

# An investigation on perceptions of street remarks by Bruneian men and women

Perceptions of street remarks

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The current study investigates perceptions of street harassment from a linguistic perspective. With regard to the theory of speech acts, some may deem street remarks as compliments instead of catcalls. There is a lack of linguistic research regarding the issue conducted with a Bruneian demographic. This study recognises the difference in the use of language by men and women and aims to find whether there is a difference in their perceptions of street remarks.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A method of triangulation between questionnaire surveys and focus group interviews was carried out to actualise these aims. Thirty-two female and thirty-two male respondents from the survey were used to conclude quantitative findings, whereas three male and three female participants were recruited for the focus group interview. Data were analysed through a *t*-test and discourse analysis consecutively.

**Findings** – Quantitative data ( $p = 0.398$ ) reveal that both men and women perceive street remarks almost equally as a form of street harassment. However, qualitative data reveal that male language and behaviour portray a more positive and tolerant attitude.

**Practical implications** – This study provides evidence of the difference in perceptions between men and women towards street harassment.

**Originality/value** – This study explores a relatively unexplored area, that is investigating street remarks in a non-Western context, where the demographic could have different perceptions towards street remarks.

**Keywords** Linguistics, Pragmatics, Speech acts, Language and gender, Street remarks

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Speech acts are a widely researched linguistic phenomenon established by Searle (1969, 1979). Illocutionary points Searle outlines as “expressive” acts contain compliments – an expression used by a speaker to express admiration or praise. There is, however, a grey area in the speech act of complimenting, primarily, compliments from men towards women. This speech act could be perceived as a social issue; defined by Gardner (1980) and labelled in a recent study by Bailey (2017) as “street remarks”, to refer to remarks uttered by men towards women in public. Kissling (1991) refers to this as street harassment, or “the language of sexual terrorism”, claiming it violates the norms of speech acts. The issue at play is that street remarks are perceived by “defenders” as “complimenting”, but argued by opponents as “catcalling”, or street harassment. Kissling (1991) highlights the severity of street harassment by citing a study by Davies, Miranda, Longrigg, Montefiore and Jansz (1986), claiming that a feature of a women’s travel guide describes what harassment is like in “nearly every country

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of the world and how women tourists can cope with it”, implying that it is “an international issue” which needs “global attention and solutions”.

With reference to previous studies conducted in other countries and demographics, this study intends to investigate the perceptions of Bruneian men and women towards street remarks made by men towards women. This paper will adopt “street remarks” to refer to the phenomenon without deeming it as either a “compliment” or a “catcall”.

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### *1.1 Language and gender*

Street remarks could be observed through the study of language and gender. The difference in the use of language by men and women has been widely researched, and street harassment could be deemed an issue under language and gender when taking into account the roles played by men and women in the act of a street remark. [Tannen \(1991\)](#) differentiates the way men and women use spoken language, stating that men are perceived to be more powerful and independent in using language compared to women. [Güvendir \(2015\)](#) outlines how men are more aggressive and use crude language compared to women. This can be supported by local literature when considering a study on impoliteness strategies through comments on Facebook ([Ghani, 2018](#)). The study finds that hostile complaints in the comment sections are more likely to be written by male complainants. In contrast, female complainants are “more inclined to opt for less direct approaches”, denoting their less hostile or friendlier approach to language.

Further, a study conducted in Brunei which shows the differences between language used by men and women ([Ghani, 2016](#)) finds from analysing recordings of same-sex conversations that “men have more overlapping speech than women”. She highlighted a study by [Zimmerman and West \(1975\)](#) to support her findings that there were “far more frequent interruptions by men in mixed-sex conversations”. This can highlight the higher social standing men hold in their use of language, merely reflected from their participation in controlling the floor of conversations.

The phenomenon of accommodation can also show the dominance of men in language use. Another finding from Brunei is a study conducted on how female and male speakers accommodate their pronunciation when communicating with friends versus when being interviewed by an expatriate professor. [Rozaimée \(2017\)](#) found that female speakers “tend to show positive accommodation while male speakers exhibit negative accommodation, perhaps to emphasise their identity”. This shows how female speakers of a language will change their communicative ways to accommodate the language domain, further highlighting the disadvantage or lack of power women inherit in communicative language contexts.

[Kissling’s \(1991\)](#) study supports these claims, implying that men use language as a tool by making street remarks towards women to mark the public space as their own territory.

Differences in the use of language between men and women are necessary to consider as they could be translated into how they perceive the use of street remarks.

It is therefore necessary to establish a definition of street remarks to move further into this research. [Bailey \(2017\)](#) mentions that “scholarly work on street harassment tends to conceptualise street harassment in terms of the content of what is said”. However, Bailey argues that assessing the literal content of street remarks without considering the context of the situation would result in downplaying possible harassment such remarks pose. This brings the research to pose two questions as the foundation of this research:

- (1) How do Bruneian men and women view catcalls?
- (2) Are there differences between Bruneian men’s and women’s perceptions towards street remarks?

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## 2. Literature review

This section reviews past literature that covers the debate of perceiving street remarks as catcalls or undermining the issue as mere compliments. Themes such as gender and power pertaining to the issue will also be outlined in this section.

### 2.1 *Catcalling or compliments*

Bailey (2016) analysed 134 naturally occurring street remarks from 2013 to 2014. He finds that less than ten of the utterances by men were “explicitly vulgar or degrading”, the vast majority were mundane and “many were complimentary”, depending on the context of the speech act for respondents to perceive. Bailey also finds that “explicit compliments, serve as first-pair parts of adjacency pairs, inviting engagement”. This shows the notion that street remarks as “compliments” could easily be dismissed considering that these forms of remarks are less frequently answered or come with the second part of the adjacency pair. He outlines a violation that men use endearment terms such as “*beautiful*” or “*my love*” as a compliment, which flouts a dynamic a stranger would utter towards another stranger in public, as these terms are normally performed towards an addressee the speaker shares a relationship with. This argument shows how street remarks are dismissed as “compliments” due to the lack of second parts in the adjacency pairs and because these acts are socially unacceptable to utter towards women, or to fleeting strangers in public.

A study by di Gennaro and Ritschel (2019) aims to find the relationship between catcalling and complimenting and found that “catcalls are aberrant compliments at best, and insidious reminders of women’s inequality at worse” (p. 1). Total of 133 of the 165 respondents find remarks such as “*Hey beautiful*” as a catcall instead of a compliment, and 61 respondents define a catcall as a “type of compliment”. This led to the claim that “catcalling and complimenting is unclear or not the same for all individuals”. The study concludes that there is a “lack of agreement among scholars as to what constitutes a catcall”.

In another study, Bailey (2017) analysed 1,000 consecutive comments, and found that comments “defending” street remarks as appropriate “outnumbered comments condemning them, by a ratio of 2.5 to 1”. Two-hundred comments defending street remarks drew attention to the “literal meaning of words and conventional meanings of acts” as greetings or compliments. Only 79 respondents perceived the remarks as “uncivil harassment”, showing that people may interpret the act of street remarks through the literal meaning, tolerating it or regarding it as a compliment.

### 2.2 *Power*

Street remarks are considered a portrayal of gender inequality through the power dynamic between men and women. This concept is crucial to consider when investigating issues pertaining to language and gender.

Wesselmann and Kelly (2010) cited in di Gennaro and Ritschel (2019) identified street remarks as a form of harassment. Their findings show male participants are more likely to carry out street remarks “in groups, as groups offer anonymity for the recipient and serve a bonding function among men” (p. 4). This shows that groups act as an enabler for the perpetrator of the remark, portraying dominance in the speech act imposed upon the victim. Wesselmann and Kelly (2010) mention that stranger harassment is a norm in group contexts, as larger groups increase the “pressure on individuals to engage” in such behaviour. This shows a power dynamic upon the perpetrator to carry out the street remark, enabling the speech act to take place.

Delgreco, Hubbard & Denes (2021) find that “college men who have the self-perception of having lower power than women were most likely to engage in street harassment behaviours, whilst expecting a positive response from women”. (p. 17). The study revealed that men perform this speech act as a form of response to avoid women who may be a threat to their

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masculinity and social standing. This exposes a power dynamic the speaker is aware of, attempting to claim it back through street remarks.

Bailey (2017) supports these findings when he concludes the act can be a “criticism of men’s position of power in society”, considering women’s increasing social standing threatening their own. Street remarks are speech acts containing misogynistic comments with “assertions that the street remarks are civil”. In his 2016 study, Bailey relates street remarks to Goffman’s (1983) interaction order, a set of norms that takes place during face-to-face communication; “men take advantage of the interactional machinery of conversational pressure, forcing women into an engagement”. (p. 591) This portrays male dominance in the power dynamic by violating a set of norms through carrying out street remarks, as a means of claiming back their power in a public setting and a way to mark the public space as their territory (Kissling, 1991).

### *2.3 Gender differences in perceptions*

A study regarding perceptions of males and females towards language use that should be mentioned is one by Kramer (1977), to find whether men and women perceive any differences between male and female speech. Kramer agrees that stereotypes are “part of our social heritage”, establishing that men and women “possess stereotyped concepts of the speech of their own sex and of the opposite sex”. (p. 160) Therefore, male speech represents traits such as “boastful, use swear words, dominating speech, authoritarian speech, forceful”, whereas female speech is perceived as a “counter language” (p. 159) to men’s.

di Gennaro and Ritschel (2019) studied perceptions of men and women towards catcalling. They find that 76% of men and 83% of women define “Hey beautiful” as a catcall, but open-ended questionnaires show that men “seemed more likely than women to interpret catcalls positively”. (p. 7) This shows a difference in the perception of men and women towards street remarks.

Walton & Pederson (2021) examined the reasons why men engage in street remarks. They find that 72% of their male respondents carry out street remarks for sexually positive affect motivations, whereas 62% have the motivation to flatter the addressee and that men engaging in the act hoped to “elicit negative emotions”. They conclude that although findings suggest street remarks are “motivated by misogynistic ideologies, the majority of those engaging in street remarks do not intend to cause harm or negative psychological outcomes”.

Differences in perception of gender speech is important to take note, as the current study hypothesises men to perceive street remarks as a “compliment” given their stereotyped use and perception of language to be “authoritarian” or “forceful” (Kramer, 1977), whereas women perceive street remarks as a catcall. Most of the research cited here is based on findings from studies conducted in Western contexts.

This current study explores a relatively unexplored area, that is investigating street remarks in a non-Western context, where the demographic could have different perceptions towards the issue. Most papers regarding this issue tend to look at cultural factors such as belief systems which might play a role in the perceptions of men and women towards this issue. Other factors, for example, a society’s car culture, might even play a significant role. With regard to the literature reviewed, this paper will investigate the perceptions of verbal communication in the speech act of street remarks; whether participants perceive this as a form of harassment or a greeting in society.

## **3. Research methodology**

This chapter outlines methods used to collect primary data to answer research questions posed. A mixed-methods approach is used to analyse the findings. Findings from this

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research will be compiled via a triangulation of two methodologies, to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Collected data will then be analysed accordingly. Performing a method of triangulation ensures the study gathers valid and reliable data so that it could produce credible research findings as “questionnaires alone, or interviews alone, will not yield satisfactory results” (Ho, 2016, p. 117). Increasing these qualities in the findings is especially crucial given the lack of literature carried out in the current study’s social and geographical context of the participants.

### 3.1 Pilot study

A questionnaire containing eleven close-ended questions and one open-ended question was distributed as the pilot study. Based on categories of speech acts analysed by Bailey (2016), several options were provided in the questionnaire, containing scenarios where a perpetrator of the remarks carried out verbal and non-verbal actions towards a victim named *Salmah*, such as blowing kisses and following her around. Upon analysing the responses from the pilot study, the researcher decided to remove the instances of non-verbal speech actions to focus on verbal language in the questionnaire for the main study. It was decided that in order to obtain more insightful qualitative data, focus group interviews will be conducted among a small group of Bruneian men and women. This is an attempt for participants involved to “express themselves more freely, resulting in differing or even conflicting viewpoints” (Ho, 2016, p. 117).

### 3.2 Main study: questionnaire

The questionnaire in the style of a close-ended multiple-choice format may increase the response rate. Throughout the questionnaire, different prompts were used by the speaker of the remark in each question. The use of prompts leaves the respondent to decide and perceive if the scenario described is categorised as any of the options of the multiple-choice provided. A questionnaire was used through describing scenarios of a remark to receive immediate stimuli from the respondents to consider their answers. Other than to gain a better response rate, a questionnaire was used for a voluntary simple random sampling approach for an ethical approach in extracting primary data, where respondents are voluntarily answering the questionnaire. This sampling approach was used to reach a more diverse audience and decrease experimenter bias of the research. Prompts were created based on the nature of encounters extracted from Bailey (2017, p. 6–8), and based on a general understanding of what compliments and catcalls could be classified as, with Brunei Malay translations to make accessible for Bruneian respondents. Prompts created became increasingly derogatory, with an increasing nature of remarks being deemed generally as a form of harassment throughout the questionnaire.

**3.2.1 Participants and procedure.** Participants were sampled from the general public that gained access to the questionnaire. The questionnaire survey is carried out through Google Forms and distributed through various social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter and Instagram to find respondents from different social backgrounds, ages and perspectives to prevent a homogenous demographic. The process of random sampling was carried out to gain respondents’ contribution to the data analysis. The questionnaire collected 138 responses, where 106 were female and only thirty-two were male. Twenty-nine respondents were of the age range of 18 to 21 years, whereas eighty-two respondents were 22 to 26 years. Seven respondents were above the age of 47, whereas thirteen respondents were between the ages of 30 to 42 years.

**3.2.2 Data collection and analysis.** The data were collected through an online questionnaire containing nine close-ended questions. Options provided for respondents to choose were based on categories of speech acts analysed in Bailey (2016) which are “addressing, greeting,

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expressing astonishment or admiration, summoning, asking rhetorical questions". These options were amended to include alternatives that were likely to occur in the context of Brunei. The questionnaire was carried out through nine scenarios containing different prompts from a "male stranger", placing a female character *Salmah* as the addressee of these prompts. It is important to note that a "male stranger" carried out the prompts, to establish the context of these prompts as a form of street harassment, therefore letting respondents decide which of the alternatives they perceive the remark to be. Questions were arranged by examples of utterances that were perceived by the researcher as less threatening to gradually more threatening examples of catcalls.

Carrying out the questionnaire through scenarios was used as a method of attempting to receive a certain stimulus from the participants. A *t*-test was conducted to determine significant differences in Bruneian men and women's views towards street remarks, based on their responses in the questionnaire. The *t*-test records the significant difference according to data recorded in which the male versus female respondents choose remarks in the multiple-choice options as a form of harassment. Quantitative data allow responses to be compared to carry out the *t*-test and seek for any differences between the perceptions. Since the survey compiled an unequal ratio of male-to-female respondents, two separate *t*-tests will be performed, where one analyses the first thirty-two female respondents against the thirty-two male respondents, and the other will analyse the entire female respondents (106) against the thirty-two male respondents.

### *3.3 Main study: focus group interviews*

The role of triangulation and the need for a second research method are to cross-verify the collected data from two different types of research methods: to check for the consistency of findings, and act as a form of control for any possible deficiencies. The data from the recording were transcribed and analysed through discourse analysis. This is a preferable way of gathering qualitative data compared to the method in the pilot study, where data were gathered through an open-ended question, as it gives an insightful portrayal of each participant's behaviour recorded through language use. Data retrieved from interviews provide a more natural and candid quality of responses, especially as a method of gathering data on the behaviour of participants.

*3.3.1 Participants and procedure.* Data were collected from three male and three female interviewees. All interviewees provided consent and were briefed during the recruitment process and were informed that the interview will be recorded. Participants were recruited through volunteer sampling, where the participants self-select themselves to be a part of the study when asked. Respondents were chosen randomly through simple random sampling, based on convenience and voluntary opportunities. Three male and three female participants of ages ranging from 22 to 26 years old were recruited as part of the focus group interview. The interview was carried out online through *Zoom*.

*3.3.2 Data collection and analysis.* Qualitative data were obtained from the recorded group interview **to provide** transcribed data for discourse analysis. Recurring patterns or leading themes of the transcribed data interview were compiled through a thematic analysis approach into categories. The aim of this mode of analysis was to identify prevailing dominant discourse on street remarks by Bruneian men and women. This method allowed for more detailed answers and **naturally occurring** insight from respondents. A discourse analysis method was performed as the data extracted from the focus group interview were naturally occurring, and focused on language in use. Thematic patterns were categorised into different themes across the recorded spoken language.

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## 4. Results

This section will reveal findings from research methods outlined in the previous chapter. Only [section 4.1](#) will showcase the pilot study to portray the nature of the results gathered and for a brief comparison with the main study. Other subsections portray findings from the main study.

### 4.1 Pilot study

The pilot study gained 290 respondents from different age ranges (ranging from eighteen to seventy-three years old), consisting of 230 females, 57 males and 3 respondents that identified as non-binary. The pilot only considered the first fifty male and female respondents in the analysing process, due to only the first 50 males having answered the open-ended questions of the pilot study. This led researchers to conduct focus group interviews to gather qualitative data for the actual study. The quantitative *t*-test results from the close-ended survey of the pilot study showed that there was no significant difference ( $p = 0.13009$ ). The mean value of male and female respondents perceiving the scenario-based questions as a form of harassment was 28.6 and 38.1, respectively, showing that female respondents viewed most of the remarks in the questions as a form of harassment. Seven categories of discourse were recorded from the open-ended question; namely the discourse of abhorrence, harassment, justification, self-reflection, awareness, discomfort and contemplation. The discourse of self-reflection was found to include exclusively female participants, whereas the discourse of justification was led by male participants. The pilot study was able to garner a diverse range of discourse types.

### 4.2 Main study: questionnaire survey

This section will outline the findings of the questionnaire survey. Despite efforts to increase the response rate by using a questionnaire, only 138 respondents were recorded, which is 52.4% less than the pilot study, where only thirty-two male respondents were recorded in the survey. Further interpretation of this will be made in the discussions section. The data **are** outlined to directly portray the differences between male and female respondents in each scenario described in the questionnaire. Therefore, the first thirty-two female respondents were chosen for a direct comparison against the thirty-two male respondents.

The results show majority of respondents perceive “How are you?” as a greeting. Seven female respondents perceived it as a form of harassment, whereas only three male respondents perceive it as such.

The majority of the male respondents view “Hello” or “Hi” as a form of greeting. A number of female respondents view it as a form of harassment, compared to only one male respondent.

An equal number of responses from male and female respondents were recorded when asked what they perceive a male stranger requesting a victim’s phone number would be. An equilibrium is seen in four categories.

A number of female respondents view the fourth question as a form of harassment. The majority of male respondents, however, view the utterance of “What’s your name?” or “*Apa nama kita?*” as a form of friendliness or being playful.

Both male and female respondents perceived the remark in Question 5 as harassment. A number of male respondents perceived “So pretty!” or “*Lawa eh!*” as expressing a compliment.

An uneven distribution of both male and female respondents categorises the remark along the spectrum of responses. Both male and female participants regarded the remark in Question 6 as a form of harassment, with five more female respondents than males.

Male and female respondents perceived the remark in Question 7 to be a form of harassment. One female respondent viewed it as a form of threat. Other male respondents viewed it as a summon and compliment.

An equal number of male and female respondents viewed the remark as a compliment, whereas a near equal amount of male and female respondents viewed the remark as a form of harassment.

A higher number of female respondents viewed the remark in Question 9 as a form of harassment.

A two-sample assuming unequal variance *t*-test was performed to compare the difference between how male and female respondents perceived each remark as harassment. The mean value of male respondents in perceiving the remarks as a form of harassment was 16.8, whereas the mean value for the female respondents was 20.8. This shows more female respondents perceive the remarks in each scenario as a form of harassment compared to male. The final *p*-value of the test shows that it is larger than 0.05, where the *p*-value = 0.398, revealing that there is no significant difference between male and female perceptions.

#### 4.3 Main study: focus group interviews

The focus group interview was carried out among six participants, consisting of three male and three female respondents of a close age range. The group interview carried out through *Zoom* was recorded and transcribed to undergo thematic analysis. Two types of distinct leading discourse themes were found. Male and female participants were labelled as M1, M2, M3 and F1, F2, F3, consecutively.

*4.3.1 Discourse of awareness.* Two main discourse categories could be identified amongst participants from the focus group interviews. The first discourse category will be named the discourse of awareness, where participants of the interview are aware of the issue either because they have experienced the situation, because they feel they could have been a victim or subject of harassment through remarks, or simply because they have knowledge as to what makes the remark a form of catcall or harassment. F1 shares her own personal experience of street remarks, whereas M2 shares an encounter with likely perpetrators' street remarks. Examples of this discourse in the interview data include the following:

Translation of F1: Okay so like that time I went to this supermarket and I was just wearing a t-shirt it's just like, a normal t-shirt, and there was a group of guys like (directed towards participant) this is tasty, this is tasty, and I was like, I- and I thought they were talking about the food, but then I'm like-

Translation of M1: I'm Chinese right, like back then, I always passed by a group of guys just hanging around and because I'm Chinese I was pretty small back then, and they would kind of say things walking past and I do feel scared for myself

F2: (if the hi is directed) for a girl even if its a hi something thats innocent I guess? It kind of feels like an opening you know- if you respond to them like first thing atu macam like hi and then you're like hi its like - you're welcoming them- which we're not- but you know its allowing them to like- oh this girl's talking to me so I can talk to them more and it goes like it escalates really fast from there so.

*4.3.2 Discourse of frivolity.* Frivolity is one reoccurring theme analysed exclusively from male participants. This theme of discourse will be named the discourse of frivolity, where they speak of the issue in a light-hearted, carefree nature. It could be seen through the use of tone, phrases, laughter and content such as relating the issue to a frivolous social media application, *TikTok*:

M1: if someone went up to me and said- (mocking tone) oh nice clothes- ah clothes- then I'd be okay with that

M1: the vibes are off

M1: (mocking tone) I just remembered like if I dont choose this choice I would be a very bad person

M2: yeah I guess it would be harassment because I didn't want it? [laughs]

M1: you almost never go on TikTok without seeing someone talking about . . .

The data showed a unique perspective from M1 who talks about a "halo effect" that may influence the findings of the interview data. The independent data are worthy of interpretation for further discussion and are not discourse type of its own:

M1: . . . what I just said I feel like there will be people who aren't truthful as they should be like thats the halo effect they try to be real angels in that survey'

Participants were asked, "What would you do if you saw this happen in real life?" Different attitudes arose from this question. Some participants felt an obligation to enter the situation, and answered definitively:

M3: . . . I would give my assistance because this is a very important discussion . . . so someone including me someone should step in help other people

F1: I would sacrifice myself like I don't know I think like because I don't want them to feel the same way I do so- it's a very scary thing to experience

Others answered that they would attempt to help the situation:

F2: I'd try to help

F3: If I ever say a person gets these street remarks harassments I basically would just glare at the stranger because I'm also scared of men to be specific and I wouldn't do like I wouldn't approach the stranger because I'm also scared yeah thats the suckish part about being a female I guess.

## 5. Discussion

This section will answer the research questions through the results and previous literature. This section is divided into themes outlined in the literature review section. Questionnaire and focus group interview findings will be presented in each theme as a means to triangulate quantitative and qualitative data, simultaneously answering both the research questions proposed.

### 5.1 *Catcalling or compliments*

There is a general trend from the questionnaire findings that the female respondents view the remarks in the questionnaire more as harassment than a civil form of greeting (as showcased in 4.2), whereby the mean value of female respondents perceiving the remarks as harassment is 20.8 and the mean value for male respondents is 16.8.

Findings from the interview proved that female participants view street remarks as a form of harassment or catcall, especially when F2 from the discourse of awareness findings mentions the issue as an "opening" with regard to the opening of an adjacency pair "Hi":

F2 (if the 'hi' is directed) for a girl even if its a hi something thats innocent I guess? It kind of feels like an opening you know (.) if you respond to them like first thing atu macam (Translation of conversational filler: it's like) like hi and then you're like hi its like (.) you're welcoming them (.) which we're not (.)

This aligns with previous literature regarding the flouting of Goffman's interaction order which [Bailey \(2016\)](#) interprets as a system that "forces women into engagement", not only flouting the interaction dynamic with a stranger, and the speech act is deemed socially

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unacceptable due to the context, whereby both perpetrator and addressee are strangers. The difference in the mean numbers of quantitative data (where male respondents who viewed the prompts as a form of harassment are 16.8, and female respondents 20.8) aligns with findings by [di Gennaro and Ritschel \(2019\)](#) that what constitutes a catcall is “unclear and lacks agreement”. These findings from the interview show how female participants will perceive street remarks more as a catcall than a compliment, especially due to the flouting of the interaction order.

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### 5.2 Power

As it has already been established from the results section that there is a difference in the mean number of male and female respondents viewing the street remark prompts as a form of harassment, the final  $p$ -value of a two-sample assuming unequal variance  $t$ -test showed that there was no significant difference when there is a direct comparison between the thirty-two males and thirty-two females. This means that there is no significant difference in perception of both male and female respondents towards street remarks (considering the  $p$ -value = 0.398). This could be supported by the findings in the focus group interview, considering the male contribution and their opposition towards the issue in the discourse of awareness:

M3 At first- at first I wasn't familiar with the words street remarks uh look at the meaning its like harassment then definitely it is harassment like I'd say it's still harassment cause' like if you have nothing to say then don't say anything at all . . . But when you compliment something which is not a usual nice thing to say then it is still harassment

The leading example from male respondents that carries the discourse of awareness is when M2 attempts to relate to the phenomenon by sharing his own personal anecdote and being disadvantaged in terms of his race, instead of his gender:

M2 I'm Chinese right, like back then, I always passed by a group of guys just hanging around and because I'm Chinese I was pretty small back then, and they would kind of say things walking past and I do feel scared for myself

Although this is regarded as a race issue and opens a gap for potential research regarding street remarks where the addressee is of a different race from the perpetrator, this does show the lack of understanding in the definition of what general street harassment is, further supporting the claim by [di Gennaro and Ritschel \(2019\)](#) that there are “blurred lines” between what constitutes a compliment and a catcall. This contribution from M2 could be argued as an attempt to relate to the female experience of being a victim in instances of street remarks, which further places male participants leaning towards perceiving remarks as a form of harassment.

Although a race dynamic is brought up from the discourse of awareness, the fact that M2 refers to the perpetrators as a “*group of guys*” emphasises the gender dynamic that the perpetrators are men, no matter who their street remark addressee is. This brings up the context where not only a gender dynamic is being tested, where the male-to-female dynamic is challenged, but also a male-to-male dynamic. This raises the question of power from previous literature by [Wesselmann and Kelly \(2010\)](#) cited in [di Gennaro and Ritschel \(2019\)](#), whereby male participants are more likely to perform street remarks in groups, as “groups enable the perpetrator to perform the speech act” and strengthen their bond, all at the cost of the addressee. This further leads to the discussion of whether male or female groups could be enablers of this speech act towards lone male or female individuals. The conclusion by [Wesselmann and Kelly \(2010\)](#) that men are more likely to catcall in groups as a “bonding function” in public spaces could be supported by the participation of M2 in the discourse of awareness.

True to quantitative data of female respondents showing a higher average in deeming the prompts as a form of harassment, female respondents tend to show through the focus group interviews their high regard and knowledge towards the issue. F3 mentions her awareness of a power shift through group dynamics:

... by a group of men I wouldn't feel safe but if its like (.) by one person I think I would feel a little bit safer.

This could be supported by the conclusion of [Wesselmann and Kelly \(2010\)](#) that men are more likely to catcall in groups as a “bonding function” in public spaces. The claim by F3 to “*feel a little bit safer*” if the remark was uttered by “*one person*” compared to “*by a group of men*”, aligns with the idea that the participant would be more of a subject that serves “a bonding function among men” ([Wesselmann & Kelly, 2010](#), p. 4), emphasising the power dynamic between the addressee and the group of men.

Overall, qualitative data that show group dynamics according to race and difference in gender support the idea that power can constitute street remarks as a form of harassment. This is supported by quantitative data when there is no significant difference ( $p$ -value = 0.398) in how participants perceive street remarks as a form of harassment, whereby they agree that the perpetrator is taking advantage of a power dynamic in the context of a street remark.

### 5.3 Gender differences in perceptions

Research questions could hypothesise that Bruneian men perceive street remarks less as a form of catcall or harassment compared to women, whereas women will perceive the remarks more as a form of catcall and harassment. This assumption is supported by the quantitative findings, whereby the mean for the perception of remarks as a form of harassment by male respondents is 16.8, and female respondents is 20.8. Qualitative data such as the discourse of frivolity, whereby male respondents speak of the issue in a light-hearted and carefree nature, are evident through the use of tone, slang terms such as “*vibe*”, laughter, content such as referring to “*TikTok*”, and women’s active participation in the discourse of awareness. This assumption could be supported by the use of language by men and women outlined by [Tannen \(1991\)](#) and [Kissling \(1991\)](#).

The male category of discourse shows a less serious attitude towards the issue, which emphasises the hypothesis that men perceive street remarks less as a form of harassment. The focus group interviews show that only male participants would make passive light-hearted comments in light of the topic discussed. Despite all male participants expressing their opposition to street remarks, the discourse of frivolity could be interpreted as male participants having a tolerant attitude towards the issue. While female attitudes portray they are more likely to be the victim in such situations, male participants reveal that there is less probability of them being the target of a street remark. One instance of this is seen in M1’s repetition of “*if*”:

M1 I mean if someone went up to me and said oh nice clothes- but if he says something like- if he or she . . .

The uncertainty and improbability that male participants are the target of a street remark could be seen through their lack of understanding of the issue through the use of “*I guess*” or the need to ask if a prompt is a remark, as shown in the following excerpt:

M2 yeah I guess it would be harassment

M1 I dont think- that’s a remark right?- it’s just- what’s a remark

M3 at first I wasn’t familiar with the words street remarks.

The discourse of frivolity could, therefore, undermine other quantitative findings portraying male and female respondents to perceive remarks equally as a form of harassment. This finding supports [di Gennaro and Ritschel \(2019\)](#) where they find that nearly equal numbers of men and women perceive “*Hey beautiful*” as a catcall, but open-ended data show men interpret catcalls more positively.

*T*-tests from the quantitative data do not show a significant difference, unless the difference in numbers of male against female respondents taken into account from [Tables 1–9](#) in [section 4.2](#). The quantitative findings suggest that numbers shown in the female row of the

**Table 1.**  
Results from question  
1: “How are you?” or  
“*Apa khabar kita?*”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	19	0	5	4	0	3
Female	16	0	6	2	2	7

**Source(s):** Table by authors

**Table 2.**  
Results from question  
2: “Hello” or “Hi”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	24	0	2	4	1	1
Female	16	0	5	1	1	9

**Source(s):** Table by authors

**Table 3.**  
Results from question  
3: “Can I have your  
phone number?” or  
“*Minta nombur telipun  
buleh?*”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	1	6	5	1	19
Female	1	0	6	5	1	19

**Source(s):** Table by authors

**Table 4.**  
Results from question  
4: “What’s your name?”  
or “*Apa nama kita?*”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	2	2	13	5	2	8
Female	0	0	11	5	1	15

**Source(s):** Table by authors

**Table 5.**  
Results from question  
5: “So beautiful/pretty!”  
or “*Lawa eh?*”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	11	2	1	2	16
Female	0	5	3	2	0	22

**Source(s):** Table by authors

harassment column are higher than the male numbers, indicating female respondents perceive remarks more as harassment than male respondents. This is further strengthened by discourse themes from the qualitative data, where female awareness and knowledge in the discourse of awareness go against male attitudes towards the issue in the discourse of frivolity. We could therefore establish with support from the qualitative findings from the interview that there is a difference between Bruneian men and women’s perceptions towards catcalls and street remarks.

Another factor to consider is the response rate of respondents. The scarce number of responses from male respondents could be interpreted as their lack of awareness or urgency towards the topic. This could be supported by [DelGreco et al. \(2020\)](#) where they find that men lack the sense of urgency towards the issue as the study found that men’s motivations in performing street remarks are “more positive such as to demonstrate affection or to have fun”. Despite the questionnaire informing its multiple-choice nature to encourage completion and a higher response rate, the survey still received more than three times the response rate from women than men.

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	3	3	2	3	21
Female	1	2	2	0	1	26

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 6.**  
Results from Question 6: “Wah, crazy!” or “Wah, gila!”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	1	0	2	0	29
Female	0	0	1	0	1	30

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 7.**  
Results from question 7: “They’re big!” or “Besar jua!”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	2	0	0	2	28
Female	0	2	0	0	1	29

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 8.**  
Results from question 8: “This is tasty!” Or “Ani nyaman ni!”

Gender	A greeting	Expressing a compliment	Showing friendliness or being playful	Summoning	Making a threat	A harassment
Male	0	2	1	2	1	26
Female	0	0	1	1	0	30

Source(s): Table by authors

**Table 9.**  
Results from question 9: verbal sounds; “Psst psst” or “Wah” or “Wow”

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Another point worth highlighting is that there was more male participation in the transcribed focus group interview findings, showing that they were more active and dominant in the interview conversation, compared to their participation in the quantitative survey. This highlights the traditional male feature of speech, that is male participants tend to dominate a conversation more (Tannen, 1991), despite the nature of the conversation topic being an issue that they are not entirely knowledgeable about.

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#### 5.4 Limitations

The research method being conducted through describing scenarios of remarks can be seen as unnatural. Although this was an attempt to access a stimulus from the respondents reading the questions, it could be argued that not all respondents may receive the same stimuli researchers need to come to the desired answer.

This highlights the notion of social desirability bias, which participant M1 from the focus group interview refers to as the “*halo effect*” (see section 4.3). Grimm (2010) defines this phenomenon as the “tendency of research objects to give socially desirable responses instead of choosing responses that are reflective of their true feelings”. This may explain the lack of significant difference in the quantitative findings.

Social desirability bias could also be considered as an outcome of the focus group interviews, due to the presence of the researcher. This means participants could have answered the prompts in an attempt to answer in a socially acceptable manner to please the researcher. This could also have manifested in the results of the focus group interviews, as there were fewer discourse types compared to the pilot study.

Another limitation would be the sample size from both research methods. This leads to the issue of an unrepresentative demographic of respondents. Although there was a diverse age range from the survey, it could be said that most respondents share a homogenous, educated background which may lead to similar results being obtained. Similarly, all participants of the interview were from a similar background as they were recruited from the same university campus. The small number of data collected from the main study contributes to the fact that the data are unrepresentative of the larger demographic outside of the study. The statistical quantitative results could have revealed different results had there been an equal number of male respondents in the survey of the main study.

## 6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that there is a shared opposition between men and women towards street remarks, as quantitative findings reveal that there is no significant difference between the perception of male and female respondents towards what constitutes a street remark as harassment. As the research delves deeper into the phenomena through a focus group interview, qualitative data reveal that there are more truthful findings that explain the perception of men and women regarding street remarks, that is, Bruneian women are more knowledgeable and concerned about this issue, whereas men are more tolerant, less aware and tend to approach the issue in a light-hearted manner.

Findings contribute to an unexplored area, as it is conducted on a non-Western, Bruneian demographic to explore their perceptions towards a socially universal phenomenon. There is also a lack of recent studies carried out regarding street harassment which specifically looks into the dynamics of communication in street remarks.

Suggestion for future research is to conduct a similar study among men and women of different ages and backgrounds to see if any differences can be attributed to age as well as gender. Future research should also include recruiting more male participants to take part in the survey.

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**Further reading**

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