

# The Silent Treatment: A Multimodal Study of Campaign and Advocacy Materials against Sexual Harassment

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## Abstract

Because of increasing attention given to non-linguistic modes like images, there is a need to reframe the study of discourse alongside other multimodal texts in analyzing how social issues are constructed and reconstructed by language. This study applies a multimodal framework to uncover the prevalent discourse and the representations of sexual harassment in the University of the Philippines (UP) as reflected in the posters and campaign materials produced by its Office of Anti-Sexual Harassment (OASH). By focusing on the relationship between visual elements and linguistic features, the findings reveal a recurring narrative of silence and shame in the portrayal of victims of sexual harassment. The campaigns and advocacy materials address these representations by constructing imperatives that urge victims to break their silence and overcome shame by reporting and sharing their experiences. The results of this study offer a glimpse of how sexual harassment is perceived and understood in a particular context in the country.

Keywords: discourse analysis, multimodal, sexual harassment

## Introduction

Four decades ago, the term sexual harassment did not exist. It was only in 1978 that Lin Farley, after facilitating a public forum on women's rights, first coined the term to refer to behavior that men exhibited in the workplace to gain power over women. At that time, there was no standard or appropriate phrase for it, revealing an absence of meaning, insight, and naming for the forms of abuse experienced by women (Herbert 27). Prior to the public attention it received, acts considered to be forms of sexual harassment were deemed normal and unquestioned, especially in the workplace. Owing to the efforts of feminist movements and judicial reviews of individual cases, sexual harassment became recognized as one of many forms of violence against women ("Statistics on Violence against Filipino Women").

The act of sexual harassment can be studied under different frameworks:

1. As a tool for domination to keep "women" in place in specific settings such as the workplace and schools;
2. As a tool for men to gain sex and sexual favors from women;
3. As a form of sexism and discrimination, consequently reinforcing current gender roles; and
4. As a form of punishment for non-conformists of the gender structures.

Imbalanced power relations based on gender give emphasis to these perspectives. Earlier conceptualizations of sexual harassment identify men as assailants and women as victims. According to Farley, the usual perpetrators are men who are in positions of power and authority while the victims are women who occupy relatively inferior positions. During the course of her research, Farley observed that the behavior of men causes women to feel uncomfortable enough to quit or to be fired from their jobs. The treatment of men towards women is a tool to keep women "in line" and to ultimately maintain and reinforce the power relations in the workplace. As a reward, men retain both personal and group power (cited in Herbert 17). Similarly,

MacKinnon asserts that women are mostly the victims and men the assailants (cited in Herbert 17). She argues that sexual harassment is the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements levied on another person in a relationship of unequal power (18). Thus, men in power use sexual harassment as a means to gain sex or sexual favors.

Uggen and Blackstone further expound on the idea that sexual harassment is an expression of power, where the harasser is usually situated in a position of power. They support the idea that power imbalance is a quotient of sexual harassment acts committed against less powerful people (8). Their study attempts to test the generality of MacKinnon's theory on sexual harassment by studying adolescent behavioral syndrome for sexual harassment. They mention that few empirical studies have tested MacKinnon's most basic proposition that the most sexually harassed victims are women. The data reveal that there are more reports of female respondents who experience sexual harassment, generally supporting MacKinnon's claim. The authors mention, however, that the reports of male victims experiencing sexual harassment are higher than they anticipated. These results are incompatible with MacKinnon's suggestion that harassment of males would be unlikely (Uggen and Blackstone<sup>9</sup>). It suggests that there remain certain factors other than gender that need to be considered in analyzing sexual harassment behaviors. Most of the studies mentioned provide a pretext of heteronormative and binary gender relations in theorizing about sexual harassment thus positioning sexual harassment acts in male-female relationships.

However, Franke observes "cracks" in the doctrine of sexual harassment. Her paper, "What's Wrong with Sexual Harassment", discusses why sexual harassment is "so wrong" by expounding on how it is an indication of sex discrimination. This means that sexual harassment is a way of enforcing the gender roles of the two sexes. Women are harassed, because as women, it is expected for them to be "sex objects", thus justifying the sexual acts committed to them by men. Sexual harassment also ensures the expectations on men to be sexual conquerors of women. When a man does not subscribe to this idea, he will also get sexually harassed because he has failed to fulfill his sex role

(695). Franke stresses that “sexual harassment is a kind of sex discrimination not because the conduct would not have been undertaken if the victim had been a different sex, not because it is sexual, and not because men do it to women, but precisely because ... it seeks to masculinize men and feminize women” (695). This happens through the imposition of sex-role expectations towards men and women. Sexual harassment maintains a society where women act feminine (thus conquerable) and men act masculine (to ascertain success in conquering) (696). Moreover, this new perspective allows a reframing of sexual harassment as a tool used to keep gender non-conformists in line. This operates on the premise that when one does not subscribe to the “normative” expectations of one’s sex, one is more vulnerable to sexual harassment (694). This is a shift from the standpoint of early theories that only focus on the dichotomy of power relations between men and women.

These studies demonstrate the impressive body of sociological theory around the phenomenon of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, Sever mentions that “no empirical study of sexual harassment has appeared in the prominent general interest sociology journals *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, or *Social Forces*” (cited in Uggen and Blackstone 6–7). Consequently, this neglect forestalls the research that could have broad implications in sparking discourse on sexual harassment and the policies crafted to address it (Uggen and Blackstone7).

## Policies against Sexual Harassment

In the Philippines, one of the earliest initiatives to respond to the problem of sexual harassment was the government agency, the Department of Labor and Employment, which issued a landmark memorandum in 1991 to address the problem. The memorandum, however, covered only the employees of the Department. It was only in 1995 when Republic Act 7877 was signed into law that sexual harassment was declared unlawful in the employment, education and training environments (Kintanar 4).

When schools and universities were also identified as vulnerable settings for abuses like sexual harassment, the University of the Philippines (UP) enacted a policy that required the establishment of an office that would cater specifically to sexual harassment-related problems in the university. In 2003, the Office of Anti-Sexual Harassment (OASH) was set up as an extension of the Center for Women's Studies. Aside from conducting gender-sensitivity programs, the OASH also produced campaign and advocacy materials to raise awareness among the UP community, as part of its commitment to end sexual harassment on campus (Mondiguing).

The use of posters and other forms of media to promote an advocacy or a movement is one that is often adopted by different groups in order to generate attention from the public, or more specifically, from their intended audience (Lirola 248). A closer inspection of these materials can offer insight on how sexual harassment is presented in a particular setting. Moreover, the content of posters and other related materials can reveal underlying assumptions that influence the choice of themes and other relevant information. This study aims to find out how sexual harassment is portrayed and what possible underlying messages on sexual harassment are found in materials produced by the OASH.

## Method

This study selected two posters that OASH produced and disseminated in UP in 2002 and 2013. The analysis focused on the textual and the visual content of these materials. Textual features refer to linguistic features. Halliday's Theory on Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) was used to classify the semantic representations of the word choices in the selected posters. Transitivity focuses on representing patterns of experience, "of goings on" and "happenings" in the world. There are three basic components of the transitivity process: the process by itself, the participants involved in that process, and the circumstances associated with the process (Halliday 45). Clauses are analyzed based on these components. There are four types of

processes: material (doing), mental (experiencing, sensing), verbal (saying), and relational (being, becoming). The type of participant is dependent on the type of process being used in the clause (46). Meanings, however, are not only generated from linguistic structures. As Halliday posits, language is only one of the semiotic modes through which meaning-making is possible (47). In this study, visual features were analyzed using van Leeuwen and Kress's Visual Grammar. Particular attention was given to salience, modality, and composition of the visual elements in the poster. Lastly, O'Halloran's Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis framework, the intersemiosis of the visual and textual elements, was interpreted using O'Halloran's intersemiosis, referring to the process by which meaning is created across language and visual imagery (14).

## Results and Discussions

The poster below (Figure 1) was published before the official opening of OASH in 2002. The creation of this poster was through the joint effort of the OASH staff and student interns from the UP Diliman College of Social Work and Community Development (Mondiguing).

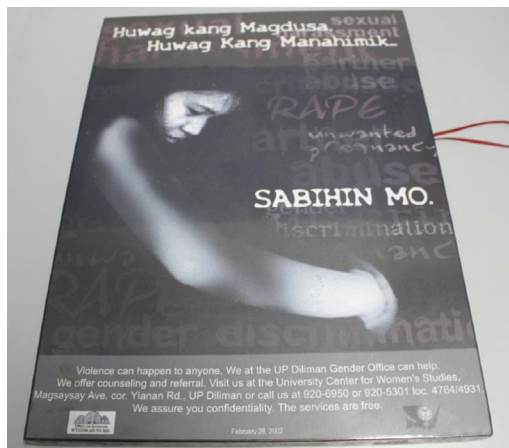


Figure 1. Poster (2002)

The locus of attention is the image of a woman. The image is placed on the left side of the page, making it the point of departure for the text beside it. To its right is the text “Sabihin mo” (Say it). Located on the top section of the page, directly above the visual representation of the woman, is the text “Huwag kang magdusa. Huwag kang manahimik” (Do not suffer. Do not be silent). Other than the salient texts, there are also texts scattered around the background; these texts are in low color saturation and obscure typeface. Some of them are barely readable. The readable words are: sexual harassment, rape, unwanted pregnancy, abuse, and gender discrimination. The background texts provide examples of the different forms of abuse that can be inflicted on the person. Meanwhile, the main texts are imperatives, telling the viewer to speak up and not suffer. The texts achieve meaning by presenting a contrasting idea. While the image indicates a symbol for reclusiveness and silence, the text asks the viewer to do the exact opposite: to speak out, to expose, or to reveal. In presenting two contrastive semiotic resources, recontextualization is necessary to identify the logical relation between the two.

The picture of the woman is in black and white, set in a black background. Since the background color is also black, the image seems to be camouflaged, and the only visible parts are the face of the woman and her right arm crooked towards her body. Van Leeuwen and Kress explains the theory of visual grammar as the concept of establishing credibility based on color saturation (114). Color saturation is a scale running from full color saturation to absence of color, that is, to black and white. Color saturation is related to the concept of modality. Images with low saturation and extremely high saturation have low modality. This is because they are farther from the naturalistic or realistic mode. Low saturation suggests a sense of insubstantiality, while extremely high-saturated images suggest a hyperreal setting. Thus, the black and white saturation of the image of the woman plus the black background create a low saturated visual experience, giving it an ethereal, almost unreal effect.

Another way to understand the communicative function of an image is to analyze the gaze of the represented participant. According to van Leeuwen and Kress (116), there is a fundamental difference between pictures in which

the participant looks directly at the viewer's eyes and pictures in which this is not the case. By looking at the viewer directly, the eyelines serve as vectors connecting the participants to its viewer, even though it is only at the imaginary level. This contact has two interrelated functions. One is the creation of a visual form of direct address, acknowledging the presence of the viewer and addressing him or her directly, and thus serving as a visual "you" (17). Halliday calls this the 'demand' because the image does something to the viewer; it "demands" that the viewer enter into a relationship with the participant, however imaginary (cited in van Leeuwen and Kress117).

The represented participant in the picture, however, is looking away from the viewer, and does not establish eye contact. More notable is that her gaze is directed downwards, as if expressing shyness or shame. This is accentuated by her bowed head. She seems to be preventing herself from being noticed; her arm crooked towards her also suggests this.

The narrative of shame defines the representative of sexual abuse victims, whether the abuse is in the form of rape, sexual harassment, or other related offenses. As a victim, she is assumed to be in a vulnerable state, and therefore unable to talk about her experience. As MacKinnon and Herbert explain in separate studies, power is the basic currency of sexual harassment. It is an act used to maintain and reinforce the current power relations, specifically nuanced to gender roles and stereotypes. Women are perceived to be the less powerful thus the more likely victim. In the poster, the image of a woman was chosen to represent this idea of female victimization, highlighting the urgency of the imperative to "speak out".

The intersemiosis of the image and the text also engages the discourse of power. By juxtaposing the narrative of shame and powerlessness through the image of the woman with the texts, power is appropriated to the victim. Texts in the imperative form demand action from the participant. The poster seems to assume that the victims of sexual harassment or other forms of abuse are in a state of vulnerability or powerlessness that could lead to paralysis or silence. Herbert explains this 'culture of silence' among female victims of sexual abuse (27). She cites different reasons for why females do not usually report their



experiences, which include shame and guilt that they might have brought the abuse upon themselves, fear of not being believed, and anxiety over the consequences of reporting the harasser to authorities (i.e., greater retaliation, getting fired, or getting a low grade in class) (28). Thus, the linguistic choice of using imperatives responds to the “silence” commonly associated with victims of sexual harassment.

Besides the structure of the texts, it is also relevant to look into the language choice of the poster. Halliday points out that language in itself is also a semiotic mode (117). As a semiotic mode, it signifies a certain meaning. According to Coulmas, choosing one language over another or choosing elements of one language or another carries social meanings (128). In this instance, Filipino functions to increase a connection and affinity with the intended audience. It establishes a sense of familiarity. Using the more familiar language functions to further address the viewer and establish a sense of affective relationship towards the viewer. This is important in recognizing the identity and worth of the person addressed to, especially considering that the person is probably ashamed and has a low or negative sense of self-worth because of what has happened to her. The intention to form an affective relationship with the person by addressing her in Filipino helps the person realize that she is being recognized as a person of importance and is being extended support.

Notably, there is a shift to English from Filipino in the secondary statement. The statement says “Visit us at the UP Gender Office”. While the more salient texts are in Filipino, the secondary statements are in English. In addition, they are found at the bottom section of the poster and in smaller font. One possible function of shifting to English is to signify a level of professional expertise for the Office. The idea that English is a medium more commonly associated with formal settings implies that the context is more formal. The change from an intimate interaction in Filipino to a more formal, businesslike relationship in English signals a change in the intention of the message. The purpose is no longer to increase connection and to build trust; the goal is to inform the audience that the members of the Office are professional and trained to handle cases. It also signals the fact that they take the issue of sexual harassment

seriously. These implications also relate to the idea of “building trust” that is essential to the victims given their struggle with shame and fear. They are given the assurance that their stories will be handled and responded to appropriately by the right people. Thus, the poster appeals to both the personal and formal aspects of victimization.

The second material under study, a sticker, was produced in 2013 to coincide with the celebration of Women’s Month. Its main objective was to initiate an awareness campaign against sexual harassment in public spaces in the form of advocacy stickers. The stickers were posted in the interior of jeepneys operating within the UP campus. The project aimed to expand its reach to the general public in its fight against all forms of sexual intimidation (“Advocacy Stickers on UP campus Jeepneys”).



Figure 2. Sticker (2013)

In this material, the most salient feature is the text itself. There are two announcements, and both are placed at center, occupying majority of the space. The large font size also contributes to the salience, making the text easier to read even from afar. On the left side of the text is the image of a man’s silhouette holding a rectangular board with two secondary statements. Compared to past materials where the language of the text is English, the textual content here is only in Filipino. The advocacy stickers were produced with the goal of expanding the scope of campaigns, previously confined to academic settings, to public spaces like jeepneys (OASH, 2013). Since Filipino is more widely spoken and more inclusive than English, it was used as the medium

of the text. Mondiguing, the coordinator of OASH, explained that the sticker's designers preferred Filipino because they felt that it would be clearer and more understandable to everyone, even to jeepney drivers and other passengers.

The first announcement, "Ang sexual harassment ay isang krimen" is translated into "Sexual harassment is a crime". Applying the semantic representation structure to categorize the text, the process is relational, the carrier is sexual harassment, and the attribute is crime. Characterizing sexual harassment as a crime adds gravity to the act itself. It conveys the idea that it is against the law, and more importantly, it is punishable. It speaks for both potential harassers and victims. On the one hand, harassers realize that their behavior has grave consequences. On the other hand, victims are informed that the treatment their harassers subject them to is a crime. It strengthens the idea that sexual harassment is a pressing and relevant issue and therefore victims should not consider it as a negligible act that requires no urgent response. Moreover, it also assures victims that their harassers will be held accountable by the system once they (the victims) decide to report or file a case.

Below the first announcement are phrases that refer to forms of sexual harassment: *panghihipo* (touching), *paninili p*(voyeurism), sextexting, and *bastos na pananalita* (offensive language). From these examples, one can see how sexual harassment constitutes not only physical but also verbal acts. Sextexting and offensive language are both verbal forms of sexual harassment. The sample forms of sexual harassment are also reflective of the changes in the scope of the setting. Sextexting is a form of harassment that was not included in the early materials. It refers to the act of sending sexually explicit messages that are offensive to a person. The inclusion of this type of sexual harassment only shows how the digital world is an extended space for these kinds of abuse.

By placing examples of sexual harassment clustered below the first announcement, the viewer is led to think deductively. First, the announcement presents a general idea that sexual harassment is a crime, and then it cites different behaviors considered to be harassment. It allows the viewer to realize that these acts are actually criminal in nature.

The second announcement is “Magsumbong ka!” It is both an imperative and an exclamatory sentence. “Magsumbong ka!” is translated as “Report it!” The participant sayer is (You), while the verbal process is report. Here, the statement is addressed to the victim. From the first two statements, it logically follows that knowing sexual harassment is a crime and citing examples of sexual harassment, the victim now is commanded to report the harasser. However, the imperative to report insinuates that the harasser will be punished once the victim acts on it by reporting. This can be deduced by the first announcement, i.e., identifying sexual harassment as a crime, and thus, necessitates punitive measures for the criminal.

This idea is further recontextualized when analyzed side by side the image located on the left side of the sticker. The image represents the silhouette of a man holding a board, as if being photographed for a mugshot. This solidifies the assertion of considering acts of sexual harassment to be unlawful and criminal. The silhouette is also holding a board with a text. It reads, “irespeto ang sarili. irespeto ang lahat.” When translated, it becomes, “respect yourself. respect everyone.” Unlike texts that address victims, the text on the board seems to be directed at potential harassers. They are asked to respect themselves and to respect other people as well. Since sexual harassment takes place in a context where there is an imbalance of power, the idea of respect addresses the imbalance and implies that everyone is equal and everyone deserves to be respected. The interaction of the elements in the materials is able to address the two main characters in sexual harassment: the harasser and the harassed. Sexual harassment is a crime, and there are two responses to it. For the victims, it should be reported. For the harassers and the potential harassers, they should not do it because it is a crime and because everyone deserves to be respected.

## Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that textual and visual elements work coherently to represent and construct messages regarding sexual harassment in the UP setting. Most of the textual elements present the definition of sexual

harassment and urge the victims (the intended audience) to report incidents of sexual harassment to the OASH. The definitions of sexual harassment include both a description of the nature and of various forms of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is commonly characterized as a criminal and offensive act.

In terms of structure, most of the texts are sentences in the imperative form. The longer, more extensive definitions of sexual harassment demonstrate the limited awareness that the UP community has over the issue of sexual harassment. In the second campaign material, the texts pertaining to definitions of sexual harassment are relatively shorter and condensed; the assumption must be that the awareness of sexual harassment in the university has increased.

Language choice is also a relevant point of discussion. Given a material with a bilingual content, it can be inferred that the medium of Filipino is used to establish a more personal connection to the viewer or addressee, while the English medium is used to convey a more formal tone. The goal of building a connection through Filipino is to convey an assurance of trust and genuine concern for the victims. On the other hand, the function of English is to inform the victim of the capability and professional approach that will be afforded them in the instance that they decide to report to OASH. Finally, while the role of the texts is to appropriate values and meanings to sexual harassment through definitions, the employment of the visual features is geared towards providing a more concrete conceptualization of sexual harassment. In the analysis, the image of the woman serves as the representative of the victim of sexual harassment. Moreover, the portrayal of women in the materials alludes to the reality of the culture of silence as underlined by shame among victims. The features of the image, like gaze, color, and saturation, contribute in establishing the underlying context of shame and silence.

Thus, the relationship between the textual and the visual demonstrates complementarity. In portraying a weak and vulnerable image of the victim visually, the texts are assigned the role of reacting to this depiction by addressing the main premise of victimization: powerlessness and silence. As discussed in the analysis, the use of imperatives forwards the idea that power

can be appropriated to the victim when she does decide to break her silence. The imperatives, as a form of a call to action, implicitly tell the victim that “speaking up” is a way of possessing power.

The conceptualization and the representations of the “victim” in the campaign materials demonstrate how the theorizing of sexual harassment in abstraction affects how it is represented and applied in actual texts. The meanings and the mentality associated with the label “victim” in the context of sexual harassment and power require a re-examination and a reevaluation. It is possible to look for a term to replace it (a term akin to how typhoon victims are now referred to as survivors) that is less loaded and neutral. This might necessitate a paradigm shift in the study of sexual harassment from describing its nature to investigating its representations.

For multimodal studies, this research can contribute to the growing body of literature that focuses on analyzing how text and other non-linguistic elements work together to construct and reveal social realities. By incorporating a combination of theoretical frameworks, the study is able to demonstrate that it is possible to employ these theories to investigate and expose underlying ideas and issues about sexual harassment from a given multimodal text.

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