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Bystander Responses to Street Harassment Based on Gender, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: A Qualitative Vignette Study From the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Street harassment based on gender, gender identity or sexual orientation is a common form of violence globally, experienced daily by many people. Despite the scale of the problem, there is surprisingly little research investigating street harassment from the perspectives of bystanders who observe it. In this study, 120 online participants from the United Kingdom read three vignettes depicting street harassment of a presumed cis-gender woman, a trans woman and a gay couple. After reading the vignettes, participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their potential actions and barriers and facilitators to help. We employed thematic analysis in exploring the responses and constructed five themes: (i) Perceived safety and risk; (ii)

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Bystander characteristics, knowledge and understanding; (iii) Perceived target need; (iv) Presence of other people and (v) Suggested bystander action. We discuss the results with a reference bystander literature, relating it to the specific context of street harassment.

Keywords
bystander, LGBTQIA+, gender-based violence, sexual harassment

Introduction

Street harassment is a common, global form of violence, experienced by many individuals on a daily basis (Livingstone, 2015). Often perpetrated by strangers (i.e. 'stranger intrusion'; Vera-Gray, 2016), street harassment can be sexual or non-sexual in nature and vary from degrading looks and comments to stalking and physical violation. Here, we conceptualise street harassment broadly as a form of bias-based violence occurring in public places (e.g. streets, parks, public transport), where the targets are chosen based on presumed characteristics such as gender (i.e. being a woman), sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, gender-non-conformity or the intersection of multiple characteristics (see Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023; Keel et al., 2024, for inconsistencies in the definitions). Although sometimes viewed as harmless, there can be multiple adverse mental health and behavioural consequences for the targets of harassment (e.g. avoidance of places, making oneself invisible, negative emotions; Fielding et al., 2021; Ison et al., 2023; 2025; Narula et al., 2025; Useche et al., 2024). While street harassment is performed by individuals, their actions often monitor social norms that govern the acceptability of bias-based violence, reflecting underlying structural and hierarchical inequalities (Baptist & Coburn, 2019; Cullen-Rosenthal & Fileborn, 2022; Fairchild, 2023; Kolysh, 2021). Current research largely addresses identification of the problem, without sufficient focus on prevention or intervention development (Fileborn & O'Neill, 2023). One promising intervention strategy utilises bystanders, individuals who are present in harassment situations, and could aid the targets in multiple different ways (Hauspie et al., 2025). Despite the common occurrence of witnesses in public places where street harassment takes place, the perspectives and roles of bystanders are surprisingly under-explored in this context.

According to an ecological model adapted by Victoria Banyard (2011), bystander behaviour is a process that functions at multiple, dynamically interacting levels – from the individual characteristics to interpersonal

relationships, communities and societies. A large body of quantitative and qualitative research, mainly in the context of sexual harassment in education, has demonstrated that a range of factors at all levels could impact intervention likelihood. Bystanders are confronted by a complex interplay of situational (e.g. perceived risk; clarity of the abuse), individual (e.g. personality; lived experiences; morality), relational (e.g. social relationships) and societal (e.g. social norms) variables that could be barriers or facilitators of intervention (e.g. Brewer et al., 2024; Lyons, Brewer, Bogle, et al., 2022; Lyons, Brewer, Castro Caicedo, et al., 2022; Lyons, Brewer, et al., 2024; Lyons, Gómez, et al., 2024; Lyons, Brewer, et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2026; Mainwaring et al., 2023; Reyes et al., 2025; Robinson et al., 2022). However, there is sparse knowledge of bystanders in the context of *bias-based street harassment* where the actors are often strangers, and the dynamics of the situations are significantly different to university settings. In addition, bystander literature suffers from a significant heteronormative bias, with insufficient focus on harassment towards sexual and gender minorities (Holtzman, 2024; Kirk-Provencher et al., 2023). Despite the growing interest in understanding bystander's role in bias-based violence, there are still notable gaps in the literature.

Indeed, we could find only a handful of published studies that investigated bystanders in bias-based street harassment. Three studies (from the target's perspective) suggested that bystander intervention is rare (e.g. see Fileborn, 2017 for a study in Australia on sexual/gender minorities; Chowdhury & Fileborn, 2020 for a study on gender violence in Bangladesh; and Fielding et al., 2021 for a study on gender violence in public transport in the United Kingdom). When bystanders helped, it was mostly verbal, directed towards the perpetrator; followed by checking in with the target of harassment; calling the police; or trying to create a safer physical space (e.g. by keeping close distance, or placing themselves between the perpetrator and the target; Fileborn, 2017). These actions had varied outcomes, from stopping the harassment to escalating it, with the bystander turning into a target. However, these studies focused on how the targets of street harassment perceived the bystanders, rather exploring how the bystanders themselves perceived the situations.

In addition, researchers have investigated the experiences of street harassment from the perspectives of the bystanders, conducted in Spain (gender-based harassment; Vázquez-González & Ferrer-Pérez, 2025), Belgium (gender-based harassment; Hauspie et al., 2025), Switzerland (based on characteristics including race, sexual orientation and gender; Milani & Carbajal, 2023) and Colombia (LGBTI+ directed harassment; Reyes et al., 2025). For instance, research with a diverse sample from Belgium showed that bystander

intervention in public sexual harassment was uncommon (especially between strangers), potentially because it was not perceived as harmful (Hauspie et al., 2025). In these studies, bystanders reported that they had, or would, employ mainly direct verbal intervention, as well as support the victims. Indirect intervention (e.g. directing the attention of the perpetrator elsewhere) was mentioned less commonly. Participants who disclosed personal lived experiences of street harassment were also more likely to report having been a bystander, and potential motivations for action included morality, empathy and perspective taking. Fear of negative consequences and uncertainty about the situation were main barriers to intervention in Spain and Colombia (Reyes et al., 2025; Vázquez-González & Ferrer-Pérez, 2025). Despite the common occurrence of harassment in the street/public spaces, there is a surprising gap in the literature investigating the topic from bystander perspectives in diverse countries and contexts.

In the present study, we acknowledge the importance of bystander responses to street harassment among strangers, using a qualitative vignette design with mostly student participants from the United Kingdom to investigate potential bystanders' perceptions of harassment and intervention. In this context, there is a public health crisis of transphobia (Connolly et al., 2025), high levels of hate crimes towards LGBTQ+ communities (Stonewall, n.d.), and growing anti-women, far-right misogyny (Huber et al., 2023). In order to develop effective ways to tackle bias-based street harassment, it is important to increase our understanding of potential bystander perceptions of harassment and intervention, including perceived barriers and facilitators to help. In this pilot research, we examine qualitative responses to scenarios where targets are harassed based on gender (cisgender woman), presumed sexual orientation (gay couple) or presumed gender identity (trans woman).

Methods

Participants

Participants ($N = 120$; $M_{age} = 19.50$, $SD = 2.70$) were recruited from a psychology student participant pool at a University in Northwest England and via snowball sampling through the researchers' social networks. The sample consisted of 96 cisgender women, 21 cisgender men, 2 trans men and one participant who did not disclose their gender identity. All participants resided in the United Kingdom or Ireland at the time of the study, and most participants were British ($n = 105$) or Irish ($n = 7$). Participants were typically students ($n = 97$), with the remaining participants mostly working in the customer service or care industries. Students received course credit for participation. The

non-student sample did not receive incentives for participation. Most participants identified as ethnic majority (i.e. white; $n=97$), and the rest as ethnic minority (i.e. black, African, Caribbean, Arab, Asian, mixed, $n=23$). For sexual orientation, 77 identified as 'heterosexual' or 'straight', 22 as 'bisexual', 6 as 'gay' or 'lesbian', 1 as 'not sure' and the rest ($n=14$) did not disclose their sexual orientation.

Procedure and Materials

The study was administered in English via the Question Pro platform. After a series of demographic questions, participants were directed to read three vignettes in the following order – (i) gender-based harassment (cis-gender woman vignette; CWV); (ii) gender identity-based harassment (i.e. trans woman vignette; TWV) and (iii) sexual orientation-based harassment (i.e. gay couple vignette; GCV). In each vignette, the target(s) of the harassment were walking down the street, attracting the attention of a group of men who started hurling verbal abuse. The vignettes were based on a sexual orientation-focused vignette created for earlier studies investigating street harassment in the Latin American context (see Reyes et al., 2025).[1] The team that worked on the vignettes consisted of multi-national (including the United Kingdom) researchers and activists from diverse sexual and gender orientations. They were based on common street scenarios, also influenced by current research and reports from charities. The vignettes were discussed with postgraduate psychology students in the United Kingdom, who confirmed that the scenarios are common and realistic also in this context.

Participants were instructed that 'In the next section, we would like you to read different hypothetical scenarios that involve bullying and harassment based on gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. Think about different factors that could influence whether you would/would not provide help to the targets of the harassment'. They were then presented the scenarios in the order of CWV; TWV; GCV. Participants were requested to imagine a scenario where . . .

'. . . a woman walks down the street when she receives the sexual attention of a group of men. They start to shout and whistle, making rude gestures with their hands and commenting on how "hot" she is' (CWV); '. . . you observe a woman walking down the street. On a closer look, you notice that the woman could be a transwoman (i.e., someone who was born as a man, but identifies as a woman). The woman has caught the attention of a group of men, who start shouting transphobic slurs and obscenities' (TWV); '. . . you see two men walking down the street, looking like they are a couple and in love with each other. They walk past a group of men, who immediately start

shouting rude comments, using degrading words and saying how disgusting the couple is' (GCV).

After reading each vignette, participants were instructed to 'Please answer the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers- we are interested in hearing your opinions on what might happen in different situations. 1. As a bystander, what are the possible actions that you could take? 2. What are the things that would prevent you from acting and 3. What things would help you to act'. The study was completed in one session, and participants could take as much time as they needed. The study was approved by the Psychology Research ethics committee of Liverpool John Moores University (PsyREC-RA-186-23/24).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed with the aid of inductive thematic analysis, an approach that is well-suited for qualitative online survey data with relatively short responses (see Braun et al., 2021, for a discussion). We adopted an emic, reflexive, bottom-up approach, which is a valid method to analyse potential bystanders' perceptions of harassment and intervention in new contexts (e.g. Lyons et al., 2024b). The first author (ML) read and re-read all participant responses multiple times, creating initial codes and grouping them into preliminary themes. While analysing the data, it became apparent that responses to the three vignettes were very similar to each other. We therefore decided to code across rather than within the vignettes. After the first reading, GB and LM each coded the participant responses, using the coding system developed by ML. After discussions on the suitability of the themes, we decided to slightly alter the theme titles. However, the original coding and the themes remained unchanged.

All team members are white cisgender women with lived experiences of being targets and bystanders in gender-based street harassment, and bystanders in LGBTQ+ street harassment in the UK and elsewhere. ML and GB are faculty members with experience of similar kind of qualitative studies, as well as other research that investigates bias-based violence. LM is a postgraduate student with experience working with perpetrators of violence. Although we do not have lived experiences as targets of street harassment that is based on sexual orientation or gender identity, we have some understanding of this from bystander perspectives. However, it must be acknowledged that the data are viewed through the limited lenses of white, cisgender women, and lack intersectional (e.g. based on sexual and/or ethnic minority status) perspectives on bystander behaviour.

Results

We constructed five themes from the data. These were (i) Perceived safety and risk; (ii) Bystander characteristics, knowledge, and understanding; (iii) Perceived target need; (iv) Presence of other people and (v) Suggested bystander action.

Theme 1: Perceived Safety and Risk

Participants wrote about perceived safety and risk as barriers and facilitators to potential bystander action. Factors that could increase the risk of physical harm (e.g. aggression, weapons, substance use, multiple perpetrators and a dark, isolated or unfamiliar location) were commonly discussed as hypothetical barriers to intervention for all three scenarios. One participant wrote about multiple risks, 'Time of day, likelihood that I could be assaulted, how far away they are, how quickly they could gain access to me' (P1 CWV). Another participant articulated how 'In this situation, I portray these men as threatening and intimidating so this may interfere with my ability and decision to help her if I feel the situation is too unsafe' (P45 TWV). In contrast, feeling safe in the situation was considered as a facilitator to help, 'If I was in a public place and felt safe' (P98 GCV). Thus, perceived physical risks and safety were thought both as a barrier (high personal risks) and a facilitator (low personal risks) to help.

The perception of risk was sometimes linked with individual identity (see also Theme 2), such as being a woman, 'A large group of men is intimidating especially as I am a young woman myself and therefore that could prevent me from acting' (P6 CWV). One participant also considered how the individual vignette characteristics could influence the risks, 'Fear of retaliation from the men. From what I experienced in my life violence against transwomen is much more extreme than the violence against cis-women, so I would want to make my distance, so I don't have get caught up in it' (P110 TWV). Social risks (e.g. embarrassment; see also Theme 2 for factors that could influence the susceptibility to feel embarrassed) were also considered as a potential barrier to intervention. These could arise from multiple factors, such as the inability to articulate one's point of view; becoming the centre of unwanted attention; or causing a socially embarrassing scene by misreading the situation. Example comments include: 'Fear of them turning their attention to me and saying something to me . . . Embarrassing me' (P100 CWV); or 'The men making me feel foolish or stupid' (P100 GCV). These comments highlight how perceived risks could also be social in nature.

This theme also includes concerns about the possibility of increased risks to the targets of the violence, 'The men possibly hurting me and the woman' (P61 TWV); 'Don't know if you put the couple at risk of harm' (P86 GCV); 'Fear of also being spoken to by the men and possibly making things worse for the woman' (P49 TWV); 'If I thought that maybe it could make the situation worse and then me and the women would be in danger' (P108 CWV). Comments like these demonstrate that when reading hypothetical scenarios, people consider the safety of the target of violence, especially if their intervention would lead to escalation of violence.

To note, the presence of other people in the scenarios was discussed as a factor that could reduce physical risks, increasing the likelihood of bystander help. The company of people who are familiar or likeminded was especially important as a facilitator that could reduce the risks. Other people featured prominently in the responses, and despite some overlap with Theme 1, we will consider this in a separate theme (see Theme 4).

Theme 2: Bystander Characteristics, Knowledge and Understanding

Participants identified several personal factors (e.g. personality, lived experience, perspective taking, empathy), which could impact on their willingness to provide help. Participants often answered with one word; for example, 'confidence', 'shyness', 'introversion' when contemplating barriers that could hold them back in all three scenarios. One participant wrote how 'confidence level at the current time would likely hold me back. I am introverted and very non-confrontational, but I would deeply want to act nonetheless' (P46 CWV). Another participant mentioned how they would be more likely to help if they were '. . . maybe being more outspoken and not afraid of the aftermath of me saying anything' (P104 CWV). 'If I am intimidated by the crowd, if my anxiety is particularly bad that day' (P24 CWV), and '. . . natural awkwardness (P72 GCV)' were also discussed as barriers. This also has links to Theme 1, where social risks were mentioned, but without a reference to the participants' own characteristics/experiences. It is likely that individual factors also influence the likelihood of feeling embarrassed, which could prevent people from providing help.

Many stated how their altruism, empathy, morality and emotions could facilitate intervention in the vignettes. Several participants gave one-word answers (e.g. altruism, morality, empathy, guilt). Pro-social emotions such as guilt played a role in perceived facilitators of help, 'Guilt, I would feel guilty for not checking if she okay or to tell the men to stop' (P120 CWV). Altruism

and 'doing the right thing' featured in many responses. For instance, 'The fact that it's the right thing to do' (P114 TWV); 'Natural altruism and knowing I'd want someone to do the same for me' (P72 TWV); and 'Knowing that the right thing to do is to intervene so that the couple know that they do not deserve the abuse' (P52 GCV) were discussed as facilitators. In these responses, empathy and perspective taking sometimes linked to lived experiences of harassment. Participants disclosed how '. . . knowing I've been in her position before and wanted someone else to help me' (P12 CWV), or 'Seeing the woman in distress and being a woman myself, knowing the pain she will be in' (P49 CWV) could be potential facilitators. The lived experiences were not necessarily confined to the type of harassment depicted in the scenario. For example, one person wrote how experiences of racism would influence their likelihood of providing in the GCV, 'Being a person of colour who grew up in a prominently white area I am aware of the impact on my own self esteem that racist and nasty insults and comments' (P45 GCV). Overall, participant's thought that their moral compass, allyship and own experiences of being targets of harassment could facilitate intervention.

Theme 3: Perceived Target Need

Participant comments highlight how the target and their perceived needs could act as a barrier or a facilitator of intervention. Clear signs of distress and fear of escalation (i.e. physical danger to the target) were identified as some of the potential facilitators of intervention. Perceiving the targets as vulnerable (e.g. because of their gender, age, etc.) was also a proposed facilitator of bystander help. Barriers included perceptions that verbal harassment is not severe enough for intervention, or that the target(s) were perceived as capable of handling the situation without external help.

Perceiving the situation as harmful (physically or psychologically) or as increasingly aggressive was discussed as a facilitator to action. For example, 'If it seemed the woman was in immediate danger' (P24 TWV); 'Seeing that the comments are having a real effect on the couple and making them upset which would make me want to act to help them and make them feel supported' (P18 GCV); 'If the woman gives me a certain look or signal, I would act without second thoughts. As well as if the said woman appeared to be vulnerable or young' (P54 CWV); and 'If I could see that the victim was badly affected by the harassment and was looking for someone to step in and help' (P34 TWV) were mentioned as potential facilitators. Clear signs of distress, severe verbal abuse, and the potential to escalate into physical violence were discussed as factors that would make it easier to provide help.

If participants believed that the abuse was not harmful or the targets were not distressed or could easily defend themselves, they reported that they would be less likely to act. For instance, 'If the woman looked like she enjoyed the attention, then I would feel no need to act' (P6 CWV); 'If the couple look like it is not bothering them and they are not in any physical harm' (P119 GCV); 'If the woman really did not care I would act like I didn't hear anything' (P28 TWV) were barriers to help. These responses highlighted how the bystander's perception of the target's reaction to the harassment could be an important factor in decision-making. Additionally, many thought that verbal abuse might not be serious enough for warranting an intervention. 'Not wanting further trouble, it not effecting you that much because they are just comments' (P42 CWV); 'if the couple look like it is not bothering them and they are not in any physical harm' (P40 GCV).

Especially in the GCV, participants wrote how two men should be able to defend themselves, without the need for intervention from outsiders. This was especially the case for verbal harassment, which could be seen as less intervention-worthy as physical harassment. 'All involved are men. I would approach the couple of course if things got aggressive, but if it was simply verbal my thoughts would be that they have each other' (P3 GCV); 'There's two men who could potentially protect themselves from the group of men' (P27 GCV); and 'I'd feel like gay couple are both men so they would be more able to handle it than women' (P56 GCV) were barriers to help. The gender of the bystander was also an issue for perceived receptiveness of the target. Some participants were concerned that female targets of street harassment may feel suspicious about men who want to be bystanders, which could stop the male bystanders from providing help, such as '. . . the woman assuming I'm also harassing her' (P72 CWV).

Theme 4: Presence of Other People

The presence of other people encouraged intervention across the three vignettes. Often, participants did not elaborate beyond the mention of 'other people'. Sometimes, they expanded on their comment, writing how they would be more likely to help '. . . if other people around looked annoyed by the actions of the group of men' (P69 CWV); 'other people seeing the situation happening making it feel safer if something were to go wrong' (P87 TWV); or 'other people being around to help if the situation began to escalate' (P87, GCV). The presence of other people could relate to safety (overlapping with Theme 1), where group action can mean a lowered risk of harm. However, the presence of others appeared to be related to multiple other barriers and facilitators (not just risk of harm), and we decided that these

responses would be best presented as an individual theme, rather than as part of Theme 1.

Using other people as confirmation that the situation is abusive, and creating/following social norms underpinned some of the responses that mentioned the presence of other people. For instance, 'If other people are looking concerned for the woman . . .' (P51 CWV), and 'If more people also noticed the disruption and recognised something was wrong' (P74 GCV); and '. . . if someone stepped up to help her before me' (P24 TWV) were discussed as facilitators. The presence of other people could help the bystanders confirm a perceived threat.

The importance of other people could also be understood as a drive for social justice, where people could potentially unite in collective action. Comments such as '. . . if I'm with others so we can do it together' (P21 TWV); 'Knowing other people that support LGBT are around' (P83 TWV); or 'there being other men around who are not part of the shouting who are going against the men' (P57 CWV). The presence of other people was perceived as important providing that they were 'same-minded', and likely to join in the supportive action.

The presence of authorities was also mentioned as a potential facilitator of intervention. 'If another bystander in a position of authority for example a police officer was present' (P32 GCV); 'If police officers were nearby' (P116 CWV); or if they could 'Call the police/security' (P60 TWV) were discussed as something that would aid the bystanders.

Theme 5: Suggested Bystander Action

The actions suggested by participants could be mapped onto existing frameworks, such as the '5 D's' (Right To Be, n.d.). Participants wrote about multiple different forms of intervention, such as direct (verbal or physical, aimed at the target or the perpetrator), delegating (delegating to other bystanders or authorities, phoning the police), distracting (indirectly addressing the situation, e.g. by pretending to know the target), documenting (taking video or other evidence), or delaying (offering the target help after the harassment had ended). In addition, there were other actions that did not directly fit within the existing framework, such as displaying discomfort (showing disagreement with non-verbal communication), distancing (taking the target away from the situation; walking with them). Many participants outlined multiple strategies in their responses, depending on situational factors. For example,

As a young woman, these situations make me extremely uncomfortable and depending on the age and the appearance (whether they look dangerous) of the men, would depend on how I would approach this situation or say

anything to them. If they are not threatening to me, I would tell them to grow up and have some bloody manners and respect. Regardless of whether or not I would approach the group of men, I would ensure that the woman is ok and I would walk her to where she needs to go or at least in that general direction until she feels safe. I would also try and comfort and support her, reassure her that she is safe and if she needs to talk any actions such as reporting them, I would support her in this case (P7 CWV).

This example highlights how the participant thought that they would first assess the situation for levels of threat. Subsequent bystander actions would then be based on what they perceived as a safe action in the vignette.

Many of the suggested direct actions were verbal, directed at the perpetrators, such as 'Shout to the men to stop bullying the lady' (P120 TWV); 'I would probably be enraged so I would approach the group of men and shout and call them out on their behaviours' (P69 CWV); 'I could confront the group of men and educate them by telling them that their actions are wrong. I could also check on the woman to make sure she is okay and offer her as much support as I can' (P53 TWV); or 'I would approach the group of men and tell them how disgusting they're acting and to move on, that in today's society that should not be happening' (P63 GCV). Some individuals thought that they would directly name the act, such as 'Tell the men to stop being homophobic' (P100 GCV), or 'Call out their comments as sexist and antisocial' (P30 CWV). Participant motivations for direct intervention included education, reproach or signalling disapproval of perpetrator actions.

Other forms of suggested direct action included verbally supporting or comforting the targets. Although this is often regarded as a 'delay' response in the 5D framework, participants did not always make it clear whether the support provided to the target would take place during the incident, or after it was over. Many times, the support seemed to be framed as bystander help that happens during the incident. These acts included 'checking in' on the targets, asking what help they would prefer, or reaffirming how the perpetrator's behaviour was wrong. Participants wrote how 'Ask the woman if she is okay – ask the woman if she needs help getting away from the situation' (P25 CWV); 'Calmly approach woman, ask if she is okay, ask if she would like me to walk with her until she is out of sight from the group of boys (P32 CWV); 'Focus on the victim, not the instigators and try to offer a sense of safety and attention to reassure that they have a witness' (P71 TWV). The proposed support could take different forms, for example 'Asking them if they were okay either verbally, mouthing it or with hand gestures' (P41 GCV). The motivation for addressing the targets directly included wanting to show solidarity and bring emotional comfort.

Sometimes, rather than directly addressing the situation, participants wrote how they could display their disagreement or discomfort and offer support with non-verbal communication. For instance, 'Give them a dirty look . . .' (P65 TWV) is an example of an indirect nonverbal act directed at the perpetrators. 'If I were alone, I would probably try to make eye contact with her to reassure her that I can see what is happening to make her feel safer . . . Saying something in that situation to the guys could make it escalate, which is why calling them out directly in that moment is risky' (P71 CWV); 'Asking them if they were okay either verbally, mouthing it or with hand gestures' (P41 GCV) represent indirect nonverbal actions directed at the target.

Another proposed form of indirect intervention was to create a distance between the target(s) and the perpetrators by physically accompanying the targets and walking alongside them. 'Watch closely what is going on and if they continue to follow her, go over to her and start walking with her' (P115 CWV); 'Walk alongside the woman so that she is not alone whilst receiving the verbal abuse (P109 CWV); 'Walk with the woman, take her a opposite direction' (P74 TWV); '. . . to walk between them and the group that are targeting them' (P64 GCV).

Some participants wrote about distraction tactics that could safely diffuse the situation. '. . . go up to her and pretend to be a relative/friend to make her feel more comfortable or less scared as she won't feel alone' (47 CWV); '. . . pretend to know the woman and get her into a safer environment to prevent harm from happening' (P87 TWV) were examples of tactics that use distraction.

Delegating to other bystanders, security or phoning the police were also among the suggested actions. For instance, 'Report them to the authorities' (P17 GCV); '. . . you could tell someone like a police officer or security guard nearby' (P117 CWV); 'Call police if it looks like it could proceed to something dangerous' (P37 TWV), were mentioned as potential actions.

Discussion

We constructed five themes from qualitative responses to vignettes based on street harassment in the contexts of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. These themes highlighted perceived barriers and facilitators to bystander intervention and suggested actions that the bystanders could take. To summarise, perceptions of security played a role in bystander decisions (Theme 1; Perceived safety and risk), indicating that feeling safe from negative consequences facilitated hypothetical action. Bystander internal characteristics and experiences were also important (Theme 2; Bystander characteristics, knowledge and understanding), with factors such as personality, empathy and

lived experiences as facilitators or barriers to intervention. This theme had some overlap with Theme 1, as the bystander characteristics sometimes overlapped with the perceptions of risk. Views on whether the targets or the situations warranted bystander intervention were also important (Theme 3; Perceived target need). Clear signs of distress, potential for physical danger and perceived target vulnerability were mentioned as facilitators. Perceiving the situations as not severe (i.e. verbal rather than physical violence) and thinking that the targets could defend themselves were barriers. Other bystanders also play multiple roles (Theme 4; Presence of other people), as likeminded bystanders could provide more safety (also linking with perceptions of risks in Theme 1), and increase clarity surrounding the seriousness of the situation. Potential forms of help (Theme 5; Suggested bystander actions) varied from addressing the situation directly, indirectly or via delegation to third parties. Below, we discuss the key findings with a reference to broader bystander literature.

Perceived safety and risk were of concern to bystanders across the three scenarios. Previous research suggests that fear of negative consequences is a common barrier to intervention across several contexts, from racism, sexual harassment/gender-based violence and homophobia in universities (e.g. Lyons et al., 2024, 2026; Park et al., 2024) to racism and homophobia in various public and private spaces (Lyons, Brewer, et al., 2025; Reyes et al., 2025). The uncertainty of how situations may evolve is especially pressing in scenarios of street harassment with unknown individuals and multiple factors that could come into play.

Interestingly, the presence of other people was mentioned by multiple participants in Theme 4, which also links to the perceptions of safety and risk in Theme 1. Other people provide opportunities for collective action, where several bystanders could intervene together, making actions less risky. Previous studies, analysing CCTV footage of violence in public places, have also demonstrated that bystanders are more likely to help in the presence of other bystanders (Bloch et al., 2018; Liebst et al., 2019; Weenink et al., 2022). These ‘caring collectives’ (Bloch et al., 2018) or ‘circles of peace’ (Weenink et al., 2022) involve bystanders monitoring each other’s responses to collectively de-escalate situations involving public violence. As verbal street harassment can quickly escalate into physical violence, it makes sense that bystanders observe other people when deciding how to act. Our study suggests that in the United Kingdom and Ireland, bystanders could address a range of public harassment (i.e. sexist, transphobic and homophobic) incidences by collective action.

As well as security, the presence and reaction of others could signal anti-harassment and pro-intervention social norms. Indeed, previous research

shows that social norms moderate the relationship between individual attitudes and bystander intervention (Nickerson et al., 2023). Social norms could be especially important in the current sociopolitical climate, where hate against LGBTQ+ (and especially trans) individuals in the United Kingdom is commonplace (Bradley, 2020; Maine, 2022). The normalisation of hate (e.g. Haynes et al., 2025) and negative media representation (e.g. Bailey et al., 2016) could mean that bystanders are not sure what constitutes appropriate or acceptable behaviour. In the absence of clear disapproval or action from other bystanders, hate could be viewed as being within the socially acceptable boundaries of behaviour, and subsequently, go unchallenged.

Responses to the vignettes also indicated that individual characteristics are important in hypothetical bystander intervention. In Theme 2, participants highlighted how empathy, perspective taking, and morality could function as potential facilitators regardless of the harassment context. Previous studies on street harassment (see Vázquez-González & Ferrer-Pérez, 2025 for a study on gendered street harassment in Spain; and Reyes et al., 2025, for a study on LGBTQ+ directed street harassment in Colombia) and harassment in other contexts (see Ríos-Albert et al., 2025 for a study in European universities) have also found that empathy and morality promote positive action. It is also possible that lived experiences of street harassment facilitate perspective taking and a sense of morality, which support recognition of harassment and increase the likelihood of bystander intervention (Milani & Carbajal, 2023).

The target's perceived need also influenced hypothetical decisions to intervene. Hence, it is important to recognise that perceptions of 'legitimate' need and 'appropriate' target responses to harassment may have an important impact on bystander intervention. If bystanders were unsure whether the target needed or wanted help, intervention was perceived as less likely. For instance, some participants indicated they would not help in the gender-based harassment vignette if they thought that the woman enjoyed the attention, suggesting that women may not always be perceived as 'real' victims when experiencing street harassment. A previous vignette study found that women were perceived more negatively if they responded positively to street harassment masked as compliments (Moya-Garófano et al., 2020). It is possible that when bystanders are not sure whether harassment is unwanted, they also perceive the intervention target negatively (i.e. as less worthy of help), which could lead to bystander inaction. Lack of clarity (e.g. unclear signals, unclear whether situation is harassment, doubts about whether the target wants or needs the help) can also deter bystanders from offering their assistance (e.g. Lyons, Brewer, et al., 2025; Lyons et al., 2026; Reyes et al., 2025; Vázquez-González & Ferrer-Pérez, 2025). In the streets, especially when the other

actors are often strangers and situations evolve rapidly, the assurance that bystander help is appreciated could be of crucial importance.

Some of the ideas in Theme 3 demonstrated gendered stereotypes around masculinity. In the vignette with the gay couple, participants thought that bystander help was not necessary because two men should be able to defend themselves, again suggesting that some targets are not perceived as 'real' victims. In sexual assault literature, men and sexual minorities are perceived as non-prototypical victims that also receive less empathy (Davis, 2023; Wakelin et al., 2003). Bystander education in the context of street harassment should include expelling the myths of 'ideal victims', highlighting how bias-based violence is something that should be addressed irrespective of the characteristics of the victim.

As well as identifying barriers and facilitators of intervention, participants discussed a range of strategies that could be used in the three hypothetical vignettes. These actions aligned well with the (5 D's and 3 D's) frameworks used in bystander training in the North American context (e.g. York et al., 2021). Participants wrote about multiple different forms of intervention, such as directly addressing the situation by talking to the perpetrator or target; delegating help to authorities; distancing the targets from the perpetrators by taking them away from the situation; distracting the situation by different means; documenting by taking evidence or displaying disapproval or discomfort with nonverbal communication. In previous studies, verbal intervention/confronting the aggressors directly has been identified as the most common strategy (Fileborn, 2017; Milani & Carbajal, 2023). Direct confrontation of the perpetrators is, however, risky. In the presence of unknown people, direct confrontation could escalate the situation. When developing bystander training in the context of street harassment, it is important to emphasise non-direct forms of help that could be safer than direct confrontation.

One notable finding was that the responses were very similar irrespective of the vignette (i.e. whether the targets received transphobic, homophobic or gender-based harassment). The only vignette-specific bystander barriers were in Theme 3. The idea that the two men can defend themselves (in the GCV), and that the cisgender woman might enjoy the attention of the men (in the cisgender woman vignette) were barriers that were mentioned in relation to only one scenario. However, all the other answers were comparable across the vignettes.

One of the explanations for this could be the sample characteristics. We had a fairly homogeneous university student sample, which could be more open-minded and progressive than the general public. Despite abnormalisation of social justice (Cammaerts, 2022), and the 'public health crisis' of transphobia in the United Kingdom (Connolly et al., 2025), the responses

were supportive of trans-identities. For instance, all the participants wrote 'woman' when discussing the trans-woman scenario, respecting the gender identity in the vignette. Generally, universities in the United Kingdom and Ireland are supportive of LGBTQ+ students (Smith et al., 2022), which could explain empathetic responses irrespective of the identity of the targets of the street harassment. Furthermore, the university where most of the participants were studying has student-led LGBTQ+ societies, campaigns (e.g. Respect, Always), and inclusion support for trans and non-binary individuals (e.g. Hughes, 2023). It is possible that bystander perceptions differ significantly across the vignettes when studied in samples from more diverse British and Irish populations who may have less respect for diverse identities.

Future research should explore the importance of intersectionality. Individuals with multiple marginalised identities are more likely to be targets of street harassment (Baptist & Coburn, 2019; De Backer, 2020). Intersectionality also shapes the form or impact of street harassment and target responses to it (Fogg-Davis, 2006; Lennox, 2024; Mason-Bish & Zempi, 2019; McCurn, 2017). It is crucial to investigate bystander perceptions in street harassment scenarios where the targets have intersectional identities, to determine whether the barriers, facilitators and actions are similar to scenarios with a single marginalised identity. Additionally, future studies should include the perspective of the targets of street harassment. Relatively few studies have examined the impact of intervention on the targets, and the types of actions that they would find useful (Banyard, 2024).

Our study has methodological limitations that warrant discussion. First, similar responses across the vignettes could be due to order effects. The vignettes were presented in the same order for all the participants, and they could have used the first one in anchoring the following replies. Future studies would benefit from employing a between-participants design, where individual participants read and respond to just one vignette. Second, the seemingly favourable, progressive answers could also reflect socially desirable responding. This also relates to the tensions between intended behaviour (what people think they would do), and actual behaviour (what people would do in reality). There is some experimental evidence showing that bystanders may not always act in a way that they intend to act (see Szekeres et al., 2023, for a study on bystanders in racism). Although vignette designs are convenient and widely used, the results should be understood as behavioural intentions that may not have a relationship with actual behaviours. Third, the student participants were awarded course credits, which could explain some of the short, one-word responses when students may want to rush through the study to save time.

Overall, the results have some lessons for bystander education in the context of street harassment. First, there should be an emphasis on the seriousness and adverse consequences of street harassment – even words can be harmful (Fairchild, 2023; Narula et al., 2025; Thornton et al., 2024). Second, psychoeducation around what harassment is, and masculinity and 'ideal victims' (i.e. teaching that men can also be targets who are harmed by street harassment) would be beneficial. Third, the risks associated with involvement in street harassment could be mitigated by teaching bystanders' diverse ways to disrupt the situations, for example, distracting the violence without directly addressing it. Although our study should be considered as a pilot investigation with a limited sample, the results demonstrate how bystander perceptions of bias-based street harassment is an important field of study that will hopefully grow in popularity among the research community.

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Note

1. In Reyes et al. (2025), the vignette focused on sexual orientation only and stated 'You see two men walking down the street, it seems that they are a couple and very much in love with each other. They walk past a group of men, who immediately start yelling rude comments, using degrading words, and saying how disgusting the couple is'.

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