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The Sexualized Girl: The Development of an Expanded (Sexualized) Gender Stereotype Among Children

Ellen A. Stone

University of Kentucky, e.stone@uky.edu

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Ellen A. Stone, Student

Dr. Christia Spears Brown, Major Professor

Dr. David Berry, Director of Graduate Studies

THE SEXUALIZED GIRL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPANDED
(SEXUALIZED) GENDER STEREOTYPE AMONG CHILDREN

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kentucky

By
Ellen A. Stone

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Christia Spears Brown, Professor of Psychology
Lexington, Kentucky
2013

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

THE SEXUALIZED GIRL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPANDED
(SEXUALIZED) GENDER STEREOTYPE AMONG CHILDREN

The current study examined children's stereotypes about sexualized girls. Elementary school children ($n = 208$) from the mid-South between the ages of 6 and 11 completed a survey assessing their stereotypes about sexualized girls and non-sexualized girls. Participants were asked to justify, in their own words, their responses to several stereotypic evaluations. Children's cognitive development was analyzed through classification skill as a moderator of belief in stereotypes about girls. Results revealed that children perceived the sexualized girl to be more popular and better liked by boys than the non-sexualized girl. However, the sexualized girl was also rated as less athletic, nice, smart, and typical than the non-sexualized girl. The non-sexualized girl was reported to have nicer clothes and was someone the participants would rather be friends with than the sexualized girl. Girls believed that they dressed more like and looked more like the non-sexualized girl than the sexualized girl, however, they had no preference for which girl they would rather look like. Classification skill moderated the endorsement of these stereotypes, such that high classifiers were more differentiated in their answers than low classifiers. Thus, the current study suggests that children have unique stereotypes about sexualized girls.

KEYWORDS: Sexualization, gender stereotypes, cognitive development, classification skill, childhood

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Ellen A. Stone

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THE SEXUALIZED GIRL: THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EXPANDED (SEXUALIZED) GENDER STEREOTYPE AMONG CHILDREN

By

Ellen A. Stone

Dr. Christia Spears Brown
Director of Thesis

Dr. David Berry
Director of Graduate Studies

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Date

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Chapter One
Introduction

There is a growing culture of sexualization of women and girls in the U.S. (APA, 2007). So much so that, in 2007, the American Psychological Association formed the Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA, 2007). The task force found sexualization of women and girls in nearly all forms of media. For example, media messages consistently show that women are most valued when they look and act sexy, which means having and maintaining the perfect body, wearing revealing clothing, and enjoying the attention of men. Television, music videos, magazines, and video games are saturated with these sexualized messages, in which women are portrayed as sexual objects for men's pleasure (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Conrad, Dixon, Zhang, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Downs & Smith, 2010; Ward, 1995; Ward, 2002). Even female athletes, more so than male athletes, are often portrayed in magazines wearing little clothing and posing in a sexually provocative manner (Daniels, 2009).

While these messages are often targeted towards adults, children are increasingly being sexualized and becoming the targets of sexualized messages. In 2012, American children aged 2-11 watched as much as 24 hours of television a week (Hinckley, 2012). With children exposed to this much media, it is likely that they are being exposed to numerous images of sexualized women. Even children's clothing has sexualized characteristics, with one-quarter of girls' clothing described as being revealing or having sexually suggestive writing (Goodin, Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011).

An ecological systems framework asserts that children are influenced by the contexts – including mass media and cultural contexts – in which they develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Thus, it seems likely that these prevalent sexualized images and

messages are influencing children; yet, very little research has examined this issue. We are unclear, for example, about how children perceive the sexualized girls they see, whether the girls' sexualization is salient or noticed by children, and whether children associate sexualized girls with certain traits and characteristics. Before we can fully examine the impact of the sexualization of girls in American culture on children, it is important to first establish how children perceive and think about sexualized girls. That is the overall goal of the current study.

Adults' Stereotypes of Sexualized Women and Girls

Research with adults and adolescents has consistently shown that sexualized messages impact individuals' attitudes and stereotypes about women and girls (e.g., Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998). For example, in experimental studies, men who viewed sexualized women rated them as lower in competence, associated more stereotypical sexist words with them, and made more judgments based on appearance rather than performance relative to men who viewed non-sexualized women (Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005; Rudman & Bordiga, 1995). Among adults, these attitudes and stereotypes about sexualized women extend to sexualized girls as well. For example, men and women perceived a sexualized fifth grade girl as less determined, capable, and competent than a non-sexualized fifth grade girl (Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012).

Not only are sexualized women and girls viewed differently than non-sexualized women and girls, but viewing sexualized messages impacts adults' broader attitudes and stereotypes about gender and gender roles. Both men and women who watched sexualized media were more likely to endorse sexualized gender stereotypes in which

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women are sex objects and men are sexual pursuers, and were more likely to endorse traditional gender stereotypes in which women are fragile and need male protection, compared to men and women who watched non-sexualized media (Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey, 2011; Ward, 2002; Ward, Merriwether, Caruthers, 2006). Men who viewed sexualized women were also more likely to condone sexual harassment and were more accepting of interpersonal violence relative to men who viewed non-sexualized women (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011).

Considering these findings, it appears that sexualized images of women and girls activate individuals' cognitive schemas about gender, or gender stereotypes, and lead to the endorsement of even more exaggerated gender stereotypes. Previous research has shown that viewing gender-stereotypic exemplars via media images can activate broader gender stereotypes by a process of spreading activation (Taylor & Setters, 2011). If being a sexual object is part of the stereotype about women and girls, then activating that component of the cognitive schema about women should activate and strengthen other parts of the schema as well (e.g., that they are also less competent and more focused on their appearance). Research has also shown that some targets activate gender stereotypes more than others (Powlishta, 2000). Based on the research on sexualization reviewed above, it seems that being sexualized is a key component of the stereotype about women (and perhaps girls) among adults.

Although, like adults, children also have gender schemas and endorse gender stereotypes, it is unknown whether children also include "being sexualized" into their stereotypes about girls. It is critical, however, to understand the ontogeny of these *sexualized* gender schemas and stereotypes if we are to fully understand (a) how

stereotypes shape children's developing characteristics, values, and aspirations, and (b) how they function in adulthood (Bigler & Liben, 2006).

Children's Stereotypes of Sexualized Girls

For decades, research has consistently shown that children develop gender stereotypes as young as 2 years old, and continue to hold stereotyped beliefs throughout childhood (Albert & Porter, 1983; Golombok, Rust, Zervoulis, Croudace, Golding, & Hines, 2008). Gender stereotypes in childhood typically consist of children viewing men as strong, brave, athletic, and aggressive, and women as helpful, friendly, nurturing and emotional (Albert & Porter, 1983; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009). These stereotypes also guide children's behavior. For example, children are more likely to play with toys they believe are stereotypically appropriate for their gender, such as guns for boys and dolls for girls (Carter & Levy, 1988).

Although pre-pubescent children likely do not have a concept of sexualization per se, we predict that children do have attitudes and stereotypes about sexualized women and girls. Although the research is limited, some work has shown that, by age 9, girls perceive sexualized dolls to be more favorable and desirable than non-sexualized dolls (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). This suggests that children do indeed notice and distinguish sexualized girls and non-sexualized girls. However, the extent of their attitudes about the sexualized girls is unclear. For example, it is unclear, based on the existing research, whether children associate sexualized girls with other specific traits and characteristics that may or may not differ from the traits of non-sexualized girls.

In the current study, we predicted that children have incorporated "being sexualized" into their gender stereotypes (having been exposed to enough sexualized

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images of women and girls by elementary school). Thus, we predicted that seeing

sexualized images would activate their gender schema. Specifically, we predicted that

children would perceive sexualized girls through the lens of their activated gender

schema, and would apply additional domain-general gender stereotypes to the sexualized

girl (e.g., they would also perceive her to be less athletic and less intelligent than other

girls).

We also predicted that girls would be more susceptible to this schema activation

than boys because their schema for "being a girl" is more complex and accessible (Martin

& Halverson, 1981; Bem, 1981). According to gender schema theory (Bem, 1981), it is

more important for girls than boys to pay attention to information about girls, and thus

they have more elaborate gender schemas about girls than boys do (and conversely, boys

have more elaborate schemas about boys). It seems likely, therefore, that a) if being

sexualized is part of the stereotype of being a girl, b) if seeing a sexualized girl activates

the broader gender schema about girls, and c) if girls have more developed gender

schemas about girls than boys do, that girls would show stronger stereotypic responses

about sexualized girls than boys would.

Cognitive Development and Stereotypes

It is important to understand stereotype development in children (Bigler & Liben,

2006). However, because children in elementary school are still developing cognitive

abilities, their endorsement of stereotypes related to gender may be impacted by their

own cognitive development (Aboud, 1989; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

For example, one cognitive skill that has been previously linked with the

endorsement of stereotypes is classification skills (Aboud, 1989; Bigler, 1995). This

refers to the ability to classify objects, animals, or people into discrete categories (e.g., the ability to sort dogs and cats). Multiple classification ability refers to the ability to characterize individuals along more than one dimension, simultaneously. Although 2 – to 3-year-old children can sort objects consistently along one dimension (e.g., color) and 4-year-olds can re-classify objects along a second dimension (e.g., shape), it is not until approximately age 7 that children can classify stimuli along multiple dimensions simultaneously (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Children also develop an understanding of the hierarchical nature of categories around age 7 (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

The attainment of these classification skills has been linked – correlationally and experimentally – to decreases in gender and racial stereotyping (Bigler & Liben, 1992). In part, multiple classification abilities allow the child to simultaneously recognize both the gender of the person, as well as individuating information. This typically leads to a reduction in the endorsement of stereotypes. However, multiple classification abilities could also allow children to become more specific in their stereotypes, as children that can classify along multiple dimensions can also recognize subcategories within that dimension. For example, a sexualized girl is a specific type of girl that may have different stereotypes than an athletic girl would. Thus, multiple classification ability could either limit stereotyping by allowing children to see that a girl can be both an athletic and be dressed in sexualized clothing, or multiple classification ability could enhance stereotyping because children perceive sexualized girls as a different (but equally stereotyped) category of girl.

For the purposes of this current study, it was predicted that children who have not yet developed multiple classification abilities would be especially likely to perceive

sexualized images of women and girls as stereotypic. For example, they may be unable to recognize that a girl can be dressed in sexualized clothing *and* be an athlete.

Current Study and Hypotheses

In the current study we examined children's attitudes and stereotypes about sexualized girls, and whether attitudes about sexualized girls are reflective of broader stereotypes about girls in general. Using a within-subjects design, elementary school children were shown images of sexualized and non-sexualized girls, taken from previous research with children (Starr & Ferguson, 2012). Children were asked a series of questions about each girl, assessing their attitudes, stereotypes, and perceptions of other's attitudes. In addition, because of the importance of cognitive development in the endorsement of stereotypes, children's multiple classification skill was analyzed.

It was hypothesized that children would perceive sexualized girls as more gender stereotypical (specifically, as less intelligent and less athletic) than non-sexualized girls, and that this stereotype endorsement would be moderated by their multiple classification ability.

Chapter Two

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study were 208 children (103 girls, 105 boys) recruited from an afterschool program at local elementary schools. Of the 208 participants, all were between the ages of 6 and 11. Most of the participants were White (74%), with African-American (12.5%) and multi-racial (6.3%) being the next largest groups.

Procedure and Stimuli

After parental consent and child assent were obtained, the child was individually taken into a quiet space in the elementary school to conduct the study. They were told they could stop the study at any time and that their answers were anonymous and confidential.

Children first performed a series of sorting tasks to measure their classification skill and answered a demographics questionnaire. Second, using a within-subjects design, all children viewed a total of four images of girls (depicted as paper dolls) – two different non-sexualized girls wearing pants and t-shirts and two sexualized girls wearing short skirts and revealing tops – taken from Starr and Ferguson (2012). A short vignette about each girl accompanied each image (see Appendix A). To test the hypothesis that sexualized girls are perceived as more stereotypical than non-sexualized girls, participants were presented an image and, while viewing the image, asked about their perceptions of the particular girl. This was repeated for all four dolls. The presentation of images was counter-balanced (the vignettes associated with each girl were separately counter-balanced).

Upon completion of the measures, children were debriefed, allowed to pick a small toy from a toy box, and returned to the afterschool program.

Measures

Classification Skill. Classification skill was measured using procedures developed by Jones and Bigler (1996). Children were given a series of pictures of grey bears and elephants and brown bears and elephants. They were asked to sort the pictures into two piles according to one dimension (e.g., by either color or animal type) and then asked to justify why they sorted in that manner. The pile was then shuffled and children were asked to sort the pictures into two new piles, according to a new dimension and asked to justify their sorting. They received one point for each correct sort and one point for each correct justification. For example, children received one point if they were able to sort the animals into two piles, one of bears and one of elephants, and one point if they were able to explain that they sorted by animal. They received one point if they then re-sort based on color, grey and brown, and one point if they correctly explained the re-sort.

Children were then presented with a 2x2 matrix. Following a demonstration sort, in which the researcher sorts the bears and elephants along both color and animal type dimensions simultaneously, children were asked to create their own 2 X 2 matrix using red and yellow boats and cars and asked to justify their reasoning. Again, children were given one point for a correct sort and one point for a correct justification. Thus, scores ranged from 0 to 6, with higher scores reflecting greater classification skill.

Stereotypic Evaluations of Sexualized vs. Non-Sexualized Girls. While viewing the sexualized and non-sexualized paper dolls, children were asked a series of questions regarding particular stereotypes about the girls. Specifically, children were shown a paper

doll, then while viewing it, answered the questions. Boys answered 17 questions, while girls answered 18 questions. The questions were repeated for each of the 4 paper dolls, the order of which was counter-balanced. The measure included questions such as, "How popular do you think she is?", "How nice do you think she is?","How smart do you think she is?" and "How athletic do you think she is?" A complete list of questions is in Appendix B. Girls were asked two additional questions: "How much do you look like her?" and, "How much do you want to look like her?" Boys were asked one additional question: "How much do you like her?" The items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from not at all (1) to very much (4). The measure was accompanied by a visual scale of a series of cups, which correspond to the Likert scale range.

Children were also asked several open-ended questions to more deeply explore the content of their stereotypes. In responses to the questions, "How popular do you think she is?", "How athletic do you think she is?", "How smart do you think she is?", and "How much do you think boys like her?", children were asked to explain why they gave that answer. The research assistant wrote down their answers verbatim.

Chapter Three

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Children's responses to same items for the two sexualized girls were averaged together, and the responses to the same items for the two non-sexualized girls were averaged together. Because each item addressed a distinct component of stereotypes and attitudes, each item was analyzed separately, contrasting ratings relating to the sexualized girls versus non-sexualized girls. To test for order effects, a 2 (condition: sexualized vs. non-sexualized) x 6 (story order) repeated measures MANOVA was conducted for each item. There were no order effects: $F(65,450) = .87$, $p > .05$. A similar analysis also showed no effect of school, $F(52,360) = .11$, $p > .05$.

To examine the effects of classification skill, children were split into high and low classifiers, with low classifiers receiving between 1-3 points and high classifiers receiving 4-6 points on their sorting tasks. Classification score was positively correlated with age ($r = .33$, $p < .05$), such that older children had higher classification scores. Classification score did not differ by gender. For each of the analyses reported below, parallel analyses were conducted in which age rather than classification skill was included. Results indicated that classification skill was a more consistent moderator of stereotypes than age, and thus analyses with classification skill are reported.

Comparison Between Sexualized Vs Non-Sexualized Girls: Quantitative Analyses

To test the hypothesis that children perceived the sexualized girl as more stereotypic than the non-sexualized girl, a 2 (boy vs. girl) x 2 (high classifiers vs. low classifiers) x 2 (condition: sexualized vs. non-sexualized) repeated measures MANOVA

was conducted, in which the last variable was a within-subjects variable. Each item (n =16) was assessed in the MANOVA. There was an overall multivariate main effect of gender ($F[12,192] = 11.04$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 =.41$), classification skill ($F[12,192] = 2.56$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 =.14$), and condition ($F[12,192] = 20.94$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 =.57$). There were also significant multivariate interactions between condition and gender ($F[12,192]$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 =.19$) and condition and classification skill ($F[12,192]$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 =.13$). For each significant multivariate effect, we examined the univariate results related to specific questions. The means and F values of each item are indicated in Table 3.1.

Results from the univariate tests on the main effect of condition revealed that children believed the sexualized girl to be more popular than the non-sexualized girl. Children also believed that boys would like the sexualized girl more than the non-sexualized girl. Conversely, the sexualized girl was rated as less nice, less athletic, less intelligent, and less typical than the non-sexualized girl. Children wanted to be friends with the non-sexualized girl more than the sexualized girl. Children also liked the non-sexualized clothes more than the sexualized clothes. Taken together, the non-sexualized girls were perceived to have more positive traits than the sexualized girls. The sexualized girls, however, were perceived a more popular in general and more well-liked by boys than the non-sexualized girls.

There were significant interactions between condition and gender. First, there was an interaction for the question about how athletic each girl was ($F[1,192] = 4.16$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 =.02$). Tests of simple effects indicated that boys ($M=2.74$, $SD=.88$) rated the non-sexualized girl as significantly less athletic than girls did ($M=3.03$, $SD=.70$), $t(206) = 2.76$, $p < .05$. This, however, is due to boys rating all girls as less athletic than did girls.

Table 3.1

Univariate Tests on the Main Effect of Condition

Variable	M (SD)(non-sexualized)	M (SD) (sexualized)	F	p	η^2
Popular	2.81 (.72)	3.26 (.79)	34.17	<.001	.14
Nice	3.62 (.56)	3.08 (.86)	63.23	<.001	.24
Athletic	2.88 (.81)	2.30 (1.04)	49.33	<.001	.20
Smart	3.56 (.50)	3.11 (.81)	46.00	<.001	.19
Good at School	3.50 (.58)	3.00 (.82)	58.74	<.001	.22
Like Clothes	2.85 (.89)	2.44 (1.15)	19.16	<.001	.09
Mom Dresses Like	2.08 (.93)	1.41 (.73)	105.85	<.001	.34
Boys Like	2.73 (.85)	3.02 (.96)	14.16	<.001	.07
Girls Like	3.37 (.69)	3.25 (.79)	3.76	.06	.02
Be Friends With	2.86 (.99)	2.46 (1.07)	23.09	<.001	.10
Typical	3.33 (.78)	2.83 (1.00)	31.84	<.001	.14

There were also significant gender interactions that moderated the previously-mentioned main effects. Specifically, there were significant interactions between condition and gender for the questions about how much the participants wanted to be friends with each girl ($F[1,192] = 9.22$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .04$) and how much they thought other girls would like each girl ($F[1,192] = 4.64$, $p = .03$, $\eta^2 = .02$). For girls, they wanted to be friends with the non-sexualized girl more than the sexualized girl ($t[102] = -5.77$, $p < .001$), and they perceived other girls would also like the non-sexualized girl more than the sexualized girl ($t[102] = -2.87$, $p < .05$). Boys, however, liked both girls the same amount, and assumed girls would like them the same amount as well. Boys did not differentiate between the non-sexualized and sexualized girls in terms of their own liking of her and girls' liking of her.

Analyses also revealed that cognitive development moderated the endorsement of stereotypic beliefs about sexualized girls. The condition by classification skill interaction indicated that high classifiers differentiated more than the low classifiers about how popular, nice, athletic, smart, and typical the girl is. In other words, for each of the traits, children with the strongest multiple classification skills made the biggest distinctions between the non-sexualized girl and the sexualized girl. The means for both low and high classifiers are reported in Table 3.2.

Girls were asked several additional questions relating to how much they wanted to dress like, how much they actually dressed like, and how much they wanted to look like the non-sexualized and sexualized girls. A 2 (condition: sexualized vs. non-sexualized condition) x 2 (classification ability: high classification skill vs. low classification skill) repeated measures MANOVA was conducted on these three items. Means and F values

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Table 3.2

Interactions Between Condition and Classification Skill

Variable	Non-Sexualized Condition		Sexualized Condition		F	p	η^2
	$M\,(SD)_{low}$ classifiers	$M(SD)_{high}$ classifiers	$M\,(SD)_{low}$ classifiers	$M\,(SD)_{high}$ classifiers			
Popular	3.07 (.60)	2.67 (.74)	3.32 (.78)	3.23 (.80)	4.89	.03	.02
Nice	3.60 (.59)	3.63 (.54)	3.27 (.85)	2.97 (.85)	6.89	.01	.03
Athletic	3.00 (.81)	2.82 (.81)	2.69 (1.00)	2.09 (1.00)	7.51	.01	.04
Smart	3.58 (.55)	3.55 (.48)	3.33 (.74)	2.99 (.82)	6.83	.01	.03
Typical	3.42 (.69)	3.28 (.82)	3.15 (.91)	2.67 (1.01)	4.65	.03	.02

of each item are reported in Table 3.3. There was a significant multivariate main effect of condition: $F(3,99) = 19.89$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .38$. Univariate tests revealed that girls believed they actually dressed more like and looked more like the non-sexualized girl than the sexualized girl. Importantly, however, girls expressed no preference for which girl they *wanted* to look more like. Thus, despite perceiving the non-sexualized girl to have more positive traits than the sexualized girl, girls did not show a preference to look like the non-sexualized girl. There was no effect of classification skill.

Qualitative Analyses: Descriptions of the Stereotype

Children were asked several open-ended questions about their stereotypes about each girl. Specifically, both boys and girls were asked to explain their responses to how popular, athletic, and smart each girl was. Girls were additionally asked to explain their responses to how much boys would like each girl. Their responses further illuminated how children perceived the sexualized girls.

The children's open-ended answers were coded according to the content of their responses. "Non-answers" consisted of responses that strictly used the biography as reasoning (e.g., "Because she goes on the school bus a lot") and responses such as "I don't know", "Just seems like it", and "Because I think so". The rest of the answers were iteratively assessed to find several core themes. Children's responses were then coded into each specific theme. Two coders read through every child's answers to according to several themes. Inter-rater reliability for coding was adequate (83%). Any inconsistencies were discussed until the coders reached agreement.

Each question revealed several themes that children used as their reasoning behind endorsing a particular stereotype. Overall, girls were more explicit and detailed in

Table 3.3

Variable	$M(SD)_{non\text{-}sexualized}$	$M(SD)_{sexualized}$	F	p	η^2
Univariate Tests for the Main Effect of Condition: Girls' Questions Only					
Dress Like	2.36 (.90)	1.52 (.79)	50.94	<.001	.34
Look Like	2.00 (.76)	1.68 (.82)	8.66	<.05	.08
Want To Look Like	2.38 (.99)	2.17 (1.04)	1.58	>.05	.02

their reasoning than boys were. Boys were more likely than girls to respond with non-answers, such "I don't know", "Just seems like it", "Because I think so," or to use explicit references to the biography when explaining their answers. In fact, significantly more boys (61.9%) than girls (42.7%) answered with non-answers (Linear X Linear association = 20.67, $df = 1$, $p < .001$). Although boys did express the following themes, girls' answers give a more detailed portrayal of children's perceptions of these stereotypes.

How popular do you think she is? Children were asked how popular the sexualized and non-sexualized girls were and were asked to explain their response. Their explanations followed three main themes. The first theme indicated that the sexualized girl was more popular than the non-sexualized girl because she wore fancy or expensive clothes, which in turn made her popular. The second theme was that the sexualized girl was pretty or attractive, which in turn made her popular. The third theme was that the sexualized girl was "showing more skin," and that was associated with popularity.

Overwhelmingly, the most common theme children used as reasoning for why they perceived the sexualized girl to be more popular than the non-sexualized girl was that the sexualized girl had the type of clothes that a prototypically popular person would wear, namely "fancy" or "expensive" clothes. In contrast, the non-sexualized girl wore "plain" or inexpensive clothing, which is associated with unpopularity. Almost half of all children (47%; n=97) used this theme as their reasoning (note: answers are not mutually exclusive, and thus the numbers reported are not mutually exclusive nor do they add up to 100%). This theme appeared in the answers of 55% of girls and 38% of boys.

For example, several children believed that the sexualized girl was very popular because "she dresses and looks like she wears expensive clothes, "she's wearing fashion

clothes with high heels and her skirt is short and a headband", and "what she's wearing, those shoes look like they cost a lot of money". When referring to the non-sexualized girl, however, children would claim that she could not be popular since her clothes were not as fancy as the sexualized girl's clothes. Some children expressed the idea that non-sexualized girls do not look popular because "popular girls would dress really fancy and they would have their hair done and they would wear really nice clothes", "the way she dresses. I see most popular girls their hair is up and they wear a lot of fancy clothes", and "popular girls wear expensive stuff like high heels and stuff." Furthermore, one child referred to media in particular as a reason why the non-sexualized girl was less popular than the sexualized girl, stating that "Well she doesn't – you know how where you see in the movies, they're all wearing skirts and make-up and stuff and she's wearing a jacket and jeans." Thus, children believed that the sexualized clothing is what popular people wear.

The second most common theme expressed in children's answers was that the sexualized girl is attractive, and that is why she would be popular. Thirteen percent of children ($n = 26$) used this theme in their answer. It appeared in 14% of girls' answers and 11% of boys' answers. Although the same girl appeared in both the sexualized and non-sexualized pictures, children perceived the sexualized girl to be more attractive than the non-sexualized girl. Often children would say the sexualized girl is popular because "she looks really cute," or "she's pretty."

The third most common theme in children's answers was that sexualized girls show a lot of skin by wearing revealing clothing, and that is why she is popular. Seventeen percent of children ($n = 17$) used this theme in their answer. It appeared in

14% of girls' answers and 3% of boys' answers. In other words, for girls, this was tied as their second most common explanation for the sexualized girls' popularity; yet, it was much less common among boys. For example, one child stated that the sexualized girl is popular because, "she's barely wearing any clothes." Another child stated that the sexualized girl is popular because, "she has a short shirt and a short skirt. And she's wearing high heels", while another child said, "because she has on shorts and she has on a top that shows her belly." Thus, children appear to perceive sexualized girls as popular because she is wearing expensive clothing, is attractive, and shows a lot of skin.

How athletic do you think she is? Children were also asked how athletic they thought the sexualized and non-sexualized girls were and asked to justify their response. Their reasoning followed two themes. The first theme was that the clothing the sexualized girl is wearing is not compatible with playing sports or being athletic. The second theme was that sexualized girls (synonymously referred to as popular girls by children) do not want to play sports or be sporty.

The most common theme for justifications of athleticism was simply that the sexualized girls' clothes were not compatible with doing athletic things. This reasoning was expressed by 42% (n=88) of children. This theme appeared in the answers of 57% of girls and 28% of boys. Many children stated that the sexualized girl was not athletic because "she's not wearing sporty clothes", "those are definitely not sport clothes", and "people who are athletic don't wear tops and shorts like that."

The second theme used for explaining the girls' athleticism was that the sexualized girls do not want to play sports or be sporty. This theme was reflected in 27% of children's answers (n=57). It was seen in 27% of girls' answers and 29% of boys'

answers. The previous popularity question revealed that children perceived the sexualized girl to be more popular and "fancy" than the non-sexualized girl. Thus, children used the term "the popular girl" or "the fancy girl" to refer to the sexualized girls. Children would respond that the sexualized girl would probably not want to be seen playing sports, nor would she enjoy playing sports. For example, one girl stated that the sexualized girl is not athletic because "she'd probably be like one of those girls to say, "Oh I got mud on my clothes". Another child stated, "Her shoes are very fancy and maybe she doesn't want to play sports because she thinks it's gross and she's so pretty", while another child stated, "fancy people don't do sports but not fancy people do." Some children perceived the sexualized girl to be a little athletic because "some popular girls they don't really like sports", "popular girls aren't really athletic", and "she looks like she'd rather be in nicer clothes." One child stated that the sexualized girl was a little bit athletic because "divas don't like to go to gyms and stuff. She hangs out with her friends and go shopping, like she might work out a little to get her shape in."

How smart do you think she is? Children were also asked to explain their response to how smart the sexualized and non-sexualized girls were. Although one-third of children responded to this question with non-codeable answers (such as "it just looks like it"), three themes did emerge among the codeable responses. The first theme is that the sexualized girl is not as smart as the non-sexualized girl. Simply put, the sexualized girl is seen as "dumb." The second theme is that the sexualized girl simply acts dumb. There is a distinction here between these two themes. In the first theme, the sexualized girl is seen as unable to be smart while the second theme focuses on the idea that the sexualized

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girl will pretend to be dumb in order to maintain popularity. The third theme is that the sexualized girls can't focus on school because she is focused on her appearance.

The first theme was used in 10% of children's responses (*n*=21). This theme appeared in the answers of 12% of girls and 9% of boys. In this theme, children perceived the sexualized girl to be overall less intelligent than the non-sexualized girl. For example, one child stated the that sexualized girl was not smart because, "girls that dress like that aren't very smart." Often children would use justifications such as, "she looks just like she would be just not as smart as the other kids in middle school." In this theme, children are expressing the belief that the sexualized girl is not what a smart person would look like.

The second theme is that sexualized girls are not as smart as non-sexualized girls because they do not *want* to be smart. This theme also appeared in 10% of children's responses (*n*=21). This theme appeared in the answers of 18% of girls and 2% of boys. The idea behind this theme is that sexualized girls act dumb or do not pay attention in class to be popular. For example, several children stated that the sexualized girl is not smart because "most divas just do their nails during math", and "she looks like she's popular but doesn't like to do stuff in class". Some children stated the sexualized girl was somewhat smart because "some popular girls think they are pretty and don't think they should care" and "some popular girls would act dumb". One child had a more elaborate explanation of this theme stating that the sexualized girl was somewhat smart because "some girls they look fancy, just want to be fancy, and want a lot of things, and they don't pay attention and they just like to look pretty and be mean."

The third most common theme in children's answers was that sexualized girls couldn't focus on school and academics because they would be focused on appearance-related concerns. Nine percent of children ($n = 19$) used this theme in their answer. It appeared in 10% of girls' answers and 9% of boys' answers. In other words, for boys, this was tied as their most common explanation for the sexualized girls' intelligence. Some children stated that the sexualized girl was not smart because "she looks like she just pays attention to her clothes, not in class," and, "she acts sassy and cares only about fashion, it looks like." One child stated, "since she wears that clothes, she wouldn't be paying attention, she would only pay attention to the way she dresses perfect." The idea in this theme is that the sexualized girl's clothing reflects that she does not care about anything else other than fashion, even when in class.

How much do you think boys like her? Finally, girls were asked how much they believed boys liked the sexualized and non-sexualized girls and were asked to explain their response. There were three main themes in their responses. The first theme was that boys would like the sexualized girl because she's attractive, pretty, or fancy. The second theme was that boys would like popular girls and being sexualized is what makes girls popular. The third theme was that boys would like girls who show their stomachs.

The first, and most common, theme was expressed in 67% ($n=69$) of girls' answers, and reflects the notion that boys would like the sexualized girl because she is fancy and pretty. This was similar to the second theme that emerged after the popularity question. Again, children appear to believe that sexualized clothing is expensive, high-end, and attractive. For example, some girls stated that boys would very much like the sexualized girl because "she's pretty and has pretty clothes", "boys might like her

because you know her clothes and she looks like the kind of person to wear a lot of make-up and get ready in the morning", and "she has very nice clothes and I really, really like what she wears and I bet boys like it too." Sexualized clothing is clearly associated with popularity and attractiveness.

The second most common theme was also based on popularity, and assumed that the sexualized girl is more popular, and boys would like the popular girl. This justification was used in 17% (n=17) of all girls' answers. For example, one girl stated that boys would like the sexualized girl very much because "considering the fact most of the time in the movies the popular girl always gets the guy and that would be logical here". Another girl stated that boys would like the sexualized girl because "she wears cool clothes so she'll get boys attention and then boys will start being her friends." Several girls stated that the non-sexualized girl would not be liked by boys because "they ignore her cause she's not as popular as everybody else", "usually in movies when you're not popular you might be friends with the popular girl like Samantha (sexualized girl's name) but usually guys like Samantha", and "she doesn't look that popular and boys like popular girls".

The third theme was that boys would like the sexualized girl more than the non-sexualized girl because boys are attracted to girls who show their skin. This was similar to the third most common theme associated with popularity, that popular girls reveal more skin. This was reported by 15% (n=15) of girls. Boys are seen as liking girls who show a lot of skin as the sexualized girls do. Several children stated that boys would like the sexualized girl because "she's showing her belly", "some boys like girls to show off their bodies but they may not like her personality", "she's wearing clothes that open up to

her body and she looks very pretty so a lot of boys might pay attention." Thus it appears

that children believe that boys will pay attention to girls who show skin and sexualized

girls show skin.

Chapter Four

Discussion

Overall, the results support our hypotheses that children hold stereotypes for sexualized girls that are different than stereotypes for non-sexualized girls. This research extends previous research by Starr and Ferguson (2012) by expanding on the stereotypes associated with sexualized girls. Specifically, it appears that children have, in many ways, an exaggerated gender stereotype about sexualized girls. Children rated them as less athletic and less intelligent than non-sexualized girls. In terms of popularity and social status, however, the stereotypes are more nuanced. Sexualized girls are perceived as high in status, rated as more popular, and most well-liked by boys; non-sexualized girls, however, are rated as nicer, more typical, and more well-liked by girls.

Interestingly, although girls rated the non-sexualized girl as more positive than the sexualized girl on all traits (except popularity and being liked by boys) and preferred the non-sexualized clothing to the sexualized clothing, girls did *not* show a preference for which girl they wanted to look more like. This suggests that girls are being heavily influenced by the traits associated with the sexualized girl. It appears that popularity and being liked by boys is important and valued enough to negate the positive characteristics associated with the non-sexualized girl (such as being smart, athletic, and nice).

These findings further highlight the distinction between popularity and likeability, two distinct components of peer relations (Cillessen & Marks, 2011). Popularity is a reflection of social status and prestige within the peer group, whereas likeability reflects being well-liked and having many friends (Mayeux, Houser, & Dyches, 2011). For girls, these two dimensions are not often related to one another (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004).

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Previous research has also shown that more feminine and typical girls are perceived as more popular (Jewell & Brown, 2013), and that children in early adolescence value popularity even more than likeability (Merten, 2004). The findings of the current study are consistent with this. Girls associated the sexualized girls with popularity, not likeability, and this perceived popularity seemed to exert a powerful pull toward the sexualized girl (despite her other more negative traits).

Future research should examine how girls internalize these positive and negative stereotypes. For example, if girls assume that sexualized girls are supposed to "act dumb," and girls want to look like the sexualized girl because of her enhanced popularity, girls may downplay their own intelligence and underperform at school. In addition, girls may begin to drop out of athletics as they identify more and more with the sexualized girl (who, stereotypically, is not supposed to be athletic).

Our hypothesis that girls would be more detailed in their stereotypes about sexualized girls than boys was also supported. This hypothesis was supported by two pieces of evidence. First, boys were more likely to respond to the open-ended questions with non-answers (such as "I don't know") than girls were. Second, girls differentiated more between the sexualized and non-sexualized girls than boys did. Boys rated both types of girls equally in terms of athleticism, how much they liked each girl, and how much they perceived girls to like each girl. Girls, however, reported differences between sexualized and non-sexualized girls on every item. This suggests that girls have more elaborate gender schemas, more strongly endorse these distinct stereotypes about sexualized girls, and have more detailed depictions of the stereotypes than boys. This is important because girls are the ones most likely to be personally impacted by these

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stereotypes. Future research should examine which factors predict different levels of

stereotype knowledge, differentiation, and endorsement. These may include socialization

factors (such as media consumption) and individual difference variables (such as gender

schematicity).

Finally, it appears that cognitive development, specifically multiple classification

ability, moderates children's stereotypes about sexualized girls. Children who are more

advanced at classifying have stronger stereotypes about the sexualized girl than children

who are less advanced at classifying. Importantly, cognitive development was more

important than age in moderating children's stereotypes. Instead of leading to a decrease

in stereotyping (as shown in Bigler & Liben, 1992), the current findings suggest that

advanced classification ability allowed children to see that sexualized girls are a different

category of girl associated with different stereotypes than other girls. Future research

should further explore the exact cognitive mechanisms that are associated with children's

stereotyping of sexualized girls.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. The children responded to pictures

of sexualized and non-sexualized paper dolls rather than real people. Thus, children may

have a differing stereotype when exposed to images of sexualized and non-sexualized

real people. This study also did not examine whether sexualized images are salient to

children in their everyday lives. Future research needs to examine how children relate to

these stereotypes in their everyday lives with real people. Despite these limitations,

however, this study suggests that children do indeed have elaborate and detailed

stereotypes about sexualized girls. Considering the increasingly common culture of

sexualized girls in media, it is critical that researchers more fully address the impact of these messages on the developing child.

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Appendix A

This is Olivia. She's in middle school. She lives with her parents and her brother.

This is Anna. She's in middle school. She lives next to her Aunt, Uncle, and cousin.

This is Molly. She's in middle school. She rides the bus to school everyday.

This is Samantha. She's in middle school. She walks to school everyday.

Appendix B

1. How popular do you think she is?

    a. Why?

2. How nice do you think she is?

3. How pretty do you think she is?

4. How athletic do you think she is?

    a. Why?

5. How smart do you think she is?

    a. Why?

6. How good at school do you think she is?

7. How much do you think boys like her?

    a. Why?

8. How much do you like her clothes?

9. How much do you think girls like her?

10. How much does your mom dress like her?

11. How much do you want to be friends with her?

12. How much do you think she is like a typical girl?

VITA

Ellen A. Stone

Education:

Bachelor of Arts (Psychology)

University of Texas at Austin

Minor: Sociology

Professional Positions:

Teaching Assistant, University of Kentucky   August 2013 - present

Scholastic and Professional Honors:

Honorable Mention, National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program, April 2013

Professional Publications:

Stone, E.A. & Brown, C. S. The Sexualized Girl: The Development of an Expanded (Sexualized) Gender Stereotype Among Children (Manuscript submitted for publication).