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Factors Influencing Labeling Nonconsensual Sex as Sexual Assault

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Abstract

The current study examined the effects of physical attractiveness and sexual interest cues on men's sexual perceptions of women and whether increases in sexual perceptions of a woman would lead to decreases in labeling of subsequent nonconsensual sex as sexual assault. Two hundred thirty-three male college students ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.17$, $SD = 1.22$) read a vignette describing a hypothetical social interaction between a man and a woman; within the vignette, the female character's physical attractiveness (attractive vs. less attractive) and the degree to which the female character behaved interested in the male character (uninterested vs. ambiguous) were manipulated. The vignette ends with the male character physically forcing sexual intercourse with the female character. After reading the vignette, participants' labeling of the nonconsensual sex as sexual assault was addressed. Participants' perceptions of the female character's sexual interest in the male character prior to the nonconsensual sex was assessed as a dependent variable during stopping points in the vignette, prior to sexual assault. Both physical attractiveness and interest cues had a significant positive influence on men's perception of the female character as sexually interested. In addition, perceptions of sexual interest had a direct negative effect on sexual assault labeling. These results indicate that increases in physical attractiveness and interest cues increase perceptions of sexual interest, in turn decreasing the labeling of nonconsensual sex as sexual assault. This experimental research contributes to the literature on misperception of sexual interest and sexual assault labeling. These findings provide implications for intervention programs and for forensic issues related to sexual assault.

Keywords

sexual assault labeling; misperception of sexual intent; college men

The term sexual assault refers to a range of behaviors, including fondling, kissing, and oral, vaginal, or anal penetration obtained through force, threatening to use force, or victim's inability to give consent due to age, intoxication, or mental status (Abbey, Zawacki, Buck, Clinton, & McAuslan, 2004). Although the legal definition of sexual assault differs slightly

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from state to state, this definition fits the federal law and most state laws (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995; Koss, 1996).

Sexual assault is most common among college-aged individuals, ranging from late adolescence to early adulthood (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995; National Victim Center, 1992). Over 25% of this age group are college students, putting college students at high risk for sexual assault (Zawacki, 2008). For this reason, studies have been conducted to determine the prevalence of sexual assault in college samples. A study by Koss, Gidycz, and Wisniewski (1987) surveyed over 3,000 women and almost 3,000 men from 32 American universities and found that since age 14 years, 54% of female college students had experienced some form of sexual assault, while only 25% of males reported committing some form of sexual assault. In addition, the Campus Sexual Assault (CSA) Study found that 13.7% of undergraduate women had been victims of at least one completed sexual assault since entering college (Fisher, Cullen, & Turner, 2000). Similar results have been found for females by other studies from different universities (Edwards, Kearns, Calhoun, & Gidycz, 2009; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Neal & Mangis, 1995). On the contrary, men's self-reported perpetration has varied from about 10.5% to 57% depending on the study (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Craig, Kalichman, & Follingstad, 1989; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Rapaport & Burkhart, 1984).

On average, men report far less sexual assault perpetration than women report sexual assault victimization. There are many potential reasons why women's victimization rates differ from men's self-report rates of perpetration. One potential explanation is that men and women label nonconsensual intercourse differently. This gender difference in labeling could be due to perceptions and beliefs that keep male perpetrators from correctly labeling their sexual assault. Improper labeling of a sexual assault could lead to further perpetration, which could contribute to the high numbers of self-reported sexual assaults in the female population.

Sexual Interest Perceptions and Sexual Assault Labeling

Aspects of the social interaction prior to nonconsensual sex may influence its labeling as sexual assault. One potential aspect of social interactions that may influence men's labeling is men's overperception of women's level of sexual interest. Gender differences in perceptions of sexual interest have been empirically examined since Abbey's (1982) landmark study, which found that in comparison to female raters, male raters perceived opposite sex targets as more sexually interested. The research design consisted of four participants: two men and two women. Participants were paired into dyads: one dyad was to engage in a conversation, while the other dyad observed their actions from a separate room. Both dyads were asked to rate the degree to which the participants were behaving in a flirtatious, seductive, and promiscuous manner. Results showed that the male actors rated the female actor as being more seductive and promiscuous than the female actors rated themselves. Also, male actors reported being more sexually attracted to the opposite sex actor than female actors did. Finally, the male observers rated the female actors as being more sexually attracted to their partners than did the female observer. Since this time many authors have found similar misperception effects using various methodologies (Abbey,

Cozzarelli, McLaughlin, & Harnish, 1987; Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Abbey & Melby, 1986; Bostwick & Delucia, 1992; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Harnish, Abbey, & DeBono, 1990; Haselton & Buss, 2000; Henningsen & Henningsen, 2010; Saal, Johnson, & Weber, 1989; Shotland & Craig, 1988).

Abbey (1991) posited that men's overperception of sexual interest may lead to difficulty identifying uninterested female partners. Often, males who commit sexual assault report that they initially perceived their partner as sexually interested before the sexual assault occurred (Abbey et al., 1998). Also, numerous studies have linked overperception of sexual interest with sexual assault, finding that men who have engaged in sexually aggressive behavior are significantly more likely to overperceive women's sexual interest than are other men (Abbey et al., 1998; Kanin, 1984; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). Perception of sexual interest may contribute to incorrect labeling of sexual assault. A man who overperceives his companion's sexual interest may be unlikely to label subsequent nonconsensual sex as a sexual assault because he incorrectly believes she has implicitly consented to sex earlier in their social interaction.

One explanation for why men's overperception of women's sexual interest happens is that men are socialized to view the world in sexual terms (Abbey, 1987). Thus, men are prone to attribute more sexual meaning to interest cues than may be intended by a woman. In addition, men might misperceive sexual interest by assuming that women have the same level of sexual interest as themselves (Shotland & Craig, 1988). Men who anticipate having sex with their partner often misperceive their partner's cues as sexual (Abbey et al., 1998).

Interest Cues and Perceptions of Sexual Interest

Often, sexual interest cues are ambiguous or vague to save embarrassment for both parties (Koeppel, Montagne-Miller, O'Hair, & Cody, 1993). For example, if a woman is sexually interested in a man but unsure whether the man is interested, she may not be very overt with her cues to avoid the embarrassment of rejection. In addition, if a woman is not interested in a man, she may continue to be friendly to save the man from embarrassment. Another possibility is that if the woman is not interested in the man and the man is not interested either, the woman will not openly reject the man because she may be unsure of the man's true level of sexual interest to begin with, which can be embarrassing for both parties. In all scenarios, the woman may display cues that are ambiguous to avoid conflict, whether it is embarrassment, rejection, or awkwardness. Some authors suggest that more ambiguous cues of sexual interest are more likely to be misperceived than less ambiguous cues (Fisher & Walters, 2003; Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Kowalski, 1993; Shotland & Craig, 1988).

When a man sees the possibility to have consensual sex, he may perceive ambiguous cues as sexual interest cues. This can be of concern for several reasons, specifically, related to sexual assault. For example, a man's misperception of interest cues is related to committing sexual assault (Abbey et al., 1998). Furthermore, if sexual interest is perceived when it is not intended, men may incorrectly believe that they have been "led on." College men who committed sexual assault on dates were more likely to feel that the woman had "led them on" than men who had not engaged in assault (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987). Also,

compared to noncoercive men, sexually coercive college men report more experiences where they had mistakenly perceived a woman as sexually attracted to them only to find out later that the woman was merely trying to be friendly (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004; Abbey et al., 1998; Abbey et al., 2002). In addition, in college-aged men, an inability to distinguish interest cues has been linked to sexually coercive and aggressive behavior (Farris, Treat, Viken, & McFall, 2008).

Physical Attractiveness and Perceptions of Sexual Interest

Although physical attractiveness has been studied in depth within many areas of psychology, it has been understudied in terms of its relationship to the perception of sexual interest. In their review, Farris et al. (2008) address this issue, explaining that the influence of attractiveness on perceptions of sexual interest has not been well-studied. Since this time only one study has directly assessed this relationship and found that men's ratings of female physical attractiveness correlated positively with the degree to which the women's sexual interest was overperceived (Perilloux, Easton, & Buss, 2012).

Although Perilloux et al.'s (2012) study is the only research to our knowledge assessing this relationship, there is other research that can help guide predictions pertaining to physical attractiveness and sexual interest perceptions. Some evidence indicates that men perceive physically attractive women as more sexually aroused than average women; this effect was found in men's ratings of neutral headshots of attractive and average women (Maner et al., 2005).

These findings suggest that female physical attractiveness may influence male's overperception of sexual interest. Shotland and Craig (1988) posited that men might assume women have a similar degree of sexual interest as themselves. In other words, a man's perception of sexual interest from a woman is based on his level of sexual interest in that woman. A man may perceive a physically attractive woman as more sexually interested than a less attractive woman because he is sexually interested in the physically attractive woman; this effect is a product of the male projecting his level of sexual interest and assuming that the woman is equally as sexually interested as he is. Furthermore, Harnish et al. (1990) suggested that based on socialization, men are taught to focus on physical attractiveness and sexual availability of women; this in effect produces a sexual schema about women. As a result, men may take information about women, such as physical attractiveness, and attribute sexual characteristics to these women. For example, a study assessing inferences made about female targets' sexual experiences found that physically attractive women are perceived as more sexually experienced (Garcia & Kushnier, 1987). Thus, research has shown that a woman's level of physical attractiveness affects areas of men's perceptions of her sexuality.

Overview of Current Study

The current study addresses the following two overarching research questions:

Research Question 1: What factors in a social interaction increase a man's sexual perceptions of a woman?

Research Question 2: Do these increases in a man's perceptions of a woman's sexual interest during a social interaction decrease his labeling of subsequent nonconsensual sex as sexual assault?

In the current study, male participants will read an experimental vignette describing a sexual encounter between a male character (Jeff) and a female character (Andrea). The experimental story depicts a social interaction in which the male character walks the female character home after a party and the two characters decide to watch a movie together at the female character's apartment. The vignette ends with the male character physically forcing sexual intercourse against the female character's will. The vignette includes the following two manipulated variables with two levels each: (a) the physical attractiveness of the female story character (attractive or less attractive) and (b) the degree to which the female story character behaves uninterested in the male character (uninterested rejection cues or ambiguous mixed cues) during her social interaction with him prior to the sexual assault. Dependent variables include participants' perceptions of the female character's sexual interest in the male character prior to the nonconsensual sex, and participants' labeling of the nonconsensual sex as sexual assault.

We hypothesized that the manipulated factors of victim's interest cues (uninterested vs. ambiguous) and victim's physical attractiveness (attractive vs. less attractive) will indirectly influence participants' sexual assault labeling via their direct effects on participants' perceptions of the female character's sexual interest in the male character (see Figure 1). We hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 1: Compared to participants in the uninterested cue condition, those in the ambiguous cue condition will give higher ratings of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character.

Hypothesis 2: Compared to participants in the less attractive victim condition, those in the attractive victim condition will give higher ratings of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character.

Hypothesis 3: Manipulated physical attractiveness of the victim will interact with manipulated interest cues to influence ratings of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character.

Specifically, it is hypothesized that the effect of physical attractiveness will be present within the ambiguous cue condition but not within the uninterested rejection cues condition. This pattern of interaction is hypothesized based on past research showing that men are able to correctly read cues of sexual interest and disinterest when they are not ambiguous (Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Shotland & Craig, 1988). Therefore, only the ambiguous cues condition provides a context in which the physical attractiveness variable can exert an effect on ratings of the female character's sexual interest in the male character. Hence, it is hypothesized that in the ambiguous cues condition, the physically attractive victim condition will result in higher ratings of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character, while within the uninterested rejection condition there will be no significant effect of victim's physical attractiveness on ratings of the female character's sexual interest. Finally, we hypothesized the following:

Hypothesis 4: Increased ratings of participants' perceptions of the female character's sexual interest will, in turn, decrease participants' labeling of the situation as sexual assault.

Method

Participants

Participants consisted of 233 male Introduction to Psychology students recruited via University of Texas at San Antonio's experiment management system. Here, they were able to view the study titled "Dating Opinions," read a brief description stating the purpose of the study to investigate men's opinions of dating scenarios, and register for participation. To be eligible for this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) participants were required to be above the age of 18 years, and (b) participants must have reported interest in dating the opposite sex. Upon completion, participants were compensated with partial credit toward their Introduction to Psychology course requirement. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 40 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.50$, $SD = 3.82$). For more information, see Table 1.

Procedure

After participants registered for the study, they were individually notified via email regarding how to complete the study online. Participants were given a web address and code word to enter the study's website. Participants then completed informed consent and proceeded to the photo and vignette portion of the study. Dependent measures were introduced and collected during the latter half of the vignette and after the vignette. After completion of the dependent measures, participants completed the background questionnaire. Finally, participants read a debriefing outlining the purpose of the study as well as instructions on how to leave identifying information so that they would be compensated. Identifying information was collected such that it could not be connected to the data.

Materials

Experimental vignette—Participants were given an experimental vignette consisting of approximately 1,050 words. The story depicts a party scenario where the male character walks the female character home after the party; the vignette ends with the male character physically forcing sexual intercourse against the female character's will. A previous version of the vignette used by Abbey, Buck, Zawacki, and Saenz (2003) found the vignette to be highly realistic with a mean of 6.34, $SD = .95$ on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very*). The vignette used in the current study was adapted to fit the study's purpose.

The vignette begins with two women going to a party, but once they arrive, the main character, Andrea, realizes that she has lost track of her friend. While Andrea is looking for her friend, she spots Jeff. The vignette goes on to give a brief description of Andrea and Jeff's prior relationship as classmates and explains that Andrea would like to get to know Jeff better. Throughout the party, Andrea and Jeff have a conversation, dance, and drink. At the end of the party, Jeff offers to walk Andrea home as she lost track of her friend earlier,

who is also her roommate. When Andrea and Jeff get to Andrea's apartment, there is no one home. They decide to watch a movie while they wait for her roommate to get home. Eventually, Andrea and Jeff start kissing and Jeff gets sexually aroused. Andrea explains how she is not ready to be sexually intimate and does not want to get physical with Jeff, but he insists and physically forces intercourse with Andrea without her consent. "Jeff pushes Andrea down on the couch with one hand while he unbuttons his pants with the other. Andrea continues to tell Jeff 'no' but he has sex with her anyway." The act described at the end of the vignette meets the federal statute for sexual assault (Kruttschnitt, Kalsbeek, & House, 2014).

The vignette included two manipulated variables with two levels each: (a) the physical attractiveness of the female character (attractive or less attractive) and (b) the degree to which the female character behaves uninterested in the male character (uninterested rejection or ambiguous mixed cues). In all other regard, the vignette remained standardized so that the only differences between conditions were the experimental manipulations.

All vignettes included one stopping point following the presentation of the manipulated interest cues to measure perceptions of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character as well as a question after the completion of the vignette to assess sexual assault labeling.

Sexual interest cue manipulation—Participants were randomly assigned to read a version of the vignette that contained either eight uninterested rejection cues or eight ambiguous cues. For example, in the vignette the male character asks to walk the female character home. In the uninterested rejection condition, the female character responds "I guess that's OK" while in the ambiguous condition she responds, "That would be great." Previous pilot research established that the uninterested and ambiguous vignettes differ in how much participants perceive the female character as sexually interested in the male character. Except for this manipulation, both the male and the female character behave the same throughout the vignette.

Victim physical attractiveness manipulation—The female character's level of physical attractiveness was manipulated via photograph at the beginning of the vignette so that the participants received the less attractive manipulation or the attractive manipulation. Pictures depicting a physically attractive and a less attractive female were selected from a collection of photos used in previous studies that manipulated attractiveness (Maner, Gailliot, Rouby, & Miller, 2007; Maner, Miller, Rouby, & Gailliot, 2009). The photos have been previously rated by undergraduate students and used within these studies to depict physically attractive or less attractive women. Each photo was standardized based on image size with a color face shot of the female on a white background. In addition, the facial expression of each female was neutral. Previous research had students rate the photos from 1 (*very unattractive*) to 9 (*very attractive*). Average ratings for the attractive female photo sets were $M = 7.52$ ($SD = 1.39$). Average ratings for the less attractive female photos were $M = 4.77$ ($SD = 1.61$). Of these photo sets, one picture was used for each condition to maintain uniformity across participants.

Measures

Background questionnaires—Participants reported demographic information, such as age and ethnicity.

Dependent measures—Participants responded to dependent measures at a stopping point in the experimental vignette after all manipulated cues had been presented and at the end of the experimental vignette. This was done to establish temporal precedence by having participants observe appraisals regarding perceptions of the female vignette characters' sexual interest prior to the sexual assault incident and labeling of the incident as sexual assault after it had occurred.

Perception of sexual interest—Perceptions of sexual interest as a dependent variable assessed the participants' perception of the female vignette character's sexual interest in the male vignette character. Items were adapted from previous research to include the vignette characters' names (Abbey et al., 2003; Zawacki et al., 2009). These questions were presented after all the manipulated interest cues are presented and prior to the sexual assault incident. The perception of sexual interest questions consisted of 10 items ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 1.14$, Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [.90, .93]). Example items include, "Is Andrea sexually attracted to Jeff?" and "How much does Andrea want to have sex with Jeff?" The items were rated using a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

Sexual assault labeling—At the end of the vignette, we developed one item to assess the degree to which the participants label what occurred in the vignette as sexual assault. Participants were asked, "To what degree do you consider what happened in the story to be sexual assault?" This item was rated on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not sexual assault*) to 6 (*definitely sexual assault*; $M = 5.34$, $SD = 1.04$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A series of one-way ANOVAs was conducted to determine whether the manipulations in the experimental vignette were successful. To determine whether the victim's physical attractiveness manipulation (attractive vs. less attractive) was successful, participants were asked, "How physically attractive would you rate the female character?" on a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all attractive*) to 10 (*extremely attractive*). The results indicated that there was a significant difference in perceived attractiveness based on the victim's physical attractiveness condition, $F(1, 231) = 65.28$, $p < .001$. Participants in the attractive condition rated the female character as significantly more physically attractive ($M = 6.72$, $SD = 1.58$) than those in the less attractive condition ($M = 4.72$, $SD = 2.17$). To test the interest cues manipulation (ambiguous vs. uninterested), participants were asked, "Is Andrea interested in having sex with Jeff?" on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*). The results indicated that there was a significant difference between perceptions of the female character's level of sexual interest based on the interest cues, $F(1, 229) = 24.86$, $p = .001$, with participants in the ambiguous cue condition rating

Andrea as more interested ($M = 3.73$, $SD = 1.52$) than in the uninterested cue condition ($M = 3.08$, $SD = 1.36$).

There were no significant condition differences in the degree to which participants thought the experimental vignette was realistic, $F(1, 229) = .10$, $p = .757$. When asked on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) scale how realistic the story was, participants in the attractive/ambiguous cue condition ($M = 5.58$, $SD = 1.37$), attractive/uninterested cue condition ($M = 5.63$, $SD = 1.39$), less attractive/ambiguous cue condition ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 1.57$), and the less attractive/uninterested cue condition ($M = 5.54$, $SD = 1.36$) thought the vignette was equally realistic despite manipulation differences.

A preliminary examination of the dependent variables was conducted to assure that assumptions of statistical normality were met. An examination of the ratings of the female character's sexual interest showed a normal distribution (skewness = .362, $SE = .159$; kurtosis = -4.33 , $SE = .318$). However, the distribution of sexual assault labeling was negatively skewed (skewness = -1.507 , $SE = .159$; kurtosis = 1.316 , $SE = .318$). To address the influence of nonnormality, sexual assault labeling was recoded to portray a positively skewed distribution, then an inverse transformation was conducted. Inclusion of the transformed variable did not modify the results of the regression analyses; consequently, we retained the original (nontransformed) variable of sexual assault labeling for main data analyses.

Bivariate correlation analyses among the study variables revealed significant correlations between ratings of the victim's sexual interest and the victim's physical attractiveness, $r(231) = .173$, $p = .008$, ratings of the victim's sexual interest and interest cues, $r(231) = .252$, $p < .001$, and ratings of the victim's sexual interest and sexual assault labeling, $r(231) = .156$, $p < .017$. The remaining bivariate correlations were not significant. Specifically, ratings of the victim's attractiveness did not correlate with ratings of the victim's sexual interest, $r(231) = .064$, $p = .323$, or with sexual assault labeling, $r(231) = .040$, $p = .543$. Also, ratings of the victim's sexual interest did not correlate with sexual assault labeling, $r(231) = -.040$, $p = .548$.

Data Analyses

It was hypothesized that the effects of interest cues and physical attractiveness would influence sexual assault labeling indirectly via their direct effects on ratings of the female characters' sexual interest in the male character. Path analysis was used to test the indirect and direct effects of the manipulated variables (physical attractiveness and interest cues) and their interaction with the outcome variable of sexual assault labeling via ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest. Two multiple regressions were conducted; at each step, the dependent variable was regressed onto all variables to the left of it in the model (Pedhazur & Schmelkin, 2013). Within each path analysis step, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed such that the main effects were entered in a block before the interaction effect (Meyers, Gamst, & Guarino, 2006).

The following path model was tested: Step 1: Ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest was regressed onto physical attractiveness, interest cues, and the two-way

interaction between physical attractiveness and interest cues, Step 2: The outcome variable of sexual assault labeling was regressed onto physical attractiveness, interest cues, ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest, and the two-way interaction between physical attractiveness and interest cues.

A summary of the multiple regression analyses testing the path model is presented in Table 2. Step 1 of the path analysis was significant, $F(3, 229) = 7.49, p < .001$, indicating that physical attractiveness, interest cues, and the two-way interaction accounted for 8.9% of the variance in ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest. In this step, both physical attractiveness and interest cues emerged as significant predictors of ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest. Step 2 of the path analysis was significant, $F(4, 228) = 2.52, p = .04$, indicating that 4.2% of the variance in the labeling of sexual assault was accounted for by attractiveness, interest cues, ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest, and the two-way interaction between attractiveness and interest cues. Ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest emerged as a significant, negative predictor of sexual assault labeling.

The indirect effects of attractiveness and interest cues on sexual assault labeling through perceptions of the female character's level of sexual interest were tested using bias-corrected bootstrapping procedures recommended by Hayes and Scharkow (2013). Analyses based on 1,000 bootstrapped samples using bias-corrected 95% CIs indicated that there was a significant indirect effect from physical attractiveness to sexual assault labeling through ratings of the female character's level of sexual interest, $b = .057, (95\% \text{ CI } [.017, .143])$. There also was a significant indirect effect for the path from the interest cues predictor to sexual assault labeling through ratings of the female character's sexual interest, $b = .088, (95\% \text{ CI } [.028, .212])$. The path model and significant path coefficients are presented in Figure 2. In addition, cell means for ratings of female character's level of sexual interest and labeling of sexual assault can be seen in Table 3.

Discussion

The current study addressed two overarching research questions:

Research Question 1: What factors in a social interaction increase a man's sexual perceptions of a woman?

Research Question 2: Do these increases in a man's perceptions of a woman's sexual interest during a social interaction decrease his labeling of subsequent nonconsensual sex as sexual assault?

As hypothesized, participants in the ambiguous interest cue condition reported higher ratings of the female character's sexual interest than those in the uninterested cue condition. This is consistent with previous research that has found that men are more likely to misperceive sexual interest when cues are not clear (Fisher & Walters, 2003; Koukounas & Letch, 2001; Kowalski, 1993; Shotland & Craig, 1988) and that men in general perceive cues as having more sexuality than is intended (Abbey, 1982).

Consistent with hypotheses, participants in the physically attractive condition were more likely to report the female character as being sexually interested in the male character in comparison with the less attractive condition. Participants may have perceived the physically attractive female as more sexually interested than the less attractive female because they believed the male character was more sexually interested in the physically attractive female, a product of the male participant projecting the male character's level of sexual interest onto the female character, and assuming that the female character was equally as sexually interested as the male character. This is consistent with Shotland and Craig's (1988) projection hypothesis, which suggests that men may project sexual interest, and thus a man's perception of sexual interest from a woman is based on his own level of sexual interest in that woman.

Results did not support the hypothesis that the manipulated physical attractiveness of the female character would interact with the manipulated interest cues to influence ratings of the female character's sexual interest in the male character. Although the data did follow the hypothesized pattern, these differences were not significant. The lack of significant interactions in the present study may be attributable to the degree to which the two independent variables counter-balance one another when joined together. Therefore, though each independent variable yields significant differences in perceptions of the female character's sexual interest when examined alone, combining the independent variables did not result in significant differences for some conditions. Based on previous research, males perceive greater sexual interest from women who are physically attractive. Therefore, we hypothesized that the physically attractive manipulation should result in greater perceptions of sexual interest; this was supported by our findings. However, research indicates that men can interpret cues when they are clear and non-ambiguous, thus when the higher attractiveness level was paired with the clear cues—uninterested rejection level, there was little room for misperception to occur. In this way, attractiveness was less likely to be interpreted as sexual interest because the cues were clear, in effect bringing the mean rating of sexual interest for this condition closer to the means of other conditions. This is consistent with previous research that states that cue ambiguity leaves more room for physical cues to influence perceptions. This is also supported in our data with the attractive and ambiguous cues resulting in the highest ratings of sexual interest.

As hypothesized, physical attractiveness and interest cues indirectly affected sexual assault labeling through perceptions of sexual interest. Specifically, greater physical attractiveness of the female character increased perceptions of the female character's sexual interest in the male character. Furthermore, greater interest (ambiguous vs. uninterested) displayed from the female characters directly increased participants' ratings of the female character's sexual interest. Increased ratings of the female character's sexual interest decreased subsequent labeling of the scenario as sexual assault. These findings are consistent with previous research which found that physical attractiveness (Perilloux et al., 2012) as well as interest cues (Kowalski, 1993) influence perceptions of female sexual interest. In addition, perceptions of sexual interest have been found to be a precursor of sexual assault (Abbey et al., 1998). However, the relationship of physical attractiveness and interest cues with perceptions of sexual interest and sexual assault labeling has not been studied experimentally until now.

The current study is limited in that we did not examine gender differences in perceptions of sexual interest or labeling of sexual assault. Men and women have been shown to differ in the degree to which they perceive sexual interest. Future studies should experimentally investigate the effects of physical attractiveness as well as examine the direct and indirect relationships between perceptions of sexual interest and sexual assault labeling using a female population.

The current study experimentally investigated a particular set of social factors: attractiveness and interest cues; however, there are many more social variables that may relate to sexual interest perceptions and sexual assault labeling. The advantage of using experimental vignettes is that researchers are able to manipulate multiple social factors through minimal adjustments within the vignette. Future studies should include additional social factors to determine their effects on labeling.

The current study may have been limited by the use of attractiveness as an independent variable. Previous studies have found mixed results when investigating attractiveness in reference to sex crimes (Whatley, 1996). The female character's attractiveness was found to be significantly different in each condition. The current study used neutral headshots of women to manipulate attractiveness; however, other aspects of attractiveness may reveal differing effects. Future researchers should look at full body shots instead of head-shots; however, this may be difficult because of additional factors that arise when including full body images (clothing, body shape, etc.), which may also influence sexual interest perceptions. It is likely that attractiveness can be interpreted many ways. Future studies should examine attractiveness in relation to how attractiveness is appraised. For example, attractiveness' effects on perception of sexual interest may be a product of natural beauty, such as facial symmetry or social factors relating to the effort placed on attractiveness, such as makeup, cleanliness, and grooming.

Our inclusion of the term "attractiveness" is not meant to reinforce the objectification of women but to acknowledge that sexual objectification of women exists. Attractiveness affects social perceptions and interactions in many ways (Leder, Mitrovic, & Goller, 2016). Researchers have highlighted the importance of acknowledging objectification to improve women's lives in sociocultural context (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011). One goal of this article is to advocate for women and highlight that objectification of women occurs not only in interactions between men and women but also while making judgments about those interactions after the fact, in this case while labeling nonconsensual sex. Being aware of biases beyond overperception of sexual interest but also in the objectification of women is critical in understanding how perceptions can influence the labeling of sexual assault.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that perception of heterosexual social interactions and the judgments individuals make about these interactions are likely shaped by our societal gender norms. Certain behaviors or beliefs among men and women are expected and even encouraged as traditional gender roles (Szymanski et al., 2011). For example, in heterosexual interactions, women may be prescribed gender roles that encourage ambiguity, and men may be prescribed gender roles that encourage aggression, oversexualization, and objectification of women. Beliefs about gender norms influence behaviors

and interactions between women and men (Lewis, Lee, Patrick, & Fossos, 2007). Gervais's (2016) review of the Social Interaction Model of Objectification (SIMO), as it relates to sexual violence, delineates how personal beliefs and norms have the potential to guide behavior and cognitions in dyadic interactions that may lead to sexual violence. Likewise in the context of sexual assault, normative beliefs regarding gender roles are important to recognize as they have the potential to create biases in attribution (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Grubb & Turner, 2012). One way that future research could focus on this is by assessing participants' heteronormative patriarchal beliefs about masculinity and femininity and examining their effects on perceptions of heterosocial interactions and labeling of sexual assault.

The dependent variable of sexual assault labeling is difficult to assess. The current measurement of sexual assault labeling only included one item, thus future research should examine assault labeling using multiple items. Many researchers have examined differences in blame (Jacobson & Popovich, 1983; Seligman, Brickman, & Koulack, 1977; Thornton, 1977; Thornton & Ryckman, 1983; Villemur & Hyde, 1983), guilt (Deitz & Byrnes, 1981; Jacobson & Popovich, 1983; Thornton, 1977), deservingness (Thornton, 1977) and responsibility (Bolt & Caswell, 1981; Quackenbush, 1989; Smith, Keating, Hester, & Mitchell, 1976; Wiener & Vodanovich, 1986); however, there has been difficulty in the past distinguishing some of the terminology (Harvey & Rule, 1978). Future studies should develop a method to assess labeling of sexual assault that is distinct from other outcomes and includes multiple items.

Although we reached statistical significance in a number of places, the current study is limited in that many of the differences we found were small. For example, the mean scores across all conditions for labeling the scenario as a sexual assault were similar ($M = 5.12$) and indicated correct labeling of the scenario as sexual assault. Furthermore, participants, overall, did not perceive a great deal of sexual interest from the female character ($M = 3.92$). In reference to small mean differences in sexual assault labeling, it is important to note that many factors can influence labeling. The current study is limited in that we only examined attractiveness of the female character and interest cues using vignette methodology and photograph manipulations. It is possible that more realistic methods would result in greater differences. In addition, only one item was used to assess sexual assault labeling which is a limitation. Future studies may find greater effects using implicit measures or multiple items. Although mean differences are small and only a small proportion of variance is explained with the current model, we would like to argue that even small differences are potentially meaningful. Sexual assault can result in both legal and social consequences, and thus, it is important to recognize the role of social desirability and stigma that participants may experience when answering questions related to sexual assault and labeling. In this case the risk of being a sexual assault sympathizer is potentially more costly than inaccurate labeling. The small differences presented here were able to overcome the effects of social desirability and stigma, and thus are worthwhile to share and investigate further.

Despite these limitations, this study provides evidence for the role of physical attractiveness and interest cues in perceptions of sexual interest and in turn sexual assault labeling. The current study builds upon the previous research examining physical attractiveness and

perceptions of sexual interest. Farris et al. (2008) pointed out that not many studies have investigated the effects of physical attractiveness on sexual intent. The current study also expands upon previous interest cues research. In the past, interest cues have been used to study differences in perception of sexual interest between men and women. However, previous studies have failed to experimentally examine the outcome variable of sexual assault labeling. In addition, most studies that have assessed both perceptions of sexual interest and sexual assault have not experimentally examined the factors that influence perceptions of sexual assault with sexual assault labeling as an outcome variable, but looked at background variables that contribute to sexual coercion or sexual assault after they have taken place (Kanin, 1984; Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987; Shea, 1993).

In addition, previous research has mostly examined perceptions of sexual assault labeling using mock jury studies. These studies include vignette scenarios where the act of sexual assault is ambiguous and not clearly presented to the participant (Jacobson & Popovich, 1983), or after directly stating that “rape” has occurred (Deitz & Byrnes, 1981). The current study provided a scenario where it was clear that an act meeting the legal definition of rape took place, but did not label the act as rape. Very few studies have looked at sexual assault in this way. The labeling of sexual assault is important in reference to the criminal justice system. The current study attempts to deliver vignette information on sexual assault in a way that would not label the non-consensual sex as sexual assault, but would unambiguously include nonconsensual sex.

It is crucial to study the factors that influence men’s labeling of sexual assault to address the potential discrepancy that exists between men and women in the labeling of sexual assault (Koss et al., 1987). The current findings provide empirical evidence that physical attractiveness and interest cues not only have an influence on perceptions of female sexual interest but also indirectly affect sexual assault labeling through these perceptions of sexual interest. Although previous research examining interest cues, physical attractiveness, perceptions of sexual interest, and labeling of sexual assault are numerous, none have experimentally examined these factors together. The current study attempted to examine these factors collectively and address missing information within the research.

Understanding the influence of social factors, such as physical attractiveness and interest cues, provides researchers with knowledge that can be incorporated into prevention programs targeted toward reducing sexual assault and courtroom decision making. For example, prevention programs should educate men that ambiguous sexual interest cues do not equate to consent. Furthermore, programs can increase awareness that perceptions of sexual interest may be inaccurate while highlighting the importance of gaining sexual consent, in turn encouraging unambiguous sexual consent between partners. In addition, the current study can be applied to cases brought before a jury; the possibility of bias can be reduced by informing the jury that physical attractiveness can affect perceptions of sexual interest and, consequently, sexual assault labeling. In conclusion, this experimental study provides empirical support for the role of physical attractiveness and interest cues on perceptions of sexual interest and subsequent labeling of sexual assault.

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Biographies

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Figure 1. Hypothesized results from mediation analysis to determine the indirect effects of interest cues and physical attractiveness on sexual assault labeling mediated through sexual interest perceptions.

Figure 2.

Path model of relationships among study variables with significant standardized regression coefficients.

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

Table 1Sample Demographics and Self-Reported Sexual Aggression ($N = 233$)

	<i>n</i>	%
Age		
18	50	21.5
19	88	37.8
20	35	15
21	11	4.7
22	13	5.6
23	7	3
24	3	1.3
25	2	0.9
26–30	13	5.6
31–40	7	3
No response	4	1.7
Ethnicity		
Latino American or Hispanic	81	34.8
European American of non-Hispanic White	80	34.3
Asian or Pacific Islander	23	9.9
African American/Black	17	7.3
Native American/American Indian	3	1.3
Arabic or Middle Easterner	2	0.9
Multiracial	12	5.2
Other	6	2.6
No response	9	3.9
Education		
Freshman (<30 credits)	110	47.2
Sophomore (30–59 credits)	67	28.8
Junior (60–89 credits)	26	11.2
Senior (90–120 credits)	26	11.2
Other	2	0.9
No Response	2	0.9
Self-reported sexual aggression		
No	134	57.5
Yes	99	42.5

Table 2

Summary of Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Ratings of the Female Character's Level of Sexual Interest and Sexual Assault Labeling ($N = 233$).

Variable	Ratings of Sexual Interest		Labeling of Sexual Assault	
	β	R^2	β	R^2
Model 1				
Step 1		.09 **		
Physical attractiveness	.16 **			
Interest cues	.24 **			
Step 2		.00		
Physical Attractiveness $\times$ Interest Cues	-.06			
Model 2				
Step 1				.04 *
Physical attractiveness			-.02	
Interest cues			.08	
Sexual interest			-.17 **	
Step 2				.01
Physical Attractiveness $\times$ Interest Cues			.19	

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Summary of Means for Victim Attractiveness and Interest Cues Effect on Ratings of the Female Character's Sexual Interest and the Labeling of Sexual Assault ($N = 233$).

		<u>Ratings of Sexual Interest</u>	<u>Labeling of Sexual Assault</u>
Condition	<i>n</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Attractive			
Ambiguous	65	4.32 (1.08)	5.45 (0.99)
Uninterested	55	3.84 (1.22)	5.12 (1.17)
Less attractive			
Ambiguous	55	4.03 (1.13)	5.31 (1.10)
Uninterested	59	3.41 (0.95)	5.46 (0.92)