

## **At the intersection: Gender, public space, and social media**

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“Hey, baby. Yeah, hey you.”

I put my head down and walk a little faster. I can hear the initiator chuckling to his buddy; my resistance has made this into a game.

“Hey, baby. I’m talking to you. Come over here.”

I can still hear the two of them after I put in my earbuds. They trail after me for a couple of blocks, until my lack of response bores them and they skulk away.

It doesn’t matter if I’m wearing sweatpants or a dress and heels. It doesn’t matter if I’m alone or with a group of friends, or even if I’m walking hand-in-hand with my boyfriend. The truth of the matter is that strangers seem to think it’s okay to yell things at me from the moment I leave the house. Even if I’m not harassed or cat-called, the possibility exists—forever looming over my head.

Sometimes these things manifest themselves as blatant forms of harassment; shouts of “hey, sexy” or “hey, blondie” from street corners or whistles from passing trucks. Sometimes, though, they begin as seemingly innocent compliments. “You can’t come to school looking like that and expect to not get hit on.” That particular incident quickly escalated, much to my dismay, until nearby strangers shrieked at me to present him with my phone number.

I am not the only person who has to live with the reality of having my autonomy violated on a near daily basis. I have spoken to many people, primarily those who identify as women, who are subjected to this sort of lewd behaviour far more often than I.

So what is it about women’s bodies that makes them into communal property? Why do men feel entitled to verbally harass women on a daily basis? Why do other women feel the need to comment on the appearance of one another? And why do strangers on the Internet feel compelled to chastise women for being ‘too fat,’ ‘too skinny,’ or for wearing varying degrees of makeup or clothes?

While all of these forms of aggression target men too, female-presenting people are overwhelmingly the victims of these attacks.

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“A lot of the sexualisation and misogyny is very new to me.”

As someone who is becoming increasingly feminine in the public eye, Courtney Demone is ever more aware of her positionality in public space.

The trans activist began hormonal replacement therapy (HRT) about three months ago, and has since started her #DoIHaveBoobsNow project on various social media platforms, including Facebook and Instagram.

“We’re just taking pictures of me topless throughout hormonal replacement therapy,” explained Demone, “to see at what point Facebook, Instagram, whatever, decides that my chest is big enough to be sexualized and worthy of censorship.”

“Normative ways of being in public space is gendered; there are different gendered expectations about how one behaves in public space,” said Kay Gallivan, the UVSS Women’s Centre Outreach and Communications Coordinator. “Obviously, as [Demone] is illustrating with [her] project, [those expectations dictate] whose naked body can be in public space and whose cannot.”

Through #DoIHaveBoobsNow, Demone is narrating the implications of gendered privilege in social spaces, as well as her experiences of losing privilege as she undergoes the transition.

Recently, all of Demone’s topless photos were removed from Instagram for violating their community guidelines.

As Demone commented on her project’s Facebook page, Free All Bodies, “Instagram removed all the images, so it seems to be less about the amount of breast development and more about the fact that I present feminine with my nipples showing.”

“I think it’s interesting that Instagram decides to make this hardline decision that since I’m a woman and I’m topless, that means those pictures are not okay, which is respectable in one way, but also still feeding into that censorship and sexualisation and all that jazz,” she said in interview.

Demone’s project is still fully documented on Facebook, and Demone noted that Facebook seems to be far more lenient with female nudity than Instagram.

The public/private dichotomy is particularly prevalent on social media, where many spatial boundaries are blurred, insofar as media platforms bring the private into the public, and vice versa.

The removal of Demone’s photographs by Instagram is a prime example of the public asserting some degree of control over the private.

“You have to select gender on [social media] and they’re forcing gender binaries on you; and they’re making these choices about what to censor and what not to censor ... When they’re censoring [your image], they’re still making an assumption of your gender,” said Demone.

“Facebook and Instagram are having to make these hardline decisions about what is too sexual to show and what isn’t, and yet, at the same time, Facebook and Instagram are

filled with super misogynistic and essentially pornographic images already; they're just making a really weird arbitrary distinction with nipples."

When certain bodies are seen to be inherently sexual, people are marginalized and their ways of being are policed.

"For cis gender women, there are still at least normative ways of being in public, whereas for non-binary and gender fluid people, often times they're just erased," noted Gallivan. "There's a lot of erasure – just because there are no normative ways to exist in public."

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Public reactions to #DoIHaveBoobsNow on social media have been all across the board.

"Most people have been super supportive," said Demone. "People ... only really spend a lot of time on the Internet looking at stuff that they really like or really hate, and more stuff that they really like for the most part, so I've been getting mostly support."

However, Demone is all too familiar with bearing abuse from strangers online.

"[It's] kind of hard to deal with emotionally because, like I knew going into this, that if it got big, I would be exposing myself to a lot of abuse and harassment, but to consciously know that and to actually experience it is a very different thing; I thought 'I can deal with this, it's just random people being jerks,' but it still fucking sucks."

Ultimately, Demone hopes her project will be a conversation starter.

"I have no expectations that what we're doing is going to be big enough to poke the bear that is Facebook and Instagram ... but hopefully it's starting these conversations where people are looking at my story and being able to ... think about things in a new way, and I think people have been ... that's all we're really looking for."

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While social media can perpetuate harassment and misogyny, it also provides a platform to discuss counter-narratives.

Last fall, *This Week in Blackness* CEO Elon James White launched the Twitter handle #DudesGreetingDudes to examine the 'harmless' behaviour of verbally harassing women on the street.

"Im [sic] so confused as to why dudes are complaining about not being able to say hi to women," the inaugural tweet read. "Go say hi to other dudes if you need to so bad."

Gallivan laughs as we scroll through pages of tweets. "A dude would not say that to another dude."

While entertaining, the hashtag ultimately draws attention to the double standard of approaching strangers on the street.

"I'm just saying. I'm a nice guy. I just want to say HI. And you're going to accept this greeting whether you fucking like it or not," read another of White's tweets.

"Maybe that gets at . . . the gendered nature of how people interact in public space and how it's sort of treated like this really benign thing ... when really something like #DudesGreetingDudes illustrates that it is, in fact, quite gendered and has a bit of a power dynamic to it," said Gallivan. "[It] can be scary."

Demone has experienced firsthand how quickly 'benign' conversations can quickly become vindictive. In an article she co-authored for Mashable, Demone recounts how even though her OKCupid profile states that she isn't interested in men, men continue to pursue her. When she does not engage with these suitors, they'll lash out and hurl abuse at her—even though they were clearly making advances on her in the first place.

"In my years of Internet dating before coming out, I never received messages like this. Goodbye, privilege to not be frequently sexually harassed by strangers. Hello, expectation to engage with every man who approaches me," she wrote.

In her narrative, Demone also comments on her realization of how scary it can be to present as a woman in public spaces. Not only does being viewed as a sexual object limit what you can do, it also limits how safe you can feel, Demone noted.

Demone also told me that she receives more abuse when she presents as feminine, rather than when she is seen as more trans.

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Navigating the intersection between gender, social media, and public space is not easy, though I realize that as a white, cis gender individual, my experiences are far less adverse than those of many, many other women. But that doesn't stop me from feeling frustrated and angry.

It frustrates me that "I'm sorry, I have a boyfriend" bears more weight than "I'm just not interested in you." And it makes me physically sick that people very dear to me have had their bodily autonomy violated, and have felt responsible for the perverse actions of another.

In order to reduce gendered violence in public spaces and through media platforms, we must de-gender these spaces and de-sexualise bodies.

"Getting rid of sexist censorship like this would be nice because that's a step towards desexualising," said Demone. "The argument I've heard a lot since starting this project is 'well, women are censored for their own protection, otherwise there's just going to be porn everywhere, and women are going to be sexualised even more . . . but really, once

you stop thinking of a woman's body as something so sexual that it needs to be covered, it's going to become less sexualised."

The responsibility falls on all of us to become better allies in the fight against gender inequality. For as long as male privilege exists, and arbitrary decision-making regarding censorship and bodily autonomy lies within hegemonic structures, society needs men to step up and use that privilege and power. Whether that means learning about your privilege, being aware of your positionality in public spaces, or simply refraining from whistling at women from your truck, the societal implications are huge.

While Demone was aware of her male privilege prior to starting HRT, nothing prepared her for the discrimination and abuse she endures on a daily basis, just for being a woman in public. Demone defined this as a set of privileges that men have gained through no action of their own, but that they benefit from just for being a certain gender.

"I definitely considered myself a feminist ally and understood all of this stuff—well, I mean, cognitively understood it I guess. And then, like, going from knowing that those things exist to actually experiencing them is super different. Like talking about how women aren't safe in public spaces or in certain public spaces—you can talk about that all you want, [but] then feeling that threat and that sense of being threatened is totally different."

As it currently stands, there is a blatant difference in the way genders are treated in social spaces. This difference not only defines how people are expected to dress and behave, but it extends to how safe they can feel. Moreover, this difference is exacerbated on social media, where users feel entitled to police the behaviour of others and chastise them for defying hegemonic social norms.

You don't have to bare it all as Demone does in order to free your body, and those of the people around you. Society does need to, however, stop considering female bodies to be inherently sexual. Gender equality will only come when everyone feels safe in public spaces and breasts are seen as nothing more than tissue.