Beliefs about Men's Sexual Self-Control
Predict Attitudes toward Women's Immodest Clothing and Public Breastfeeding

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Abstract

Why do some people have negative views toward mundane behaviors such as women breastfeeding in public or wearing revealing clothing? We suggest that moral opposition to these behaviors may partly stem from their perceived effects on men's sexual responses. We hypothesized that (a) people would stereotype men as having relatively less control of their sexual urges (i.e., lower sexual self-control) compared to women and that (b) stereotypes about men's sexual self-control would uniquely predict attitudes about women's mundane (but potentially sexually arousing) behaviors. Five studies show that (a) people stereotyped men (vs. women) as lacking sexual self-control (Study 1) and (b) endorsement of this stereotype was associated with opposition to public breastfeeding and immodest clothing (Studies 2-5). The effects hold even after controlling for potential confounds and seem specific to relevant moral domains, although women (vs. men) tend not to view these behaviors as moral issues.

Keywords: moral judgment, stereotypes, sexual self-control, strategic morality, ambivalent sexism

Beliefs about Men's Sexual Self-Control

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Since ancient times, art and literature often present the concept of the female temptress—a woman so desirable that men lose control of their inhibitions. The notion of men being unable to control their sexual urges is clearly displayed in artwork depicting the temptation of Saint Anthony. In Christianity, Saint Anthony is said to have suffered through great temptation while in the Egyptian desert, and his ability to withstand temptation is held as exemplary. Different painters have depicted this scene in different ways, sometimes with demons, sometimes with wine and food, but other times surrounded by naked women.

The presence of such supposed temptresses in an example of extreme self-control suggests that, perhaps not surprisingly, people view sexuality as a supreme temptation for men (but perhaps not for women). Given the magnitude of this temptation, one possibility is that people view men as sexually weak or lacking in *sexual self-control* (hereafter SSC). Thus, Saint Anthony's self-control might seem particularly exemplary in the light of his denial of easy sexual opportunities.

In the present investigation, we examine the moral implications of beliefs about men's SSC. Specifically, we examine whether people do indeed stereotype men (compared to women) as having relatively low SSC, and whether individual differences in beliefs about men's (but not women's) SSC has important implications for social attitudes and sexual double standards, including moral views of women's "immodest" behaviors in public regardless of their sexual intent (i.e., public breastfeeding and revealing clothing). We expect that people who view men as sexually weak and unable to control their urges will be less likely to accept behaviors that could potentially "trigger" their sexual urges—even behaviors that are not overtly sexual.

Stereotypes about Men's Sexual Self-Control

Why would people have intuitions about men's sexual inclinations? First, men across cultures are consistently more open to sexual novelty than women (Buss & Schmitt, 2019), have a stronger sex drive (Baumeister et al., 2001), and are more sensitive to sexual stimuli (Hamann et al., 2004). Further, aggression is more closely linked to sexuality in men than in women (Peplau, 2003), and men who are sexually aroused become more willing to engage in sexually coercive behaviors (Ariely & Loewenstein, 2006). Men also routinely over-perceive the sexual interest of potential partners (Murray et al., 2017; Perilloux et al., 2012). Taken together, it might be reasonable for people to hold stereotypes about men's sexual weaknesses.

There is some evidence that people do hold strong stereotypes about men's sexual behavior. Stereotypes about masculinity often include sexual promiscuity (Cook & Cottrell, 2021). Further, both men and women tend to agree that men are more motivated by sexuality than women (Kane & Schippers, 1996), and there is even some evidence that women endorse stereotypes of men as being sexually "weak" (Clements-Schreiber & Rempel, 1995).

Moralization of Women's Immodest Clothing and Public Breastfeeding

Morality is often linked to perceptions of harm (Gray et al., 2014; Schein & Gray, 2018). From this perspective, it is easy to imagine why behaviors such as theft might be morally condemned. Yet many divisive moral issues deal with more mundane behaviors. For instance, it is not intuitively apparent why people might view a woman nurturing her baby as potentially harmful.

One possibility is that opposition to breastfeeding in public or immodest clothing is rooted in gender roles. Consistent with this notion, ambivalent sexism predicts both the

importance that people place on breastfeeding (Glick & Fiske, 2001), as well as opposition to public breastfeeding, although with some nuance (Acker, 2009; Huang et al., 2020).

A complementary explanation, which we propose here, is that people view public breastfeeding—as well as immodest clothing—not as harmful *per se*, but as harmful in their potential implications. Most people view breastfeeding positively—it is only when done in public that it seems to induce negative perceptions (Acker, 2009). Similarly, those who deride women for dressing immodestly tend to appeal to what it communicates to others (e.g., sexual openness) rather than the inherent moral pitfalls of wearing less clothing (Montemurro & Gillen, 2013). In sum, both behaviors are likely moralized primarily to the extent that they are viewed as sexually tantalizing (see also Johnston-Robledo et al., 2007).

If public breastfeeding and immodest clothing are viewed as providing sexual stimuli to observers, people might perceive them as immoral. This might be especially true if people harbor stereotypes that men have low SSC. People who hold these stereotypes might reason that, if men are unable to control themselves when sexually aroused, then any behavior that might inadvertently arouse them should not be allowed.

Overview

Across five studies, we tested the hypotheses that (a) men are stereotyped as having lower SSC than women, and (b) stereotypes about men's (but not women's) SSC are linked to attitudes toward women's behaviors that involve exposing their bodies in public (i.e., breastfeeding and immodest clothing). Throughout the manuscript, we control for several alternative explanations and potential confounding variables, showing that the relation between perceived men's SSC and moralization of these two outcomes is consistent and robust.

Study 1 established that people indeed have stereotypes about men's and women's SSC—both men and women rated men lower on a measure of perceived SSC. Study 2 replicated this effect and also found that stereotypes about men's (but not women's) SSC significantly predicted moralization of women's public breastfeeding and immodest clothing. We further found that these effects hold, even when controlling for participants' open-mindedness, religiosity, short-term mating orientation, endorsement of rape myths, conservatism, stereotypes about men's preferences for short-term mating, and ambivalent sexism (Studies 2-5). We also found evidence for domain specificity in the effect—believing men to be low in SSC predicts moralization of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, but not general moral punitiveness toward theft or violence (Study 3). Study 5 used a more direct measure of moralization. Although women tended to report very low scores on these moralization measures, the focal effects held for men, even when controlling for ambivalent sexism. This suggests that, while stereotypes about men's SSC predict moralization for men, this may not be the case for women. All study materials, data, and analysis scripts are available at https://osf.io/f52tb/?view_only=48fcfb14ae2d45e0b432cdf0dd06d807. Only Study 5 was preregistered, and deviations from our preregistered plan and their rationale are reported transparently.

Study 1: Stereotypes about Men's and Women's Sexual Self-Control

In Study 1, we first sought to examine people's stereotypes about men's and women's SSC. Specifically, we were interested in whether people rate men as lower in SSC, and whether both men and women harbor these stereotypes. For exploratory purposes, we also examined whether various individual differences (religiosity, sexual disgust, and short-term mating

orientation) might predict endorsement of these stereotypes (measures, results, and discussions are reported in the Supplemental Materials).

Method

Participants

We recruited 496 (306 female; $M_{age} = 18.97$, $SD = 2.26$; 437 heterosexual) undergraduate participants to complete a study on person perception. We recruited as many participants as possible, given our resources. Given the within-subjects nature of our data, a sensitivity power analysis (Erdfelder et al., 2009) suggested we were sufficiently powered to find a small effect size (Cohen's $f = .06$), which is smaller than what we anticipated.

Procedure

After giving informed consent, participants completed three versions of the Perceived Sexual Self-Control Inventory (Exner et al., 1992), which examines participants' perceptions of their ability to resist sexual urges on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale (e.g., "Once I get sex on my mind, I can't stop or relax until I have fulfilled my desire", reverse coded). The other two versions were altered such that the target was not the self, but men or women in general (e.g., "Men/Women are unable to control their sexual urges", reverse coded). These three versions were presented in random order and had acceptable reliability ($\alpha_{men} = .82$, $\alpha_{women} = .75$, $\alpha_{self} = .76$). Higher scores indicate higher perceived SSC. Participants also completed several individual difference measures (see Supplemental Materials for details and results) before completing demographic information and an unrelated study.

Results and Discussion

As seen in Figure 1, both men and women stereotyped men as lower in SSC than women, although both tended to rate their own SSC the highest, suggesting the better-than-average effect

(cf. Alicke et al., 1995). A within-subjects ANOVA (with the Greenhouse-Geisser correction for sphericity) using the afex package in R (Singmann et al., 2019) revealed a significant effect of target (men, women, or self), $F(1.76, 872.20) = 589.03, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .543^1$. Most importantly, although perceived Men's and Women's SSC are modestly correlated ($\beta = .30, p < .001$), planned comparisons suggested that men were rated lower on SSC than women. This effect held among both male ($t(988) = -8.96, p < .001$) and female ($t(988) = -24.54, p < .001$) participants.

Figure 1. Pirate plot (Phillips, 2017) showing ratings of perceived SSC as a function of target (Men vs. Women vs. Self) and participant sex in Study 1. Black lines and white bands represent means and 95% confidence intervals, while plot width represents density distributions.

¹ Adding participant sex and a Target $\times$ Sex interaction revealed a significant interaction, $F(1.84, 910.19) = 82.37, p < .001$, and a significant main effect of target, $F(1.84, 910.19) = 543.54, p < .001$. There was no main effect of participant sex, $F(1, 494) = 1.66, p = .198$. All pairwise comparisons were significant, and are available on the paper's OSF page.

Study 2: Do Stereotypes about Men's Sexual Self-Control Predict Attitudes toward Women's Immodest Clothing and Breastfeeding in Public?

In Study 2, we sought to replicate the pattern of stereotypes found in Study 1 in a non-student population. We also conducted our first test of the hypothesis that stereotypes about men's SSC would be uniquely associated with attitudes about public breastfeeding and immodest clothing.

Method

Participants

We recruited 401 participants (219 female; $M_{age} = 34.99$, $SD = 13.00$; 325 heterosexual) via Prolific Academic (Peer et al., 2017) to complete an online study in exchange for monetary compensation. Again, we ran as many participants as resources allowed. Sensitivity power analysis (Erdfelder et al., 2009) suggest we had sufficient power to detect a small effect size (Cohen's $f = .07$) in a repeated measures ANOVA with two measurements (i.e., Perceived Men's SSC and Perceived Women's SSC), and an effect size (f^2) of .02 for a linear regression coefficient.

Procedure

After completing an unrelated study on prejudice, participants completed shorter versions of our Perceived Men's SSC ($\alpha = .91$) and Perceived Women's SSC ($\alpha = .89$) measures (we removed the two reverse-coded items in the interest of survey length). They also completed three attitude measures using 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scales: the 4-item Acceptance of Public Breastfeeding Index (Vaaler et al., 2010), which assesses attitudes about public breastfeeding (e.g., "It is okay for women to breastfeed in public places like restaurants, parks, etc.", $\alpha = .92$). We created a 4-item measure of acceptance of public immodesty partly based on

the wording of the breastfeeding measure (e.g., “I am comfortable with women wearing relatively little clothing in public”, $\alpha = .94$), and a measure of attitudes about sexualized advertisements, using the same strategy (e.g., “It is okay for brands to use sexualized women in products advertised toward men”) on the same scale ($\alpha = .91$)². An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with a Varimax rotation suggested that all five of these measures load on distinct factors. Full results of this EFA are available on the paper’s OSF page.

Finally, we also assess two potential confounds. We measured open-mindedness using the Actively Open-Minded Thinking Scale (Haran et al., 2013), which assesses the extent to which people value open-mindedness on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*; e.g., “Allowing oneself to be convinced by an opposing argument is a sign of good character”, $\alpha = .77$). We measured religiosity using a 3-item religiosity measure on a 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely or deeply*) scale (based on Cohen et al., 2006; $\alpha = .95$). We included these measures because attitudes about sexually liberal or novel behaviors have been linked to both open-mindedness (Price et al., 2015) and religiosity (Moon et al., 2019; Weeden et al., 2008).

Results and Discussion

Do People Stereotype Men as Having Lower Sexual Self-Control than Women?

As shown in Figure 2, and consistent with Study 1, men were stereotyped as having less SSC than women, $F(1, 400) = 217.02, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .352$. Pairwise comparisons suggest this effect was significant for both female ($t(398) = -13.21, p < .001$) and male participants ($t(398) = -7.62, p < .001$). Of interest, male and female participants did not rate men’s SSC differently

² Besides the finding that men supporting sexualized advertisements more than women, there were no significant effects. Thus, we do not discuss this variable further, and did not include it in subsequent studies. Full results are available in the paper’s OSF page.

($M_{\text{women}} = 4.93$; $M_{\text{men}} = 4.92$; $p = .934$), although female participants rated women's SSC as higher than men's ($M_{\text{women}} = 6.06$; $M_{\text{men}} = 5.63$; $p = .001$).

Figure 2. Pirate plot (Phillips, 2017) showing ratings of perceived SSC as a function of target (Men vs. Women) and participant sex in Study 2. Black lines and white bands represent means and 95% confidence intervals, while plot width represents density distributions.

Do Stereotypes about Men's Sexual Self-Control Uniquely Predict Attitudes about Women's Public Immodesty?

To examine whether stereotypes about men's SSC were associated with acceptance of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, we used multiple regression predicting each attitude variable as a function of perceived men's SSC and perceived women's SSC. Religiosity, open-mindedness, and participant sex were also included as covariates in the model. All predictors were standardized, and we allowed perceived men's and women's SSC to interact with participant sex.

As shown in Table 1, above and beyond the influence of other variables (most notably, stereotypes about women's SSC), stereotypes about men's SSC were significantly associated with attitudes about women's public breastfeeding and immodest clothing. That is, believing that men tend to have low SSC was associated with opposing both public breastfeeding and immodest clothing in women. Notably, this was not the case with stereotypes about women's SSC—it was not significantly associated with attitudes about immodesty, but was significantly associated with breastfeeding attitudes, such that those who believed women have *high* SSC were more likely to oppose public breastfeeding (the opposite direction from the effect of beliefs about men's SSC on breastfeeding attitudes). There was also a small, but significant interaction between perceived women's SSC and participant sex, such that the negative relationship between women's SSC and approval of public breastfeeding was stronger among women than men. Though we did not predict this interaction, we suspect it could reflect the notion of female purity, or perhaps benevolent sexism. We return to the topic of benevolent sexism in Study 5. However, because we were primarily interested in perceived men's SSC, we did not collect data on perceived women's SSC in subsequent studies.

In sum, as predicted, stereotypes about men's SSC were uniquely associated with attitudes about public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, even when controlling for potential

confounds. This effect of men's SSC was not significantly moderated by participant sex for either variable ($ps = .074$ and $.379$).

Table 1. Results from Study 2.

	Public Breastfeeding			Immodest Clothing		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Women's SSC	-.22	-2.25	.025	-.05	-0.51	.612
Men's SSC	.28	3.58	<.001	.17	2.21	.028
Sex	-.15	-2.85	.005	.01	0.21	.832
Open-Mindedness	.30	5.18	<.001	.25	4.44	<.001
Religiosity	-.02	-0.29	.776	-.25	-4.72	<.001
Women's SSC $\times$ Sex	.22	2.27	.024	-.04	-0.41	.680
Men's SSC $\times$ Sex	-.15	-1.79	.074	-.07	-0.88	.379

Note: Participant sex is coded as follows: 0 = Female, 1 = Male. Degrees of freedom for both models = 344. Women's [Men's] SSC = Perceived Women's [Men's] Sexual Self-Control.

Study 3: Moderation and Domain Specificity

In Study 3, we test whether these effects are specific to relevant moral domains. Our approach suggests that stereotypes should only predict moralization in relevant domains—that is, stereotypes about sexuality should be relevant to attitudes about public immodesty and breastfeeding (to the extent that people consider these behaviors relevant to sexuality), but may have little to do with condemnation of theft. Thus, we included a general measure of moral punitiveness (i.e., desire to punish behaviors such as theft or fraud), predicting that stereotypes about SSC would be consistently associated with attitudes about public immodesty and breastfeeding, but not with general moral punitiveness.

A secondary purpose of Study 3 was to examine whether short-term mating orientation might moderate these effects. We reasoned that the stereotype that men have low SSC might predict attitudes about public immodesty primarily among those who view sexual promiscuity as problematic—that is, the effect of perceived men’s SSC on attitudes should be especially strong among those low in short-term mating orientation.

Finally, we controlled for two more potential confounding variables: conservatism and rape myths, or beliefs that victims of sexual abuse are deserving in some way (Burt, 1980). We reasoned that rape myths might be associated with both stereotypes about men’s perceived SSC and attitudes. That is, people might be more likely to blame women for “asking for” rape if they consider men less able and thus less culpable for their behavior.

Method

Participants

We recruited 382 (169 female; $M_{age} = 37.95$, $SD = 11.72$; 355 heterosexual) via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) using TurkPrime (Litman et al., 2017) to complete a survey in exchange for monetary compensation. Seven additional participants who failed an attention check question (Oppenheimer et al., 2009) were excluded from all analyses. As in Studies 1 and 2, we maximized our sample size according to resources. Sensitivity power analysis (Erdfelder et al., 2009) suggested that we were sufficiently powered (.80) to detect regression coefficients with an effect size of $f^2 = .02$, a small effect.

Procedure

After completing an unrelated study, participants completed the same 4-item measure of stereotypes about men’s SSC ($\alpha = .90$) and the same measures of acceptance of public breastfeeding ($\alpha = .93$) and immodest clothing ($\alpha = .95$), as well as the same 3-item scale for

religiosity ($\alpha = .95$) as Study 2. We assessed endorsement of rape myths (Payne et al., 1999), which was divided into two subscales: we were particularly interested in the “she asked for it” subscale ($\alpha = .68$), but we also included the “rape as a delinquent act” subscale ($\alpha = .68$) for exploratory purposes. The two subscales are significantly correlated ($r = .60, p < .001$). A four-item measure of short-term mating orientation (e.g., sex without love is OK”) was on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, assessing participants’ propensity to engage in and approve of short-term sexual relationships (Jackson & Kirkpatrick, 2007; $\alpha = .94$). We also assessed conservatism with a single question on a 7-point scale (1 = *extremely liberal*, 7 = *extremely conservative*).

Finally, we assessed moral punitiveness using three vignettes, each with four items, adapted from Ding and Savani (2020). In these vignettes, participants read about a physician who recommends a less effective treatment for his own financial gain, someone who steals a tip left on a restaurant table, and someone who keeps and sells the tools a technician left behind at his home. They are asked how bad, unethical and threatening these behaviors are, as well as how much they think the perpetrator should be punished. We averaged responses across all 12 items ($\alpha = .95$).

Results and Discussion

We first examined whether participants’ short-term mating orientation moderated the effect of men’s perceived SSC on acceptance of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing. We regressed these two outcomes on perceived men’s SSC (centered), short-term mating orientation (centered), and participant sex. The perceived men’s SSC $\times$ short-term mating orientation was not significant for acceptance of public breastfeeding ($p = .356$), nor for acceptance of immodest clothing ($p = .496$). Moreover, the three-way interaction (including participant sex) was also not

significant ($ps = .793$ and $.849$, respectively). Thus, we did not find evidence that this relation was moderated by participants' own preferences for short-term mating.

Next, to examine whether the effect of stereotypes about men's SSC on our focal attitudes holds when controlling for rape myths, short-term mating orientation, religiosity, and conservatism, we regressed our focal outcomes (i.e., public breastfeeding, immodest dressing, and general moral punitiveness) on perceived men's SSC, short-term mating orientation, rape myth (the "she asked for it" subscale), religiosity, and participant sex. We also included a Perceived Men's SSC $\times$ Sex interaction to test whether effects were consistent for men and women.

Results are shown in Table 2. Most importantly, even though both rape myth and short-term mating orientation predict acceptance of public immodesty and breastfeeding, perceived men's SSC was still a significant predictor in both cases. However, consistent with the notion that morality is not domain general but targets relevant behaviors, this effect did not extend to general moral punitiveness. In other words, stereotyping men as low in SSC is not associated with moralization across the board but seems to specifically target behaviors relevant to the stereotype (public breastfeeding and immodest clothing).

Finally, although we included rape myth endorsement as a potential confounder for which to control, we also examined whether beliefs about men's SSC were significantly related to these measures—of particular interest, believing men have high SSC is negatively related to endorsement of both the "she asked for it" ($r = -.35, p < .001$) and "rape is a deviant event" ($r = -.24, p < .001$) facets of the rape myth inventory. That is, people who believe men are good at controlling their sexual impulses also seem less likely to blame women for rape.

In sum, Study 3 provided some evidence for the domain specificity of the effects of stereotypes on attitudes—believing men are sexually weak is associated with lower acceptance of behaviors that could ostensibly “tempt” men. However, these stereotypes do not predict morality writ large—they seem to be irrelevant to people’s punitiveness toward immoral behaviors outside the sexuality domain.

Table 2. Results from Study 3.

	Public Breastfeeding			Immodest Clothing			General Moral Punitiveness		
	β	t	p	β	t	p	β	T	p
Men’s SSC	.22	3.19	.002	.15	2.42	.016	.07	0.81	.417
Sex	−.16	−3.40	<.001	.02	0.36	.719	−.06	−1.01	.313
STMO	.25	4.90	<.001	.40	8.70	<.001	−.07	−1.11	.269
Rape Myth	−.26	−5.24	<.001	−.21	−4.69	<.001	−.17	−2.99	.003
Religiosity	.07	1.26	.210	−.08	−1.70	.091	.07	1.12	.266
Conservatism	−.22	−4.24	<.001	−.18	−3.90	<.001	.03	0.56	.573
Men’s SSC $\times$ Sex	−.11	−1.64	.102	−.04	−0.58	.562	−.01	−0.06	.949

Note: Participant sex is coded as follows: 0 = Male, 1 = Female. Degrees of freedom for the t -values = 371, respectively. STMO = Short-term mating orientation; Men’s SSC = Perceived Men’s Sexual Self-Control

Study 4: Controlling for Other Relevant Stereotypes and Potential Confounds

One alternative explanation for the results of Studies 1-3 is that stereotypes about SSC are not a unique construct, *per se*, but that they are simply an extension of stereotypes about men’s short-term mating orientation. One possibility is that attitudes toward women’s public immodesty is related to stereotypes about men’s SSC only because these stereotypes are related also to stereotypes about men’s sexual promiscuity.

In Study 4, we assessed whether stereotypes about men's SSC predict acceptance of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, above and beyond stereotypes about men's short-term mating orientation. We also sought to control for sex, age, and conservatism as potential confounds.

Method

Participants

We recruited 398 participants (208 female; $M_{age} = 29.50$, $SD = 10.58$; 303 heterosexual) from Prolific Academic to complete a study on attitudes and perceptions of others in exchange for monetary compensation. Sensitivity power analysis (Erdfelder et al., 2009) suggested we were again sufficiently powered (.80) to detect a regression coefficient with a small effect size ($f^2 = .02$).

Procedure

After completing an unrelated study about stereotypes, participants completed the following measures: perceived men's SSC (the same 4-item measure as used in Studies 2 and 3; $\alpha = .88$); stereotypes about men's short-term mating orientation (based on the four items used to assess short-term mating orientation in Study 3, but with men as the target, e.g., "Men tend to think sex without love is okay"; $\alpha = .87$); and the same measures of acceptance of immodest clothing ($\alpha = .93$) and public breastfeeding ($\alpha = .93$), and religiosity ($\alpha = .94$). Along with demographic information, we also used the same item to assess conservatism as Study 3.

Results

We first examined how closely stereotypes about men's SSC were related to stereotypes about men's sociosexuality. The zero-order correlation between the two was modest, such that

people who believed men have lower levels of SSC tend to stereotype men as also somewhat more oriented toward short-term mating ($r = -.22, p < .001$).

Next, we used multiple regression to examine whether perceived men's SSC predicts acceptance of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, even when controlling for stereotypes about men's short-term mating orientation and several control variables (i.e., sex, conservatism, age, and religiosity). We also included an interaction term to test the Perceived Men's SSC $\times$ Sex interaction, as in prior studies.

As shown in Table 3, perceived men's SSC was again associated with acceptance of both immodest clothing and public breastfeeding. We note that, although perceived men's SSC and men's short-term mating orientation were negatively correlated, they were both positively associated with our outcome. That is, negative attitudes toward immodest clothing and public breastfeeding were predicted not only by the beliefs that men's SSC is low but also by the belief that men are relatively less oriented toward short-term mating.

Table 3. Results from Study 4.

	Public Breastfeeding			Immodest Clothing		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Men's SSC	.16	2.58	.010	.16	2.65	.008
Men's STMO	.16	3.36	<.001	.13	2.81	.005
Sex	-.10	-2.14	.033	-.04	-0.99	.322
Conservatism	-.23	-4.42	<.001	-.33	-6.77	<.001
Age	-.13	-2.83	.005	-.16	-3.60	<.001
Religiosity	-.07	-1.38	.170	-.18	-3.86	<.001
Men's SSC $\times$ Sex	.01	0.11	.911	-.07	-1.20	.231

Note: Participant sex is coded as follows: 0 = Male, 1 = Female; Men's SSC [STMO] = Perceived men's sexual self-control [short-term mating orientation]. Degrees of freedom for both models = 391.

In sum, Study 4 provided evidence against the claim that the effect of stereotypes about men's SSC on acceptance of women's immodesty was simply an artifact of sexual stereotypes in general (e.g., short-term mating orientation). Even when controlling for stereotypes about men's short-term mating orientation, the stereotype that men have low SSC predicted negative attitudes toward public breastfeeding and immodest clothing.

Study 5: Direct Moralization Measures and Control for Ambivalent Sexism

In Study 5, we conducted a preregistered experiment attempting to manipulate stereotypes about men's SCC. However, recognizing that many primes are unsuccessful or have only small effects, we preregistered a plan to analyze the data as correlational if the experimental manipulation did not significantly affect stereotypes about men's SCC (https://osf.io/rhdjs/?view_only=7edbd993d30042079f74cf090b4109ad).

We also refined our measures to more explicitly assess moralization. The measures used in previous studies included items such as "I am comfortable seeing a woman breastfeeding in public" and "It is okay for women to breastfeed in public places" (Vaaler et al., 2010). However, it is possible that responses to these statements could reflect concern for women's safety or even just perceptions of norms³.

Finally, we measured and controlled for ambivalent sexism to rule out the possibility that hostile or benevolent sexism account for the pattern of results in Studies 2-4. There is evidence, for example, that ambivalent sexism is a strong predictor of attitudes toward breastfeeding in public (Acker, 2009; Huang et al., 2020).

Method

Participants

³ We thank an anonymous reviewer for making this point.

We recruited 497 participants (407 female; $M_{age} = 24.33$, $SD = 7.33$; 361 heterosexual)⁴ from Prolific Academic to complete a study on attitudes and perceptions of others in exchange for monetary compensation. As specified in the preregistration, three additional participants who failed an attention check were excluded from all analyses. Sensitivity power analysis (Erdfelder et al., 2009) suggested we were again sufficiently powered (.80) to detect a regression coefficient with a small effect size ($f^2 = .01$).

Procedure

Following Pinsof and Haselton (2017), participants were randomly assigned to read one of two fictitious New York Times articles: one detailing a study finding that men have low SSC, and one detailing a study finding that men has equal amounts of SSC as women. Following the experimental manipulation, they completed measures of men's SSC ($\alpha = .85$) and women's SSC ($\alpha = .86$). To ensure our measures accurately capture moralization, we created a straightforward measure of moral opposition (rather than acceptance or positive attitudes) toward public breastfeeding to the following three items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale: "It is immoral for women to breastfeed in public," "Women who breastfeed in public should face legal consequences," and "Society should prevent women from breastfeeding in public" ($\alpha = .95$). The immodest clothing measure used the same wording, but substituting "wear immodest clothing" for "breastfeeding" ($\alpha = .94$). Participants also completed the same measure of short-term mating orientation as in previous studies ($\alpha = .89$), as well as the 6-item versions of benevolent sexism ($\alpha = .79$) and hostile sexism ($\alpha = .90$) from the short version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (Rollero et al., 2014).

⁴ The younger and more female sample seems to be due to promotion of Prolific on the social media platform TikTok: <https://blog.prolific.co/we-recently-went-viral-on-tiktok-heres-what-we-learned/>

Results

We first conducted a *t*-test to examine whether the manipulation successfully altered participants' stereotypes about men's SSC. This test was significant, $t(495) = 2.08, p = .038$. Although not specified in the preregistration, we also tested whether the effectiveness of the prime was consistent for men and women. Using multiple regression, we found a significant Condition $\times$ Sex interaction, $t(493) = -2.38, \beta = -.27, p = .017$. Simple slopes analysis suggested that the effect of the manipulation was significant for men, $t(493) = 2.95, \beta = .31, p = .003$, but not for women, $t(493) = 0.69, \beta = 0.03, p = .491$.

Because the prime was not consistently effective for the majority of our sample, we deviated from our preregistered plan and decided to analyze the data as a correlational study. Unlike prior studies, where effects held for both men and women, women in this study were much less likely than men to moralize immodest dress and public breastfeeding. In fact, 79% of women scored a 1 on the measure of moralization of breastfeeding, and less than 5% scored above a 2. Thus, moralization of public breastfeeding seems to face a floor effect for women. Such restriction of range naturally makes it difficult to predict participants' scores.

As specified in the preregistration, we first examined whether perceived men's SSC predict moralization of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing (although we did not preregister the interaction with participant sex, we felt this was important to consider after viewing the data plotted). As shown in Figure 3, perceived men's SSC is a strong predictor of moralization of public breastfeeding and immodest clothing among men, while women seem very unlikely to moralize these behaviors. Multiple regression confirmed a significant Perceived Men's SSC $\times$ Sex interaction for both public breastfeeding, $t(493) = 6.84, \beta = .76, p < .001$, and for immodest clothing, $t(493) = 9.28, \beta = .57, p < .001$. There was a main effect of perceived

men's SSC (which represents the simple slope for men) for both public breastfeeding, $t(493) = -10.69$, $\beta = -.88$, $p < .001$, and for immodest clothing, $t(493) = -8.26$, $\beta = -.69$, $p < .001$.

Figure 3. Moralization of immodest clothing (left) and public breastfeeding (right) as a function of perceived men's sexual self-control and participant sex. Values reported are correlations for male and female participants, rather than coefficients from the multiple regression analysis.

Next, we examined whether this relation holds when controlling for benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and short-term mating orientation. We also included participant sex as a covariate, given its apparent importance. As shown in Table 4, perceived men's SSC remains a significant predictor of moralization (for men), above and beyond the effects of the other predictors⁵—benevolent sexism, hostile sexism, and short-term mating orientation.

In sum, Study 5 suggests that women do not moralize either public breastfeeding or immodest clothing, even though they largely had similar scores to men on the measures of

⁵ Including experimental condition as a covariate did not alter results.

acceptance of these behaviors in Studies 2-4. It also suggests that, for men, the effect of stereotypes about men's sexual self-control predicts moral opposition to these behaviors, even when controlling for the most theoretically relevant alternative explanations.

Table 4. Results from Study 5.

	Public Breastfeeding			Immodest Clothing		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
Perceived Men's SSC	-.66	-8.14	<.001	-.40	-5.47	<.001
Sex	-.41	-10.40	<.001	-.35	-9.65	<.001
Hostile Sexism	.24	5.20	<.001	.38	9.17	<.001
Benevolent Sexism	.16	3.56	<.001	.15	3.54	<.001
STMO	.01	0.30	.295	-.11	-3.26	.001
Perceived Men's SCC $\times$ Sex	.64	8.34	<.001	.41	5.80	<.001

Note: STMO = short-term mating orientation. Degrees of freedom for both models = 490. Because sex is coded as 0 = Male, 1 = Female, coefficients for Perceived Men's SSC represent the slopes for males.

Discussion

Across five studies, we show that (a) both men and women stereotype men as having weaker SSC than women, (b) stereotypes about men's (but not consistently about women's) low SSC predict acceptance of women's public immodesty and breastfeeding, (c) this effect does not generalize to moralization of unrelated phenomena, but seems restricted to relevant domains (i.e., skin exposure that could be sexually arousing), (d) this effect holds even when controlling for stereotypes about men's short-term mating orientation, and (e) this effect does not seem to be explained by benevolent or hostile sexism, at least for men. Unlike men, women's opposition to female skin exposure are partly explained by perceived men's SSC only when we measure their general attitudes (not moralization). The finding suggests that, for women, their judgments

regarding breastfeeding and immodesty may in fact reflect the underlying construct of gender role ideology rather than moral one.

Our results revealed several predictors that consistently predict attitudes toward both public breastfeeding and immodest clothing. Consistent with prior research (Acker, 2009; Huang et al., 2020), both benevolent and hostile sexism were closely linked to moral judgment toward both of these behaviors. Notably, these effects were quite strong—especially for hostile sexism. Our studies also suggested that short-term mating orientation, religiosity, and open-mindedness are significant predictors. Nevertheless, across all studies, stereotypes about men's SSC consistently predicted attitudes toward public breastfeeding and immodest clothing, even when controlling for other theoretically relevant predictors.

Implications

Stereotypes about men's sexuality can be harmful to both men and women. They are harmful to men because stereotypes of men's sexual weaknesses can be damaging to targets, leading to distrust and prejudice toward men (Cook & Cottrell, 2021; Moon et al., 2018; Pinsof & Haselton, 2016). Moreover, women who endorse these stereotypes are more likely to exploit these possible weaknesses and use manipulative strategies against men, including attempting to make them jealous to change their behavior (Clements-Schreiber & Rempel, 1995).

These stereotypes are also damaging to women. As our data suggest, the stereotype that men have difficulties controlling their sexual urges may lead people to place pressure and blame on women for their mundane behaviors that are not overtly sexual (even the one that is motherly and platonic in nature). Seeing women in revealing clothes, people who believe that men lack the ability to control themselves sexually may wonder why these women "ask for it." Rape myths and other victim blaming attitudes have untold negative consequences on mental and physical

health among women (Payne et al., 1999). In the case of public breastfeeding, stigma around this behavior carries enormous costs every year because it prevents mothers from breastfeeding their children at all (Foss & Blake, 2019; Rollins et al., 2016). Interestingly, the beliefs that women have *high* sexual self-control and men have *low* sexual self-control predicted stronger opposition to women's public breastfeeding. As people expect women to have relatively high sexual self-control, they may also believe that it is the women's responsibility (e.g., covering up themselves) to prevent ordinary men from succumbing to their primitive drives.

Notably, although both men and women in this study believed that men in general have relatively low sexual self-control, it is not the case that our male participants believed that this stereotype applies to them. In fact, men in this study perceived themselves as having more sexual self-control than other average men and women. Therefore, it is unlikely that they were afraid that women's skin exposure (via public breastfeeding and revealing clothes) would have an effect on themselves. Rather, their opposition to women's public immodesty may stem from the desire to prevent harm (e.g., rape, infidelity) committed by *other* men. Despite having good intentions (e.g., to protect women), we argue that this stereotype (that men have low sexual self-control) may do more harm than good by breeding sexist beliefs and encouraging restriction of women's autonomy.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the correlational data support our hypothesis, the question of causality remains. We hypothesized that stereotypes about men's sexual self-control would lead to relevant moral judgments, but the opposite causal order is also possible. That is, people might oppose public breastfeeding or immodest clothing for other, perhaps more mundane, reasons (e.g., cultural practices or political affiliations), and their reported stereotypes about men's sexual self-control

only provide post-hoc justifications for these reasons (cf. Haidt, 2012; Tetlock, 2002). Future research could conduct experiments to test the causal relation between these variables, as we attempted to do in Study 5. We note, however, that we remain somewhat skeptical that a short laboratory manipulation will reliably alter stereotypes that may be deeply ingrained based on years of experience and socialization.

We also urge caution in generalizing these results to other cultures. We suggest that these effects are likely to hold only in cultures where (a) there is significant opposition to public breastfeeding and immodest clothing in women, and (b) there is sufficient variation in attitudes toward these behaviors. That is, we would not expect these findings to replicate in societies where these behaviors are nearly universally tolerated, or in societies where most of the population is opposed to them.

Conclusion

These results add to a growing body of research suggesting that context matters for moral judgment—people judge differently depending on how much they value a target (Beal, 2020) or on the identity of people involved (Hester & Gray, 2020). Just as lay theories about free will, human goodness, and economics can influence moral judgments (Nettle & Saxe, 2020, 2021; Shariff et al., 2014, 2016), our data suggest that people’s beliefs about men’s sexual self-control can also predict moralization of important social issues.

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