

The Sexualized Girl: A Within-Gender Stereotype Among Elementary School Children

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Two studies (conducted in 2013) examined whether elementary-aged children endorse a within-gender stereotype about sexualized girls. In Study 1, children ($N = 208$) ages 6–11 rated sexualized girls as more popular but less intelligent, athletic, and nice compared to nonsexualized girls. These distinctions were stronger for girls and older children, and in accordance with our developmental intergroup theoretical framework, were related to children's cognitive development and media exposure. Study 2 ($N = 155$) replicated the previous findings using more ecologically valid and realistic images of girls and further explored individual differences in the endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype. Additional results indicated that the belief that girls should be appearance focused predicted their endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype.

The study of gender stereotypes among children largely began in the 1970s (e.g., Kuhn, Nash, & Brucken, 1978; Tibbetts, 1975; Williams, Bennett, & Best, 1975). Research since then has clearly documented that children endorse gender stereotypes as young as age 2 and continue to hold stereotyped beliefs throughout childhood (Albert & Porter, 1983; Golombok et al., 2008). Traditionally, most research has shown that girls are perceived as being kind, gentle, passive, sensitive, and well behaved relative to boys (Albert & Porter, 1983; Miller, Lurye, Zosuls, & Ruble, 2009), and these stereotypes have been reflected and perpetuated throughout children's media (Aubrey & Harrison, 2004; Browne, 1998; Hamilton, Anderson, Broaddus, & Young, 2006).

There has been a cultural shift, however, over the past two decades in how girls are portrayed in media and society at large; girls, even young girls, are increasingly being portrayed as sexualized (American Psychological Association, 2007). Sexualization occurs when women and girls are most valued for their sexual appeal, are sexually objectified, or have sexuality inappropriately forced on them (American Psychological Association, 2007).

Although research has documented the increasing sexualization of girls, very little research has focused on how children perceive these sexualized girls, and whether children (both boys and girls) have distinct attitudes and stereotypes about sexualized girls relative to nonsexualized girls. This is the purpose of the current two studies.

The Sexualization of Girls

To date, most research on the sexualization of girls has documented the increasingly prevalent media portrayals of sexualized women and girls, and examined the impact of sexually objectifying messages on girls' and boys' attitudes about themselves and others. Before discussing previous research, it is important to clarify the different, but overlapping, constructs.

First, *sexualization* differs from a general *appearance orientation* (or being appearance focused). Appearance orientation involves self-surveillance and monitoring one's appearance, with a focus on being attractive, and is associated with being well groomed, clean, and "natural" (Smolak, Murnen, & Myers, 2014). Although both boys and girls can show concerns about their appearance, girls are typically more appearance focused than boys (Dunn, Lewis, & Patrick, 2010; Jones & Crawford, 2006). Indeed, a focus on appearance is a key component of the feminine gender norms that influence

The authors are grateful to Maya Kearns and the children and parents of Central Kentucky. Also, the authors especially thank Petra Ronald, as well as Jenny Baker, Allie Campbell, Camila Cardosa, Jordan Carr, Naomi Charalambakis, Meredith Haley, Chia Hong, Shelby Kennard, Bria Mills, Francesca Reynaert, Jonathan Sarfin, Ishman Sims, Abby Spalding, Casey Taylor, Adrian Weldon, and Rachel Williams.

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DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12405

European American middle-class culture in the United States (Mahalik et al., 2005). Appearance orientation is contrasted with sexualization, which refers specifically to behaviors that relate to being “sexy,” and is associated with wearing heavy makeup and tight clothing that emphasizes sexual body parts (e.g., breasts and buttocks; Smolak et al., 2014). A person can be attractive, but not necessarily sexualized, and girls are much more likely to be shown as sexualized than boys (Hatton & Trautner, 2011; Near, 2013). In the current studies, sexualization is operationalized as wearing tight clothing that emphasizes sexual body parts and wearing makeup (in accordance with Smolak et al., 2014).

Sexualization is also related to, albeit distinct from, *objectification* (defined as being turned into an object for someone else’s use). Although it is possible to be sexualized without being objectified, they are often confounded and most of the research on sexualization has really examined the impact of the sexual objectification of women and girls. Specifically, research has shown that television, music videos, magazines, and video games are saturated with messages in which women and girls are portrayed as sexual objects for men’s pleasure (Aubrey, Hopper, & Mbure, 2011; Conrad, Dixon, & Zhang, 2009; Daniels, 2009; Downs & Smith, 2010; Ward, 1995, 2002). Thus, women and girls are both sexualized, via their tight clothing and makeup, and objectified, portrayed as existing for men’s pleasure and lacking in their own agency. There is not a parallel trend in which boys are often sexualized and objectified.

Because most portrayals of sexualized women and girls also involve objectification, research has consistently shown that repeated sexualization messages are associated with numerous negative outcomes (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Lerum & Dworkin, 2009). For example, after watching images of sexually objectified women, girls show lower body esteem, greater dieting restrictions, lower self-esteem, and depression (American Psychological Association, 2007; Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Glick, Larsen, Johnson, & Branstiter, 2005). Girls who internalize messages about sexualization have lower academic performance and more body shame than girls who do not (McKenney & Bigler, 2014a, 2014b). Although boys are not sexualized like girls are, they are still affected by these messages about girls; for boys, viewing sexually objectified girls is associated with rape myth acceptance, endorsement of the stereotype that women are sex objects and men are sexual pursuers, and endorsement of

traditional gender stereotypes (American Psychological Association, 2007).

The current studies focus on the sexualization of girls. This is important to examine within developmental psychology because girls—not just women—are often sexualized, and both boys and girls are the targets of sexualized messages. Children’s television shows frequently portray girls as sexualized by wearing tight, revealing clothing (Lacroix, 2004), an especially concerning trend given that children between the ages of 2 and 11 years old watch an average of 24 hrs of television a week (Turrill, 2013). Even children’s clothing has sexualized characteristics, with one fourth of girls’ clothing described as being revealing or having sexually suggestive writing (Goodin, Denburg, Murnen, & Smolak, 2011). Previous research has found that girls as young as 4 are already portraying sexualized behaviors, such as wearing makeup and having body image concerns (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014).

It is also important to examine stereotypes about sexualized girls within the context of gender stereotypes. Researchers have repeatedly documented the negative impact of gender stereotypes (Bigler, Arthur, Hughes, & Patterson, 2008; Else-Quest, Hyde, & Linn, 2010; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). For example, adults and children often endorse the traditional gender stereotype that girls are bad at math, and this stereotype can be detrimental for girls (e.g., by reducing their math performance via stereotype threat, self-fulfilling prophecy, and expectancy-value mechanisms, as well as leading to academic discrimination; Leaper & Brown, 2014). Because of the repeated media portrayal of sexualized girls, there is also a stereotype that girls should be sexualized. This may be detrimental for girls, especially if the stereotype is associated with other negative traits. However, while most research on sexualization has examined the impact of watching sexualized media, little research has examined whether children (both boys and girls) spontaneously notice the sexualization of girls, whether children have specific stereotypes or beliefs about sexualized girls, and how these stereotypes about sexualized girls are related to their stereotypes about nonsexualized girls and their attitudes about girls in general.

While there has been little research on children’s stereotypes, research has shown that adults have stereotypes about sexualized women and girls and that these stereotypes are indeed associated with negative traits. Sexualized women appear to be perceived as less competent, less intelligent, and less moral (albeit desired by men) compared to

nonsexualized women (Daniels & Zurbriggen, 2014; Graff, Murnen, & Smolak, 2012; Grauerholz & King, 1997; Smolak et al., 2014; Ward, 1995). Furthermore, sexualized women are judged more on their appearance than their task performance (Glick et al., 2005; Rudman & Borgida, 1995). These negative traits are applied to sexualized girls as well. For example, men and women perceived a sexualized fifth-grade girl to be less determined, capable, and competent than a nonsexualized girl (Graff et al., 2012). Only one known study has been conducted, however, examining children's perceptions of sexualized girls. In a study by Starr and Ferguson (2012), researchers found that by age 9, girls perceive sexualized dolls to be more favorable and desirable than nonsexualized dolls, suggesting that children do distinguish between nonsexualized and sexualized girls. This research, however, did not include boys' attitudes about sexualized girls and did not examine children's specific stereotypes about sexualized girls.

Thus, the goal of the current studies was to examine children's stereotypes about sexualized girls. Identifying the existence of a "sexualized girl stereotype" will allow for a more systematic study of the impact of sexualization and may lead to interventions based on existing stereotyping interventions. We predicted that children would perceive sexualized girls differently than nonsexualized girls. Specifically, we predicted that children would have distinct stereotypes about sexualized girls that include her being more popular, but not as smart, athletic, or nice as nonsexualized girls. These traits were predicted to be associated with sexualized girls because (a) common media images of sexualized girls show them being popular, but not smart or nice (e.g., *Mean Girls*) and (b) the adult literature indicates that sexualized women are perceived as less intelligent, less competent, and less moral than nonsexualized women. In this way, the "sexualized girl stereotype" operates like a within-gender stereotype (or subtype) of a girl. Thus, using a developmental intergroup theoretical framework (Bigler & Liben, 2006), we examined whether boys and girls hold a within-gender stereotype of sexualized girls.

The Construction of Stereotypes: Developmental Intergroup Theory

Developmental intergroup theory details the process through which children develop stereotypes about particular groups (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Based on this framework, we propose that children

first perceive sexualization to be a perceptually and psychologically salient attribute; they then categorize individuals based on that attribute; and finally, they construct a stereotype about sexualized girls that they apply to new individuals. We outline each step below.

Perceptual and Psychological Salience of Group Attributes

For children to hold a stereotype about a group, they must first perceive a group attribute to be perceptually and psychologically salient. In other words, children must be able to easily recognize and encode the group attribute before they develop stereotypes based on that group. Experimental research has shown that group attributes that are not highly salient (such as eye color) are not used as a basis for group stereotypes (Bigler, 1995). Salient group attributes, and groups for which children develop strong stereotypes, include gender, race, and attractiveness (Bigler & Liben, 2006). To examine whether children hold stereotypes about sexualized girls, we must first demonstrate that being sexualized is a perceptually and psychologically salient group attribute for children.

Categorization of Individuals

Second, according to developmental intergroup theory, if a group attribute is salient, children will categorize individuals by that salient dimension. The extent to which children perceive and categorize individuals based on their group attribute is dependent on their cognitive abilities (Bigler & Liben, 2006). One cognitive ability that relates to children's categorization is their classification skills. 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 categorize individuals along more than one dimension simultaneously (e.g., brown and black dogs and cats), a skill that develops around age 7 (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

The attainment of these classification skills has been linked with the development of stereotypes (Aboud, 1989; Bigler, 1995). For example, multiple-classification abilities allow children to categorize an individual as a girl who can also be an athlete, which can lead to a decrease in between-gender stereotyping in children (Bigler & Liben, 1992). We predicted, however, that multiple-classification skills could also result in increased complexity in children's *within-gender* stereotypes, such that

children would be able to categorize an individual as a specific type of girl (e.g., a nonsexualized girl may also be an athlete, but a sexualized girl cannot be an athlete). We predicted that children who have developed multiple-classification skill would be more likely to categorize sexualized girls as a subgroup of girls, in comparison to children who have not yet developed multiple-classification skill and who would be less likely to differentiate sexualized from nonsexualized girls.

Development of Stereotypes

Finally, according to our framework, once children perceive a group to be salient, and categorize individuals based on that group, they begin to develop stereotypes about the salient social group. Specifically, they make group–attribute links, often based on exposure to environmental (e.g., media) messages (Bigler & Liben, 2006). For example, because the media often portray sexualized girls as attractive and popular (Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, & Thompson, 2004), children may link the group “sexualized girls” with the attribute of popularity.

In addition to linking salient groups with specific attributes, because children are essentialists, they assume that external characteristics of the group reflect innate, internal characteristics (Bigler & Liben, 2006). For example, although sexualized girls and nonsexualized girls only differ in their clothing and makeup, children may assume that sexualized girls differ in personality traits and abilities from nonsexualized girls (e.g., sexualized girls are less smart and less nice than nonsexualized girls). Thus, we predicted that children would associate external clothing and makeup choices (either sexualized or not) with internal character traits such as intelligence, athleticism, and niceness. These traits were predicted because they map onto the stereotypes endorsed by adults (with sexualized women being low in intelligence, competence, and morality).

Current Studies

As stated, the goal of the present research was to examine whether children endorse a within-gender “sexualized girl stereotype,” using the developmental intergroup theory as a framework. In Study 1, we examined whether children associate different traits and attributes with sexualized girls versus nonsexualized girls and whether these group–attribute links are predicted by their cognitive development and media exposure. Study 1 used exaggerated

depictions of sexualized girls taken from previous research (Starr & Ferguson, 2012), and Study 2 replicated Study 1 using realistic images of girls that children might see in real life.

In addition to hypothesizing that sexualized girls would be perceived overall as less smart, less athletic, and less nice (as a way of being less moral) than nonsexualized girls, we also predicted that girls would show stronger stereotypic responses than boys would. According to gender schema theory, because of increased self-relevance, girls should have more elaborate and well-developed gender schemas about girls than boys should (Bem, 1981). Further, we hypothesized that children’s cognitive development, as assessed through multiple-classification skill, would predict their endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype, such that children with greater classification skills would endorse a stronger within-gender distinction than children with weaker classification skills. It was also predicted that children’s sexualized media exposure would predict their endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype, such that children with more exposure to sexualized media would endorse the sexualized girl stereotype more strongly than children with little exposure to sexualized media. Beyond these specific theory-based moderators, we predicted that older children would endorse the within-gender stereotype more strongly than younger children, partially because (a) other types of cognitive development (such as understanding individual differences and within-group heterogeneity) increases with age, (b) they have more media exposure over time, and (c) they are approaching puberty and thus sexualized behavior may be more salient.

Study 1

Method

Participants

The study was first approved by the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) to be conducted off-site at five public elementary schools in Lexington, Kentucky through their after-school programs. The director of the after-school program also approved the study. The participants in this study were 208 children (103 girls, 105 boys) recruited from their respective programs. Each program served between 80 and 150 children. Thus, consenting rate at each program ranged from 34% to 48%. Approximately 61% of the children who attended the afterschool programs did not participate in the study due to sporadic attendance (this was exacerbated because the

data were collected around winter break), no response to the consent form, or a parent or a child declining participation.

All participants were between the ages of 6 and 11 (Grades 1–5). The mean age was 7.88 ($SD = 1.47$). Of the 208 participants, 74% were European American, 12.5% were African American, 3.8% were Latino, 1.4% were Asian, and 6.3% were multiracial. The gender and ethnic composition of the sample matched the composition of the schools. All of the interviewers were female (seven undergraduate students and one graduate student). All data were collected in the spring of 2013.

Procedure

Parental consent forms were passed out to all parents as they arrived at the after-school program to pick up their children. All parents were told a brief description of the study. If parents signed a consent form (either immediately or after taking the forms home and returning them), their children were then approached about participating. Children who gave their assent were then individually taken into a quiet space in the school to conduct the study. They were told that 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 demographic and sexualized media use questionnaire. Second, using a within-subjects design, all children viewed a total of four images of girls (depicted as paper dolls)—two different nonsexualized girls wearing pants and t-shirts and two sexualized girls wearing short skirts and revealing tops—taken from Starr and Ferguson (2012). A very short vignette about each girl accompanied each image (see Starr & Ferguson, 2012, for images). The four vignettes were written specifically for this study, were counterbalanced across each image, and were kept very brief so as to not contain any information about the traits of the girl. For example, one vignette stated, "This is Olivia. She's in middle school. She lives with her parents and her brother." After listening to the vignette, and while looking at the image of the girl, children were asked questions about the traits of the particular girl. Specifically, the research assistant read the vignette and all questions, and recorded the child's responses, which was repeated for all four dolls. The presentation of images was counterbalanced. Upon completion of the measures, children were debriefed and allowed to pick a small toy from a toy box.

Measures

Classification skill. Classification skill was measured using procedures developed by Jones and Bigler (1996). Children were given a series of pictures of gray 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 explain their sort. 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 1 point for each correct sort and 1 point for each correct justification. Children were then presented with a 2×2 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 2×2 matrix using red and yellow boats and cars and asked to justify their reasoning. Again, children were given 1 point for a correct sort and 1 point for a correct justification. Thus, scores ranged from 0 to 6, with higher scores reflecting greater classification skill.

Stereotypic evaluations of sexualized versus nonsexualized girls. While viewing the sexualized and nonsexualized paper dolls, children were asked about the traits of the girls. Specifically, children were shown a paper doll, then while viewing it, answered the questions. Children were asked, "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?" Each item was 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. The calculation of scores is described in the Results and Discussion section.

Children were also asked several open-ended questions to more deeply explore the content of their stereotypes. In response to the questions, "How popular do you think she is?" "How athletic do you think she is?" and "How smart do you think she is?" children were asked, "Why do you think so?" (open-ended questions were not asked about niceness). The research assistant wrote down their answers verbatim. Open-ended answers were coded first using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to see which themes emerged without a priori assumptions. The answers were iteratively assessed to find the most common core themes. These differed by trait and are described in detail in the Results and Discussion section. A second round of coding looked specifically for responses that

reflected attention to sexualization (if they referred to the girl showing skin, accentuating sexual body parts, or being sexy), appearance focus (if they referred to the girl as being attractive or wearing fashionable clothing), or objectification (if they referred to the girl doing any behavior for someone else's benefit). 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" were not coded. Two coders, a female undergraduate and graduate student, read through every child's answers and coded their answers. Interrater reliability was adequate, $\kappa = .76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.73, .78]. Any inconsistencies were discussed until the coders reached complete agreement.

Sexualized media use. In the demographics questionnaire, children were asked to list their three favorite television shows. Children were asked this question using an open-ended format to better assess which shows were most salient to children. Children's responses were coded using ratings for sexual content taken from www.Commonsensemedia.org. This website rates all media used by children (including television, movies, and video games) on domains such as the amount of sexual content, positive messages, and violence. For this study, we focused on their ratings for sexual content, which the website subdivides into milder sexual content (i.e., "sexy stuff," including flirting and references to sexual interest) and more explicit sexual content (i.e., "sex," including kissing and references to sex). Using their codes, scores could range from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating greater mild sexualization, or 6 to 10, with higher scores indicating greater explicit sexualization (most shows scored below a 5, indicating mild references to sexuality or sexual interest). Two coders rated every child's answers. Interrater reliability was excellent (99%). Coders independently watched and rated two television shows that were not listed on Commonsensemedia.org. For these two shows, interrater reliability was excellent (100%). Ratings for the three shows were averaged together for one overall score, with a possible range from 1 to 10.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Results and Preliminary Analyses

First, we examined boys' and girls' stereotypes about the traits of sexualized girls and whether these stereotypes were moderated by gender and age. Children's quantitative ratings were examined

first in a repeated measures multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), followed by the analyses of their qualitative responses. Second, we examined whether classification skill and sexualized media use moderated children's endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype. For analyses that included age as an independent variable within the MANOVA, we divided children into two age groups, based on a median split ($Mdn = 8$). Thus, children were sorted into a 6- to 8-year-old group ($n = 142$) and a 9- to 11-year-old group ($n = 66$). For other analyses that used regression models (i.e., when examining classification skills), age was treated a continuous variable to preserve power.

Preliminary analyses indicated that classification score was positively correlated with age, such that older children had higher classification scores than younger children, $r = .31$, $p < .05$. Classification score did not differ by gender. The sexualized content of media use was also positively correlated with age, with older children watching more sexualized media than younger children, $r = .39$, $p < .05$. Furthermore, boys ($M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.86$) watched more sexualized media than girls ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 1.40$), $t(131) = -2.30$, $p < .05$. To test for order effects of pictures on trait ratings of sexualized and nonsexualized girls, a 2 (condition: sexualized vs. nonsexualized) \times 6 (story order) MANOVA was conducted for the four traits. There were no order effects, $F(40, 995) = 1.10$, $p = .31$.

Comparison Between Sexualized and Nonsexualized Girls

To examine whether children endorsed specific traits for sexualized versus nonsexualized girls, and whether this was moderated by age and gender, children's responses to the same traits for the two sexualized girls were averaged together, and the responses to the same traits for the two nonsexualized girls were averaged together (see Table 1). Each trait (popular, athletic, smart, and nice) was analyzed as part of a 2 (gender: boy vs. girl) \times 2 (age median split: 6- to 8-year-olds vs. 9- to 11-year-olds) \times 2 (condition: sexualized vs. nonsexualized) repeated measures MANOVA (in which the last variable was the within-subjects variable). As hypothesized, the multivariate main effect for condition was significant, $F(4, 201) = 53.75$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .52$; the multivariate interaction between condition and age was significant, $F(4, 201) = 9.86$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$; and the multivariate interaction between condition and gender was significant, $F(4, 201) = 3.78$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Although not related

Table 1
 Study 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Trait Ratings for Sexualized and Nonsexualized Girls

Traits	Boys		Girls	
	6–8 years	9–11 years	6–8 years	9–11 years
Popular				
S	3.05 (.85)	3.22 (.79)	3.40 (.74)	3.48 (.70)
NS	2.89 (.70)	2.63 (.68)	2.84 (.78)	2.76 (.60)
Athletic				
S	2.46 (1.05)	2.05 (1.01)	2.42 (1.03)	1.84 (.97)
NS	2.74 (.93)	2.71 (.81)	2.99 (.76)	3.18 (.50)
Smart				
S	3.39 (.66)	2.60 (.79)	3.28 (.75)	2.74 (.87)
NS	3.55 (.62)	3.43 (.47)	3.63 (.44)	3.60 (.38)
Nice				
S	3.21 (.77)	2.62 (.85)	3.38 (.77)	2.60 (.92)
NS	3.53 (.57)	3.31 (.74)	3.81 (.37)	3.76 (.36)

Note. Means range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the traits. NS = traits associated with the nonsexualized girl; S = the sexualized girl.

to the hypotheses, and thus not discussed further, the multivariate main effect of gender was significant, $F(4, 201) = 2.67, p < .05, \eta^2 = .05$, as was the multivariate main effect of age, $F(4, 201) = 7.81, p < .01, \eta^2 = .14$. Only those results that were significant in the multivariate analysis are discussed as significant at the univariate level. The responses to the open-ended follow-up questions are presented after the univariate results for each relevant trait.

Popular. As hypothesized, there was a significant univariate main effect of condition on ratings of popularity, such that sexualized girls were rated as significantly more popular than nonsexualized girls, $F(1, 204) = 48.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$. There were several interactions that moderated the main effect. First, there was a marginally significant interaction between condition and gender, $F(1, 204) = 3.40, p = .07, \eta^2 = .02$. Although both genders perceived the sexualized girls to be more popular than the nonsexualized girls, girls made slightly but not significantly more differentiated ratings than boys did (girls' $\eta^2 = .23$ vs. boys' $\eta^2 = .14$). There was also a significant interaction between condition and age, $F(1, 204) = 4.13, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. Although both age groups perceived the sexualized girls to be more popular than the nonsexualized girls, older children made substantially more differentiated ratings than younger children did (older children's $\eta^2 = .37$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .11$).

Children were asked to report *why* they believed each girl was popular. The most common theme

that emerged in children's responses (used by 49% of the sample, $n = 101$) was that the sexualized girl had the types of clothes that a prototypically popular person would wear, namely, "fancy" or "expensive" clothes. In contrast, the nonsexualized girl wore "plain" (i.e., unpopular) clothing. For example, one child stated, pointing to the sexualized girl, "Popular girls would dress really fancy and they would have their hair done and they would wear really nice clothes." Another child stated, in reference to the nonsexualized girl, "Well she doesn't—you know how where you see in the movies, they're all wearing skirts and makeup and stuff and she's wearing a jacket and jeans." These types of responses (about the "fanciness" of the sexualized girls' clothes) reflected the notion that the sexualized girl is appearance focused, and this is predictive of being popular.

The second most common theme that emerged for why children perceived the sexualized girl to be more popular than the nonsexualized girl (used by 21% of the sample, $n = 43$) was that the sexualized girl wears sexualized clothing (i.e., that shows a lot of skin) and that is why she is popular, reflecting a theme of sexualization. This theme more closely reflects the idea that the sexualized clothing specifically is what makes a girl popular. For example, one child stated that the sexualized girl is very popular because "she has a short shirt and a short skirt. And she's wearing heels." Another child stated that the sexualized girl is popular because "she has a belly shirt and her shoulders are showing and her hair is well-kept and the popular people in my grade have really well-kept hair." Thus, children believed that sexualized clothing is the type of clothing that popular people would wear.

Athletic. As hypothesized, there was a significant univariate main effect for condition on ratings of athleticism, such that the nonsexualized girls were rated as significantly more athletic than the sexualized girls, $F(1, 204) = 86.40, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$. As predicted, there were also significant interactions that moderated the main effect. First, there was a significant interaction between condition and gender, $F(1, 204) = 9.93, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$. Girls made substantially more differentiated ratings than boys did (girls' $\eta^2 = .36$ vs. boys' $\eta^2 = .21$). There was also a significant interaction between condition and age, $F(1, 204) = 14.21, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$. Older children made substantially more differentiated ratings than younger children did (older children's $\eta^2 = .51$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .15$).

Again, children were asked to report why they believed the girls were athletic. Children most

commonly stated that the sexualized girls' clothes were not compatible with doing athletic things, in contrast to the more "sporty" nonsexualized girls' clothes (used by 42% of the sample, $n = 88$). Many children would state, in reference to the sexualized girl that "those are definitely not sport clothes." Another common theme used by children was that sexualized girls do not want to play sports or be sporty, which was reflected in 19% ($n = 39$) of children's answers. One child, for example, 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 referred to the sexualized girl as a diva, stating, "Divas don't like to go to gyms and stuff. She hangs out with her friends and go [sic] shopping, like she might work out a little to get her shape in." These responses all reflected the idea that sexualized girls are appearance focused and thus too focused on appearance to care about being athletic.

Smart. As hypothesized, there was a significant univariate main effect for condition on ratings of intelligence, such that nonsexualized girls were rated as significantly smarter than sexualized girls, $F(1, 204) = 86.76, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30$. There was also a significant interaction between condition and age that moderated the main effect, $F(1, 204) = 25.44, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$. As predicted, older children made substantially more differentiated ratings than younger children did (older children's $\eta^2 = .50$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .10$). Gender did not moderate ratings.

In response to why they believed the sexualized girls were not smart, 24% ($n = 50$) of children stated that the sexualized girl is too focused on her clothing or looks to pay attention in school, which again reflects the idea that the sexualized girl is appearance focused. For example, one child stated, in reference to the sexualized girl, that "since she wears that clothes, she wouldn't be paying attention, she would only pay attention to the way she dresses perfect." Another child said, "She like worries on her clothes more." Another 12% ($n = 25$) of children stated that the sexualized girls were simply not as smart as the nonsexualized girls. For example, one child stated that the sexualized girl is not smart because "girls that dress like that aren't very smart." Another 10% ($n = 21$) of children stated that sexualized girls are not as smart as nonsexualized girls because they do not *want* to be smart. One child stated, in reference to the sexualized girl, "some popular girls would act dumb." Overall, children's responses seem to reflect the theme that sexualized girls are so appearance

focused that they cannot or will not focus on anything else, including academics. One third of children responded with noncodable answers (such as, "It just looks like it").

Nice. Finally, as hypothesized, there was a significant univariate main effect for condition on ratings of niceness, such that nonsexualized girls were rated as significantly nicer than sexualized girls, $F(1, 204) = 109.25, p < .001, \eta^2 = .35$. There were significant interactions that moderated the main effect. First, there was a significant interaction between condition and gender, $F(1, 204) = 5.40, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$. As with other traits, girls made substantially more differentiated ratings than boys did (girls' $\eta^2 = .40$ vs. boys' $\eta^2 = .28$). The interaction between condition and age was also significant, $F(1, 204) = 19.35, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. Older children made substantially more differentiated ratings than younger children did (older children's $\eta^2 = .51$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .19$). Children were not asked to justify their responses for their nice ratings; thus, there are no qualitative data for the nice responses.

Moderators of Stereotype Endorsement

To test the hypotheses that children with more advanced classification skills and children with more sexualized media use would endorse stronger stereotypes about sexualized girls, two regression models were examined. First, because these hypotheses were focused on an overall stereotype and were not examining individual traits of sexualized girls, an overall "sexualized girl stereotype" score was calculated. The score was created by first calculating the difference between the ratings of sexualized girls and nonsexualized girls for each trait, such that higher positive ratings indicated endorsement in the stereotyped direction (e.g., for the popularity rating, we subtracted the ratings for nonsexualized girls from the ratings of sexualized girls). These difference scores were averaged across all four traits for an overall stereotype score. Scores could thus range from -3 to $+3$. Scores of 0 indicated no differentiation between the girls, and higher positive scores indicated that children endorsed the stereotype that sexualized girls were more popular, but not as nice, smart, or athletic as nonsexualized girls. Overall, reflecting the pervasiveness of the stereotype, 73.6% of children scored above a 0, indicating that they endorsed the sexualized girl stereotype, while 11.1% of children endorsed no stereotype and 15.4% of children endorsed the counterstereotype.

Classification skill. We first examined whether classification skill predicted the extent to which children endorsed the sexualized girl stereotype, over and above the effects of age. A regression model predicting the endorsement of the stereotype was conducted with age in the first step, classification score in the second step, and the Age \times Classification Skill interaction in the third step. Results indicated that the overall model was significant, $F(2, 207) = 21.29, R^2 = .17, p < .001$. Age predicted endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype, with older children endorsing the sexualized girl stereotype more than younger children, $\beta = .36, p < .001$. Once age was accounted for, however, classification skill only marginally predicted children's endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype, $\beta = .13, p = .07$.

Sexualized media use. We next tested the hypothesis that children who watched media with a higher sexualized content would endorse the sexualized girl stereotype more strongly than children who watched media with lower sexualized content. A regression analysis was conducted with age and gender in the first step, sexualized media rating in the second step, and age and gender interactions in the third step (gender was included because there were initial gender differences in media use). Results indicated that the overall model was significant, $F(5, 132) = 5.65, R^2 = .18, p < .001$. After controlling for gender and age, the average amount of sexualized content in children's favorite media significantly predicted their endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype, $\beta = .41, p < .05$. This was moderated, however, by the significant interaction between gender and sexualized media use ($\beta = -.34, p < .04$). Analysis of simple slopes shows that only girls', but not boys', average sexualized media use predicted their endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype (girls' $\beta = .29, p < .01$; boys' $\beta = .05, p = .68$).

Study 2

Overall, results from Study 1 supported the hypotheses that elementary-aged boys and girls perceive sexualized girls as distinct from nonsexualized girls. Specifically, we consider this to be a within-gender stereotype of a sexualized girl: She is popular but not very athletic, smart, or nice relative to nonsexualized girls.

Although Study 1 established that children do endorse a stereotype about sexualized girls, the stimuli for Study 1 were an extreme example of

sexualized girls (exaggerated paper doll drawings of sexualized girls). It is possible that children's stereotype for sexualized girls may be less prevalent when presented with more realistic depictions. As described above, the first key component for the development of stereotypes is that children perceive the group attributes to be psychologically and perceptually salient (Bigler & Liben, 2006). Thus, it is important to establish that children notice whether a girl is sexualized or not using ecologically valid stimuli. In Study 2, using a within-subjects design, children were shown photos of a real girl dressed in clothes purchased at a children's clothing store. In other words, children were shown photos of a girl who wore sexualized clothing they could easily see in real life and asked about their perceptions of her traits. To further assess the perceptual and psychological salience of sexualized girls using ecologically valid stimuli, children were also shown two music videos taken from a popular children's television channel that differed in the degree to which the characters were sexualized. The videos are important because they present a large degree of visual information, in addition to the clothing of the sexualized girl. It is important to examine whether children notice the sexualization of the girl (and apply stereotypes to her) when she is embedded within other salient and competing information. To date, no known research has examined children's perceptions of sexualized girls using realistic images.

Study 2 also examined whether children who perceive sexualization to be more salient more strongly endorse the sexualized girl stereotype compared to children who perceive sexualization to be less salient. In other words, according to developmental intergroup theory, for children to categorize and stereotype an individual girl, they must be able to perceive whether she is sexualized or not (i.e., the group attribute must be salient). There are likely, however, individual differences in the degree to which sexualization is salient that may predict the degree to which she is stereotyped.

Finally, we examined how the sexualized girl stereotype was related to children's other gender stereotypes. We focused on two distinct types of gender stereotypes: (a) a traditional gender stereotype about the less powerful role of girls and women relative to boys and men and (b) the belief that girls should be appearance focused. We predicted that the endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes would be unrelated to the endorsement of a sexualized girl stereotype. The sexualized girl stereotype, as established in Study 1, involves sexualized girls being

perceived as more popular, but not as smart, athletic, or nice as nonsexualized girls. This stands in contrast to the traditional gender stereotype about girls, in which they are perceived as less powerful than boys, but always nice (Albert & Porter, 1983; Miller et al., 2009). We argue that the sexualized girl stereotype is a within-gender stereotype of girls that is independent of how girls in general are viewed relative to boys. We also examined whether children endorsed the belief that girls in general should be pretty—a component of gender stereotypes that asserts that girls should be appearance focused and valued for their appearance. Although being sexualized is typically considered distinct from being appearance focused (Smolak et al., 2014), children's qualitative answers from Study 1 suggest that children at this age equate the two. For example, they perceived sexualized girls to value their appearance because they are wearing "fancy" clothes. It is likely that children who believe that girls *should* be focused on their appearance would more positively value the sexualized girls than children who believe girls should not be focused on their appearance.

Method

Participants

This study was approved by the IRB through the same process as Study 1. The participants in this study were 155 children (83 girls, 71 boys) recruited from after-school program at two public elementary schools in Lexington, Kentucky. The after-school programs are representative of the larger student body at each school in terms of gender and ethnicity. Each after-school program served between 100 and 150 children. Thus, the consenting rate at each program ranged from 60% to 63%, and approximately 37% to 40% of children who attended the programs did not participate in the study due to sporadic attendance, no response to the consent form, or a parent or child declining participation. All participants were between the ages of 6 and 11 (Grades 1–5). The mean age was 7.80 ($SD = 1.31$). Of the 155 participants, 64.5% were European American, 14.8% were African American, 7.1% were Latino, 5.2% were Asian, and 3.9% were multiracial, matching the ethnic composition of the schools. Consenting was the same as in Study 1.

Procedure

Upon completion of consenting and assenting, children first completed the salience task designed

to assess whether sexualization among adults is a salient attribute for children. Participants completed measures assessing their endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes and their beliefs that girls should be appearance focused. Second, using a within-subjects design, children viewed two still photos of a sexualized and nonsexualized girl and two music videos differing in sexualization of the main character. Following each photo and music video, participants were asked about the traits of each girl. Children were then debriefed wherein they were told that the study aimed to understand what children think about girls and were provided the opportunity to ask questions. Afterward, children were given a small toy. All data were collected in the fall of 2013.

Stimuli and Measures

Salience of adult sexualization. Children were asked to sort 12 photographs of women into two piles. The photos were chosen by the authors from online advertisements and consisted of 6 sexualized and 6 nonsexualized women, who also differed in terms of posture (arms above head or arms at waist), hair color (brown or blonde), and ethnicity (European American or African American). Five undergraduate research assistants rated all photos on the level of sexualization and attractiveness, on a scale from *not at all* (1) to *very* (5). The sexualized photos were rated as significantly more sexualized than the nonsexualized photos (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 4.31$ and 1.73 , $SD_s = .41$ and $.43$), $t(4) = -11.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 6.14$. The photos did not differ on ratings of attractiveness (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 3.83$ and 3.12 , $SD_s = .39$ and $.69$), $t(4) = -2.17$, $p = .10$, $d = 1.27$.

Children were presented with all 12 photos in a random order and told to put the "pictures that looked like they go together" into two piles. Children could have made two piles according to ethnicity, hair color, posture, sexualized clothing, or something idiosyncratic. To assess whether children perceived sexualization to be a salient attribute, research assistants documented which photos were sorted into the two piles (based on numbers written on the back of each photo). Children were given a 1 if at least 75% of the photos of the sexualized women were sorted into one pile or a 0 if they sorted by anything other than sexualization (e.g., ethnicity, posture, hair color). All photos were put away after children completed the sorting task.

Traditional gender stereotypes. A slightly modified version of Galambos's Attitudes Toward Women

Scale for Adolescents was used to assess children's traditional stereotypes about women and girls (Galambos, Peterson, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985). The measure consisted of eight items such as, "Boys are better leaders than girls" and "The father should be in charge of making family decisions." Children responded using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4), with higher scores indicating more traditional attitudes toward women. All scales were accompanied by a visual aid of frowning and smiling faces. The measure had acceptable psychometric qualities ($\alpha = .71$ for boys, $\alpha = .74$ for girls; $\alpha = .67$ for 6- to 8-year-olds, $\alpha = .75$ for 9- to 11-year-olds).

"*Girls as appearance-focused*" beliefs. To assess whether children believed girls should be appearance-focused, they were asked three items: "How a girl looks is one of the most important things about her," "I only like girls who are pretty," and "It is important that girls look pretty every day." Children responded using a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4), with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the belief that girls should be appearance focused. The measure had acceptable psychometric qualities ($\alpha = .75$ for boys, $\alpha = .63$ for girls; $\alpha = .67$ for 6- to 8-year-olds, $\alpha = .71$ for 9- to 11-year-olds).

Stereotypic evaluations of sexualized versus nonsexualized girls. Children were presented with two different photographs of one 9-year-old, European American girl, wearing different clothing. All of the clothing, both sexualized and nonsexualized, was purchased from the same national chain children's clothing store at the local mall. Both outfits were matched for how colorful they were and were both considered "trendy" or fashionable. In the sexualized photo, the girl was wearing a crop-top shirt that revealed her midriff, a short skirt, midheeled shoes, and bracelets. In the nonsexualized girl photo, the girl was wearing skinny blue jeans, a long-sleeved pale green shirt decorated with lace, a sequined sparkly scarf, and feminine dress shoes without a heel. Five undergraduate research assistants rated both photos on level of sexualization and attractiveness, on a scale from *not at all* (1) to *very* (5). The sexualized photo was rated as significantly more sexualized than the nonsexualized photo (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 4.6$ and 1.2 , $SD_s = .55$ and $.45$), $t(4) = -13.88$, $p < .001$, $d = 6.77$. The photos did not differ on ratings of attractiveness (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 4.0$ and 2.4 , $SD_s = .71$ and 1.34), $t(4) = 1.97$, $p = .12$, $d = 1.49$.

Before being presented with the first photo, children were told,

We are going to show you a picture of a girl. Her name is Mindy and she has a twin sister. She lives with her parents and sister. She goes to a school similar to this one. Please look at this picture because we're going to ask you questions about her.

When presented with the second photo, children were told,

Now we are going to show you a picture of Mandy. She is the twin sister of Mindy. She lives with her parents and her sister. Please look at this picture because we're going to ask you questions about her.

The names and the order of the photos was counterbalanced. Children were then presented the photo of the girl for 10 s. Following each photo, children were asked, "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?" which were the same from Study 1. The items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4).

Children also viewed two music videos taken from the Disney Channel. The videos are based on two of the most popular shows among children of this age group (based on open-ended responses from Study 1). The sexualized music video (based on characters from the show *Shake It Up*) titled, "Fashion Is My Kryptonite," contains girls wearing tight, short clothing. The focus of the video was girls changing into different sexualized outfits and putting on a fashion show. The lyrics focus on being in style; for example a sample of the lyrics is, "We got style in our veins 'cause fashion's what we breathe." The nonsexualized music video (featuring the main character from the show *Good Luck Charlie*) titled, "We Can Change the World," is focused on helping one another and features girls in skinny jeans and t-shirts. The video also contains images of children and teens holding motivational signs. The lyrics focus on taking steps to help each other; for example, a sample of the lyrics is, "We got the world in our hands, now we're going to start a new day." Both videos ranged from 2 to 3 min long. Before being presented with the music video, children were presented with an image of one of the girls from the video. Children were told to pay attention to the girl in the picture because we

would be asking questions about her. Each picture was shown for 10 s before the music video. Five undergraduate research assistants rated the music videos on level of sexualization and attractiveness, on a scale from *not at all* (1) to *very* (5). The sexualized music video was rated as significantly more sexualized than the nonsexualized music video (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 3.8$ and 2.0 , $SD_s = .45$ and 1.0), $t(4) = 4.81$, $p < .01$, $d = 2.32$. The music videos did not differ on ratings of attractiveness of the key characters (averaged ratings, respectively: $M_s = 4.2$ and 4.2 , $SD_s = .84$ and $.45$), $t(4) = .00$, $p = 1.0$, $d = 0$.

After viewing each music video, children were asked about the same traits as before. Children were asked, "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?" The items were rated on a Likert scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4).

Results and Discussion

Overview of Results and Preliminary Analyses

Results were analyzed similarly to Study 1. First, we examined boys' and girls' stereotypes about the traits of sexualized girls and whether these stereotypes were moderated by gender and age. This was examined for the photos and videos in a repeated measures MANOVA. Second, we examined whether the salience of sexualization, traditional gender stereotypes, and the belief that girls should be appearance focused predicted children's endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype. As in Study 1, in the MANOVA, children were categorized into a 6- to 8-year-old group ($n = 106$) and a 9- to 11-year-old group ($n = 48$). For the analyses that used regression models (i.e., when examining stereotype endorsement), age was treated a continuous variable.

Correlations were analyzed between the nonsexualized photo and nonsexualized music video ratings for each trait, as were correlations between the sexualized photos and music video for each trait. Analyses found that each paired rating was significantly positively correlated, except for the correlation between the nonsexualized music video and photo for ratings of being smart (which was positively, albeit not significantly, correlated).

Based on which stimuli the child saw first, there were order effects for the sexualized girl stereotype, $F(3, 154) = 3.11$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Post hoc tests indicated that children who saw the nonsexualized video

first endorsed the overall sexualized girl stereotype less strongly than everyone else. To examine whether order effects changed our results, we included stimuli order in the large MANOVA reported below. Including it, however, did not change the results and thus it was omitted in the final analysis to reduce the complexity of the model. To assess whether knowledge of the television show characters from the music videos predicted children's video-based sexualized girl stereotype (calculated only from their difference ratings of the videos), an ANOVA indicated no differences in children's ratings based on knowledge of the characters.

Overall, 63 (41%) children sorted the adult photos by sexualization. Of the 63 children, significantly more girls ($n = 41$, 49%) than boys ($n = 22$, 31%) perceived sexualization to be a salient attribute, $\chi^2(1, n = 153) = 11.78$, $p < .01$, $\phi = .30$. There were no differences in salience of adult sexualization between the younger children ($n = 40$, 38%) and older children ($n = 23$, 48%), $\chi^2(1, n = 153) = .56$, $p = .46$, $\phi = .07$. Boys ($M = 2.56$, $SD = .55$) endorsed stronger traditional gender stereotypes than girls ($M = 2.29$, $SD = .53$), $t(153) = 3.06$, $p < .005$, $d = .50$; there were no differences by age. The belief that girls should be appearance-focused ($M = 2.21$, $SD = .88$) did not differ by gender, yet it was negatively correlated with age, such that younger children had higher scores on the measure than older children ($r = -.16$, $p = .05$).

Comparison Between Sexualized and Nonsexualized Girls

A 2 (gender: boy vs. girl) \times 2 (age median split: 6- to 8-year-olds vs. 9- to 11-year-olds) \times 2 (condition: sexualized vs. nonsexualized) \times 2 (stimuli: music videos vs. photos) repeated measures MANOVA (in which the last two variables were within-subjects variables) was performed for the four traits (see Table 2). Results indicated that the multivariate main effect of condition was significant, $F(4, 144) = 12.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$. There was a significant multivariate interaction between condition and stimuli, $F(4, 144) = 3.10$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .08$. There was a significant multivariate interaction between condition and age, $F(4, 144) = 2.33$, $p = .05$, $\eta^2 = .06$. Lastly, there was a significant four-way interaction between condition, stimuli, age, and gender, $F(4, 144) = 2.59$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .07$. Although not part of the hypotheses, and thus not discussed further, there was also a significant multivariate main effect of stimuli, $F(4, 144) = 35.72$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .50$, such that children rated the girls

Table 2
 Study 2: Means and Standard Deviations for Trait Ratings for Sexualized and Nonsexualized Girls

	Photographs				Videos			
	Boys		Girls		Boys		Girls	
	6-8 years	9-11 years	6-8 years	9-11 years	6-8 years	9-11 years	6-8 years	9-11 years
Popular								
S	1.98 (.99)	1.76 (1.04)	2.04 (.98)	1.96 (1.04)	2.59 (.64)	2.55 (.74)	2.74 (.64)	2.77 (.43)
NS	1.88 (.95)	1.41 (.91)	1.80 (.98)	1.92 (.80)	2.57 (.74)	2.73 (.55)	2.72 (.45)	2.73 (.53)
Athletic								
S	1.80 (1.19)	1.48 (.81)	1.46 (1.07)	1.74 (1.11)	1.76 (1.16)	1.50 (.91)	1.84 (1.12)	1.54 (1.07)
NS	1.73 (1.06)	1.82 (.96)	1.89 (1.04)	1.96 (.96)	1.85 (1.07)	1.73 (.99)	1.95 (1.09)	1.88 (.91)
Smart								
S	2.33 (.90)	2.19 (.87)	2.56 (.71)	2.15 (.97)	2.53 (.74)	2.14 (.77)	2.53 (.78)	2.50 (.65)
NS	2.53 (.71)	2.32 (.89)	2.59 (.68)	2.65 (.56)	2.73 (.64)	2.82 (.50)	2.70 (.63)	2.77 (.43)
Nice								
S	2.33 (.83)	1.95 (.97)	2.56 (.66)	2.23 (.99)	2.69 (.55)	2.32 (.78)	2.74 (.55)	2.77 (.51)
NS	2.59 (.64)	2.41 (.80)	2.66 (.67)	2.77 (.43)	2.86 (.41)	2.64 (.58)	2.91 (.34)	2.73 (.45)

Note. Means range from 1 to 4, with higher scores indicating greater endorsement of the traits. NS = traits associated with the nonsexualized girl; S = the sexualized girl.

in the videos as more popular, nicer, and smarter than the girl in the photo (likely a function of greater familiarity). Only those results that were significant in the multivariate analysis are discussed as significant at the univariate level.

There was a main effect of condition on ratings of being athletic $F(1, 147) = 10.13, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$; being smart, $F(1, 147) = 38.88, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$; and being nice, $F(1, 147) = 26.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$. As predicted, these findings replicate those of Study 1; there was no effect, however, of condition on ratings of popularity. There were also several interactions that moderated and qualified these main effects. Specifically, the Condition \times Age interaction was significant for ratings of being athletic, $F(1, 147) = 5.39, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Although both age groups of children rated the sexualized girls (in both the photos and videos) as less athletic than the nonsexualized girls, only older children significantly differentiated between the girls (older children's $\eta^2 = .21$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .01$).

There was also a significant interaction between condition and age for being smart, $F(1, 147) = 6.05, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$, with older children again differentiating more than younger children (older children's $\eta^2 = .34$ vs. younger children's $\eta^2 = .08$). This effect is qualified, however, by the significant four-way interaction between condition, stimuli, gender, and age, $F(1, 147) = 6.44, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Tests of simple effects indicated that although all children responded in the same direction, older boys were

differentiating between the girls in the videos ($p < .001, \eta^2 = .41$), whereas older girls were differentiating between the girls in the photos ($p < .01, \eta^2 = .26$).

Finally, there was a significant interaction between condition and stimuli for ratings of being nice, $F(1, 147) = 3.89, p = .05, \eta^2 = .03$. Tests of simple effects indicated that children differentiated more between the girls when looking at photos than the music videos (pictures $\eta^2 = .12$ vs. videos $\eta^2 = .06$).

Salience of Adult Sexualization

To test the hypothesis that children who perceived sexualization of adults to be a salient attribute would more strongly endorse the sexualized girl stereotype, two 2 (salience of sexualization: yes vs. no) \times 2 (gender: boy vs. girl) \times 2 (age: 6- to 8-year-olds vs. 9- to 11-year-olds) ANOVAs were conducted. One sexualized girl stereotype score was calculated for the photo stimuli and one score was calculated for the music video stimuli (each calculated the same as in Study 1). These scores were kept separate in this analysis (instead of collapsing into one overall score) because the stimuli differed in the amount of competing perceptual information.

Results indicated that salience was not related to the photograph-based sexualized girl stereotype, $F(1, 120) = .002, p = .96, \eta^2 = .00$. There was, however, a main effect of salience on the video-based

sexualized girl stereotype, $F(1, 121) = 4.56, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$. Specifically, children that sorted based on sexualization (i.e., for whom sexualization was a salient attribute) endorsed the sexualized girl stereotype in response to the music videos more than children that did not sort based on sexualization ($M_s = .20$ and $.06, SD_s = .38$ and $.37$, respectively).

Relationship Between Sexualized Girl Ratings and Gender Stereotypes and Beliefs

Traditional gender stereotypes. To test the hypothesis that the endorsement of traditional gender stereotypes would be distinct from children's sexualized girl stereotypes, we examined the overall sexualized girl stereotype score (we collapsed across the photos and videos, because the ratings were significantly correlated with one another and there was no theoretical reason to keep separate). A regression analysis was conducted in which age and gender were entered in the first step, and the traditional gender stereotype score was entered in the second step, and the Traditional Gender Stereotype Score \times Gender interaction was entered in the third step predicting the sexualized girl stereotype. In the final model, $F(4, 153) = 4.03, R^2 = .10, p < .005$, age significantly predicted the sexualized girl stereotype ($\beta = .32, p < .01$). Older children more strongly endorsed the stereotype than younger children. As hypothesized, however, traditional gender stereotypes did not predict the sexualized girl stereotype ($\beta = .35, p = .18$), nor did the interaction between traditional gender stereotypes and gender ($\beta = -.27, p = .30$).

"Girls as appearance focused" beliefs. To test the hypothesis that children who believed that girls should be appearance focused would hold positive attitudes toward the sexualized girls, we were interested in just children's ratings of the sexualized girls (and not their ratings of the nonsexualized girls). Therefore, we calculated ratings for each of the four traits of the sexualized girls, averaging across the sexualized photo and music video. Each trait rating for the sexualized girl in the photo and music video was significantly positively correlated (popular: $r = .22, p < .01$; athletic: $r = .54, p < .001$; nice: $r = .34, p < .001$; smart: $r = .36, p < .001$). We analyzed each sexualized girl trait in a regression analysis, in which we controlled for age and gender in the first step, and entered the "girls as appearance focused" belief score in the second step. Results indicated that, controlling for gender and age, children who more strongly endorsed the belief that girls *should* be appearance focused rated the sexualized

girls as more popular ($\beta = .21, p < .01$), model $F(3, 152) = 2.81, R^2 = .05, p < .05$; more athletic ($\beta = .19, p < .05$), model $F(3, 152) = 2.99, R^2 = .06, p < .05$; smarter ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), model $F(3, 152) = 7.83, R^2 = .14, p < .001$; and nicer ($\beta = .19, p < .05$), model $F(3, 152) = 8.25, R^2 = .14, p < .01$, than children who did not endorse those beliefs.

General Discussion

The purpose of the current studies was to examine whether children have developed a within-gender stereotype of girls, distinct from traditional gender stereotypes, referred to here as the sexualized girl stereotype. Across two studies, we found evidence that children do hold unique stereotypes about sexualized girls. Specifically, sexualized girls are decidedly less athletic, nice, and intelligent than nonsexualized girls. Children apply this stereotype to exaggerated depictions of sexualized girls (Study 1), realistic photos of girls in easily attainable clothes (Study 2), and girls in music videos (Study 2). When the sexualized girl is an exaggerated depiction, she is also perceived as more popular than the nonsexualized girl.

Furthermore, based on the qualitative data, children in middle childhood seem to assume that sexualized girls are appearance focused (or that they are choosing appearance concerns over concerns about being intelligent and athletic). For example, statements such as, "She'd probably be like one of those girls to say, 'Oh I got mud on my clothes,'" "Since she wears that clothes, she wouldn't be paying attention, she would only pay attention to the way she dresses perfect," "She like worries on her clothes more," and "Popular girls would dress really fancy and they would have their hair done and they would wear really nice clothes," reflect a focus on appearance concerns. Indeed, for children who have not yet entered puberty, being appearance focused is a much more prevalent characteristic of sexualized girls than being sexual per se. Interestingly, these constructs are not synonymous and are theoretically orthogonal (Smolak et al., 2014), but for children who are not yet sexual, being appearance focused is at least a component of being sexualized. Sexualized girls, therefore, in some ways embody the Western feminine norm of focusing on their appearance (Mahalik et al., 2005). They defy other feminine norms, however, by being less nice than other girls (Mahalik et al., 2005).

Based on developmental intergroup theory (Bigler & Liben, 2006), because children made

distinctions between the two types of girls across various stimuli, being sexualized or not was obviously a perceptually and psychologically salient attribute for elementary school children. Even when their clothing was not pointed out or mentioned, children encoded the differences and made trait attributions based on those differences. Furthermore, as predicted by developmental intergroup theory, the girls' short skirts and cropped tops were not simply external clothing choices, but represented internal character traits such as intelligence, athleticism, and niceness.

Although the majority of children (more than 75%) endorsed this sexualized girl stereotype, there were individual differences in the strength of this endorsement. First, there were individual differences in how salient sexualization was as a characteristic. Children who perceived sexualization to be a salient characteristic more strongly endorsed the sexualized girl stereotype when presented with distracting, competing information (e.g., in a busy music video). When looking at still images with fewer distractions, almost all children endorsed the stereotype, regardless of how salient sexualization was to them personally. When there is other information that can be used as a basis of judgment, as in the video, it was only the children who sorted by sexualization that differentiated between the sexualized girl and nonsexualized girl.

Second, as predicted, the sexualized girl stereotype was, at times, more strongly endorsed by girls than boys. According to gender schema theory, it is more important for girls than boys to pay attention to information about girls as a way to create a self-relevant gender schema (e.g., Bem, 1981; Martin & Halverson, 1981). Thus, seeing sexualized girls may activate a broader gender schema about girls, which leads girls, in some cases, to have stronger stereotypic responses to sexualized girls than boys do.

Relatedly, although we predicted that children who watched more sexualized media would be more likely to endorse the sexualized girl stereotype than children who watched less sexualized content, this effect was only true for girls. The more sexualized media that girls consumed, the greater their distinctions were between the two types of girls. This suggests that girls are especially attuned, relative to boys, to environmental messages about sexualized girls versus nonsexualized girls. This is also supported by the finding in which sexualization was a more salient attribute for girls than for boys (from the sorting task in Study 2). The implication of this finding is that girls seem particularly

vulnerable to media messages about sexualized girls, likely because of the greater self-relevance of the messages. Previous research has pointed out that repeated sexualization messages are associated with negative outcomes for girls, such as increases in body shame, surveillance, and disordered eating, as well as decreases in academic performance, body esteem, and psychological well-being (Fredrickson et al., 1998; Lindberg, Grabe, & Hyde, 2007; McKenney & Bigler, 2014a, 2014b; McKinley, 1999; Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005; Tiggemann & Lynch, 2001). The current studies extend this previous research by indicating that even when boys and girls are assessed on a comparable outcome, stereotypes about girls, girls are the most vulnerable to sexualization messages.

The sexualized gender stereotype was also consistently more strongly endorsed by older children than younger children. We presume that there are social, biological, and cognitive reasons for this effect. First, older children have likely been exposed to more sexualized messages than younger children, which may have increased the number of times they have seen the group–attribute links regarding sexualized girls (Bigler & Liben, 2006). This assumption is supported by the general finding in the current studies linking exposure to sexualized media with the endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype (Study 1). It also supports previous work showing that girls who see more sexualized girls and women in the media show more negative psychological outcomes (e.g., lower self-esteem and greater depression; American Psychological Association, 2007).

Second, research has shown that as children reach adolescence and approach puberty, they become more aware of and concerned about their body image (Lindberg et al., 2007). They may also begin to be more concerned with how they appear to the other gender (at least for heterosexual youth), including how they can best attract the interest of potential suitors. Thus, the greater endorsement of the sexualized girl stereotype among older children compared to younger children may reflect impending pubertal (i.e., sexual) interests. To examine this, future research should explore whether children who have already reached puberty endorse the sexualized girl stereotype more strongly than their age-mates who have not yet reached puberty. Future research should also examine whether post-pubertal youth associate sexualized girls with more sexual behaviors, rather than just appearance concerns (which was the primary focus for prepubertal children in middle childhood).

Third, although the effect was only marginally significant, children who had greater classification abilities were slightly more likely to endorse the sexualized girl stereotype, over and above the effects of age, than children with less developed abilities (Study 1). This supports the hypothesis that children's cognitive development (to a degree) facilitates their categorization of sexualized girls into a distinct category of girls. Future research should explore the role of cognitive development in influencing stereotype endorsement. It may be that multiple-classification ability is not the most predictive cognitive skill associated with within-gender stereotypes. Or, it may be that multiple-classification skill, in combination with individual difference variables such as gender schematicity (or the degree to which gender is chronically accessible to the child; Levy, 1994), best predicts children's stereotypes.

Regardless of the exact reasons for this developmental trend, the implications for development across middle childhood are important. By the end of elementary school, children have distinct stereotypes about what a sexualized girl is like. Importantly, these negative stereotypes extend to a girl wearing clothes that are easily available from an extremely popular store in the local mall, in other words, a girl who could easily be in their class at school. Because these stereotypes are associated with academic abilities, sports participation, and prosocial development, they may be particularly harmful for elementary-aged children who are in the process of developing these abilities.

Ironically, although most of the stereotypes about sexualized girls are negative, there is variability in how positively they are perceived. Both boys and girls who believe that girls should always be pretty and valued for their appearance are more likely to perceive sexualized girls positively overall. The exact impact of these attitudes remains unclear. Future research should explore the long-term impacts of valuing the appearance of girls and the associated belief that being sexualized is positive for girls. For girls, these attitudes are most likely associated with greater body shame and surveillance (Fredrickson et al., 1998); for boys, they may be associated with greater acceptance of sexual harassment toward girls (Brown & L'Engle, 2009). Future longitudinal work should assess the impact of endorsing a sexualized girl stereotype in elementary school.

Future research should also examine how girls internalize these positive and negative stereotypes. For example, if girls assume that sexualized girls are supposed to "act dumb" (as stated by one participant) and girls want to look like the sexual-

ized girl because of her popularity, girls may downplay their own intelligence and underperform at school (McKenney & Bigler, 2014a, 2014b). This is particularly concerning considering the gender gap that still exists in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields that begins to emerge in early adolescence (Robnett & Leaper, 2013). In addition, girls may begin to drop out of athletics as they identify more and more with the sexualized girl (who is not supposed to be athletic). This is problematic because girls may then forego the many positive outcomes associated with girls' involvement in sports, such as positive self-esteem and body esteem (Kane et al., 2007). Future research should also examine how other children and adults view girls who internalize and embody these stereotypes. For example, if another student perceives a girl to be sexualized, he or she may behave toward that girl in accordance with the sexualized girl stereotype and thus treat her as less intelligent, athletic, and nice. Research on gender stereotypes has consistently shown that children often act in accordance with the stereotypes (e.g., Leaper & Brown, 2014), further contributing to the existing gender gaps in academics and athletics. Future research should examine individual characteristics that could lead to the endorsement and internalization of the sexualized girl stereotype, such as parental socialization, previous academic success, and need to belong. The implications for boys are just as important. It is important to examine how boys' behaviors and beliefs may be influenced by their attitudes about girls. This is likely especially influential as children approach puberty and begin to reengage in cross-sex interactions.

Of course, this study is not without limitations. First, each trait was assessed by only one item. Furthermore, the stimuli in the study may not have been equally gender-typed. For example, the non-sexualized girl in the photo and paper doll was wearing pants, which may be seen as less feminine than a skirt. Future research should examine whether the sexualized girl stereotype is applied to girls that are wearing dresses or other types of clothing that are still highly feminine but not sexualized. This study was also conducted with a largely European American, middle-class sample using European American girls as stimuli. Future research should examine whether this stereotype is endorsed by a more diverse group of girls, and whether it is applied to a more diverse group of targets. Furthermore, future research needs to examine other possible mediators (such as concern for popularity) between children's endorsement of

the sexualized girl stereotype and how children are impacted by these stereotypes. 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 the media, it is critical that researchers more fully address the impact of these messages on the developing child.

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