

The compliment: between flattery and harassment. Case study Eloy Alfaro Secular University of Manabí

*El piropo: entre el halago y el acoso. Caso de estudio Universidad Laica
Eloy Alfaro de Manabí*

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to analyze the perception of gender violence expressed through catcalls within higher education institutions. To do this, it was decided to take the Eloy Alfaro Secular University of Manabí (ULEAM) as a case study. The aim was to determine the impact that the content of a catcall has on the person who receives it. The methodology implemented had a quantitative approach, in which the descriptive statistical method was used, since the survey technique was applied to collect information in the university faculty. The results show that 38% of the university population of ULEAM has suffered harassment through catcalls, both as students, teachers and administrative staff. Of that percentage, 45% of them stated that they felt uncomfortable when receiving a catcall. It is concluded that 38% of the ULEAM university community has been the victim of verbal sexual harassment through a compliment within the university premises, which made them feel uncomfortable. However, the compliment is sometimes wrongly perceived as an attempt at flirting, which makes it difficult to see.

Keywords: compliment, sexual harassment, gender, educational institutions, sociolinguistics

Resumen

La actual investigación tuvo el propósito de analizar la percepción de la violencia de género expuesta a través del piropo dentro de las instituciones de educación superior. Para ello, se decidió tomar como caso de estudio a la Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí (ULEAM), en donde se buscó determinar la afectación que trae el contenido de un piropo hacia la persona que lo recibe. La metodología que se implementó tuvo un enfoque cuantitativo, en la que se utilizó el método estadístico descriptivo y se aplicó la técnica de la encuesta para la recolección de la información en el claustro universitario. Los resultados mostraron que el 38% de la población universitaria de la ULEAM, han sufrido de acoso a través del piropo, tanto como estudiantes, docentes y personal administrativo. De ese porcentaje, un 45% de ellos manifestó que se sintieron incómodos al recibir un piropo. Se concluyó que un 38% de la comunidad universitaria de la ULEAM ha sido víctima de acoso sexual verbal mediante un piropo dentro de los predios de la universidad, lo cual les generó incomodidad, no obstante, el piropo es a veces percibido erróneamente como un intento de coqueteo lo que dificultad su visibilidad.

Palabras clave: piropo, acoso sexual, género, instituciones educativas, sociolingüística

Introduction

The *piropo* (catcall), often considered a harmless gesture of admiration, has been globally recognized as a form of harassment that contributes to the normalization of gender-based violence. According to UN Women (2024), street harassment, including *piropos*, has been identified as a manifestation of discrimination and violence against women, perpetuating gender inequality and undermining fundamental human rights.

In several Latin American countries, demonstrations have taken place on this issue, reflecting the demand for the penalization of verbal street harassment, as well as the effort to make violent acts visible and raise awareness about this phenomenon. In 2015, in Argentina, legislators called for sanctions against verbal street harassment. That same year in Chile, the Observatory Against Street Harassment was established, and figures showed that 1 in 2 women had experienced street harassment, with the *piropo* being one of the most frequent forms. Meanwhile, in 2017, Mexico hosted the Global Forum on Safe Cities and Public Spaces for Women and Girls, organized by UN Women, where the Care Egypt case was presented with the aim of raising awareness among men and women about verbal harassment (Castrillón, 2022).

In Ecuador, high rates of gender-based violence against women are evident. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC), in the country, 65 out of every 100 women have suffered some type of harassment during their lives, which means a total of 64.9% of the female population (National Institute of Statistics and Census [INEC], 2019). This suggests that sexual harassment against women in the country may have cultural roots embedded for years in society. According to Rodríguez and Gómez (2015), street *piropos* have been identified as a manifestation of the deeply ingrained machista culture in Ecuadorian society, contributing to the normalization of the objectification of women in public spaces.

With regard to the conceptual structure of disrespectful *piropos* within universities, several higher education institutions around the world have revealed the presence of harassment and gender-based violence within their environments. According to Macías et al. (2023), a survey conducted among students from various universities in the city of Neiva, Colombia, indicated the most frequent places where they have received or made *piropos* are: first, the street with an 82.1% probability; followed by universities with 58.9%; then shopping centers with 46.4%; and lastly, workplaces with 33.9%. This research demonstrated that *piropos* at universities are common, ranking second in terms of public spaces.

Regarding the context of Ecuadorian universities, a discouraging outlook is evident concerning this issue of verbal sexual harassment. According to Guarderas et al. (2023), they stated: "The situation in the universities of the Sierra and the Coast continues to affect the student segment the most. The prevalence in these regions is slightly lower than in Quito: 1 in every 5 students from the Sierra has experienced verbal sexual harassment" (p.26).

It is worth mentioning that there are cases which are not always recognized as verbal sexual harassment, due to the subjectivity involved in interpreting the words used in a *piropo*, which often leads them to be mistakenly perceived as compliments. According to Álvarez (2018), in a study

carried out at a private university in Quito, it was found that half of the surveyed female population conceptually recognizes sexual harassment in its different forms, while the other half does not—indicating a clear normalization of the culture of gender-based violence.

It is important to note that in the province of Manabí, the rate of gender-based violence is not as high compared to other provinces in the country. According to INEC (2019), in Manabí, the total percentage of gender-based violence against women throughout their lives is 49.7%, placing it among the provinces with the lowest rates. In light of this, the following question arises: How does the university population at Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí perceive *piropos*?

The main objective of this study was to analyze the perception of gender-based violence expressed through verbal sexual harassment, more commonly known as *piropos*, within the campus of Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí. Furthermore, it also sought to determine the emotional impact caused by the content of a *piropo* on the person receiving it.

In this regard, *piropos*, as a form of verbal sexual harassment, have psychological effects on those who receive them. Ultimately, street harassment—which includes unsolicited *piropos*—can have serious implications for the mental and emotional health of victims, generating anxiety, fear, and insecurity (World Health Organization [WHO], 2000). Therefore, it is crucial to address the *piropo* as a form of harassment that violates women's dignity and personal space.

Methodology

This descriptive research employed a methodology with a quantitative approach, which allowed for the characterization of each element surrounding gender-based violence expressed through *piropos* in higher education institutions in Ecuador. As this was a case study, the main campus of Universidad Laica Eloy Alfaro de Manabí, located in the canton of Manta, was selected as the unit of analysis.

The method used for analyzing the statistical data was descriptive in nature, as it sought to observe measures of central tendency regarding the perception of *piropos* among the average university population. This aimed to obtain valid conclusions from the case study addressed in the research (Devore, 2008). In addition, a bibliographic review of various texts related to verbal sexual harassment and violence against women in higher education institutions was carried out.

To gather information, the survey technique was applied, targeting students, faculty, and administrative staff of ULEAM. According to the Human Resources Department, there are approximately 18,000 enrolled students, 1,000 faculty members, and 1,500 administrative staff, totaling 20,500 members of the university community during the 2023 academic period. It is important to clarify that this information pertains only to the university's main campus in Manta; therefore, populations from other university branches were excluded from this analysis. Given the large population—where any of the studied subjects could potentially experience verbal harassment within the institution—a simple random probability sample was extracted using the following formula:

$$n = \frac{N * Z^2 * p * q}{e^2 * (N - 1) + Z^2 * p * q} \quad (1)$$

After solving the above formula, the resulting sample size of the university population to be analyzed was 378 individuals, including students, faculty, and administrative staff, with a margin of error of 5% and a confidence level of 95%. The data collection instrument used was a questionnaire consisting of four multiple-choice questions and one open-ended question. It was created using the Google Forms web application and distributed via institutional email to the randomly selected study participants.

As for the processing of the information, this was carried out using Microsoft Excel software, where data from the multiple-choice questions were tabulated. The open-ended question was quantified using ATLAS.ti software in order to obtain a list of recurring words.

Results

Among the findings from the survey, it is important to mention that the demographic data of the studied population are essential for providing context to the main results. Each of these is detailed below:

- Regarding the age of the respondents, it was found that 84% of them are between 17 and 25 years old; another 7% fall within the 26 to 35 age range; 4% are between 46 and 55 years old; 3% are in the 36 to 45 age range; and only 2% are between 56 and 65 years old. This can be clearly seen in Table 1.

Table 1

Age of Respondents

Age Group	Frequency	Percentage
17 - 25 years	316	84%
26 - 35 years	28	7%
36 - 45 years	12	3%
46 - 55 years	15	4%
56 - 65 years	7	2%
Total	378	100%

- With regard to the gender of the respondents, it was observed that 66% of those who completed the questionnaire identified as female, while the remaining 34% identified as male. This is shown in detail in Table 2.

Table 2*Gender of Respondents*

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female	249	66%
Male	129	34%
Total	378	100%

On the other hand, the main findings of the survey indicate that 62% of respondents stated they had not experienced any form of sexual harassment through a piropo within the premises of ULEAM. Meanwhile, the remaining 38% reported that they had indeed felt verbally sexually harassed through a piropo within the higher education institution. This is shown in detail in Table 3.

Table 3*ULEAM University Population Who Have Experienced Verbal Sexual Harassment*

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	145	38%
No	233	62%
Total	378	100%

Of the respondents who answered affirmatively (38%), they were asked to select from several options regarding their reactions upon being harassed. A total of 45% said they felt uncomfortable in such situations, 16% reported feeling flattered, 15% said they reacted with anger, 11% stated they felt powerless, and the remaining 11% included various other reactions, as detailed in Table 4.

Table 4*Reaction to a Piropo within the ULEAM Premises*

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Anger	42	15%
Embarrassment	24	8%
Discomfort	132	45%
Powerlessness	33	11%
Flattery	47	16%
Satisfaction	13	5%
Total	291	100%

Regarding the perceived origin of the *piropo*, respondents were asked what they believed to be the main reason behind it. Of the university population, 33% indicated it was an attempt at flirting, 22% believed it stemmed from a lack of awareness of personal boundaries, 20% said it was due to admiration, 19% viewed it as disrespectful behavior, 3% stated it was an attempt at sexual aggression, and another 3% said it was a form of intimidation.

As for when a *piropo* is considered offensive depending on the characteristics of the situation, 42% of respondents pointed to the content, 19% to the tone or manner in which it was delivered, 5% to the fact that it came from a stranger, 3% cited abuse of trust, and the remaining 31% selected all of the above. This is shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Factors That Make a Piropo Offensive

Options	Frequency	Percentage
Due to its form (How it is said)	72	19%
Due to its content (Words, double meaning, sexual tone)	158	42%
Coming from a stranger	21	5%
Abuse of trust	11	3%
All of the above	116	31%
Total	378	100%

Finally, university members were asked to identify the most offensive *piropo* they had received on campus. A total of 4.72% of respondents mentioned the word "None" as the most repeated among the responses, followed by "Mamacita" with 4.31%, then "Rica" (hot/sexy) at 2.98%, followed by "Piropo" itself with 1.91%, then "Cuerpo" (body) with 0.91%, and finally "Cocina" (kitchen) with 0.75%. These can be seen in detail in Table 6.

Table 6

List of Frequent Words Mentioned in a Piropo

Word	Frequency	Percentage
None	57	4.72%
Mamacita	52	4.31%
Rica	36	2.98%
Piropo	23	1.91%
Cuerpo	11	0.91%
Cocina	9	0.75%
Less relevant words	1019	84.50%
Total words	1207	100.00%

Meanwhile, the remaining 84.50% consist of less relevant words that are not displayed due to their low frequency (less than 0.50% occurrence) in the text of comments collected through the open-ended question. However, Figure 1 shows some of the words that were excluded from the previous analysis.

Figure 1*Word Cloud of Frequent Terms Found in a Piropo*

Thus, Figure 1 shows a broad spectrum of words that become more closely linked as their frequency increases, and which are connected by a shared meaning. However, it is worth noting that some words appearing in the word cloud have little significance on their own, but serve a complementary role in the text to maintain coherence.

3.1. Discussion of the Results

The results of this research show that 62% of the university population reported not having experienced any form of verbal sexual harassment within the ULEAM campus; however, a significant 38% stated they had been harassed through a piropo at the institution. According to Carvajal (2014), piropo is not commonly recognized as one of the main visible manifestations of sexual harassment, precisely due to its normalization within cultural expression. Studies like this one demonstrate that it is indeed a form of harassment and that it should be considered a form of gender-based violence that causes discomfort, especially among women—more so when there is no consent, thereby undermining their integrity.

This reality is equally or even more present in universities in other countries. Buitrón, J. (2024), when discussing the various types of violence in Mexican universities, highlights verbal violence as the most common, with student perception indicating that men are more often the aggressors and women the primary victims. What this author states reflects that the issue of verbal sexual harassment is deeply rooted in Latin American universities, likely due to cultural factors.

In this regard, the findings support the previously mentioned evidence: among the 38% who experienced verbal sexual harassment at ULEAM, nearly half (45%) admitted that their reaction was one of discomfort. Morales and Pérez (2020) argue that piropos not only perpetuate gender

inequality but can also have serious consequences on the mental and emotional health of Ecuadorian women, who have reported anxiety, stress, and fear as a result of harassment in public spaces, including unwanted piropos. All of this points to the piropo as a form of gender-based violence that often goes unnoticed in Ecuadorian universities due to its normalization within Ecuadorian culture.

On another note, the survey determined that 33% of the university population believes that piropos are an attempt at flirting by the person who delivers them. However, Gómez and Román (2019) have highlighted how piropos can be used as a tool of male control and domination over public space, thus perpetuating gender inequalities rooted in society. In this regard, Flórez et al. (2023), in their investigative work, collected the views of university students on myths surrounding sexual harassment in Medellín. They concluded that, according to these students, vulgar piropos are not perceived as a form of harassment—this perception being a result of how such behaviors have become normalized. Nevertheless, experts do identify them as offensive actions. This reveals that verbal sexual harassment is often mistaken for a compliment, which further complicates its recognition within the university setting.

Regarding whether a piropo is offensive based on the characteristics of the situation, nearly half (42%) of respondents stated that it qualifies as harassment when its content is of a sexual nature. Galtung (1998) classifies violence into three types: direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence. The latter lies below the threshold of visible violence, which leads to its erroneous perception as something normal or natural. In this sense, piropo often lies on the line between what is visible and what is socially imperceptible. Saavedra (2022) argues:

“There are circumstances under which violence is instantly recognized; however, there are other contexts where the issue is preferably hidden or normalized. (...) A piropo or a whistle carries various meanings that can be perceived as violence, as they obstruct and discomfort the freedom of the person receiving them.” (p.101)

Saavedra categorizes the piropo as a form of street sexual harassment—harassment that, according to her, is present in countries around the world as an everyday and normalized problem. The survey results confirm the correlation between the literature review and actual events on the topic. This reaffirms the fine line between flirting and harassment. Since piropo is considered a form of harassment prone to invisibility, it is unsurprising that it is often perceived in a normalized way. As González et al. (2020) state, there are harassing behaviors that attempt to go unnoticed or be interpreted as flirtation by the aggressor but are ultimately “perceived as invasive.”

Beyond the interpretation of a *piropo* as harassment, the survey results also revealed that certain words are frequently used in *piropos*. According to the analysis of responses about the most offensive *piropo* received, the word “mamacita” appeared most often ($f = 52$), accounting for 4.31% of the total text in the comments collected in the open-ended question. However, it must be noted that the word “none” appeared most frequently overall—explained by the fact that only 38% of respondents answered affirmatively to the initial question about whether they had experienced harassment through a *piropo*.

Thus, it was confirmed that the most frequently used linguistic expression in male-to-female *piropos* within the ULEAM campus was the word “mamacita.” According to the Royal Spanish Academy, “mamacita” is a diminutive form of “mamá” and is widely used across Central America, South America, and the Caribbean (Real Academia Española, 2014). However, the Association of Spanish Language Academies (2010) notes that “mamacita” is often used to refer to a physically attractive woman, even when there is no prior relationship. Clearly, the meaning of “mamacita” varies according to the context and situation in which it is used. It is not the same when said within a romantic relationship as when it comes from a stranger, as it can be offensive—particularly when accompanied by sexual vocalization or a lewd tone of voice (paralinguistic communication).

As a result, the word “mamacita” in the context of a *piropo* can be interpreted as a form of verbal sexual harassment that makes the recipient feel uncomfortable. According to Guarderas et al. (2023), *piropo* in Ecuadorian universities is an offensive linguistic expression, and within the university environment, it occurs both from male professors toward students and from male students toward female classmates—intimidating them and generating discomfort, panic, and fear.

Likewise, Saeteros et al. (2022), in their research on sexual harassment in higher education, also found that women are the group most exposed to this type of verbal violence, including *piropos*, as a social reproduction of the patriarchal system. This causes discomfort and fear. Fear of retaliation—especially from professors toward students—keeps many victims silent, which is a matter of national concern. These statistics resonate within higher education institutions, as few dare to report, especially when verbal violence is disguised as a compliment. This results in the normalization of such behavior as something culturally accepted, as part of the stereotype of masculinity.

Conclusions

The research results determined that 38% of the university population has experienced some form of verbal sexual harassment through a *piropo* within the premises of ULEAM, whether from a professor or administrative staff member toward a student, or vice versa. Although the number of individuals who reported being victims of harassment does not exceed half of the sample surveyed, it is important to emphasize that this remains a significant percentage. Furthermore, there is a probability that some individuals interpret a *piropo* as a compliment rather than as a form of gender-based violence, since 33% expressed the opinion that a *piropo* is an attempt at flirting. It can therefore be inferred that within the university campus, there are expressions of verbal sexual harassment that are generally not highly visible due to the cultural normalization of violence.

Regarding the impact that a *piropo* has on the person receiving it, the findings showed that among those who responded affirmatively to having been victims of verbal sexual harassment via a *piropo*, 45% reacted with discomfort. This can be attributed to the fact that the content of a *piropo* may be highly offensive, particularly when it carries a sexual connotation—an idea supported by 42% of respondents. The term “mamacita” was the most frequently mentioned ($f = 52$) among those who received such comments. As a result, women are the most affected by *piropos*, since the expressions used can cause discomfort, fear, and insecurity. This reinforces the patriarchal system embedded in Ecuadorian culture and, by extension, in institutions of higher education. However, it is

important to mention that this research, being a case study, does not represent the entire university population of the country. Therefore, broader analyses on the topic are necessary.



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