

An Analysis of Anti-Gender Based Street Harassment Mobile Applications

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Abstract

Gender-Based Street Harassment (GBSH) refers to unwanted actions or remarks directed to strangers in a public location based on their perceived gender. In order to mitigate GBSH, the early anti-GBSH movement employed strategies like protests, ad-campaigns and educating men.¹ Although the movement still makes use of these tactics, it recently took on a larger online presence with the increased popularity of online activism. Even more recently, beginning in 2013 with the creation of the Hollaback! app, the mobile app became an internationally popular platform for the anti-GBSH movement. This paper will examine three of these apps. Based on analyses of both the GBSH apps themselves and publications on them, this paper will argue that, although the features of these apps may empower women and make them feel safer, they do not necessarily increase women's mobility or actually make them safer as the apps claim. Furthermore, there is no evidence that these apps have the power to decrease GBSH incidents, despite what the app developers claim. There is even reason to believe that the broad claims app developers make about the power of these apps may ironically inhibit progress in the anti-GBSH movement.

¹ Holly Kearl, *Stop Street Harassment: Making Public Places Safe and Welcoming for Women* (2010).

Introduction

On March 6, 2015, a woman named Meghan posted her story on the mobile app, Hollaback!:

Over my podcast, as he fell in step with me, I could hear the ‘yeah babies,’ kiss sounds, etc. As always I gave my disgusted look, and then forced myself to stare straight, and ignore. As I was walking down the street, with the boys’ words getting closer, I felt a hand on my rear. This was not your average “good game” pat, or a little pinch, which is bad enough. No this was the type of gesture that only the most intimate person in your life would do in private. It made me feel fear, violated, dirty, angry, sad and embarrassed.

Meghan’s story is one of thousands of equally alarming examples of gender-based street harassment (GBSH) posted on the anti-harassment app, Hollaback!. GBSH refers to unwanted actions or remarks directed to strangers in a public location based on their perceived gender. Common forms of GBSH, some of which Meghan experienced, include catcalling, stalking, suggestive gestures, unwanted touching, and unwanted sexual advances. Since GBSH disproportionately affects women, the paper will hereafter focus on women as the primary victims of GBSH. In order to mitigate GBSH, the early anti-GBSH movement employed strategies like protests, ad-campaigns and educating men (Kearl, 2010). Although the movement still makes use of these tactics, it recently took on a larger online presence with the increased popularity of online activism.

Even more recently, beginning in 2013 with the creation of the Hollaback! app, the mobile application became an internationally popular platform for the anti-GBSH movement. This paper will examine three of these apps. Firstly, founded in 2005, Hollaback! was originally a blog where victims of GBSH could share their experiences anonymously (Diamond, 2013). In 2013, Hollaback! founders developed a mobile app with the same name, which is currently used in 32 countries and 86 cities. Secondly, in 2014, mobile application developers in Bangladesh created an anti-harassment app called “Protibadi,” which means “one who protests” (Ahmed, 2014). Lastly this paper explores “SafeStreet,” an app also created in Bangladesh the following year (Ali, 2015). These three apps were selected to represent international interest in the mobile app platform and because these are the three apps from which future app developers are likely to glean inspiration.

Interestingly, the apps have some combination of the following features: a reporting feature that allows women to document when, where and how they were harassed and a map feature that collects pins on a map of where GBSH occurred. The prevalence of these two features in apps around the world indicate that they are compelling to the anti-street harassment movement; however, there is little research investigating the extent to which these apps fulfill their intended purposes and how these apps fit in the greater anti-GBSH movement. This paper will address that gap in GBSH research. The two primary implications of this research are an ability to track the progress and direction of the GBSH movement and

to set a precedent for the scrutiny with which other social movements should evaluate their use of mobile apps.

Based on analyses of both the GBSH apps themselves and publications on them, this paper will argue that, although the features of these apps may empower women and make them feel safer, they do not necessarily increase women's mobility or actually make them safer as the apps claim. Furthermore there is no evidence that these apps have the power to decrease GBSH incidents, despite what the app developers claim. There is even reason to believe that the broad claims app developers make about the power of these apps may ironically inhibit progress in the anti-GBSH movement. To provide context, the following section explores the prevalence and effects of GBSH.

Gender-Based Street Harassment Context

Studies show that GBSH is a common occurrence for women across the world and throughout time. For example, a study of three hundred women conducted in Indianapolis in the 1980's and 90's found that all had been harassed by a stranger in public (Kearl, 2010). Additionally, a 2008 study of 2,000 men and women in Egypt indicates that 83% of women experienced GBSH at least once and that 50% experienced it daily. Similarly, a 2014 study of 2,000 people conducted by researchers in the "Stop Street Harassment" movement indicates that whereas 65% of women had experienced street harassment, only 25% of men had (Brekke, 2014). Although the exact percentages of street harassment vary from study to study, they consistently show that a majority of women experience street harassment and that women are targets of street harassments more frequently than men. This gender-discrepancy can best be understood in the context of gender inequality.

Gender inequality is traditionally identified via concrete or quantifiable measures like unequal pay and unequal voting rights, but GBSH disproportionately affects women by instilling fear in them and making public environments threatening. In this sense, GBSH is a more nuanced example of gender inequality. The most prominent argument suggesting that GBSH, especially catcalling, is not a problem worthy of attention is that it is somehow complimentary to women. However, extensive scholarly writing affirms that in the context of gender inequality, GBSH contributes to unequal opportunities between men and women and furthers disrespect of women's bodies. For example, women might be less likely to seek otherwise fruitful employment opportunities in areas with a high prevalence of GBSH. One might argue that perpetrators of GBSH do not intend to harm women and therefore it is not problematic. Even if the sexualized words of catcalls or provocative gestures could be construed as harmless out of context, it would not justify their use. They are used *in* the cultural context where women are subjected to unrealistic beauty standards, where they are portrayed in popular media as sexual objects and where they fear sexual assault. Furthermore, it is illogical to claim that

women's reactions to GBSH are unjustified in a stranger situation because they do not know men's intent.

Concerning unrealistic beauty standards for women, when men comment on "admirable" or "deplorable" qualities of a women's body in a public space, they reinforce unrealistic beauty standards for women. Additionally, when perpetrating GBSH, men assert their dominance over public spaces, suggesting that the rights women have in these spaces are inferior (Kissling, 1991). Lastly, when men comment on strangers' bodies, they suggest that they have the right to their bodies. This propagates defined sexual roles that men are dominant and women are objects to be used at a man's disposal. Elizabeth Kissling writes that each of these components of GBSH lead to a culture of "sexual terrorism," which she defines as "a system by which males frighten and, through fear, control and dominate females" (1991). Studies substantiate this claim, showing that women's fear of male crime prevents them from going in public spaces (Kissling, 1991). Even those who did not identify a fear of male crime in surveys identified ways that they change their behavior to avoid male crime, especially rape. Multiple studies conducted in the United States indicate that women fear being raped more than being murdered or beaten up by someone they know (Kearl, 2010). Even though street harassment does not always lead to rape, the strong fear of rape makes street harassment particularly threatening to women. To suggest to women that fearing harassment because of a fear of rape is unjustified is to suggest that women should not try to protect themselves. This background provides the basis from which the remainder of the paper analyzes the use of mobile apps in the anti-GBSH movement.

Analysis of Anti-GBSH Mobile Apps: Reporting and Storytelling Features

To this end, the next section describes the role of the reporting feature in anti-GBSH apps to address some effects of harassment. As referenced earlier, the reporting feature allows women to document when, where, and how they were harassed. Additionally, it allows women to share a personal narrative about the experience. Researchers within the Hollaback! organization conducted interviews and surveys with users to understand the effects of the reporting feature, which they call "collective storytelling" (Diamond, 2013). One major finding of the interviews conducted with 13 women was that the app frames street harassment as a problem for women who previously thought it was a permanent part of everyday life. Framing refers to the ways a movement presents an issue to users or the public that changes the way they view it. One woman said, "It's not something that I really thought about as a serious problem. But now, I think it definitely portrays how people think about women. I think it's disgusting" (Diamond, 2013). In this sense, the app raises awareness for its users. Women also expressed that reading other stories validated their concerns and that by posting their own stories, they would validate other women. One feature

of this app that likely facilitates the validation is the button called “I’ve got your back,” which women can click to show other women that they are heard. For some women, the validation left them feeling empowered, as though they reclaimed some power they lost to their perpetrator. Overall, the sentiments expressed by the interviewees suggest that the reporting feature of the app does have the power to change users’ perspective on GBSH and their belief that someone heard and understood their story.

Although the study had a small sample size and ultimately sought to support Hollaback!’s endeavors, other studies on online storytelling and sharing show similar results. For example, a study on the effects of an Internet Breast Cancer Support Group in Denmark and Sweden found that online communication increased women’s knowledge of their disease, empowered them, and reduced their feelings of social isolation (Hoybe, 2009). Similarly, user studies from the anti-GBSH app Protibadi indicated that the app made users feel more secure (Ahmed, 2014). Both the support group and mobile apps have the ability to shift the frame on their respective issues, but whereas the support group facilitates generating solutions via back and forth communication, the apps do not harness the energy resulting from frame shifts. According to the Hollaback website, “collective storytelling online allows people who experience injustices to define the problem and provide visions for ways forward,” but one woman said in a user interview that, “It was good putting it out there, but it also felt like complaining and just leaving it there, instead of leading to action” (Diamond, 2013). This shows that Hollaback! exaggerates the potential power of its app.

Other evidence that the apps may overstate their power comes from the Hollaback! collective storytelling study itself. According to their user interviews, women faced several impediments to discussing their GBSH experience with other people including that family and friends thought they were overreacting, that they feared sharing their story would cause family to be more overprotective, and that they feared contacting law enforcement (Diamond, 2013). Similarly, the paper promoting SafeStreet outlines that in conservative Bangladeshi society, women fear speaking out against street harassment because they would risk shame and social isolation (Ali, 2015). It is because of this that the app emphasizes anonymity and security, hence “SafeStreet allows a woman to privately capture and share her own experiences in the street” (Ali, 2015). If the majority of women using these apps are those having already experienced GBSH or experienced it recently, and those are the same women that post about their experiences because of the barriers they face discussing GBSH with other people, then it is unreasonable to claim that these apps, via empowering or validating women, will lead to greater societal awareness.

Analysis of Anti-GBSH Mobile Apps: Map Feature

Even if the users of these apps do not necessarily increase greater societal awareness of GBSH, all of the apps claim that the data collected in the

map feature of the apps can inspire authorities or law-enforcement to enact changes. Yet there is little evidence indicating whether authorities have taken any action, how authorities will receive the data or what type of authorities are responsible for issues like GBSH. In one 2013 popular news article about Hollaback!, New York City Council Speaker, Christine Quinn, is quoted saying, “With this tool, New York City will be the first city to undertake an effort to gather the data needed to understand the scope of street harassment” (Price, 2013). There are no evident follow-up publications on this statement or goal. Likewise, the SafeStreet app proposal says, “though SafeStreet, law-enforcement agencies can take proactive actions such as deploying community police and volunteers in hot zone areas” (Ali, 2015). One creator of the app, Protibadi, said, “the idea is to bring such areas to the attention of the authorities so action can be taken” (Marks, 2014). An online street harassment map in Egypt also uses the same feature, although not in mobile application form (HarassMap). The website says, “we as a society can create social and legal consequences that discourage harassing behavior and seriously reduce it.” All of these statements use the word “can.” However, they do not provide evidence on how they will collect data and deliver it to authorities. What is even more problematic is that they do not demonstrate that GBSH is even within the realm of certain authority responsibilities. The SafeStreet proposal mentions that law-enforcement can take action on this issue, but earlier in the paper, writers describe that in their conservative, male-driven country, authorities do not recognize that street harassment is a problem (Ali, 2015). Relating back to the earlier discussion about these apps’ limited ability to raise societal awareness, there is no evidence that, especially in conservative countries, authorities would acknowledge GBSH data.

Not only is the map feature unlikely to inspire authority action, but the feature also does not necessarily increase women’s mobility and might even give them a false sense of safety. In this regard, the apps could make navigating public spaces even more unsafe for some women. In addition to the map feature that collects pins, “SafeStreet” updates women on risks of harassment depending on where they are going. The app also provides the safest path to their intended destination (Ali, 2015). Since SafeStreet is not widely used in Bangladesh, there may be a self-selecting explanation for the apparent concentration of GBSH in some areas versus others. Women who travel in certain areas may be more likely to have a smart phone or use mobile apps than women in other areas of Bangladesh. Differences in phone usage may skew the data and yield “safe” routes that are actually equally unsafe if not less safe than other routes. If women trust that their travel routes are safer, they may be less cautious in those areas than they would have otherwise. Consequently, the apps could indirectly put women in more danger. Assuming the apps collected representative data, the safe route feature could protect women but would not necessarily increase their mobility. This feature might unintentionally create no-women zones. One

woman in a Protibadi user interview said, “If this continues, we have to keep the women inside an *almirah* after a few days. They should instead post the pictures and profiles of the perpetrators” (Ahmed, 2014). Since women’s mobility can only logically be measured in relation to men’s mobility in public spaces, this feature does not increase mobility.

Analysis of Anti-GBSH Mobile Apps: App Marketing

Even though there is evidence that these apps can empower women and make them feel safer, the otherwise exaggerated statements app developers make about the power of their apps to enact change may ironically inhibit progress in the anti-GBSH movement. The names of the apps themselves may also contribute to this issue. Returning to an earlier discussion, user interviews suggest that some women frequently use anti-GBSH apps to begin with because they fear discussing harassment publicly. Consider a hypothetical Bangladeshi woman who uses the app for other reasons. Perhaps she was recently harassed and is inspired to take action. She discovers Protibadi and posts about her experience. If she believes that her post is being collected in a pool of data that will be presented to authorities and that as the name of the app (“one who protests”) suggests, she is sparking a larger societal conversation, she might be less likely to take further action. The same holds for Hollaback!, whose name implies that the perpetrators of GBSH somehow hear the women’s stories. Likewise, the name “SafeStreet” implies that the safe routes provided are accurate and generated from representative data. The sequence of events of the hypothetical woman would still occur if the apps achieved what developers claim, but since they do not, it has the potential to impede progress in the movement. This risk will increase as smart phones and mobile apps become increasingly popular, especially if developers do not address the limitations of their apps.

This case study on anti-GBSH apps raises ethical questions about the balance between a need for marketing and a need for accountability. Technology generally, and mobile apps specifically, provide the unique ability to rapidly unite people in a movement to a scale that was not previously possible. Given this scale, technology developers must not only invest in innovation but also in evaluating the effects of the technology on users. Much like SafeStreet developers could not foresee that “woman-free zones” might be a consequence of the safe route feature, it is impossible to anticipate all future outcomes. As such, developers should be modest in their claims about the power of apps such that if and when negative outcomes arise, they can prevent ironic outcomes as in the case of anti-GBSH apps.

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