

# Sexting, Catcalls, and Butt Slaps: How Gender Stereotypes and Perceived Group Norms Predict Sexualized Behavior

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**Abstract** The current study examined the role of endorsed stereotypes about men and women and perceived peer norms in predicting three distinct types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors (verbal, physical, and indirect) among late adolescents. Two hundred and fifty U.S. college students from the mid-South (178 females, 72 males) between the ages of 17 and 19 completed a number of surveys regarding sexual gender stereotypes (e.g., men are sex-focused and women are sexual objects), perceived peer norms about the acceptability of stereotypical sexualized behaviors (SSB), and their own SSBs. Results revealed that most college students have perpetrated these SSBs at least once, and that the most common form of sexualized behavior was verbal SSB, such as rating someone's body. Results also showed that, although the young men and women did not differ in their perpetration of indirect SSBs (e.g., sending pictures via text), young men perpetrated more verbal and physical SSB than women. For young women, endorsing the idea that men are sex-focused predicted all three types of SSB. For young men, endorsing the stereotype that men are sex-focused predicted verbal and physical SSB, and endorsing the stereotype that women are sex objects predicted physical SSB. Importantly, perceived peer group norms were a significant predictor of all three types of SSB for both women and men. Thus, the current study suggests that distinct types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors are common among college students, and are predicted by an individual's stereotypes about men and women and perceived peer norms.

**Keywords** Sexual behavior · Peer norms · Gender stereotypes

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## Introduction

Gender stereotypes that portray women as sexual objects, and portray men as sexually voracious, are common in modern U.S. society (Galambos et al. 1985; Kim et al. 2007; Swim et al. 2001; Terrance et al. 2004; Ward 2002). These stereotypes are heavily promoted in mainstream U.S. television, movies, commercials, and magazines, particularly media that target adolescents (Krassas et al. 2003; Ward 1995; Ward et al. 2006). Analyses of popular U.S. men's magazines, for example, found that 80.5 % of women are depicted in sex object roles (Krassas et al. 2003). Television programs popular among U.S. college students have references to women as sexual objects almost 6 times per hour and references to men as sex-focused almost 4 times per hour (Ferris et al. 2007). Because these stereotypical messages are so pervasive, it is important to examine how individuals are impacted by these stereotypes. U.S. college age students in late adolescence are a particularly important group to examine because youth of this age are heavily targeted by media portraying sexualized gender stereotypes (Cope-Farrar and Kunkel 2002; Ward 2002). Because of the current state of the field, the background and hypotheses are based on research conducted primarily with U.S. samples (unless otherwise noted).

At the same time they are inundated with sexualized gender stereotypes, college age students are also actively pursuing sexual relationships, and thus engaging in sexualized behaviors. For example, according to the Center for Disease Control's National Center for Health Statistics, 64 % of adolescents aged 17–19 have had sexual intercourse at least once (Tyler et al. 2012), while studies of "hooking up" (sexual encounters without the intention of forming a long-term relationship) show that anywhere from 64 % to 78 % of undergraduates report having engaged in at least one hookup (Garcia and Reiber 2008; Paul et al. 2000).

Adolescents also actively engage in sexualized behaviors that do not constitute actual sexual activity, which are referred to as *stereotypical sexualized behaviors*. While sexual behaviors, such as kissing or intercourse, are overtly sexual and usually consensual, stereotypical sexualized behaviors are less actively sexual. Furthermore, stereotypical sexualized behaviors are distinct from sexual behaviors in that they may be wanted or unwanted by the target of the behavior, may be in the context of a relationship or not, and may be verbal, physical, or indirect. In addition, stereotypical sexualized behaviors are often public, perpetrated in front of peers (Timmerman 2003, 2005). When these behaviors are unwanted, they are considered to be sexual harassment or sexual coercion (AAUW 2001; Hand and Sanchez 2000; McMaster et al. 2002). For example, sending a sexual text message (i.e., “sexting”) or snapping a female peer’s bra strap would be stereotypical sexualized behaviors, rather than sexual behaviors.

The current study examines three basic types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors (although this list is not necessarily exhaustive): verbal, physical, and indirect. Examples of *verbal* stereotypical sexualized behaviors include making a sexual comment or joke about someone or rating someone’s body or body parts; *physical* stereotypical sexualized behaviors include touching, grabbing, or pinching someone in a sexual way, or purposefully pulling at someone’s clothes in a sexual way; and *indirect* stereotypical sexualized behaviors include sexting or posting a sexual message to or about someone on the internet.

Research with U.S. samples has clearly shown that these stereotypical sexualized behaviors, whether wanted or not by the target, are extremely common among adolescents and college students. One example of a common indirect stereotypical sexualized behavior is sexting, which occurs among 28 % of 17-year-olds and 32 % of 18-year-olds (Dake et al. 2012). Other studies (e.g., Leaper and Brown 2008) find that more than 90 % of girls by late adolescence have been the target of some form of stereotypical sexualized behaviors. For example, 67 % of girls have been the target of verbal stereotypical sexualized behaviors, such as being told an embarrassing or mean joke or being called a demeaning name, while 51 % of girls have been the target of physical stereotypical sexualized behaviors, such as receiving unwanted physical contact (Leaper and Brown 2008). Thus, it is clear that many adolescents are experiencing these stereotypical sexualized behaviors.

Stereotypical sexualized behaviors are, in several ways, normative. First, they are very common among late adolescents. Second, they are often part of teenage flirting and are one way in which adolescents may express sexual interest or intent towards members of the opposite gender. Despite some normative features, however, they can be associated with many negative academic, social, and psychological outcomes

for the target. For example, stereotypical sexualized behaviors that are unwanted, especially when they are power-based, are labeled as sexual harassment. The targets of sexual harassment, particularly girls, are at risk for feeling emotional distress, embarrassment, depression, suicidal thoughts, substance abuse, and externalizing behaviors (Chiodo et al. 2009; Goldstein et al. 2007). They are also at increased risk for academic problems, school absenteeism, and school disengagement (AAUW 2001; Larkin and Popaleni 1994), and are more likely to question their potential happiness in a long-term relationship than adolescents who do not experience sexual harassment (AAUW 2001).

Although unwanted stereotypical sexualized behaviors may result in negative consequences for the target, the perpetrator may not know that the behavior is unwanted. Among college age students—late adolescents who engage in extensive sexual behaviors (Paul et al. 2000)—it is likely that an individual may perpetrate a stereotypical sexualized behavior oblivious to (or undeterred by) the desires of the target. Furthermore, if these behaviors are perpetrated by women toward men, the behavior may be misinterpreted as a precursor to sexual behavior, when in fact it is intended as benign flirting behavior. Men and women have been shown to interpret benign sexual behaviors differently, such that men may perceive sexual interest and consent when women do not (Basow and Minieri 2011; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). Unfortunately, there is little research on the perpetrations of these behaviors in college age samples.

The current study, therefore, predicts the perpetration of late adolescents’ stereotypical sexualized behaviors. One particularly relevant theory that helps predict an individual’s behavior is a reasoned action theory. Theories of reasoned action argue that an individual’s behavior is influenced by his or her (a) own attitudes and (b) perceptions of peer norms (e.g., Fishbein and Middlestadt 1989). In other words, based on this theoretical framework, the current study predicted that college students’ stereotypical sexualized behaviors are driven by (a) their own attitudes, in the form of their sexualized gender stereotypes about what is expected in heterosexual male–female interactions, and (b) their perceptions of peer norms, such as what they perceive their peers’ stereotypical sexualized behaviors to be. Therefore, situated within reasoned action theory framework, the current study examines whether the endorsement of sexualized gender stereotypes (with women as sexual objects and men as sex-focused), in addition to perceived peer norms about sexualized behaviors, predict late adolescents’ own stereotypical sexualized behaviors.

### Sexualized Gender Stereotypes

By adolescence, many individuals endorse *sexualized gender stereotypes*, stereotypic attitudes about how men and women

(and boys and girls) should act and interact with one another (Ward 2002; Ward and Rivadeneyra 1999). These stereotypes establish a “heterosexual script” regarding heterosexual male–female interactions (Kim et al. 2007; Tolman et al. 2007). These stereotypes indicate (a) that women should strive to be pretty (at the expense of other traits), should seek and be flattered by the sexual attention of men, and should assume men are primarily interested in their bodies, and simultaneously (b) that men should only be interested in women as sexual conquests (not friends), should always be assertively pursuing sexual relationships, and should not be expected to be monogamous. Thus, the “heterosexual script” for men and women involves simultaneously enacting sexualized gender stereotypes in which women are sex objects and men are sex-focused (Kim et al. 2007; Tolman et al. 2007; Ward 2002).

In general, men endorse these stereotypes more strongly than women (Greenberg et al. 1993; Ward 2002; Ward and Rivadeneyra 1999). This finding parallels the broader gender stereotype literature, which finds that boys and men typically endorse gender stereotypes more strongly than girls and women (e.g., Morrison et al. 1997; Signorella et al. 1993). These gender differences may be a reflection of the greater power and status of men relative to women in the US and reflect the more general stereotype that men should be assertive and women should be passive.

It is hypothesized that the endorsement of sexualized gender stereotypes will predict engaging in stereotypical sexualized behaviors. Although these stereotypes have not been previously linked with common stereotypical sexualized behaviors, they have been linked with sexually coercive behaviors among U.S. college students. For example, U.S. college students who endorsed the stereotype that men are sex-focused and serve as sexual pursuers of women were more likely to condone sexually coercive behaviors, were more accepting of dating violence, and were more likely to perceive relationships between women and men to be adversarial, compared to students who reject such stereotypes (Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). It is important, however, to examine whether these stereotypes are also linked to the common sexualized behaviors experienced by the majority of U.S. college age students.

Although we predict a link between sexualized gender stereotypes and stereotypical sexualized behaviors, we assume that stereotypical sexualized behaviors will be gender-specific, as each gender has a different “part” to enact in the heterosexual script (Kim et al. 2007). Specifically, it is hypothesized that young women who endorse sexualized gender stereotypes (and thus are enacting their role in the heterosexual script) will engage in the types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors that sexually objectify themselves to men. In contrast, young men who endorse these stereotypes will be explicitly sexually assertive (both verbally and physically) towards women. Thus, we predict that young women who endorse stronger sexualized gender stereotypes will engage in more stereotypical sexualized

behaviors (e.g., in which they objectify themselves via sending sexual pictures to young men) than women who don’t endorse these stereotypes. Further, it is predicted that young men who endorse stronger sexualized gender stereotypes will engage in more stereotypical sexualized behaviors (e.g., in which they assertively grab or touch a woman in a sexual way) than men who don’t endorse these stereotypes.

### Perceived Peer Norms

In addition to an individual’s stereotypes, according to reasoned action theory (Fishbein and Middlestadt 1989), another factor that may increase the likelihood that someone would engage in stereotypical sexualized behaviors is their perceived norm about that behavior. Specifically, if these behaviors are perceived to be part of the peer culture (i.e., “everyone is doing it”), late adolescents may be particularly inclined to also engage in the behavior. Perceived peer norms, also referred to as descriptive norms, are the perceived rules or expectations about what types of beliefs or behaviors are acceptable or common within a particular peer group (Kincaid 2004). When individuals perceive their peers to strongly endorse a behavior, they are more likely to engage in that behavior (Rimal 2008). In other words, if late adolescents witness their friends directing stereotypical sexualized behaviors towards others, and assume that all of their friends approve of these behaviors, then they are also likely to perpetrate these behaviors towards others.

Studies with U.S. samples have shown that 63 % of younger adolescents in middle and high school who admit to behaving sexually towards a peer claim that they did so because “a lot of people do it” or “their friends encouraged them” (AAUW 2001). As Rodkin and Fischer proposed, sexualized behavior emerges out of “a peer-based school society where attitudes and behaviors are strongly connected to peer group influence and concerns about social status” (2003, p. 177).

Perceived peer norms have been found to be predictive of other types of behaviors. For example, U.S. college students are more likely to drink if they perceive their peers to drink, regardless of their peers’ actual drinking behaviors and expectations (Borsari and Carey 2001, 2003; Neighbors et al. 2006). U.S. students are also more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors if they perceive their friends to do so as well, and conversely, they delay intercourse if they perceive their friends to be abstinent (Kapadia et al. 2012; Maxwell 2002). Ironically, the influence of perceived norms may or may not reflect actual peer behaviors, but are still influential in shaping an individual’s behavior (Berkowitz 2003).

Although it has been suggested that peer norms influence these types of sexualized behaviors (McMaster et al. 2002) and reasoned action theory supports this suggestion, no research has examined the link. However, because of the strong links with other type of behaviors, we predict the same pattern will emerge with stereotypical sexualized behaviors. In the current study,

we examined whether late adolescents' perceived peer group norms surrounding the acceptability of these stereotypical sexualized behaviors predicted their perpetration of these behaviors, over and above their own sexualized gender stereotypes.

### Current Study

In the current study, based on predictions derived from the theory of reasoned action, we examined college students' endorsements of sexualized gender stereotypes, their own reported participation in stereotypical sexualized behaviors, and the perceived acceptability of these behaviors among their peers. We specifically examined three different categories of stereotypical sexualized behaviors: verbal, physical, and indirect. To predict the perpetration of these three types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors, we examined two primary factors: (a) individual endorsement of gender stereotypes about the sexual behaviors and objectification of women and men (i.e., sexualized gender stereotypes, which reflect the common heterosexual script), and (b) perceived peer group norms supporting the different types of behaviors.

First, we predicted that young women and men would hold different levels of stereotypes and report engaging in different frequencies of behaviors. Based on existing research (Morrison et al. 1997), we hypothesized that men would more strongly endorse sexualized gender stereotypes than women. Based on existing research with high school students (AAUW 2001), we also hypothesized that a majority of late adolescents would report engaging in stereotypical sexualized behaviors, although we expected men to report higher frequencies of engaging in these behaviors than women. Specifically, we expected men to engage in more physical and verbal stereotypical sexualized behaviors (the most assertive of the behaviors) directed toward women, relative to women toward men, because of their more assertive role in the heterosexual script.

Second, and more importantly, we hypothesized that late adolescents' endorsement of sexualized gender stereotypes, specifically their endorsement of the stereotype that men are sexually voracious and women should be content to be sexual objects, would predict the degree to which they reported perpetrating the three types of stereotypical sexualized behavior. We also hypothesized that peer norms about the acceptability of each type of stereotypical sexualized behavior would predict late adolescents' own reported perpetration of those behaviors, above and beyond their own stereotypes.

## Method

### Participants

The participants in this study were 250 college students in late adolescence (72 boys, 178 girls) attending a large university in

a medium-sized city (population approximately 300,000). Of the 250 participants, all were between 17 and 19 years old. Their mean age was 18.49 years (boys' mean age was 18.42 years; girls' mean age was 18.52 years). All were heterosexual and had begun dating. Slightly more than one-quarter (27 %) of the men were members of a fraternity, and more than one-third of the women (39 %) were members of a sorority. Of the participants, 81 % were White (71 % of which were women), 11 % were African-American (63 % of which were women) and 4 % were multi-racial (80 % of which were women). The ethnic composition is representative of the school and the region it serves (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

### Procedure

Participants were students enrolled in introductory psychology classes. They responded to research credit advertisements and received research credit towards their class requirement in return for their participation.

After confirming via e-mail that they were between the ages of 17 and 19, heterosexual, and had begun dating, participants reported to a research lab and met with a lab assistant. In order to preserve participants' privacy, only one participant was present in each research lab at a time. Participants were given an iPad containing an electronic consent form and the surveys via an online survey program. Once the online survey was completed, participants were given research credit and excused.

### Measures

The measures were always administered in the following order: demographics, sexualized gender stereotypes, stereotypical sexualized behaviors (perpetration followed by norms for each behavior before addressing the next behavior).

#### *Sexualized Gender Stereotypes*

Participants completed the "Attitudes about Dating and Sexual Relationships" scale (Ward 2002). We specifically tapped their endorsement of the beliefs that (a) men are sex-focused (six items) and (b) women are sex objects (six items). The men as sex-focused (MSF) subscale included items such as, "It's natural for a boy to want to admire girls and to comment on their bodies" and "Boys are always ready and willing for sex; they think about it all the time." The women as sex objects (WSO) subscale included items such as "The best way for a girl to attract a guy is to use her body and looks" and "An attractive girl should expect sexual advances and should learn how to handle them." (We used the terms boys and girl, rather than men and women, because those are the terms the college age participants most identified with).

Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using the following



scale: 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (disagree), 3 (somewhat disagree), 4 (somewhat agree), 5 (agree), 6 (strongly agree). Although it was possible to average all of the items together for one overall stereotype score, the subscales were kept separate in the analysis for a more complete picture of how stereotypes predict behaviors. Thus, scores within each subscale were averaged, with higher numbers indicating a greater endorsement of stereotypes. See Table 1. Reliability was acceptable for both subscales (MSF  $\alpha=.76$ ; WSO  $\alpha=.73$ ).

#### *Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors (SSB)*

To measure reported perpetration of stereotypical sexualized behaviors, we used a modified version of the AAUW Sexual Harassment Survey (2001). This measure includes specific sexualized behaviors that can be perceived as sexual harassment if unwanted by the target. However, the current study was most interested in what predicts these sexual behaviors, rather than how the targets perceive the behaviors. From the AAUW larger measure, we created three categories of stereotypical sexualized behaviors, each of which consisted of two behaviors that were conceptually similar and significantly correlated. These categories are *verbal SSB* (“Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures” and “Made comments about or rated the parts of someone’s body”); *physical SSB* (“Touched, grabbed, or pinched someone in a sexual way” and “Pulled at someone’s clothing in a sexual way”); and *indirect SSB* (“Shown, given, sent, or left sexual pictures or text messages” and “Left sexual posts on someone’s wall or sent someone sexual messages”). These categories were created on the basis of (a) a factor analysis, which indicated that the indirect SSB loaded as one distinct factor, and (b) the conceptual differences (in terms of differences in associated physicality, strength, and gender norms) between making a comment to someone (i.e., verbal SSB) and grabbing someone (i.e., physical SSB).

We created two subsections of this measure to investigate participants’ (a) reported perpetration of each SSB and (b) perceived peer group norms about the acceptability of each SSB. All participants completed both subsections. Means for each subscale are reported in Table 1.

*Perpetration of Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors* To assess whether participants reported perpetrating the three categories of stereotypical sexualized behaviors, they answered questions that were phrased as “How often have you done the following behavior to a peer?” Participants responded using the following scale: 0 (never), 1 (a few times), 2 (often), 3 (very often), 4 (daily). Following each item, participants were asked, “Did you do this to...,” with the response options of a boy, a girl, both, or neither. For the current study, we only examined behaviors that were directed to other-gender peers. Inter-item correlations on each subscale were significant at  $p<.01$  (verbal SSB  $r=.33$ ; physical SSB  $r=.54$ ; indirect SSB  $r=.34$ ).

**Table 1** Means and standard deviations of variables used in analyses

Measure	Males	Females	Total
MSF	2.77(1.99) <sub>a</sub>	2.30(.76) <sub>a</sub>	2.44(1.26)
WSO	2.57(1.98) <sub>b</sub>	1.82(1.27) <sub>b</sub>	2.04(1.54)
Verbal SSB Perpetration	1.27(.77) <sub>c</sub>	.80(.61) <sub>c</sub>	.94(.69)
Physical SSB Perpetration	.81(.72) <sub>d</sub>	.49(.60) <sub>d</sub>	.59(.65)
Indirect SSB Perpetration	.40(.42)	.35(.47)	.37(.45)
Verbal SSB Norms	1.28(.58) <sub>e</sub>	1.05(.52) <sub>e</sub>	1.12(.55)
Physical SSB Norms	.91(.37) <sub>f</sub>	.75(.53) <sub>f</sub>	.80(.50)
Indirect SSB Norms	.83(.57) <sub>g</sub>	.56(.50) <sub>g</sub>	.64(.54)

Means are listed first, standard deviations appear in parentheses. Abbreviations: *MSF* Men are Sex-Focused, *WSO* Women are Sex Objects, *SSB* Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors. Scores for MSF and WSO range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Scores for SSB Perpetration range from 0 (never) to 4 (daily). Scores for SSB Norms range from 0 (never) to 3 (always). Means with matching subscripts are significantly different from one another at  $p<.05$

*Perceived Norms about Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors* To assess participants’ perceived peer norms surrounding each category of stereotypical sexualized behavior, the questions were phrased as “Do your friends think it is okay to...” Participants responded using the following scale: 0 (never okay), 1 (sometimes okay), 2 (usually okay), 3 (always okay). Inter-item correlations on each subscale were significant at  $p<.01$  (verbal NSSB  $r=.31$ ; physical NSSB  $r=.61$ ; indirect NSSB  $r=.42$ ).

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

Table 1 shows the means of all variables and Table 2 shows the correlations of all variables. All means were tested for gender differences. Gender differences were found for all variables except indirect SSBs.

Correlations were also tested for gender differences. There were both similarities and differences across young women and men. For both women and men, the two subscales of the sexualized gender stereotype measure (that men are sex-focused and women are sex objects) were positively correlated with each other. Also, for both men and women, perpetration of each SSB was correlated with perceived norms about that SSB. The primary gender difference between the correlations (at  $p<.05$ ) is that the associations between reported perpetration and perceived norms for each SSB were significantly stronger for men than women (ranging from  $r_s=.57-.70$  for men and  $.37-.42$  for women). In other words, men’s reported behaviors were more closely aligned with their perceptions of peer norms than women’s were.

**Table 2** Pearson correlations

Measure	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. MSF	–	.25*	.35**	.40**	.18	.12	.14	.24*
2. WSO	.33**	–	.13	.38**	.20	.10	.17	.16
3. Verbal SSB Perpetration	.30**	.16*	–	.50**	.26*	.61**	.45**	.35**
4. Physical SSB Perpetration	.23**	.10	.59**	–	.38**	.26*	.42**	.23*
5. Indirect SSB Perpetration	.22**	.15*	.39**	.27**	–	.23*	.31**	.39**
6. Verbal SSB Norms	.23**	.14	.36**	.25**	.36	–	.52**	.45**
7. Physical SSB Norms	.23**	.16*	.36**	.70**	.14	.50**	–	.51**
8. Indirect SSB Norms	.25**	.22**	.32**	.22**	.57**	.53**	.27**	–

Correlations above the diagonal are for males ( $N=72$ ); correlations below the diagonal are for females ( $N=178$ )

MSF Men are Sex-Focused, WSO Women are Sex Objects, SSB Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

## Gender Differences in Endorsement of Stereotypes and Reported Behavior

### Sexualized Gender Stereotypes

To test the hypothesis that young men would endorse more gender stereotypes than young women, a 2 (gender: men, women) X 2 (sexualized gender stereotype subscale: men are sex-focused [MSF], women are sex objects [WSO]) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. Results indicated a main effect of gender, such that that young men endorsed both components of the gender stereotype more than young women,  $F(1,248)=15.37$ ,  $p < .001$ . As predicted, late adolescent men endorsed the beliefs that men are sex-focused and women are sex objects more than women did. In addition, results indicated a main effect of stereotype component, such that both women and men endorsed the idea that men are sex-focused more than they endorsed the idea that women are sex objects,  $F(1,248)=8.53$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors

It was hypothesized that a majority of late adolescents would report perpetrating stereotypical sexualized behaviors (SSB), and that young men would report perpetration more than young women. We further predicted that men would perpetrate the two types of direct (i.e., assertive) SSBs—physical and verbal—more often than women (because of their more assertive role in the “Heterosexual Script”).

Overall, the rates of stereotypical sexualized behaviors were extremely high. As predicted, the majority of participants of both genders engaged in these behaviors, with 95.8 % of young men and 88.8 % of young women reporting engaging in these behaviors *at least once*. This was a significant gender difference,  $t(248)=4.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . The percentages of men and women who reported perpetrating each behavior at least once are listed in Table 3.

To examine whether the type of stereotypical sexualized behavior differed based on participants' gender, a 2 (gender of perpetrator: men, women) X 3 (type of SSB: verbal, physical, and indirect) repeated measures ANOVA was conducted.

Means are presented in Table 1. Results revealed a main effect of gender, such that young men perpetrated more overall stereotypical sexualized behaviors than young women,  $F(1,248)=19.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2=.07$ . There was a main effect of type of behavior,  $F[2,247]=108.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2=.30$ . Post hoc tests indicated that verbal SSB were reported as occurring significantly more often than physical SSB, which in turn were reported as occurring significantly more often than indirect SSB. There was also a significant interaction between gender and type of SSB,  $F(2,247)=11.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2=.04$ . Tests of simple effects indicated, as hypothesized, that young men reported perpetrating more physical SSB and verbal SSB than women. There was no gender difference in indirect SSB.

### Predicting Perpetration of Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors with Gender Stereotypes and Peer Norms

We hypothesized that late adolescents' endorsement of sexualized gender stereotypes and perceived peer norms would predict the degree to which they reported perpetrating the three types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors. To test this hypothesis, hierarchical multiple regression models were analyzed for each type of SSB. Specifically, we examined whether endorsement of the sexualized gender subscales accounted for a significant amount of variance in reported perpetration of the different types of SSB. We then examined whether perceived peer group norms were important predictors of reported perpetration of SSB over and above endorsement of gender stereotypes. To examine whether gender moderated these associations, analyses were conducted separately by gender.

Table 4 details the results of these regression models. For young men, the endorsement of the stereotype that men are sex-focused predicted their reported perpetration of verbal and physical SSB. Thus, believing that men should always be assertively pursuing sexual relationships with women predicted their own use of the more direct stereotypical sexualized behaviors. Endorsing the stereotype that women are sexual objects also predicted males' physical SSB. For all three types of SSB, perceived peer group norms were a significant predictor of reported perpetration. For indirect SSB, peer norms were, in fact, the only significant predictor. Thus, perceiving

**Table 3** Stereotypical Sexualized Behaviors (SSB): percentage and counts of participants who have perpetrated each behavior at least once

	Men		Women	
	Percentage	Count ( <i>N</i> =72)	Percentage	Count ( <i>N</i> =178)
Verbal SSB:				
Made sexual comments, jokes, gestures	93.1 %	67	78.1 %	139
Made comments about someone's body	75.0 %	54	53.9 %	96
Physical SSB:				
Touch, grab, or pinch in a sexual way	70.8 %	51	44.9 %	80
Pulled at someone's clothes in sexual way	61.1 %	44	34.8 %	62
Indirect SSB:				
Left sexual pictures or text messages	54.2 %	39	48.3 %	86
Left sexual posts/sent sexual messages on website	20.8 %	15	9.6 %	17

Numbers are percentages of men and women who have perpetrated each behavior at least once (i.e., gave any rating above 0, indicating never)

their friends to be accepting of SSB predicted young men perpetrating all three types of SSB, above and beyond their own stereotypes about women and men.

For young women, a simpler pattern emerged. For all three types of SSB, reported perpetration of SSB was predicted by two factors: (a) endorsement of the stereotype that men are sex-focused and (b) reported perceived peer group norms. Thus, young women's stereotypes about men's strong interest in sex (but not the component of the stereotype that women

are sex objects) predicted their own SSB perpetration, and their perceived peer group norms predicted all three types of SSB, over and above their own stereotypes.

## Discussion

The goal of the current study was to examine how the endorsement of sexualized gender stereotypes and perceived

**Table 4** Hierarchical regression models predicting different types of sexualized behaviors by gender

Type of SB	Variable	Males			Females		
		<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> ( <i>B</i> )	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i> ( <i>B</i> )	$\beta$
Verbal							
	(1) MSF	.13	.05	.34**	.22	.06	.28***
	WSO	.02	.05	.04	.03	.04	.07
	(2) Verbal Norms	.77	.12	.58***	.35	.08	.30***
	$R^2$ with SGS		.13**			.10***	
	$R^2 \Delta$		.32***			.09***	
	<i>F</i> Final Model		18.71***			12.87***	
Physical							
	(1) MSF	.12	.04	.33**	.17	.06	.22**
	WSO	.11	.04	.29**	.01	.04	.03
	(2) Physical Norms	.65	.20	.33**	.78	.06	.69***
	$R^2$ with SGS		.24***			.05**	
	$R^2 \Delta$		.11**			.44***	
	<i>F</i> Final Model		11.92**			56.57***	
Indirect							
	(1) MSF	.03	.03	.14	.12	.05	.20*
	WSO	.05	.03	.16	.03	.03	.09
	(2) Indirect Norms	.26	.08	.35**	.51	.06	.54***
	$R^2$ with SGS		.06			.06**	
	$R^2 \Delta$		.11**			.27***	
	<i>F</i> Final Model		4.71**			28.00***	

All *B*, *SE* (*B*) and  $\beta$  values are for the final model

*MSF* Men are Sex-Focused, *WSO* Women are Sexual Objects, *SGS* Sexualized Gender Stereotypes

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

peer norms predicted the reported perpetration of stereotypical sexualized behaviors among late adolescents of college age (using reasoned action theory as the guiding framework). As predicted, and as shown in previous research with U.S. samples, stereotypical sexualized behaviors were common among college students, with the vast majority of men and women reporting that they had perpetrated these SSBs against an opposite-gender peer at least once. Despite the high frequency of having perpetrated SSB at least once, the overall means of perpetration were relatively low. On average, young men and women reported perpetrating physical, verbal, and indirect SSBs a few times or less. Thus, though almost everyone reported having perpetrated stereotypical sexualized behaviors at some point, most adolescents did not engage in these behaviors with regularity.

The current study extended previous research by closely examining the reported perpetration of different types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors. Specifically, the results indicated that late adolescents were most likely to report making sexualized comments to others. Indeed, the single most frequently reported type of stereotypical sexualized behavior was young men making sexual comments or jokes to women. As hypothesized, although it occurred less often than verbal SSB, young men were also likely to report touching, grabbing, pinching, or pulling the clothing of a young woman in a sexual way (physical SSB), a behavior much less common among young women. Least common, although still reported by more than half of the young men and women in the study, was indirect SSB, which involved sending someone sexual pictures or texts (i.e., “sexting”). Young men and young women reported perpetrating this form of SSB at the same rate.

These findings indicate that young men and women are both similar and different in their reported perpetration of stereotypical sexualized behaviors. They are similar in that they both report engaging in similar levels of indirect stereotypical sexualized behavior. These indirect forms are markedly different than verbal or physical sexualized behavior in that they are never face-to-face and typically done while alone rather than in front of peers (although the pictures may be received, shown, or looked at with peers). Indirect forms of sexualized behaviors may feel like the safest way (both physically and socially) for women to engage in sexualized behavior toward men.

Based on the current study, it is unclear exactly what types of pictures young men and women were sharing. Some evidence suggests that young women feel social pressures to send sexual pictures of themselves to men they are either currently dating or wanting to date, pictures which are then often shared with other men (Lenhart 2009). For example, one girl stated that “most of the girls who have [sent sexual pictures] are usually pressured by a guy that they like or want to like them, or their boyfriends” (Lenhart 2009). This finding suggests that both young men and women are allowing men to be sexually

assertive in sexually objectifying women, in line with the broader social stereotypes and the Heterosexual Script (Kim et al. 2007; Swim et al. 2001; Ward 2002). Future research should closely examine this specific type of stereotypical sexualized behavior, as it this form of sexualized behavior is increasingly common in our current era of computers and smartphones (Lenhart 2009).

There were, however, gender differences in the perpetration of stereotypical sexualized behaviors. Young men reported making more harassing comments, jokes, and gestures, and being more physically assertive, than young women. This gender difference reflects the same power dynamic that is part of the broader societal stereotype that females should be passive and males should be assertive (e.g., Swim et al. 2001). That broader social stereotype seems to be played out in the actual behaviors of the late adolescents, with young men directing more assertive sexualized behaviors toward young women than vice versa. This gender difference also parallels gender differences in intimate partner violence and sexually coercive behaviors, such that men are more likely to be physically abusive and sexually coercive than women (Belknap and Melton 2005; Ménard et al. 2003). Future research should explore attributes of the men who are most likely to be physically assertive by sexually harassing women, and whether this tendency is linked with more extreme forms of sexual violence.

The primary goal of the current study, however, was to better understand what predicts these relatively common stereotypical sexualized behaviors. It was hypothesized that, as reasoned action theory would predict, endorsing the stereotypes that men are sex-focused and women are sex objects would be linked with late adolescents’ sexualized behavior. This hypothesis was supported, although the different components of the sexualized gender stereotype played different roles for different types of stereotypical sexualized behaviors.

Among young women, endorsing the component of the gender stereotype that women are sexual objects was never a significant predictor of their own stereotypical sexualized behaviors. In contrast, endorsing the component of the stereotype that men are sex-focused was consistently related to their perpetration of all three types of SSB. Specifically, young women who more strongly endorsed the stereotype that men are always focused on sex reported making more sexual comments to and about young men, pulling their clothing in a sexual way more often, and sending sexual pictures more often than young women who did not strongly endorse this stereotype. Although young men endorsed this component of the sexualized gender stereotype more strongly than young women, only half of the young women in the sample explicitly disagreed with this sexualized gender stereotype that men are focused on sex.

For young women, there is potential risk in endorsing the stereotype that men are solely interested in women because of



sex, and exhibiting corresponding sexualized behaviors. Men and women have been shown to interpret benign sexual behaviors differently, such that men may perceive sexual interest and consent when women do not (Basow, and Minieri 2011; Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). Thus, women who engage in physical or verbal stereotypical sexualized behaviors towards men may be simply “flirting,” but these behaviors may be misinterpreted as sexual interest and consent, which may put young women at greater risk for acquaintance or date rape. This misunderstanding is especially likely if they are engaging in those behaviors simply because of perceived pressures from men or peers.

Among young men, those who endorsed the component of the sexualized gender stereotype that men are sex-focused were more likely to report engaging in both types of direct stereotypical sexualized behaviors—verbal and physical—than young men who did not report endorsing the stereotype that men are sex-focused. In other words, men who believed that men should sexually pursue as many women as possible, and should consider it a sign of status to obtain sexual partners, were more likely to report making sexual comments to women, rating their bodies, and touching, grabbing, or pulling on their clothes in a sexual way than men who do not endorse these stereotypes. Furthermore, young men’s reported perpetration of sexualized physical behaviors was also predicted by their endorsement of the sexualized gender stereotype in which women are sexual objects.

Together, these findings lend support to previous research that found that men who endorse statements such as “Men are out for only one thing” are more likely to be involved in sexual aggression during dating scenarios than men who do not endorse such statements (Muehlenhard and Linton 1987). The current study extends this previous research by linking sexualized gender stereotypes with more normative (although perhaps not entirely unrelated) assertive sexualized behaviors. The young men in our sample seem to be following a gendered Heterosexual Script, in which men are *supposed* to act in a specific, highly sexual way toward women (Kim et al. 2007). Future research should examine whether these physical and verbal stereotypical sexualized behaviors are, in turn, associated with sexual aggression among men.

As predicted by reasoned action theory, perceived peer norms about stereotypical sexualized behaviors were highly predictive of college students’ behavior, above and beyond their own stereotypes. Perceived peer norms have been shown to be incredibly powerful in predicting individuals’ behavior (e.g., Rimal 2008). Indeed, in the current study, perceived peer group norms predicted reported perpetration of all three types of behavior for both men and women, over and above their own sexualized gender stereotypes. For young men, in fact, their perception of what their friends accept was a more consistent predictor of their verbal, physical, and indirect stereotypical sexualized behaviors than their own attitudes.

Thus, late adolescents in college are using their perceptions of their friends’ attitudes to drive their own behavior, even more than their own attitudes.

It is important to remember that the current study investigated the *perception* of their friends’ attitudes and not their friends’ actual behavior. Interestingly, previous research with U.S. samples has shown that late adolescents’ perception of their friends’ behavior can be more predictive of their own behavior than their friends’ actual behavior (for drinking behaviors, see Borsari and Carey 2001, 2003; Neighbors et al. 2006). If an individual perceives his or her friends to engage in a certain behavior, regardless of what the friends are actually doing, the individual is more likely to engage in the same behavior than if he does not perceive his friends to engage in that behavior. Social norms, and fitting into the social norm, are powerful forces for humans, particularly among this age group (Berkowitz 2003). Indeed, numerous college-based interventions designed to reduce risky behaviors are most effective when they change individuals’ perceptions of peer norms (Berkowitz 2003). The current study extends this general peer finding to stereotypical sexualized behavior, and supports previous work suggesting that sexualized behaviors are peer-normed behaviors, similar to drinking and risky sexual behavior.

As with all research, the current study has limitations. First, the study is cross-sectional and correlational. It is unclear whether the perception of peer acceptance of stereotypical sexualized behavior leads to greater perpetration of the behaviors over time, or whether individuals perpetrate these behaviors and then simply assume that their friends are accepting of the behavior. In addition, this study was conducted with primarily White U.S. college students. It is important to examine these behaviors and stereotypes among younger adolescents and with a more diverse sample. Indeed, many of these issues may only be relevant to a U.S. college culture, noted for its high rates of casual sexual behavior, and not indicative of same-age peers in the workforce or cross-cultural samples. The measures were not counterbalanced, so there is a chance that the earlier measures influenced participants’ responses to the later measures. Finally, the current study does not explain the context in which these stereotypical sexualized behaviors occur. For example, do adolescents only behave this way when peers are physically present or does alcohol contribute to increased stereotypical sexualized behaviors? Future research should more closely examine these contextual influences.

Despite the limitations, however, the findings from this study have implications for interventions aimed at reducing the risks associated with stereotypical sexualized behavior. These behaviors are potentially risky for two reasons. First, these behaviors could be unwanted and thus experienced as sexual harassment by the target. Second, these behaviors, particularly when enacted by women, could be misinterpreted by men as signs of sexual consent. We suggest that college-age

women and men be taught to attend to the reactions of the target. If the behaviors are unwanted, then the perpetrator needs to stop the behavior. In addition, both women and men need to be clear about their intentions in engaging in these behaviors. These behaviors could be benign signs of courtship and precursors to consensual sexual relationships. However, because these behaviors are linked to sexualized gender stereotypes that include different power dynamics between women and men, they have the potential to be stereotyped scripts rather than expressions of actual interests.

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