

## Adolescent Experiences and their Views on Social Values Related to the Phenomenon of Verbal Sexual Harassment “Catcalling”: A Qualitative Study

Fenny Etrawati✉<sup>1)</sup>, Nada NurSyifa<sup>1)</sup>, Devy Yuliantari<sup>1)</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Public Health, Universitas Sriwijaya, South Sumatera, Indonesia

✉Email: [fenny\\_etrawati@fkm.unsri.ac.id](mailto:fenny_etrawati@fkm.unsri.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Verbal sexual harassment, “catcalling,” has been experienced by many adolescents. In 2018, the National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault released that 38% of men and 77% of women aged 18 years and above had experienced verbal sexual harassment. Victims’ experiences are often ignored because society perceives them as catcalling, not abuse. **Objectives:** This study aimed to identify the experiences and views of adolescents regarding social values related to verbal sexual harassment otherwise known as “catcalling”. **Methods:** Researchers used a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design which was conducted in March 2022. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique involving 26 informants aged 12-23. The key informants comprised eight victims, two perpetrators, and sixteen non-victims. Meanwhile, expert key informants were the Head of WCC Palembang Companion, the Head of the Women’s Protection Division at the Palembang PPPAPM Office and the Head of the Division for Prevention of Bullying and Sexual Violence on Campus. **Results:** The results indicated that most informants know about catcalling. However, it was often underestimated because it has become common, and there were no sanctions for the perpetrators. Generally, catcalling occurred in crowded places such as roadsides and men’s hangouts. Catcalling was usually done by strangers, especially to women for fun, and society tended to negatively stigmatize victims. **Conclusions:** It is hoped that those around the victim can provide positive support. In addition, the government and educational institutions need to increase education and establish clear regulations to prevent sexual harassment, including catcalling.

**Keywords:** Catcalling, Sexual Harassment, Social Values

### INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassing is still a serious problem in all countries since there are many different types which can occur anywhere and at any time. The most common type of sexual harassment is verbal sexual harassment that takes place on the street or known as catcalling, with the majority of the victims being female teenagers (Ferrer-Perez et al., 2021). According to ActionAid (2015), 46% to 71% of women in Brazil report being catcalled at least once a month. In South Africa, 80% of women have experienced catcalling in the past year. In 2018, the National Study on Sexual Harassment and Assault released data that 38% of men and 77% of women above 18 years of age had experienced verbal sexual harassment. This has led most people to change their

travel routes to avoid being catcalled (Stop Street Harassment, 2018).

In 2022, there were 1,127 cases of sexual harassment in public spaces in Indonesia, according to the National Commission on Women’s Services (National Commission on Violence Against Women, 2023). The Safe Space Coalition in 2021 found that the majority of age groups vulnerable to sexual harassment in public spaces are 16-24 years old, with a percentage of 55.53% (Safe Public Space Coalition, 2022). Whistling, yelling, and making sexual comments to someone passing by on the street are considered disruptive behavior (Walton & Pedersen, 2022). Catcalling makes victims feel uncomfortable and threatened in public spaces. Most victims simply remain silent without reporting the act because of fear

and future trauma (Davidson et al., 2016; DelGreco & Christensen, 2020).

The experience of victims is often not taken into account and tends to be ignored because society considers catcalling to be a compliment or joke rather than harassment (O'Leary, 2016). Victims tend to be more negatively stigmatized by the community, including blaming the clothes worn by the victim. Neglect is also triggered because there is no clarity or certainty about the law regarding catcalling in Indonesia to provide protection and justice for victims. The protection that victims of catcalling may receive thus far is regulated in Republic of Indonesia Legislation Number 39 of 1999 Concerning Human Rights, (1999) and Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 31 of 2014 on Witness and Victims Protection (2014). Moreover, the absence of evidence of the crime sometimes means that the perpetrator ultimately goes unpunished (Halim, 2021). Therefore, this study aimed to describe adolescents' experiences with and views on social values related to the verbal sexual harassment called catcalling.

## METHODS

This study was a qualitative A qualitative approach with a phenomenological design was used in this research. Phenomenology is a type of qualitative research that emphasizes the study of the lived experiences of individuals in the world. It is a powerful approach that lends itself well to the study of complex problems related to health issues. This research was conducted in Palembang City, in 2022. The selection of informants in this study was done through a purposive sampling technique with 26 key informants between the ages of 10 and 24, consisting of eight victims, two offenders, and 16 non-offenders. Meanwhile, expert key informants in this study included the head of the Women's Crisis Center (WCC) in Palembang city, the head of the Women's Protection Division of Office of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Community Empowerment in Palembang and the Head of the Division for Prevention of Bullying and Sexual Violence on Campus.

The data were collected using the method of focus group discussions (FGDs)

for the key informants and in-depth interviews for the expert key informants. The interview and FGD guidelines were developed by the researcher based on a literature review on the issue of verbal sexual harassment 'catcalling', such as how respondents understand catcalling, where catcalling usually occurs, what is the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (whether they know each other or not), what forms of catcalling occur, what is the motivation of the perpetrator to commit catcalling, how the victim reacts when catcalled and what precautions are taken to overcome catcalling.

Prior to conducting the research, the designed instruments were reviewed by qualitative experts from the undergraduate program of the Public Health Faculty at Universitas Sriwijaya and tested on several people whose characteristics were almost identical to those of the target group. After revising the instrument, the next step was to collect data from the target group (key informants and expert key informants). During the field data collection, the research team used a recorder and a field notebook to record data, which were then used to transcribe and code the research findings.

The variables examined were adolescents' experiences with catcalling and adolescents' perspectives on societal values. Data analysis was conducted using content analysis techniques to identify patterns in recorded communication regarding a topic. First, the researcher transcribed the in-depth interviews and FGDs. Next, each response to the questions listed in the research instrument was coded and categorized. Finally, the researcher presented and interpreted the results of the in-depth interviews and FGDs in the form of tables and quotations according to the research objectives. This research has received ethical approval from the Health Research Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Public Health-Universitas Sriwijaya with number 009/UN9.FKM/TU.KKE/2022.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Content analysis of data from in-depth interviews and FGDs revealed various information about catcalling incidents from the perspectives of

victims, perpetrators, and expert key informants from various related institutions, as described in the tables and quotes below.

**Table 1.** Characteristic of Key Informants

No.	Initial	Age	Status	Level of Education	Gender
1.	AP	14	Non-Victim	Junior High School Student	Male
2.	HAR	13	Non-Victim	Junior High School Student	Male
3.	JQ	12	Non-Victim	Junior High School Student	Male
4.	F	14	Non-Victim	Junior High School Student	Male
5.	PNRH	13	Non-Victim	Junior High School Student	Female
6.	AQN	12	Victim	Junior High School Student	Female
7.	NU	13	Victim	Junior High School Student	Female
8.	NA	13	Victim	Junior High School Student	Female
9.	ADF	17	Non-Victim	Senior High School Student	Male
10.	DAB	17	Non-Victim	Senior High School Student	Male
11.	RF	16	Non-Victim	Senior High School Student	Male
12.	SN	16	Non-Victim	Senior High School Student	Female
13.	H	17	Non-Victim	Senior High School Student	Male
14.	AAN	16	Victim	Senior High School Student	Female
15.	CPL	17	Victim	Senior High School Student	Female
16.	AA	16	Victim	Senior High School Student	Female
17.	MR	21	Non-Victim	University Student	Male
18.	AAD	20	Non-Victim	University Student	Female
19.	K	23	Non-Victim	University Student	Male
20.	WS	23	Non-Victim	University Student	Male
21.	UM	22	Non-Victim	University Student	Female
22.	OC	21	Non-Victim	University Student	Male
23.	RA	22	Victim	University Student	Female
24.	DZ	20	Victim	University Student	Female
25.	RH	15	Perpetrator	Senior High School Student	Male
26.	ASR	18	Perpetrator	University Student	Male

The key informants consisted of early adolescents (junior high school students), middle adolescents (senior high school students), and late adolescents (university students), with the youngest being 12 years old and the oldest being 23

years old. One third of the informants had experienced sexual abuse and the others had not experienced sexual abuse. Those interviewed were more likely to be male than female, and all perpetrators were male.

**Table 2.** Characteristic of Expert Key Informants

No.	Institution	Initial	Level of Education	Position
1.	Women's Empowerment and Child Protection Community Empowerment in Palembang city	L	Master's Degree	Head of Field Women's Protection Division
2.	Woman Crisis Center (WCC) in Palembang city	N	Bachelor's Degree	Head of the Assistance Division
3.	Universitas Sriwijaya	MSR	Master's Degree	Head of Bullying and Sexual Violence Prevention Division in campus (Lecturer)

In addition to key informants from among the youth, researchers also obtained information from various related institutions that were used to triangulate data from expert perspectives, such as

those working in the field of women's empowerment and child protection, the Women's Crisis Center (WCC), and university elements, particularly the Division of Bullying and Sexual Violence

Prevention. They have at least a bachelor's degree and are experienced in their fields.

**Table 3.** Teenagers' Understanding of Catcalling

Initial	Status	Actions of Verbal Harassment	Winking, whistling	Calling out / teasing	Don't know, first time heard	Disturbing Actions/unwanted
AP	Non-Victim	✓	✓			✓
HAR	Non-Victim			✓		
JQ	Non-Victim	✓		✓		
F	Non-Victim	✓		✓		
PNRH	Non-Victim					✓
AQN	Victim				✓	
NU	Victim		✓		✓	
NA	Victim		✓	✓		
ADF	Non-Victim		✓	✓		✓
DAB	Non-Victim		✓	✓		
RF	Non-Victim		✓	✓		
SN	Non-Victim		✓	✓		
H	Non-Victim					✓
AAN	Victim		✓	✓		
CPL	Victim	✓		✓		
AA	Victim	✓	✓			✓
MR	Non-Victim	✓		✓		✓
AAD	Non-Victim	✓	✓			
K	Non-Victim					✓
WS	Non-Victim	✓				
UM	Non-Victim		✓	✓		
OC	Non-Victim	✓		✓		
RA	Victim	✓				
DZ	Victim		✓	✓		
RH	Perpetrator				✓	
ASR	Perpetrator			✓		

Analysis of FGD transcripts on the key informants regarding their understanding of catcalling showed that the informants were aware of what catcalling is. The majority of informants knew that catcalling is a form of verbal sexual harassment and described catcalling actions such as whistling, winking, calling, or flirting with someone who passes in front of the perpetrator. Informants also reported that catcalling was very annoying and uncomfortable. It can be seen from the following FGDs quote:

*“So catcalling is, a verbal act that leads to sexual, such as greeting with an indecent greeting, for example “sexy”, continue squealing, glaring eyes, and all actions that are disturbing.”* (AA, victim).

*“It's also a kind of harassment, but it's verbal. Maybe it's telling you that you're pretty, to give you a whistle to blow.”* (AAD, non-victim)

*“I just found out that it's harassment.”* (RH, perpetrator)

There were informants who did not know that catcalling is a form of sexual harassment. As an informant from the Palembang City Office of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Community Empowerment said, catcalling has actually occurred frequently, but the term is only now popular, so there were still many people who do not understand the term,

*“...we have often heard about this action, maybe we have experienced it, but the term or the foreign term is new...”* (L, key informant).

**Table 4.** Place of Catcalling Incident and Relationship between Perpetrator and Victim

Place of Catcalling Incident		Relationship between Perpetrator and Victim					
Initial	Status	Side of the road	Men's Gathering Place	School	Market	Unfamiliar with one another	Know Each Other
AQN	Victim	✓				✓	
NU	Victim		✓	✓		✓	✓
NA	Victim	✓				✓	✓
AAN	Victim				✓	✓	
CPL	Victim		✓	✓		✓	✓
AA	Victim	✓	✓			✓	
RA	Victim	✓	✓		✓	✓	
DZ	Victim		✓			✓	
RH	Perpetrator		✓			✓	✓
ASR	Perpetrator	✓	✓				✓

Based on Table 4, catcalling often occurred in men's gathering places and on the roadside, other places mentioned are markets and schools. Furthermore, perpetrator and victim informants said catcalling was done to someone they didn't know, but sometimes it was also done by someone they knew, as in the following quote:

*"All places have potential, it is often done on the street, hangout places..."*(Victim AA)

*"Friends, sometimes even strangers and classmates want to be teased, it's*

*just fun for me."* (RH Perpetrator)

According to the head of Department of Women's Empowerment, Child Protection and Community Empowerment (PPPAP) of Palembang City, catcalling can occur anywhere, particularly when the victim is walking alone.

*"Catcalling can occur anywhere, but it often happens in quiet places; especially, when girls are walking alone, at school, on campus, and in densely populated villages,"* (L Key Informant).

**Table 5.** Motivation and Actions of Perpetrators

Initial	Perpetrator Motivation			Actor Actions				
	Satisfying Emotions	Joking	There is an opportunity	Hold Hands	Stroking Hair	Whistle	Eye blink	Calling
RH	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓
ASR		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓

According to Table 5, the perpetrator stated that their actions were motivated by personal satisfaction, having an opportunity and amusement. The forms of catcalling they engaged in included calling and winking. In some cases, one of the perpetrators even made physical contact by holding the victim's hand or stroking their hair.

*"Sometimes there is an opportunity, for fun, joking."* (ASR, Perpetrator)

*"There is indeed an opportunity to hold her hand and stroke her hair maybe."* (RH, Perpetrator)

Sexual harassment can take various forms and motivations. According to the informant from the Women's Empowerment, Child Protection, Community Empowerment (PPPAPM) Service of Palembang City, it can be categorized as either verbal or nonverbal.

*"Sexual harassment has many forms, apart from physical and non-physical or verbal, there is also sexual harassment or violence that attacks a person's mental or psychological state; such as, catcalling."* (L, Key Informant).

Victims of catcalling often choose to remain silent and do not report the

incident to authorities. Instead, they may confided in their parents or others about the incident and hope for clear sanctions and rules regarding catcalling. It is important to address this issue and provide support for those who experience it. According to the informant, discomfort with catcalling behavior prompted victims to become more cautious and took preventive actions to avoid future incidents:

*"I once wanted to report to the police but I did not dare so that I call my parents."* (AAN victim)

*"I ask to be accompanied If I want to go to a faraway place, and I prefer to ask a friend to accompany me if I want to go to near place,"* (NA, Victim)

*"There was good response, saying hello again."* (RH, Perpetrator)

**Table 6.** Victim Response and Further Prevention

Initial	Victim Response			Further Prevention			
	Communicating with Parents	Remain Silent	Reprimand the individual responsible	Don't Walk Alone	Improving Appearance	Choose a Different Street	Don't Respond
AQN		✓			✓		
NU		✓				✓	
NA	✓			✓	✓		
AAN	✓		✓	✓			
CPL	✓		✓		✓		
AA		✓		✓			
RA		✓	✓		✓		
DZ		✓					✓

The victim took preventive action by improving her appearance and the perpetrator waits for positive response from the victim. According to the Head of the WCC Assistance Division, the perpetrator's motivation for catcalling was his interest in the victim and his expectation of a favorable response from the victim.

*"That's male nature, their instinct is that to tease the opposite gender; especially, if they feel that the woman is prettier, sexier, the man will see the response the woman gives, if the target responds with feelings of pleasure then it could continue to be closer, dating, or even to the stage sexual relations."* (N, Key Informant)

**Table 7.** Reasons for Catcalling and Community Responses

Initial	Status	Reasons			Community Responses			
		Developing a habit	There are no reprimands or sanctions	Considered as appropriate and not harassment	Environmental factor	Remain silent and behave normally	Reprimanded, provide positive support	Teasing
AP	Non-Victim	✓				✓		
HAR	Non-Victim	✓				✓		
JQ	Non-Victim		✓			✓		
F	Non-Victim			✓			✓	
PNRH	Non-Victim			✓		✓		
AQN	Victim			✓		✓	✓	
NU	Victim		✓				✓	
NA	Victim				✓	✓		
ADF	Non-Victim	✓				✓		

Initial	Status	Reasons			Community Responses			
		Developing a habit	There are no reprimands or sanctions	Considered as appropriate and not harassment	Environmental factor	Remain silent and behave normally	Reprimanded, provide positive support	Teasing
DAB	Non-Victim		✓			✓	✓	
RF	Non-Victim			✓		✓		
SN	Non-Victim				✓	✓	✓	
H	Non-Victim	✓					✓	
AAN	Victim	✓						✓
CPL	Victim		✓	✓		✓		
AA	Victim			✓		✓		
MR	Non-Victim	✓				✓	✓	
AAD	Non-Victim			✓		✓		
K	Non-Victim			✓			✓	
WS	Non-Victim	✓					✓	
UM	Non-Victim				✓	✓	✓	
OC	Non-Victim			✓		✓		
RA	Victim		✓			✓		
DZ	Victim		✓			✓		
RH	Perpetrator	✓		✓			✓	✓
ASR	Perpetrator	✓				✓		✓

Catcalling often occurred in society due to the belief that it was not a form of harassment and was even considered cool by some. This behavior has been normalized over time. It is important to recognize that catcalling is a form of harassment and should not be tolerated. Informants believed that the lack of clear regulations and accountability for perpetrators contributes to the difficulty in avoiding catcalling. The FGD quote supports this:

*"Sometimes it's considered as joking, it's considered friendliness, and at the same time praising the girl or target who is being teased,"* (Victim NA)

*"Because no one reprimands if it is a wrong act, and there is also no punishment for those who do it,"* (Non-Victim DAB).

Some individuals may responded positively or negatively to catcalling. The victim may received reprimands from society, while the perpetrator was responsible for the unwanted behavior. However, it is important to maintain objectivity and avoid subjective evaluations. The Head of the Division discussed the reasons for catcalling and its negative effects on victims for Prevention of Bullying and Sexual Violence on Campus during a focus group discussion:

*"Catcalling is considered normal since it often occurs in our society. There is no one reprimands, no one forbids it and there are no clear regulations governing catcalling from things that usually happen to culture. It is the condition of catcalling that exists in society,"* (MSR, Key Informant).

Harassment is a multifaceted issue, growing each year and affecting different social groups. It is a health problem because it endangers the mental health of those affected such as anxiety, depression or sleep quality (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020; Etrawati, 2020). The existence of verbal sexual harassment in public spaces by some irresponsible people is not surprising, because the experience of being catcalled is often felt by women (Fairchild, 2023), especially young people between the ages of 15 and 23, when they are in public spaces (Djudiyah et al., 2024). From the results of the research on adolescents' understanding of catcalling, almost all adolescent informants recognized the form of verbal harassment, but some adolescents had never heard the term catcalling. Often, the victim realized that she was being harassed and that the catcalling directed at the victim was a form of lust on the part of the perpetrator when he saw the victim. The perpetrator made the victim feel unsafe and uncomfortable doing outdoor activities by catcalling in public places (Flouli et al., 2022). Other research states that some teens were aware of catcalling and think it was a form of insult rather than a compliment, an aggressive act, and a form of invitation that leads to negativity or even racism (McDonald, 2022).

Catcalls can occur anywhere, especially in public places; the informants stated that the catcalls they received were mostly from places crowded with males such as markets, public transportation, pedestrians, parks and done by people they just met in that location (Alves & Souza, 2024; Djudiyah et al., 2024). The offender catcalls in a place where the victim often passes. According to witnesses, these places were selected because they were full of objects to tease and also felt safe because there was a park that supported this activity. Perpetrators reported that they were motivated to engage in these acts to satisfy their feelings, just for fun or to make a joke, and expressing a compliment or affection (DelGreco et al., 2021). Catcalling can take the form of nonphysical actions such as whistling, shouting, winking, or other gestures which turns women into sexual objects (Walton & Pedersen, 2022). It is usually triggered by a feeling of attraction to the victim

and a request for sex (Herrera & McCarthy. Bill, 2023). Although the behavior or comments are not explicitly threatening, they do increase women's fear of sexual violence and rape (DelGreco & Christensen, 2020).

When victims are verbally harassed, they tend to remain silent because they do not dare to fight back or at least report the harassment to their parents. Research indicates that catcalling has a negative impact on how victims view themselves, including insecurity, self-objectification, low self-esteem, and even social withdrawal, so the coping mechanisms used may be active or passive. It is assumed that if they don't like the catcalling, then they don't have to respond and just ignore it but some victims used active coping mechanism by trying to report or confront the cat callers (Baguidudol, 2023). Victims believe that taking care of their appearance is a way to prevent bad experiences with catcalling from provoking someone to do bad things to them. Furthermore, they tend to overcome their own problems by adjusting the way they dress. Victims should be concerned and protected when catcalling occurs because it is directly traumatic, both physically and emotionally (Davidson et al., 2016). There is often embarrassment and fear in reporting catcalling to someone more responsible than their parents. The victims need to share their problem with their family to relieve their stress and fear, even to have them escort them on the street to ensure that sexual harassment is not repeated.

Catcalls are common and difficult to stop because they have become an ingrained habit among society. It contributes to a culture of victim-blaming and normalizes the harassment of women (Kumar & Pandey, 2023). The community's response to victims tends to be negative by remaining silent and normalizing the incident. The community's acceptance of sexual harassment is normalized by the lack of optimal laws and sanctions for perpetrators. People tend to underestimate catcalling and allow the behavior to grow in the community. The reactions that victims and perpetrators receive from those around them are usually to remain silent and behave normally, with few people reprimanding the perpetrators. Since there is no law



against catcalling, the response is the same when they complain to the authorities. In fact, catcalling is a crime because it contains pornographic elements and is an offense against good manners (Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 44 of 2008 on Pornography, 2008).

Legislation against street harassment does not explicitly exist, and even if it does, it is not properly enforced. Therefore, there is a lack of clarity about who is supposed to report a perpetrator or incident of harassment (Adhikari & Husain, 2021). On the other hand, there are law for victim protections as listed in Republic of Indonesia Legislation Number 39 of 1999 Concerning Human Rights (1999) and Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 31 of 2014 on Witness and Victims Protection (2014). Appropriate criminal sanctions against offenders of verbal sexual harassment are difficult to establish because many people and officials consider the incident as minor sexual harassment and are reluctant to take action (Fileborn & Vera-Gray, 2017). The Indonesian government can emulate the enforcement of regulations in France where victims can report incidents directly to the police, then undergo trial at court and perpetrators are sentenced to fines and can be imprisoned for up to one year (Halim, 2021). This is considered capable of providing certainty of human rights protection for catcalling victims. It is necessary to enhance public awareness by providing education and training through various channels (Fileborn, 2022). As a consequence, this can promote the practice of proper emotional regulation by transforming negative emotions into positive emotions that can maintain the psychological health of catcalling victims (Villa, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The term 'catcalling' may be unfamiliar to some respondents, but the majority of teenage respondents are familiar with the forms and terms of catcalling which exist today. Catcalling is a negative action that makes someone uncomfortable and it often occurs in crowded places or on the roadside, market and school. It is a spontaneous action done for fun. Sexual harassment

conducted in public spaces by strangers can make the victim feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, often leading to a silent response. Victims of catcalling often choose not to report incidents to authorities due to a lack of courage and weak regulations surrounding catcalling. The lack of community support also makes it difficult to combat catcalling. Instead, they may choose to confide in their parents. Additionally, bystanders often choose to remain silent or indifferent when witnessing catcalling incidents. Therefore, support from the community is needed to prevent catcalling and enforce the regulations and sanctions.

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