

## ABSTRACT

### Perceptions of Sexual Violence: An Investigation of Sexual Harassment, Sexual Coercion, and Sexting

by

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Perpetration of sexual violence is a serious concern in the US, with research indicating that a substantial portion of the population has experienced some type of sexual victimization. There is sparse research that examines perceptions and judgments of sexually inappropriate behaviors, and existing research does not take into account the impact of individual differences and contextual factors. This study examined whether individuals recognize different forms of sexual harassment, sexual coercion, and sexting as inappropriate, and how these perceptions are affected by sex, age, and relationship status. A mixed sample of undergraduate students and adults within the community completed an online survey with 10 short vignettes (nine depicting varying types of sexual behavior and one [neutral] manipulation check scenario). Using a quasi-experimental 2 (Participant Sex: male/female) x 4 (Participant Age: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45+) x 4 (Relationship Status: partner, friend, stranger, undefined) repeated measures design, judgments of inappropriateness on a range of sexual behaviors were examined. The results indicated a significant interaction between vignette type and each variable measured (sex, age, and relationship status) suggesting that context and individual differences interact to influence

perceptions of sexual situations. More specifically, behaviors were perceived to be less inappropriate when they occurred between dating partners as opposed to friends or strangers. College-aged individuals endorsed the highest ratings of inappropriate sexual behaviors when compared to older age groups of adults. Furthermore, this study revealed substantial differences in perceptions of appropriateness between males and females, as females consistently perceived behaviors to be more inappropriate than males. These findings provide insight into individual perceptions of inappropriate sexual behaviors and highlight the importance of examining factors such as social context to ensure successful education and prevention efforts.