and avoidance or mobility restriction behaviors when women were alone (3c), but lower levels of self-esteem (3d). However, street harassment would not be a significant predictor of avoidance or mobility restriction behaviors when women were accompanied by someone else (3e).

Method

Participants

A total of 251 women participated in this study. Participants were eligible to take part in the study if they were (1) female, (2) 18 years of age or older and (3) living in Spain. After excluding data from six participants (two were less than 18 years old and four were not resident in Spain), the final sample comprised 245 participants ranging in age from 18 to 61 years old. Table 1 provides more detail on the sociodemographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample ($N=245$)

Sociodemographic Variable		
Age M (SD)		26.19 (8.61)
		n (%)
Residence	Capital	179 (73.1)
	Province	66 (26.9)
Sexual orientation	Heterosexual	208 (84.9)
	Lesbian	14 (5.7)
	Bisexual	19 (7.8)
	Other	4 (1.6)
Relationship status	Single	86 (35.1)
	In a relationship	113 (46.1)
	Living with partner	21 (8.6)
	De facto couple	2 (0.8)
	Married	17 (6.9)
	Divorced or separated	6 (2.4)
Socioeconomic status	Low	48 (19.6)
	Medium	192 (78.4)
	High	5 (2.0)
Educational level	Elementary school (6–12 years old)	1 (0.4)
	Middle school (12–16 years old)	3 (1.2)
	High school (16–18 years old)	26 (10.6)
	Vocational school	29 (11.8)
	University	135 (55.1)
	Master's degree	43 (17.6)
	Doctorate	8 (3.3)
Employment status	Full-time student	151 (61.6)
	Activity inside or outside home	79 (32.2)
	Without activity	15 (6.1)
Political orientation	Left-wing	135 (55.1)
	Centre	23 (9.4)
	Right-wing	10 (4.1)
	None	77 (31.4)
Religious identity	Believer	106 (43.3)
	Agnostic	51 (20.8)
	Atheist	88 (35.9)
Self-identified feminist	Yes	192 (78.4)
	No	53 (21.6)

Note. De facto couple is a legally recognized civil partnership in Spain with rights and protections similar to those of marriage. Socioeconomic status was a multiple-choice question with these three nominal response options, so there were no cut-off points. Employment status had a multiple response format and is shown here as a grouping of the different answer options (student: $n=180$, employed: $n=71$, unemployed: $n=29$, retired: $n=1$, homemaker and/or unpaid carer: $n=16$)

Measures

Sociodemographic Characteristics

Participants responded to an 11-item questionnaire asking about age, province and place of residence, relationship status, sexual orientation, political orientation, religiousness, educational level, socioeconomic level, employment status, and self-identification as feminist.

Street Harassment

Prior to data collection, we developed an instrument specifically designed to assess the frequency and prevalence of street harassment, which was named the Street Harassment Assessment Scale (SHAS). Since we were unable to find a validated scale specific to street harassment, the present measure was mainly based on other intentionally created instruments used in previous research (e.g., Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Lord, 2009; Sullivan, 2011) and, additionally, on different harassing actions frequently described in earlier literature on the topic (e.g., Gardner, 1995; Kearl, 2014; Macmillan et al., 2000; Sullivan et al., 2010). Thus, rather than adapting an existing scale, it was considered more appropriate to develop a new one to achieve a more comprehensive measure that would capture a broader range of behaviors that constitute street harassment. As a result, the scale consisted of 17 items, each one describing a different form of street harassment (e.g., “Lewd or discomfiting looks”, “Unwanted physical contact”). Participants used a six-point frequency scale (0 = never; 1 = *less than once a month*; 2 = *once or twice a month*; 3 = *once or twice a week*; 4 = *once or twice a day*; 5 = *several times a day*) to indicate how often during the previous year they had experienced each behavior from one or more unknown men in public or semi-public spaces (street, public transport, pubs, parks, shops, etc.). Higher scores indicate to have experienced street harassment more frequently during the previous year. To enable us to assess lifetime prevalence, participants could also choose the option “It has happened to me in the past, but not during the last year,” with a higher selection of options indicating higher prevalence of street harassment experiences during the lifetime (the original Spanish version of the SHAS is included as [Supplementary Material](#)). The reliability of the measure was Cronbach’s alpha = 0.89.

Anxiety in Response to Street Harassment

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory State subscale (STAI-S; Spielberger et al., 1970; Spanish version by Spielberger et al., 1982) was used to assess anxiety responses to street harassment situations. Higher scores indicate greater

situation-related anxiety. In this study, participants were asked to indicate how they felt when they experienced street harassment (e.g., “I get tense”, “I feel distressed”). If multiple instances of street harassment were disclosed, participants were asked to report their average level of anxiety across these incidents. The STAI-S consists of 20 items to which responses are given using a four-point frequency scale, ranging from 0 (*never*) to 3 (*a lot*). Half of the items are inversely scored (1, 2, 5, 8, 10, 11, 15, 16, 19 and 20). A constant of 30 is uniformly added to the items score to facilitate statistical treatment of the data, so the total score varies between 0 and 60. In the Spanish adaptation, Cronbach’s alpha for state anxiety ranged from 0.90 to 0.93. In our sample the reliability of the scale was $\alpha = 0.94$.

Fear of Rape

The Fear of Rape Scale (FORS; Senn & Dzinars, 1996; reduced Spanish version by Espinoza Ornelas et al., 2015) consists of 23 items related to the possibility of becoming a rape victim (e.g., “I am afraid of being sexually assaulted”). Responses are given using a five-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Five items (8, 11, 15, 20 and 21) are inversely scored; higher scores indicate greater fear of rape. The original and Spanish versions have demonstrated reliability of $\alpha = 0.91$ and $\alpha = 0.90$, respectively. In our sample the reliability was $\alpha = 0.92$.

Avoidance Behavior

The Mobility Inventory for agoraphobia (MI; Chambless et al., 1985; Spanish version by Bados, 2000) assesses avoidance behavior. This instrument has been used to evaluate avoidance behavior as a possible consequence of street harassment (Lord, 2009). It comprises two subscales consisting of 26 identical items (e.g., “Walking on the street,” “Being far away from home”); one subscale deals with how often respondents avoid each behavior when they are alone and the other with avoidance when in the company of others, giving a total of 52 responses. Responses are given using a five-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 (*I never avoid*) to 5 (*I always avoid*). A “not applicable” option was also available to allow participants to indicate that they had never had the opportunity to perform the behavior in question (e.g., “Travelling by airplane”). The subscales are scored separately, and higher scores indicate greater levels of avoidance or mobility restriction behavior. Respondents who indicated that they had not been exposed to a specific situation or place (e.g., travelling by boat) were skipped from analyses relating to that specific item. The reported reliability of the original solo and accompanied avoidance subscales ranges from $\alpha = 0.94$ to 0.96 and 0.91 to 0.97 respectively. In our

sample, the corresponding values were $\alpha=0.91$ for solo avoidance and $\alpha=0.97$ for accompanied avoidance.

Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965, Spanish version by Martín-Albo et al., 2007) assesses personal self-esteem through 10 items that describe general feelings of satisfaction with oneself, self-worth, and self-respect (e.g., “In general, I am satisfied with myself”). Responses are given using a four-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Half of the items are inversely scored (2, 5, 6, 8 and 9). Higher scores indicate greater self-esteem. The Spanish version has shown adequate internal consistency (values of α higher than 0.85). In our sample, the reliability was $\alpha=0.88$.

Sexist Attitudes

The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Spanish version by Expósito et al., 1998) consists of two 11-item subscales measuring different types of sexism: hostile sexism, i.e., negative attitudes towards women (e.g., “Most women interpret innocent remarks or acts as sexist”) and benevolent sexism, i.e., positive but patronizing attitudes toward women (e.g., “Women should be cherished and protected by men”). Responses are given using a six-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher total scores indicate more ambivalent sexism. The Spanish version has shown reliability values of $\alpha=0.89$ for hostile sexism and $\alpha=0.86$ for benevolent sexism. In this study the corresponding values were $\alpha=0.90$ and $\alpha=0.78$.

Procedure

The measures were incorporated into an anonymous online form using the *Google Forms* tool. A pilot study ($N=9$) was carried out to check the functioning of the platform and that items were interpreted correctly. A few minor changes were made in response to comments from pilot participants. The average length of the online survey was 20 min. Participants were recruited by a non-probability sampling procedure, via advertisements on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and university classes, where the link to the study was provided. The study was presented as an investigation of women’s experiences and well-being. Clicking on the study link took potential participants to a page that presented general information about the study and the informed consent form, including their rights as participants. Voluntary and anonymous participation was also ensured beforehand (i.e., participants were informed that no personally

identifiable data would be recorded and that they could withdraw from the survey at any time without any consequences). Once they had provided informed consent, the socio-demographic questionnaire was presented. Given that the aim was to assess anxiety responses to street harassment situations, the SHAS was presented first and immediately followed by the STAI-S. The order of the other instruments was randomized. If the participants did not report any form of street harassment, the STAI-S was not administered, and participants were allowed to complete the remaining scales. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were thanked for their participation and informed that they could contact the researchers with any comments or suggestions. After 32 days of data collection the link to the study was taken down. No compensation was distributed for participation in this study.

Design and Analysis Strategy

A descriptive, correlational design was employed in this cross-sectional study. We used the midpoint of the reported range of the prevalence of street harassment (60–100%) to estimate the sample required to obtain significant results ($p < .05$). Based on an anticipated prevalence of 80%, and a confidence limit of 5%, our estimate of the required sample size was $N=246$, which is almost the number of participants who met the selection criteria ($N=245$).

The first step in our analysis was to perform an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the SHAS, to test whether different types of harassment emerged. Cronbach’s alpha was used to test the internal consistency of the scale. Next, we calculated descriptive statistics for the lifetime prevalence, one-year prevalence and frequency of street harassment. Third, correlation analyses were used to examine the relationships between the different study variables. Fourth, unpaired *t*-tests were performed to compare street harassment frequency between women self-identified and non-self-identified as feminist. Finally, to assess the contribution of the frequency of street harassment experienced on psychological well-being, separate multiple regression analyses were conducted with state anxiety, fear of rape, solo avoidance, accompanied avoidance, and self-esteem as the dependent variable in each analysis, using the stepwise procedure. Independent variables included the frequency of street harassment and, in order to account for their potential contribution, sexist attitudes were also included in the model. Given their different theoretical and practical implications, benevolent and hostile sexism were addressed separately. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS software (v.25).

Results

Types of Street Harassment

In response to the first research question of the study, an EFA was conducted. The results from this analysis, using the main components method and varimax rotation with Kaiser normalization, revealed a four-factor model that explained 64.88% of the variance in scores. All items saturated in one of the four factors (factor loadings ≥ 0.40). The items making up the fourth factor (item 4, “Requests to smile”, and item 9, “Photographs or video recordings of your body, in a non-consensual manner”) did not appear to be similar behaviors, so they were removed for not reflecting any specific type of street harassment. A subsequent EFA without these items resulted in a three-factor model that accounted for 63.65% of the total variance.

Analysis of the content of the items suggested that the factors corresponded to three different types of harassment, which we labeled verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention (SH-F1, items 1–3 and 5–8), unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults (SH-F2, items 10–13, 16 and 17) and exhibitionist behaviors (SH-F3, items 14 and 15). Table 2 presents EFA results after rotation and the internal consistency of each factor. Cronbach’s alpha for the full scale was 0.89, before and after removing items 4 and 9.

Prevalence and Frequency of Street Harassment and its Types

To respond the second research question derived from the study aims, prevalence and frequency data on street harassment in general and the three types identified were calculated (see Table 3). Only five participants indicated that they had never experienced any of the behaviors described in the scale, yielding a 98% lifetime prevalence of experience of street harassment. The overwhelming majority (96.3%) of the participants reported that they had suffered some form of street harassment during the last year. 80% of participants reported that they had experienced some form of street harassment at least once or twice a month in the last year; 52.2% had experienced street harassment at least once or twice a week, and 25.7% reported experiencing it daily. Further details about the prevalence and frequency of each form of street harassment are given in Table 4.

Street Harassment, Health-Related Variables, and Sexism

First, to address the set of sub-hypotheses that comprised H1 and H2, the associations between street harassment, psychological health and sexism were analyzed. Table 5 shows the Pearson’s correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics for the study variables. The frequency of street harassment was related in the expected directions to psychological well-being variables (Hypotheses 1a-1d) and sexist beliefs (Hypothesis 2a). To further explore the link

Table 2 Exploratory factor analysis of the street harassment assessment scale items and internal consistency

Items	Factor Loading		
	1	2	3
2. Whistles or other obscene sounds (panting, barking, meowing, kisses...)	0.875		
3. Honks from a vehicle	0.798		
1. Lewd or discomfiting looks (staring, leering...)	0.753		
6. Vulgar or discomfiting gestures	0.680		
5. Discomfiting questions about personal information (name, phone number, relationship status, destination)	0.647		
8. Sexually explicit remarks (about ‘what do they would do to you’)	0.611		
7. Comments about your appearance (body, clothes...)	0.601		
13. Unwanted physical contact (stroking, groping, touching...)		0.830	
11. Intimidating approach, following or chasing (getting close, walking behind or beside you, on foot or in a vehicle)		0.722	
16. Sexual propositions		0.640	
12. Blocking your path (trying to prevent you from passing)		0.634	
10. Sexist insults (‘bitch’, ‘whore’...)		0.590	
17. Sexual assault or rape (obligation to participate in sexual acts)		0.512	
15. Masturbation with or without ejaculation			0.953
14. Exhibitionism (exposing genitals)			0.920
% Variance	27.29	22.46	13.90
Eigenvalue	4.09	3.37	2.09
α	0.89	0.81	0.96
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)=0.85			
Bartlett’s test of sphericity: $\chi^2(105)=1046.05, p<.001$			

Table 3 Lifetime and one-year prevalence and frequency (in the previous year) of street harassment by type

	Total Street Harassment	Verbal and Non-Verbal Unwanted Attention	Unwanted Sexual Approach or Contact and Insults	Exhibitionist Behaviors
	<i>n</i> (%)			
Lifetime prevalence	240 (98.0)	239 (97.6)	199 (81.2)	81 (33.1)
One-year prevalence	236 (96.3)	234 (95.5)	162 (66.1)	29 (11.8)
Frequency				
Never	9 (3.7)	11 (4.5)	83 (33.9)	216 (88.2)
Less than once a month	40 (16.3)	44 (18.0)	82 (33.5)	25 (10.2)
Once or twice a month	68 (27.8)	68 (27.8)	48 (19.6)	1 (0.4)
Once or twice a week	65 (26.5)	65 (26.5)	23 (9.4)	1 (0.4)
Once or twice a day	35 (14.3)	33 (13.5)	3 (1.2)	0
Several times a day	28 (11.4)	24 (9.8)	6 (2.4)	2 (0.8)

Table 4 Lifetime and one-year prevalence and frequency (in the previous year) of various forms of street harassment

Street Harassment Forms	Lifetime Prevalence	One-Year Prevalence	Never	Less Than Once a Month	Once or Twice a Month	Once or Twice a Week	Once or Twice a Day	Several Times a Day
	<i>n</i> (%)							
Lewd or discomfiting looks	224 (91.4)	208 (84.9)	37 (15.1)	58 (23.7)	68 (27.8)	50 (20.4)	20 (8.2)	12 (4.9)
Whistles or other obscene sounds	215 (87.8)	197 (80.4)	48 (19.6)	87 (35.5)	60 (24.5)	39 (15.9)	9 (3.7)	2 (0.8)
Honks from a vehicle	218 (89.0)	193 (78.8)	52 (21.2)	96 (39.2)	56 (22.9)	33 (13.5)	8 (3.3)	0
Requests to smile	171 (69.8)	151 (61.6)	94 (38.4)	76 (31.0)	41 (16.7)	24 (9.8)	6 (2.4)	4 (1.6)
Discomfiting personal questions	203 (82.9)	173 (70.6)	72 (29.4)	85 (34.7)	56 (22.9)	24 (9.8)	5 (2.0)	3 (1.2)
Vulgar or discomfiting gestures	181 (73.9)	156 (63.7)	89 (36.3)	73 (29.8)	53 (21.6)	15 (6.1)	9 (3.7)	6 (2.4)
Comments about appearance	207 (84.5)	191 (78.0)	54 (22.0)	66 (26.9)	57 (23.3)	36 (14.7)	18 (7.3)	14 (5.7)
Sexually explicit remarks	162 (66.1)	120 (49.0)	125 (51.0)	69 (28.2)	26 (10.6)	13 (5.3)	10 (4.1)	2 (0.8)
Photographs or recordings	49 (20.0)	33 (13.5)	212 (86.5)	27 (11.0)	5 (2.0)	0	0	1 (0.4)
Sexist insults	112 (45.7)	70 (28.6)	175 (71.4)	34 (13.9)	28 (11.4)	7 (2.9)	0	1 (0.4)
Intimidating approach or following	159 (64.9)	111 (45.3)	134 (54.7)	73 (29.8)	24 (9.8)	10 (4.1)	2 (0.8)	2 (0.8)
Blocking path	110 (44.9)	79 (32.2)	166 (67.8)	64 (26.1)	9 (3.7)	4 (1.6)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)
Unwanted physical contact	124 (50.6)	83 (33.9)	162 (66.1)	51 (20.8)	22 (9.0)	7 (2.9)	2 (0.8)	1 (0.4)
Exhibitionism	76 (31.0)	25 (10.2)	220 (89.8)	23 (9.4)	0	0	0	2 (0.8)
Masturbation	57 (23.3)	18 (7.3)	227 (92.7)	14 (5.7)	1 (0.4)	1 (0.4)	0	2 (0.8)
Sexual propositions	127 (51.8)	81 (33.1)	164 (66.9)	49 (20.0)	22 (9.0)	6 (2.4)	2 (0.8)	2 (0.8)
Sexual assault or rape	33 (13.5)	9 (3.7)	236 (96.3)	7 (2.9)	0	1 (0.4)	0	1 (0.4)

between adherence to sexist ideologies and frequency of street harassment, the difference between self-identifying as a feminist or not was also examined (Hypothesis 2b). The results indicated that women who self-identified as feminists reported a higher frequency of street harassment, $M=1.10$, than women who did not refer themselves with this label, $M=0.75$, $t(95.97) = -3.72$, $p < .001$, Levene's test $p < .05$. Significant differences were also found for street harassment types, Factor 1: $t(237) = -2.41$, $p = .017$, and Factor 2: $t(104.44) = -3.74$, $p < .001$, Levene's test $p < .05$. Specifically, feminist-identified women reported more verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention, $M=1.65$ and $M=1.31$, respectively, and unwanted sexual approaches/insults, $M=0.63$ and $M=0.30$, respectively. Differences were in the same direction for the Factor 3, $t(204.52) = -2.27$, $p = .024$, Levene's test $p < .05$; thus, feminist-identified women reported experiencing more exhibitionist behaviors, $M=0.20$, compared to non-feminists, $M=0.06$.

Street Harassment as Predictor of Psychological Well-being

Given the correlational results, it seemed relevant to consider the first two factors of the scale separately as potential predictors of psychological well-being variables, along with both hostile and benevolent sexism, to address Hypothesis 3. The results reported in Table 6 include the variables selected in the final model of the stepwise multiple regression analyses. Results indicated that frequency of street harassment involving unwanted attention (Factor 1) was a significant predictor of anxiety, fear of rape, and solo avoidance (Hypothesis 3a-3c), while frequency of street harassment involving unwanted approach or contact (Factor 2) predicted lower self-esteem (Hypothesis 3d). However, they were not able to predict accompanied avoidance (Hypothesis 3e). Among the sexist attitudes, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism were both predictors of fear of rape. Benevolent sexism was also a significant predictor of solo avoidance and accompanied avoidance.

Table 5 Means, standard deviations and correlations between frequency of street harassment, types of harassment, anxiety, fear of rape, self-esteem, avoidance and sexism

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	M	SD
1. SH	---											1.00	0.69
2. SH-F1	0.927**	---										1.54	0.92
3. SH-F2	0.800**	0.598**	---									0.53	0.66
4. SH-F3	0.383**	0.228**	0.371**	---								0.14	0.56
5. STAI-S	0.200**	0.197**	0.185**	0.058	---							38.48	12.77
6. FORS	0.228**	0.237**	0.205**	0.010	0.334**	---						2.83	0.76
7. RSES	-0.215**	-0.228**	-0.230**	-0.024	-0.272**	-0.231**	---					3.08	0.58
8. MI-A	0.191**	0.200**	0.161*	0.018	0.175**	0.511**	-0.316**	---				1.76	0.70
9. MI-C	-0.029	0.001	-0.008	-0.026	-0.085	0.169**	-0.164*	0.370**	---			1.31	0.57
10. ASI-A	-0.230**	-0.208**	-0.178**	-0.097	-0.098	0.003	-0.026	0.173**	0.241**	---		0.65	0.61
11. ASI-B	-0.126*	-0.125*	-0.068	-0.090	-0.035	0.169**	-0.073	0.241**	0.264**	0.828**	---	0.66	0.61
12. ASI-H	-0.257**	-0.224**	-0.222**	-0.079	-0.124	-0.127*	0.017	0.079	0.164*	0.901**	0.503**	0.64	0.79

Note. SH: street harassment; SH-F1: verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention; SH-F2: unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults; SH-F3: exhibitionist behaviors; STAI-S: state anxiety; FORS: fear of rape; RSES: self-esteem; MI-A: avoidance alone; MI-C: avoidance in company; ASI-A: ambivalent sexism; ASI-B: benevolent sexism; ASI-H: hostile sexism. A floor effect was found for the ASI-H subscale, with a minimum score in 29.4% of cases. No floor effect was observed for ASI-A (8.6%) nor ASI-B (13.4%)

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Table 6 Regression analyses of the psychological well-being variables

Variable	β	F	df	R ²
Anxiety		9.17*	1, 227	0.04
Frequency of SH-F1	0.20*			
Fear of rape		12.64**	3, 241	0.13
Frequency of SH-F1	0.22**			
Hostile sexism	-0.24*			
Benevolent sexism	0.32**			
Solo avoidance		15.07**	2, 241	0.10
Frequency of SH-F1	0.23**			
Benevolent sexism	0.27**			
Accompanied avoidance		18.12**	1, 241	0.07
Benevolent sexism	0.26**			
Self-esteem		13.59**	1, 243	0.05
Frequency of SH-F2	-0.23**			

Note. β =Standardized estimates; SH-F1: verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention; SH-F2: unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults. ** $p < .001$ * $p < .01$

Discussion

It has long been acknowledged that the greater prevalence of certain disorders in women may be partly due to daily exposure to sexist behavior (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Swim et al., 2001). Because of the need for more research on street harassment, this study aimed to examine the prevalence and frequency of street harassment in Spain and to identify associations between frequency of street harassment experienced and psychological well-being and sexist attitudes. Overall, the results indicated very high rates of street harassment in young women living in Spain and suggested potential risks in psychological health for those who experience this sort of sexist behavior. The present study has also led to develop a scale able to evaluate the prevalence and frequency of different types of street harassment, the SHAS, with results supporting adequate internal consistency of the scale and its factors and an initial validation of the measure based on correlation and regression results.

Considering specific sociocultural characteristics of Spain, particularly regarding the progress and setbacks in women’s liberation and the normalization of violence against women, this work can enrich the literature on street harassment in general and in this context. Regarding our first research question about the presence of different types of street harassment, the results distinguished between a type involving verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention, a second type including more invasive behaviors, such as unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults, and a third type containing exhibitionist behaviors. Previous studies have also categorized street harassment behavior according to the level of sexual intimidation or pressure (Sullivan, 2011). This distinction coincides with the differentiation between mainly verbal forms of street harassment and

sexual coercion (Fairchild & Rudman, 2008). We also distinguished a third form of street harassment related to exhibitionist harassment, whereas in other studies exhibition of the genitals was classified as sexually explicit or intimidating street harassment (e.g., Sullivan, 2011). Considering a third type of street harassment might be useful in terms of description and higher understanding of this phenomenon.

Our second concern was on the prevalence and frequency of street harassment experiences of women in Spain. 98% of women reported they had suffered some type of street harassment in their lifetime, and 96.3% had been harassed in the past year. These figures are in line with data from other countries (e.g., Gardner, 1995; Lord, 2009; Sullivan, 2011) and are slightly higher than reported in some studies (e.g., Davidson et al., 2016; Kearl, 2014; Macmillan et al., 2000), probably because the scale developed in this study captures a greater number of harassment behaviors. Furthermore, the results showed that Spanish women experience street harassment frequently, with at least 80% of them reporting it monthly, also in line with data from other countries (e.g., Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Manalo et al., 2016). This confirms that almost all women have experienced at least one form of street harassment at some point and that daily harassment is far from an unusual experience (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Since different types of street harassment emerged, their prevalence and frequency were also examined. The results showed that verbal and nonverbal unwanted attention was the most frequent type of street harassment experienced, confirming what Sullivan (2011) found in the USA. The most common forms of harassment were being honked at, whistled at, other obscene sounds, lewd or discomfiting gaze, and comments about the target's appearance, reported by more than 80% of the participants. About one third of participants reported that they had been the target of lewd or discomfiting looks at least weekly during the past year, while more than one quarter of participants reported that their appearance had been commented on by a stranger at least weekly during the same period. These results are consistent with investigations in other countries, which have also found that verbal comments and sexually suggestive looking or sounds were the most common forms of street harassment (e.g., Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Lord, 2009; Manalo et al., 2016). While these events are also the most reported in Spain, it is important to note the high presence of more invasive forms of street harassment. Concerning unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults, this type of street harassment is a monthly experience for almost 20% of the participants, which has been suffered sometime in their life by more than 80% of the women in this study and by more than 65% of them during the past year. As for exhibitionist behaviors, one third

of participants reported to have experienced it sometime in their life and almost 12% of participants during the past year.

Regarding the first hypothesis, it was expected that experiencing street harassment would be correlated with worse psychological and behavioral outcomes, which was strongly supported when considering total scores of street harassment. Predictions were also supported for the types of street harassment identified except for exhibitionism. Regression results reinforced these findings (Hypothesis 3), specifying the contribution of different types of street harassment on psychological harm. Thus, consistent with Hypothesis 1a, the results showed that the frequency of street harassment was positively related with anxiety, which corroborates previous studies from other countries that indicated that experience of street harassment might be linked to negative emotional reactions (Sullivan, 2011), particularly symptoms of anxiety (Davidson et al., 2016; Livingston et al., 2015; Moya-Garófano et al., 2021). In addition, our study has assessed situation-related anxiety and regression results permit to reinforce previous results (Hypothesis 3a). Regarding Hypothesis 1b, our results also showed that women who experienced street harassment more frequently also reported higher levels of fear of rape and, the frequency of the first type of street harassment -verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention- was a significant predictor of fear of rape (Hypothesis 3b). In other words, street harassment might serve to remind women of their vulnerability to sexual assault, as previous research has shown (e.g., Fairchild, 2010; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Kearl, 2014). We also found a positive relationship between anxiety about harassment and fear of rape. This is in line with Fairchild (2010), who reported that negative emotions were positively associated with fear of rape, such that feeling insecure or at risk of rape appears to translate into increased anxiety (Davidson et al., 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

Hypothesis 1c was also supported, as we found a positive relationship between the frequency of harassment experienced and avoidance of certain behaviors and situations when alone. There was a lack of relationship between street harassment and avoidance in company. The same pattern was observed in the regression analyses, supporting Hypothesis 3c and 3e too. This means that women who reported more frequent harassment further restricted their mobility by avoiding more places and situations, but only when they were alone. This result corroborates earlier research in other countries (Lord, 2009). In summary, experiences of street harassment can have a negative impact on women's use of public space (Bastomski & Smith, 2016; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008; Osmond & Woodcock, 2015) that has even been compared to the patterns of avoidance manifested by people with an agoraphobia disorder (Gardner, 1995; Lord, 2009).

Street harassment is a very common experience for women, so the avoidance behavior to which is linked is totally rational, and there is no reason to pathologize women for it (Lord, 2009; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). However, it is necessary to highlight that these results suggest that experiencing street harassment might restrict women's autonomy and well-being.

Like Lord (2009), Fairchild and Rudman (2008) and Calogero et al. (2021), we also found positive relationships between mobility restriction and anxiety and fear of rape. Avoidance could be understood as a way of trying to reduce the anxiety and fear of rape associated with street harassment, which Valentine (1989) referred to in the title of her article as “the geography of women's fear.” Due to its high prevalence and frequency, street harassment can be considered part of the normalized structural violence in Spain (i.e., violence aimed at re-establishing social order, see Simó Soler et al., 2023), under which at least young Spanish women are frequently warned through street harassment that they cannot live freely in public spaces. This relationship between street harassment and avoidance is further evidence for the validity of social control theory (Lenton et al., 1999), which posits that such behavior is a strategy for preserving the patriarchal social order, controlling women, and making them more dependent on men. According to this theory, street harassment would be not merely the result of isolated acts of violence, but a means of preserving power imbalances and male dominance. Hutson and Krueger (2019) found that placement and mobility are used in street harassment by men to establish dominance and power. Street harassment and women's fear of male violence could lead to a “vicious circle” of compromised autonomy and development opportunities among women (Kearl, 2010, 2015; Valentine, 1989). Indeed, in an expansion of objectification theory, the voluntary restriction of freedom of movement by women has been recently proposed as another consequence of women's encounters of sexual objectification (Calogero et al., 2021). As noted by Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020), women in this patriarchal society are burdened with two duties: “violence work,” which involves rebuilding their lives and dealing with the consequences of a violent experience, and “safety work,” the (even unnoticed by oneself) efforts to prevent such violence before it occurs. These two “tasks” require women to invest time and energy, while demonstrating how the forces of oppression influence members of oppressed groups to act in ways that reinforce their own oppression (i.e., mobility restrictions can be considered a result of alienation; Cudd, 2006; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Our findings also supported Hypothesis 1d, which predicted that frequency of street harassment would be negatively related to self-esteem. Although few studies have

investigated the impact of street harassment on self-esteem, the negative association we observed is consistent with the results of Manalo et al. (2016). Hypothesis 3d was also supported but only for unwanted sexual approach or contact and insults, with results indicating that this type of street harassment contributes to explain lower levels of self-esteem in women. This is in line with the previously observed link between self-esteem and experiences of sexual objectification (American Psychological Association [APA], Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). The fact that only this form of street harassment predicted lower self-esteem may be because this type of violence could impact more on a personal, more stable variable, while the street harassment in the form of unwanted attention, which was more frequent, could have a higher influence on affective states such as anxiety and fear and avoidance behaviors when alone. However, it could have been expected that both types of street harassment could account for all psychological well-being variables. In our study, low self-esteem was also associated with anxiety about harassment and fear of rape, as well as avoidance behaviors. Previous research suggest that low self-esteem may be a consequence of the negative feelings evoked by street harassment (Lord, 2009), specifically anxiety and fear, as the survey of the *Holla-back!* platform (Livingston et al., 2015) concluded. The link between street harassment and low self-worth could also be explained by harassment-related mobility restrictions. Low self-esteem might be a consequence of feelings of impotence and feeling a lack of control over one's environment and life, in that making unwanted changes to one's habits, such as avoiding places, may lead to a diminished sense of personal worth (Gardner, 1995).

Hypothesis 2a, which posited a negative association between sexist attitudes and frequency of street harassment, was also supported. To our knowledge, this relationship has not been empirically tested before. This negative association was observed between the frequency of overall scores of the SHAS and the factor including verbal and non-verbal unwanted attention with ambivalent, benevolent, and hostile sexism. Hostile sexism was also negatively related to the frequency of unwanted sexual contact and insults reported. The different relationship between hostile and benevolent sexism and reporting experiences of diverse forms of street harassment may be explained as follows: Individuals scoring high on benevolent and hostile sexism often hold paternalistic beliefs that may lead to interpret acts such as a man “complimenting” a woman or “looking her over” in public places (i.e., paying unwanted verbal and nonverbal attention) as displays of gallantry. However, these beliefs might not protect or blind women higher on benevolent sexism from remembering and reporting episodes of street harassment involving unwanted sexual approaches, contact, or

insults due to the more overtly violent and explicit nature of such behaviors. In essence, this phenomenon could be seen as a two-step awakening. Hostile sexism may hinder women from recognizing street harassment in all its forms, while benevolent sexism discourages them from reporting more subtle experiences, though not those involving overt violence.

In general, the results suggest that supporting non-egalitarian ideologies regarding gender roles and women and men relationships might contribute to a lower report of street harassment suffered. Previous research has shown that hostile sexism is related to lower perception of sexual harassment (Wiener et al., 2010). Similarly, it has been found that women who support the established social system consider street harassment more benign than women who do not (Saunders et al., 2017); in other words, women who endorse sexist beliefs seem to normalize at least some forms of street harassment (such as whistling or staring) to the extent that they do not regard them as violence and not process or recall such experiences as frequently as women who do not endorse sexist beliefs. This explanation is also in line with recent results showing that women's level of sexist attitudes is negatively related to perception of psychological violence (Marques-Fagundes et al., 2015) and positively to greater tolerance for sexual harassment (Herrera et al., 2018). Sirvent Garcia del Valle's (2020) research, carried out in a Spanish context, showed that tolerance of sexism had a clear and high impact on the acceptability of sexual violence. The idea that non-egalitarian ideologies lead to lower perception of violence is also supported in our findings by the connection between self-identification as a feminist and a greater reported experience of street harassment (Hypothesis 2b). This was also found for other types of sexist events in previous research (Ayres et al., 2009). Accordingly, women who report that they experience street harassment relatively infrequently are not necessarily exposed to street harassment relatively infrequently.

Thus, although we found a negative relationship between sexist ideologies and street harassment, there could be two paths for understanding this link that also align with various theoretical approaches on fear of crime and rape. Hostile sexism may lead to underreporting of sexist/sexual violence as women might perceive street harassment as normal or insignificant. This could explain the lower fear of rape and the lack of relationship between hostile sexism and avoidance behaviors when alone in our study. Conversely, benevolent sexism could contribute to lower rates of reported street harassment among women, but especially of less coercive forms. However, given that holding benevolent sexism beliefs allows to identify, at least, more explicit forms of street harassment, their identification would increase women's fear of rape and reduce their mobility, which may result

in lower levels of victimization due to their lower presence in the public space (for a more detailed examination of these perspectives about fear, see Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). This finding was previously observed by Espinoza Ornelas et al. (2015), who also found a positive association between benevolent sexism and fear of rape, but not for hostile sexism. Although we provide a theoretical explanation for this difference, this conclusion should be considered cautiously, since the floor effect found in the hostile sexism subscale may also explain the apparently inconsistency of the results.

In any case, the regression models showed a significant contribution of the frequency of street harassment experienced in women's psychological well-being even after considering the role of sexist attitudes. Although the models accounted only for 4–13% of the variability of the well-being variables, it might be considered a relevant contribution given the large number of factors that can influence mental health. These results reinforce the conceptualization of street harassment by men towards women as a mechanism to control women's use of public spaces and to keep them "in their place," thus promoting the maintenance of the status quo and male privilege. In fact, women's fear, sense of threat, and behavioral restrictions due to street harassment offer support for social control theory (Lenton et al., 1999) and objectification theory (Calogero et al., 2021). Cudd (2006) argues that oppression can take both material and psychological forms, which often coexist and reinforce each other. Psychological oppression operates through mental and emotional states and impacts, for example, on self-esteem; material oppression occurs when the own body or material resources and the opportunity to access them (wealth, work, space, etc.) are threatened. Material oppression includes the right to inhabit or locate ourselves in a specific physical location. In this way, street harassment, as a form of sexual objectification (Calogero et al., 2021; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), could be understood as both psychological and material forms of oppression.

Further, previous research suggests that self-objectification, which can be induced through experiences of sexual objectification, including street harassment, and exposure and adherence to sexist ideologies, are related to support for an objectifying view of other women (Calogero & Jost, 2011; Fairchild, 2023; Harsey & Zurbriggen, 2021). This reinforces the notion of street harassment as a tool for the maintenance of the status quo through the alienation of subordinates (in this case, women in a patriarchal system). Research has been shown that objectification may promote internalized oppression, even discouraging subordinates from engaging in activism for social change and justice (Calogero, 2013, 2017; Calogero et al., 2017; Zurbriggen, 2013). The results of our study suggest that street harassment is linked to cognitive, emotional, and behavioral

variables, and, ultimately, may be included in both types of oppression. Safety and mental health, together with lack of fear and the freedom of movement, are necessary for women's participation in public spaces, for leisure, work, and personal/social growth opportunities. It is widely recognized that Spanish women encounter more constraints when it comes to their leisure or commuting time (Casado-Díaz et al., 2023; Codina & Pestana, 2019). Along with previous research (DelGreco et al., 2021), our results highlight the need for greater efforts for an egalitarian education that eradicates sexist attitudes in women and men.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study is a first step towards understanding the phenomenon of street harassment in Spain. It partially fills the gap in knowledge about street harassment in this country and complements earlier empirical and theoretical studies. However, it also has some limitations. First, the correlational method does not allow inferences about causality; thus, we can only consider street harassment as a potential factor that might impair women's psychological well-being but cannot confirm yet a causal relationship. Second, retrospective data may be subject to biases, including a tendency to minimize the magnitude and effects of sexist behavior one has experienced (Swim et al., 2001). This would imply, however, that the recalled frequency of harassment found in this study might be lower than the actual frequency, so our results still demand serious consideration. Third, the use of a convenience sample might also limit the representativeness of the target population. For example, employing social media platforms for recruitment may explain the average age of the sample (roughly 26 years). It is possible that results may differ for older women (e.g., more invisible to the "male gaze" or the objectification and sexualization of women from a heterosexual male perspective; Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Further research should include a wider sample to avoid age bias and address intersectionality in street harassment research. The characteristics of the sample also prevented the examination of other relevant variables, such as race/ethnicity or disability. Given that other studies have found these aspects to be potential risk factors for experiencing street harassment (Ceccato, 2017; Kearn, 2015), it would also be advisable to replicate this study with more heterogeneous and randomly selected samples. Moreover, considering women belonging to minorities could provide more evidence on intersectionality. Furthermore, though the target population (female-only) was intentionally chosen to study street harassment within the patriarchy system, it must be noted that street harassment may extend beyond male perpetrators and female victims, so further studies on street harassment in different populations are warranted.

Fourth, the hostile sexism subscale showed a floor effect, which may be because hostile sexism is more easily identifiable and socially unacceptable. However, this could also reflect the common low score of women in this construct, especially when compared to scores in benevolent sexism and with men (Glick et al., 2000). Anyway, findings concerning sexist attitudes, especially hostile sexism, should be interpreted with caution and be further explored through other measures in future research (e.g., implicit measures; Castillo-Mayén & Montes-Berges, 2017). Further experimental, ecological and longitudinal research is needed to confirm the associations found in this study and the magnitude of the effects. However, although experimental designs would offer better control over variables of interest, there are ethical problems with deliberately exposing women to street harassment (Sullivan, 2011). Also, although results (via EFA, correlational, regression and reliability analyses) are an important advance for a preliminary validation of the measure, a complete validation of the SHAS using confirmatory factor analysis in sociodemographic diverse samples would be valuable. Furthermore, the items related to exhibitionist behaviors appear to function differently than the other dimensions of the SHAS. In fact, this factor did not show any relationship with the outcomes of interest. Thus, it should be investigated whether this scale better fits a bifactor model. Finally, while there is considerable qualitative research on street harassment worldwide, results may vary depending on the culture. Therefore, more qualitative studies are necessary to provide a comprehensive picture of the street harassment phenomenon in the Spanish context. For instance, it would be interesting to qualitatively examine the role of sexist ideologies among harassers, or to explore the responses of victims through diaries.

Practice Implications

Despite advances in psychological research on sexism and the situation of women in Spain, several myths and stereotypes still need to be overcome (Castillo-Mayén & Montes-Berges, 2014; Gartzia & Lopez-Zafra, 2016). Despite that psychology and related health sciences cannot deny the impact of sexual harassment on women's psychological health, the street harassment of women remains an understudied topic. Women's life experiences, including street harassment, must be considered when considering their perceptions of public spaces, their fears, their state of health, and their quality of life. When it comes to psychological interventions, we need to recognize that problems like anxiety or low self-esteem can be at least partially caused by social factors (e.g., sexualization of women and girls) and that it is necessary to look at

mental health from a feminist perspective (APA, 2018a; APA, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Zurbriggen & Roberts, 2013). Based on this analysis, women should be provided with tools to identify and confront street harassment. Reducing sexist ideologies could reduce the trivialization of street harassment and increase awareness of women's everyday sexist experiences. To eradicate phenomena such as street harassment, working with men to encourage the rejection of the male privilege and the construction of positive relational dynamics is also necessary (APA, 2018b). This is especially important in Spain, where verbal street harassment is often understood as natural "*piropos*" and even defended as part of the Spanish culture (European Commission, 2016; Moya-Garófano et al., 2020, 2021).

Nevertheless, recognizing street harassment as a tangible form of oppression against women has practical implications beyond individual therapy (Cudd, 2006). Other disciplines may also benefit from the findings of this study. For instance, feminist geographers have long argued that the analysis and design of public spaces should consider the different experiences of women and men in those settings (for an example, see Valentine, 1989). In certain regions of the world, laws limit the mobility and opportunities of women (Ceccato, 2017; Kearl, 2015). Although there is no such coercive legislation in Spain, street harassment appears to be a tool that likewise restricts women's well-being and freedom. Monitoring the victimization of women who suffer street harassment in public spaces is crucial to demand the efforts of public authorities to address and prevent such violence (Ceccato, 2017). Street harassment should be a priority issue for spatial/urban design disciplines along with public policies. The occurrence of street harassment may also have a potential impact in related fields, such as tourism, as differences in cultural tourism routes or destinations by women and men have been observed in various Spanish cities (Miguel-Barrado et al., 2023; Rubio-Andrada et al., 2024).

As a final note, it is important to mention that during the process of review and publication of this paper, a new Spanish legislation that could allow the legal criminalization and prosecution of street harassment has appeared (Ley Orgánica 10/2022 [Organic Law 10/2022, of 6th September, on the Comprehensive Guarantee of Sexual Freedom]). Nevertheless, this law requires the existence of a condition of intimidation or threat perceived/reported by the victim. The common occurrence and normalization of street harassment, as well as its potential invisibility due to sexist ideologies, could hinder the effective denunciation and enforcement of this law. This emphasizes the need for feminist awareness, including at the legislative and judicial levels.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal that street harassment is a very common experience for women in Spain. Despite being among the first European countries to develop laws to address violence against women, there is still a cultural acceptance of this type of violence, as evidenced by a notable increase in sexual violence by strangers in recent years. The present findings indicate that street harassment may seriously affect women's life choices and well-being, revealing significant material and psychological burdens aligned with objectification theory assumptions and patriarchal oppression. Women in Spain are frequently exposed to recurrent unwanted attention and coercion in public spaces which predicts negative health outcomes. This widespread phenomenon may ultimately result in further alienation and subordination of women, which aligns with social control theory and the use of street harassment to control women. The endorsement of sexist ideology among women may also dampen recognition and adaptive responses to street harassment. Given the limited research on this topic in Spain and more broadly, the current findings contribute to further elucidating a more nuanced understanding of the prevalence and relevance of street harassment in women's lives, and ways toward addressing this longstanding form of gender oppression and inequality.

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Availability of Supporting data The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Consent for publication All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Competing Interests The authors have no financial or non-financial conflicts of interest related to this study.

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate All procedures performed in the present study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration. Informed consent was obtained from all participants included in the study.

Human and Animal Ethics This research involved human participants.

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