



Inferring Sexual Interest in Different Types of Relationships: Effects of Gender, Alcohol, And Attitudes

Isabelle M. Terrett¹ · Ryan C. Anderson¹ 

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Abstract

Although many researchers have documented men's tendency to interpret individual's behaviours more sexually than do women, few have considered how perceived sexual interest differs depending on the male–female relationship. This study addresses this gap in a diverse sample of six-hundred participants who viewed one of six vignettes depicting a short interaction between a male and a female actor (targets) where relationship type and alcohol presence were experimentally manipulated. Unexpectedly female *participants* perceived more sexual interest (from observations of both male and female *targets*) than males did. Participants rated more sexual interest in the actors who were in the casual dating and long-term dating conditions, compared to the friendly condition. Male and female actors were generally perceived to be equally sexually interested, but when gender role and rape myth attitudes were controlled for, the female actor was perceived to be more sexually interested than the male actor (by both male and female participants). Surprisingly, participants did not perceive more sexual interest when alcohol was present in the interaction compared to when it was not. These findings suggest that while contextual factors can affect perceptions of sexual interest, gender role and rape myth attitudes should also be considered. The implications of the study's findings are discussed with reference to how men and women are viewed across different situations in susceptibility to sexual misperception, and hence potential sexual aggression.

Keywords Sexual harassment · Alcohol · Attitudes · Gender differences · Sexual interest · Relationship type

✉ Ryan C. Anderson
ryan.anderson1@monash.edu

¹ School of Psychological Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University, Wellington Road, Clayton, VI 3800, Australia

Introduction

Conveying and reading romantic interest in social-sexual encounters between men and women can be complex, because messages are often masked by. This often arises because men and women use a complex interchange of verbal and nonverbal cues to indicate and explore their sexual interest in one another (Henningesen, 2004). Used mainly as a safeguard from potential embarrassment or rejection, these behaviours also allow for multiple interpretations of sexual interest and can result in misperceptions (Lindgren et al., 2008). Gender incongruities in perception of sexual interest have been linked to antagonistic outcomes such as mild to extreme discomfort, sexual coercion and in some cases, sexual assault (Abbey et al., 2001, 2005; Farris et al., 2008; Muehlenard & Linton, 1987).

Many women face sexual coercion or sexual violence in the course of their everyday lives. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016a), over 50% of women aged 18 and above experience sexual harassment in their lifetime, almost always from a male perpetrator. In particular, research conducted with university-aged women found a high prevalence of sexual harassment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2016) and one in 10 of Australia's working women have experienced sexual harassment in their workplace (Baird et al., 2018). Given this, research into gender differences and individual and situational variables that increase inaccurate interpretations concerning sexual interest is essential.

There has been considerable interest in the decoding of social cues that men and women use to infer sexual interest (Abbey et al., 1987; Bondurant & Donat, 1999; Fisher & Walters, 2003; Kowalski, 1993), why it is more common for men to misperceive a woman's sexual interest than the reverse (Farris et al., 2008; Haselton & Buss, 2000; McCaw & Senn, 1998), and understanding underlying mechanisms that may increase the tendency for misperception (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Ambrose & Gross, 2016; Haselton & Buss, 2000).

However, little recent research exists in the cultural context of Australia. Further, the research on female sexual interest has focused nearly exclusively on men's impressions of women, largely neglecting to consider women's impressions of men and other women. Moreover, although more than 80% of sexual assaults occur in the context of a well-known relationship between the perpetrator and the victim (Abbey et al., 2001), no research has attempted to distinguish the interpretation of sexual receptivity in casual relationships from friendly or committed relationships. This study sought to address this.

Key Theories Explaining Differences in Interest Perceptions of Sexual Interest

It has been suggested that men, compared to women, are more likely to perceive sexual interest where it does not truly exist due to more sexualised schemas about women, primarily developed through the media and stereotypes (Abbey, 1982; Howell et al., 2012). Schematic information for men and women may differ, in that men are more likely to initiate intimate relationships (Clark et al., 1999) and are more assertive in sexual situations, making them more likely to behave in aggressive

and sexual ways (Koss et al., 1987). Women on the other hand, feel an obligation to fulfil a man's needs and behave less sexually, so that they are not seen as so-called "bad girls" (VanZile-Tamsen et al., 2005). These sexualised schemas emerge in the form of sexual scripts that include specific prescriptions about how men and women should behave toward one another in romantic contexts and expect to be responded to (Hundhammer & Mussweiler, 2013). Script-based interpretations of dating and sexual situations reinforce traditional gender role behaviour, and thus reinforce and perpetuate men's agency and women's passivity (Hundhammer & Mussweiler, 2013).

In accordance with this socialisation interpretation, it has been proposed that men have a lower threshold than women when perceiving sexual interest (Kowalski, 1993). This is because evolutionary pressure biases perceptions of sexual interest in order to maximise mating opportunities (Haselton & Buss, 2000). The cost of underperceiving a woman's sexual interest or missing a sexual opportunity is greater to a man's reproductive success than it is to a woman's reproductive success (Howell et al., 2012). Haselton and Buss (2000) have suggested that men and women manage these errors systematically based on mate value. According to error management theory (EMT), missing, or underperceiving, the sexual interest of a high mate value target is costly in terms of reproductive success (Buss & Schmitt, 1993), thus men typically err on the side of over- rather than underperception. Women on the other hand, in assessing potential mates, are less interested in strangers who have high short-term mate value (Maner et al., 2005). This finding suggests that misperception facilitates a short-term mating strategy in men, but not for women (Maner et al., 2005).

However, these accounts are incomplete and may interact with current and historical contextual variables. For example, the evolutionary consequences of misperceiving interest from a woman have most likely shifted over time. This is partly due to the changing role of women in Western societies due to greater workplace equality and progressive attitudes toward shared parenting. In addition, traditional gender roles and sex stereotypes have loosened due to increased acceptance of women having casual sexual relationships and the prevalence of the "friends with benefits" relationship among younger generations (Wegner et al., 2014). Thus, it continues to be important to look at how perceptions of sexual interest vary according to gender and self-reported attitudes.

Perceived Sexual Receptivity Between the Genders

Sexual interest perception—the assessment of one person's interest and intentions in pursuing sexual activity in oneself or another—has been found to vary based on rater and target gender (Lindgren et al., 2008). Several studies support Abbey's (1982) finding that men infer more sexual interest in female targets than women do in male targets (Abbey & Melby, 1986; Botswick & Delucia, 1992; Lindgren et al., 2007; Willan & Pollard, 2003). For example, Abbey and Melby (1986) found that male raters perceived greater sexual interest in various behaviours (i.e. eye contact, relational distance and level of physical touch) of photographed woman, than

women raters perceived in the same woman. It should be noted however, that Sigal et al. (1988) found no gender differences when they assembled various friendly and seductive nonverbal behaviours and used them in a scripted male–female interaction.

There is also evidence to suggest that differences in men’s and women’s perceptions appear to be a function of both the sexual explicitness of the behaviour and target gender (McCaw & Senn, 1998). Kowalski (1993) found that men and women perceive an equal degree of sexual interest when evaluating explicit behaviours that are either, romantic (e.g. “she invites him to her apartment”) or sexual (e.g. “she removes her blouse”). However, when the behaviour is mundane or implicit (e.g. “she smiles at him”), men tend to perceive greater sexual interest than women. McCaw and Senn (1998), who examined the Miscommunication Hypothesis, also suggested that males interpret a female’s overt behaviour as a token or overestimate her interest in sex. It was argued that this motivated bias or wishful thinking—perceiving a cue of sexual interest when no such cue is present—occurred in males but not females.

As noted earlier, much research on perception of sexual interest is dated; continuing to investigate gender differences, as well as other underlying mechanisms, will allow for a better understanding of the errors that lead to sexual misperception. This will permit a more comprehensive approach to the development of interventions to reduce the adverse effects of this phenomenon.

Individual Differences

A number of studies have suggested that men who endorse attitudes that support violence against women will perceive more female sexual interest than men who do not endorse these attitudes (Abbey et al., 2001; Kowalski, 1993; Vrij & Kirby, 2002). Further, the degree to which individuals accept rape myths, which often serve to excuse sexual aggression, coincides with levels of sexual interest perception, regardless of raters’ gender (Vrij & Kirby, 2002). Thus, it is not surprising that the positive correlation found between endorsement of rape-supportive attitudes and over-perception of a woman’s sexual interest is more common among male perpetrators of sexual coercion (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007). As such, when individuals believe that violence against women is acceptable, they often behave in a way consistent with such beliefs (Lindgren et al., 2007).

Self-reported attitudes stereotypically linked with masculinity or femininity have also been predictive of men and women’s sexual interest perceptions. Research has found that those who embrace conventional views of male and female roles are more likely to see males as the “buyers” and females as the “sellers” in sexual encounters (Muehlenhard & Linton, 1987), influenced from socialisation. A more recent study found that people who perceive females as more submissive consider it is less appropriate for females to deny sexual invitations and are more likely to interpret cross-sex interactions as sexual (Vrij & Kirby, 2002). Thus, gender differences may be caused by differences in self-reported attitudes toward rape, attitudes toward dating experiences, and/or endorsement of sex-role stereotypes.

Contextual Factors

Not all individuals who overperceive or underperceive sexual interest will do so in all situations. Rather, situational cues have been found to increase the probability of sexual over/under perception and these misperceptions can increase the likelihood of sexual harassment (Farris et al., 2010).

Alcohol

Multiple studies have assessed the influence of an individual's alcohol consumption on the judgement of sexual interest, mainly for men (Farris et al., 2010; Friedman et al., 2005). Male alcohol consumption increases sexual desire and the likelihood that a given situation will be interpreted as more sexual (Abbey et al., 2000). Similarly, women who consume alcohol, compared to women who abstain, are interpreted to be more sexualised, though much more so by men. (DeSouza et al., 1992). George et al. (1997) found that men were more likely than women to rate female targets who drank alcohol as sexually accessible and willing to engage in sexual activity than female targets who were not drinking. However, the link between alcohol and sexual aggression has been found to hold true only for some men, because the effects of alcohol consumption interact with individual differences, such as rape supportive attitudes (Abbey & Harnish, 1995).

Investigations of perceptions of female drinking targets found that women are viewed as less sexually attractive when they consume alcohol on their own while their male companion abstains (Maurer & Robinson, 2008). In comparison, when males and females both consume alcohol together, female targets are perceived as more sexualised than when alcohol effects are absent (Corcoran & Thomas, 1991). Furthermore, a more recent study by Koukounas et al. (2015) found that the mere presence of alcohol (as opposed to actual drinking) increases males' ratings of sexual interest in female targets. Thus, even beyond alcohol consumption, alcohol placement can influence sexual beliefs toward women (Woodruff, 1996). In an attempt to further clarify the association between alcohol placement and sexuality, the current study sought to extend the findings of Koukounas et al. (2015).

Relationship Type

Few researchers have attempted to explain how the type of relationship that exists between men and women might be relevant to how sexual interest is perceived. Cross-sex friendships have often been overlooked by researchers. Recent studies have found sexual activity can and does occur within the context of cross-sex friendships (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000) and that a large number of cross-gender friendships contain at least some level of attraction (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012). However, Bleske-Rechek et al. (2012) also found that men stated more attraction and a greater desire to intimately date their female friends than women did their male friends. Further, these men were also more likely to overstate how attracted their female friends were to them, whereas women understated how attractive they were to their male platonic friends. The argument is that men have biologically evolved to

be much more sexually opportunistic than women, and are inclined to overestimate their attraction to their female friends, because men face the risk of being genetically ruled out (Haselton & Buss, 2000).

Additionally, most theory and research on perception of sexual interest has focused on interactions between two individuals who have just met or who do not know each other well. The length of relationship has been found to influence the types of strategies men use to perpetrate sexual aggression, whereby isolation and alcohol tactics may be useful for recently introduced victims but not necessarily in an ongoing relationship (Livingston et al., 2004). Using a representative sample of young men in the United States, Wegner et al. (2014) found that compared to perpetrators in a committed relationship with the victim, those who dated the victims casually were more sexually dominant, drank more alcohol and misperceived the woman's sexual interest for a longer period of time. Similarly, in a study looking at the use of behavioural scripts in judgements of sexual interest, Lenton and Bryan (2005) found that "casual sex scripts", scripts pertaining to acquaintance sex that implies an absence of commitment and familiarity between sexual partners, are much more commonly used and accessible than committed romantic scripts. Consistent with this, Humphreys (2007) found that as the degree of familiarity with one's partner increases, the perceived need for explicit consent decreases.

As sexual behaviour outside of the traditional committed romantic script (i.e., casual daters, one-night stands), has become increasingly typical and socially acceptable, whether perceptions of sexual interest also change as the relationship changes becomes of greater interest. Because they prefer as many mates as possible, men favour short-term sexual encounters to long-term encounters because they maximise reproductive output (Buss & Schmitt, 1993). Additionally, as Koenig et al. (2007) demonstrated, the short-term mate value of targets (sexualised motives), but not their long-term mate value (commitment motives) predicts systematic misperception in males but not females. Thus, whether men are more competitive than women—and thus more sexually eager—in casual dating scenarios is a useful topic for empirical research.

Aims and Hypotheses

In an attempt to address these concerns, the present study was designed to explore processing of sexual interest across genders, alcohol conditions, and relationship types whilst controlling for individual differences in gender role and rape myth attitudes. Previous literature has predominately focused on men's, and largely ignored women's perceptions of sexual interest, and also focused on acquaintance relationship types when evaluating sexual receptivity. Furthermore, attitudes are expected to relate to perceptions of sexual interest and may be obscuring commonly reported effects. Thus, whether relationship type and the presence of alcohol still affects perceptions of sexual interest after the influence of attitudes has been removed from the model is an intriguing question. Focusing on these gaps in the literature may highlight important individual and situational sexual cues that have been neglected

in earlier research and offer clues concerning how to effectively communicate sexual boundaries across settings, which can then inform sexual assault prevention efforts.

It was hypothesised that after controlling for gender role and rape myth attitudes, men will perceive more sexual interest than women, particularly from female actors. As the relationship type becomes more intimate (i.e., friend to casual daters to long-term partners), perceived sexual interest ratings will increase. Finally, more sexual interest will be perceived when alcohol is present than when it is not.

Method

Participants

Participants were recruited from social media (facebook, reddit etc.) and consisted of 600 men (51%) and women currently living in Australia. Of the sample, 60.5% reported having Australian ethnic heritage. Nearly half of the sample were married (46.7%), while 30.3% indicated they were single, and 18.3% said they were in a non-married relationship. Participants ranged in age from 18–51 ($M=42.33$ years, $SD=13.58$ years). In exchange for their completion of the study, participants were given the opportunity to enter into a draw to win 1 of 4 \$50 vouchers.

Materials

Short video-clips (approximately 30 s, without sound) were included in the study as experimental conditions, requiring participants to watch footage of a man and woman interacting either with or without alcohol. Clips were prefaced with one of three statements which manipulated the relationship type ('friends', 'casually dating', or 'long-term dating'). Each of the six scenarios featured the same cross-sex dyad. Similar stimuli and self-report paradigms have been used in other studies exploring perception of sexual intent/harassment (Haselton & Buss, 2000; Rudman & Borgida, 1995; Willan & Pollard, 2003).

Perception of Sexual Interest

Participants answered a single question (for both the male and female actor) which assessed the extent to which one target was sexually attracted to the other target in the video clip. Responses were made on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Definitely not* and 6 = *Definitely*) to the question 'In your opinion, does Jack (/Jill) appear to be sexually interested in Jill (/Jack)?'.

Gender Role and Rape Myth Attitudes

Gender role and rape myth attitudes were measured by responding to both the 10-item Traditional Gender Role subscale (TGRA) and the 13-item Rape Myth Acceptance subscale (RMA). Both scales were previously used by King and Roberts

(2011), developed by incorporating items from various other pre-validated scales: Burt's (1980) Sex Role Stereotyping Scale, Burt's (1980) Sexual Conservatism Scale and Spence et al.'s (1973) version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. Additionally, four items from Burt's (1980) Rape Myth Acceptance Scale and nine items from Lonsway and Fitzgerald's (1995) Rape Myth Scale were also used to assess rape myth acceptance. An example item from the Traditional Gender Role subscale is "It looks worse for a woman to be drunk than a man to be drunk" and from the Rape Myth Acceptance subscale is "When men rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex". Each item was endorsed on a 4-point scale, with response options from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 4 (*Agree strongly*) where higher scores represent greater acceptance of traditional gender roles and rape myths. It should be noted here that any items that mentioned the word 'rape' were explicitly marked as *optional* in the survey.

Cronbach's Alpha levels for the items taken from the Traditional Gender Role subscale and the Rape Myth Acceptance subscale were acceptable (0.57 and 0.77 respectively), although lower than those reported previously (0.80 and 0.88 respectively; Burt, 1980). Additionally, it was found that the subscales correlated ($r=0.57$), suggesting the gender role items are similarly related to rape myth acceptance. Overall, the Cronbach's Alpha for the combined scale was acceptable at 0.78.

Design and Procedure

This study involved a $2 * 2 * 3 * 2$ mixed experimental design. The between-subjects independent variables were participant gender (male/female), relationship type (friend/casual date/long-term partner), and alcohol (present/absent). Target gender (male/female) was a within-subjects variable. The average of scores on the TGRA and RMA subscales was used as a covariate. The dependent variables in the current study were the ratings of perceived sexual interest of the male or female actor.

After completing demographic items, participants were presented with a single 30-s video-clip (without sound) of a cross-sex dyad interacting either with or without alcohol. Following the videoclip participants were asked about the sexual interest of the male and female, and completed the TGRA and RMA subscales. The current sample judged both the woman and the man to be slightly above average attractiveness (5.19 and 5.04 respectively on a 7-point scale).

Results

As the covariate was seen post-treatment, independence of the covariate and the treatment effect(s) was checked by performing an ANOVA on the covariate. The main effect of relationship type and alcohol were non-significant, meaning the covariate was independent of both these treatment effects. Gender as a predictor variable was observed, not manipulated and thus, the independence assumption was met.

Table 1 below indicates how both men and women perceived the sexual interest of actors according to their gender, relationship type, and whether or not alcohol was involved in the interaction.

Inferential Statistics

Perceived sexual interest was analysed using a mixed measures analysis of covariance (ANCOVA). After adjusting for gender role and rape myth attitudes scores, female participants perceived more sexual interest overall than men, $F(1, 587) = 4.45, p = 0.04, \eta_p^2 = 0.008$. Additionally, there was an interaction between participant gender and target gender, $F(1, 587) = 14.16, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.02$, but both male and female raters perceived the female actor to be more sexually interested than the male actor (both p 's < 0.001).

There was also an effect of relationship type, $F(1, 587) = 86.93, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.23$, whereby more sexual interest was perceived when the pair was described as 'in a steady relationship' than when they were described as 'dating' ($p = 0.02$), or 'friends' ($p < 0.001$). There was an interaction between relationship type and target gender but for all relationship categories the female actor was perceived to be more interested than the male actor (all $ps < 0.01$).

The presence of alcohol made no difference to perceptions of sexual interest, $F(1, 587) = 1.01, p = 0.31, \eta_p^2 = 0.002$. It should be noted that there was an effect of gender role and rape myth attitudes, $F(1, 587) = 5.14, p = 0.02, \eta_p^2 = 0.01$, and when it was removed from the model results remained largely the same except that now far more sexual interest (overall) was perceived from the female actor than from the male actor, $F(1, 588) = 84.85, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.13$.

Table 1 Mean (SD) Perception of Sexual Interest Scores for Gender of the Target, Gender of the Rater and Relationship Type (when Alcohol was Present/Absent)

Gender of rater	Gender of target	Relationship type		
		Friend	Casual dating	Long-term
<i>Alcohol Present</i>				
Male	Male	3.11 (1.36)	3.76 (1.64)	4.61 (1.66)
	Female	3.46 (1.47)	4.37 (1.09)	4.50 (1.30)
Female	Male	3.00 (1.31)	3.96 (1.20)	4.39 (1.51)
	Female	3.18 (1.64)	4.98 (1.04)	4.88 (0.99)
<i>Alcohol Absent</i>				
Male	Male	2.77 (1.17)	3.90 (1.22)	4.43 (1.08)
	Female	2.93 (1.12)	4.20 (1.23)	4.64 (1.09)
Female	Male	3.11 (1.11)	3.94 (1.24)	4.29 (1.34)
	Female	3.71 (1.27)	4.72 (0.99)	4.56 (1.29)

Discussion

The present investigation examined how men and women differentially perceive sexual interest from the same and opposite-sex, whilst controlling for gender role and rape myth attitudes. Most research in this area to date concentrates on perception of sexual interest in casual or acquaintance relationship types (Abbey et al., 2006; Noel et al., 2009); the current research looked to address this gap by specifically exploring perception of sexual interest among different relationship types: friends, casual daters, and long-term daters. Further, because previous studies have shown the importance of individual attitudinal differences in sex role stereotypes and rape myth acceptance in judgements of sexual interest (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Vrij & Kirby, 2002; Willan & Pollard, 2003), these factors were fully controlled, strengthening interpretation regarding a specific potentiating effect of these differences on judgements of sexual interest.

The results from this study indicated that overall, *female* participants perceived more sexual interest from the actors than *males* did. The female actor was perceived to be more sexually interested than the male actor, by both the male and female raters. Further, participants perceived less sexual interest between friends than when the interaction was posed as being between casual daters or long-term daters, however once again female actors were perceived as having more sexual interest than males in each relationship category. Finally, the presence of alcohol did not make a difference to perceptions of sexual interest.

Overall, the findings underline the importance of considering gender, relationship type, and gender role and rape myth attitudes when examining sexual interest, and consequently the inference of sexual harassment.

The Effect of Gender

There were differences found between male and female ratings of perceived sexual interest in the targets, but not in the hypothesised direction. The finding that female participants perceived more sexual interest overall than male participants, is inconsistent with previous literature suggesting that men are more likely than women to view the opposite sex in a sexualised manner (Abbey & Melby, 1986; Kowalski, 1993; Lenton & Bryan, 2005). Similarly, Howell et al. (2012) found that men perceive women's faces as flirtatious more often than women, because for men, missing a mating opportunity is costlier (genetically) than it is for women. Conversely, Perilloux and Kurzban (2015) found a similar effect and explained the finding as showing that women may exaggerate what they believe other women intend, as a strategy of rival derogation. Pavda et al. (2014) indicated that because men perceive women wearing the colour red to be sexually desirable, women also perceive women in red as more sexually receptive and 'obtainable'. In response, women are then more likely to guard their male mates from other women in red than from those wearing another colour (Pavda et al., 2014). When we include women's perspectives alongside men's, we are able to understand more fully the extent to which these current findings generalise to the whole population.

That this difference was only found when gender role and rape myth attitudes were controlled suggests that this factor plays a significant role in perceptions of sexual interest. Previous studies finding a gender difference whereby men perceive more sexual interest than women may have returned such a result because they failed to control for inconsistent gender attitudes. Future studies should continue to look at the effect of gender attitudes on sexual intent perceptions, particularly where standards of sexual autonomy and perception are changing due to the #metoo movement and are arguably now different to what they were previously.

The Effect of Relationship Type

Male and female raters showed a similar pattern in how they process sexual interest in cross-gender friendships. Contrary to the literature on attraction and platonic friendships.

(Bleske-Rechek et al., 2012), male raters did not perceive any more sexual interest overall than women raters, but both male and female raters judged women to be more sexually interested in each relationship category. Perhaps the heteronormative script, which assumes *all* male–female interactions are romantic, may be loosening in the modern day, due to growing equality among the sexes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016b) and changing social norms. Modern Australia affords many more opportunities for women and men to interact in friendly ways. These cross-gender friendship schemas may have influenced evolved mating strategies, allowing men to adapt to females' non-verbal cues. Further as Bleske-Rechek et al. (2012) found, those who reported no sexual attraction to their friends were in significantly longer friendships than those who felt an attraction. Hence, sexual interest among one or both cross-gender friends may have negative repercussions on the friendship level, and thus may have been the reason for lowered sexual interest ratings for friendly interactions for both male and female raters.

While it may seem that questions about whether more sexual interest is perceived when observing a cross-sex friendship dyad compared to lovers would lead to a predictable result, the magnitude of the differences between conditions were of interest here (as well as the interaction of relationship type with other variables). Perceptions of sexual interest vary considerably when relationship status is known and clarified. Research neglecting to clarify this may be unnecessarily introducing a confound. Future studies may wish to consider if and how they offer such information.

This study also found men and women judged others to feel considerably more sexually interested when the male–female dyads were depicted in the social contexts that were more sexually pertinent or proximal to sexual encounters. This finding is consistent with Treat et al. (2015), who found university-aged men relied on the sexual relevance of the environmental context when evaluating what women were feeling. The current study replicates and extends this finding by suggesting the relationship type acts as a cue on which men *and* women aged between 18 and 65 rely on when rating perceptions of sexual interest in the opposite sex. Like other parts of the context (i.e., clothing style and attractiveness) in which emotional perception takes place (Guéguen, 2013), relationship context is an element that individuals focus on

strongly when evaluating the sexual interest of others. In the current study, believing the pair were in a sexual relationship increased the likelihood of interpreting the interaction with more sexual emphasis. One implication of this is that omnidirectional contextual cues are less diagnostic than the more unidirectional, non-verbal cues when determining an individual's level of sexual interest in another (Treat et al., 2015). As such, an overreliance on environmental contextual cues can mean an increase in misperception of sexual interest (Wegner et al., 2014). Future research may wish to investigate whether expectations of sex in different relationship types transfer into sexual aggression. Whether perpetrators of sexual assault rely on particular contextual cues, like the relationship type, when judging their victim's sexual interest, is also worthy of investigation.

The Effect of Alcohol Involvement

There was no single effect of alcohol involvement on perception of sexual interest, which was inconsistent with the third hypothesis. Previous findings (Jacques-Tiura et al., 2007; Koukounas et al., 2017) that alcohol involvement produced an increase in the perception of women's sexual interest, were not replicated in the current study. Similarly, two studies to date (Abbey & Harnish, 1995; Maurer & Robinson, 2008) have examined a comparison between both actors consuming alcohol and only one actor consuming alcohol and found participants perceive character alcohol use to serve as a turn-off when the romantic target abstained. This finding was also not found in the current study. However, these previous studies emphasised alcohol consumption in targets, or only in one target depicted in acquaintance-type dating scenarios. This could explain the non-significant main effect of alcohol in this study, which focused on both the male and female actor when merely depicted with alcohol (as opposed to consuming alcohol) in particular hypothetical dating scenarios. With the scenes being largely hypothetical, and relying on subjective self-report, future studies may wish to study this in a more realistic setting. Moreover, perceptions of female promiscuity can vary by the type of drink she is drinking (Parks & Scheidt, 2000). In all of these previous studies, the alcoholic drink used was beer, whilst this study used wine. Hence, future research should explore the effects of different alcohol types and their effects on perception of sexual intent.

Further Limitations and Recommendations

Previous studies in the area of perception of sexual interest have largely relied on university samples. We believe that the use of a large diverse sample of Australian men and women between the ages of 18 and 65 years makes these findings highly generalisable for this field. There has been very little research done on populations beyond the limited age-range of college students. It would be informative to determine whether the culture surrounding perceptions of sexual interest and harassment is different among university students than it is among the general population, thus researchers may wish to consider their sampling techniques when evaluating the

ecological validity of their study. Additionally, it is problematic that existing literature appears to predominantly focus on the male perspective.

Although the current study was restricted to Australian residents, and the overwhelming majority of participants indicated their ethnicity to be European/Australian, it should be noted that footage of Caucasian actors was employed, but there is evidence that perceptions of sexual interest vary according to ethnic background (Abbey et al., 2000; Koukounas & Letch, 2001). Future researchers may wish to also consider the ethnic heterogeneity of their sample as well as their stimuli. Bissell and Young Chung (2009) suggest that significant differences exist between Western and Eastern cultures' evaluations of attractiveness. Hence, it may be beneficial for future research to compare actors of different ages, ethnicities and physical features on perceptions of sexual interest.

The current study indicated perceptions of sexual interest can be influenced by contextual factors. It is important that future research examine also how individual differences might predict the likelihood of sexual misperception, as such studies could become the basis of programs which identify those who are most likely to misperceive interest and teach them the skills to change (Jacques et al., 2007). It may be that the integration of individual variables improves the prediction of higher perceptions of sexual interest. For example, as Hart and Howard (2016) found, men with an avoidant attachment style often perceive greater amounts of sexual interest in women because they are motivated to have sexual relationships as to enhance their sense of power. In addition, due to their lessened capacity to take the woman's perspective, low-empathic men were more apt to misperceive (Jacques et al., 2007).

Implications

The current research suggests that the gender of the target is a cue to sexual interest regardless of the target's intentions, a reality that may have unwanted implications. Men misperceiving female sexual interest may increase the chance of sexual harassment (Abbey et al., 2001). The finding that greater sexual interest is perceived in females who are on casual dates than those in a friend setting suggests that social context plays a role in sexual impressions. This implies that a male on a first date with a woman is particularly prone to misperceiving her sexual interest, as he is relying on a preconceived idea that females on first dates are more sexually receptive. As Wegner et al. (2014) found, high sexual expectations can increase the likelihood of a man misperceiving a female's sexual interest and feel comfortable acting on his sexual needs regardless of the woman's objections (Abbey et al., 2001). Thus, research on sexual behaviour and prevention programs need to focus on changing men's expectations, specifically for first or casual dates with women.

Furthermore, interventions for women should be tailored to different relationship types. As Rinehart and Yeater (2011) suggested, prevention programs addressing myths about sexual entitlement would be more constructive for women if they were taught how to oppose or resist sex from a long-term romantic partner, in addition to how to control a hook-up situation through communication of boundaries with a casual acquaintance.

Conclusion

The current study is one of the first to use comparisons of perceived sexual interest across relationship types in males and females and simultaneously assess gender differences, alcohol involvement and individual differences in tendencies towards sex role stereotypes. The results highlight the importance of contextual factors and attitudinal differences, in conveying varied types and levels of sexual interest for both male and females.

Although preliminary, this research contributes to a growing literature documenting contextual influences on differences in sexual perception among the sexes. A greater understanding of the cues and individual attitudes involved in how sexual interest is perceived will permit the development of constructive and applicable intervention strategies for lessening sexual harassment perpetration or sexual coercion.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval The study described herein received ethical approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 17320).

Consent to Participate All participants in this study willingly consented to participate in this research (see above).

Consent for Publication Both authors hereby consent for this study to be published.

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