

Running Head: FUNCTIONALITY OF PLAYFUL AGGRESSION

FORM AND FUNCTIONALITY OF PLAYFUL AGGRESSION IN YOUNG ADULTS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Ethological and developmental studies have demonstrated the presence and importance of playful aggression for primates and children; additional studies suggest that playful aggression is also present in adulthood but is adapted and incorporated into relationships in different ways than it previously was in childhood. Little is known about young adults' perceptions of playful aggression in romantic relationships, especially among same-sex couples. This study investigated perceptions of aggression when the sexual orientation of the couple, the severity of aggression, and the response of the recipient, who was receiving the aggression, were manipulated in a series of scenarios. Young adults, ages 18 to 25 years ( $N = 336$ ) of both sexes rated a series of previously validated scales and then rated 24 scenarios. Data was analyzed using a series of repeated measures ANOVAs, paired samples t-tests, and independent t-tests. The data revealed that the response of the recipient had a significant effect on ratings of aggression such that in scenarios with a positive response (when the recipient smiled as opposed to frowning and walking away), behaviors were perceived as less aggressive. The gender of the aggressor also had a significant effect; scenarios with a male aggressor and female recipient were rated most aggressive out of the 24 scenarios. Additional results suggest that aggression in homosexual couples is perceived as less aggressive than comparable aggression in heterosexual couples. Results are discussed in the context of efforts to integrate research and develop a more cohesive understanding of playful aggression, specifically, how this aggression is perceived in adult romantic relationships.

*Keywords:* playful aggression, aggression, young adults, same-sex, homosexual

## INTRODUCTION

## Review of Relevant Literature

Recently, mainstream media has highlighted what researchers and psychologists have deemed the positive and adaptive qualities of roughhousing in childhood. Major bookstores and websites, such as Amazon, are selling books with titles like “The Art of Roughhousing,” “Playful Parenting,” “50 Dangerous Things (You Should Let Your Children Do),” and “It’s OK Not to Share and Other Renegade Rules for Raising Competent and Compassionate Kids.” All of these books emphasize the developmental importance of horseplay for children. A recent ABC news story titled, “Roughhousing with dad crucial for development, say researchers” echoes this sentiment, reporting that rough-and-tumble play is not only fun for both the child and parent, but serves a purpose in child development by “...shaping their [child’s] brain so that their [child] develop[s] the ability to manage emotions and thinking and physical action altogether” (Murray, 2011). This news article even insinuates that roughhousing may increase a child’s resilience and subsequently decrease their risk of getting into drugs (Murray, 2011). Due to the popularity of these preliminary studies, researchers are just now examining these initial findings through follow-up studies to see how playful aggression can affect other aspects of children’s lives, including their developmental trajectory.

Similar findings have been reported in ethological research. Numerous animal species, especially primates, have been found to use roughhousing for adaptive purposes; interestingly, researchers have found that roughhousing doesn’t go away after childhood but continues to be incorporated into close primate relationships (Enomoto, 1990; Pellis & Pellis, 1996). Despite the abundance of childhood aggression research with human children

and primate young, very few studies examine the role that playful aggression has in romantic adult relationships. Prior research such as Ryan and Mohr's (2005) study on playful aggression in romantic college relationships shows what appears to be a definite association between playful aggression and serious physical and sexual abuse. Ryan and Mohr (2005) cite additional studies that reiterate these findings based on research results, understandably out of concern that endorsing aggression in any way could easily have serious and dangerous consequences. Playful aggression seems to be perceived as a juvenile game that is outgrown at a certain age, like a childish habit, that, if retained in adulthood is perceived as socially inappropriate and potentially dangerous. The current emphasis of adult aggression research is justifiably focused on domestic violence (as opposed to playful aggression) because of its immense and destructive impact on communities and individuals; however, humans appear to be drawn to some level of aggression and this is portrayed through media representations and witnessed in day-to-day interactions between friends, family members, and partners. Ironically, while American society condemns rape and sexual violence, sexual aggression is glamorized by the media via popular television shows, movies, and the majority of pornography. Television shows such as the hit Showtime series, "Weeds" have stirred up discussion regarding their graphic and "edgy" sex scenes. Controversy surrounded an episode aired in June of 2009 (Season 5, Episode 2) during which, Nancy, the main character and widowed mother confronts her boyfriend, Esteban, a mafia boss and the mayor of Tijuana when she realizes that even carrying his unborn child may not safeguard her life. This confrontation results in him yanking her hair, aggressively bending her over a table, forcefully penetrating her while angrily reminding her, "You don't dictate the terms of this arrangement!" (Kohan &

Zisk, 2009). While this occurs, Nancy laughs briefly at one point and is shown smirking.

Blog writer, Kwame Jones (2009) writes in response:

She [Nancy] has had consensual sex with Esteban on numerous occasions and at times it has been portrayed as rough, and I myself have enjoyed some aggressive and almost violent sexual experiences (consensual, I PROMISE!)...but all of those were what this seemingly wasn't, two people deciding to be rough and physical for their own enjoyment. To me, this offered the possibility that if the man is just dark and handsome and brooding enough then maybe no doesn't really mean no...

Similar responses were written with stunned viewers writings statements such as, "Last night, I watched a rape on television. It was a dramatized rape. But it was jarring, just the same" (Floyd, 2009). Others disagreed, and wrote comments such as "Rape? Are you kidding me? ...Rape: A sexual engagement AGAINST someone's will. So he didn't ask for it, maybe THAT'S why she liked it! Never once did she say no" (unknown comment, Floyd, 2009). The depiction of a rape was not what seemed to bother viewers most; instead, it was Nancy's unexpected response, one that hinted at enjoyment that caused concern for many. The varied reactions to this episode suggest an inconsistency in the way that rape and sexual aggression is conceptualized, defined, and portrayed by society and the media. Despite the criticism that this particular episode received, Nancy's rough sexual escapades continue into the sixth season albeit with less divisive material. Removing the question of rape, the directors of "Weeds" have continued to illustrate sexual scenes that are often spurred by anger or a 'passionate disagreement' and involve biting, slapping, hair-pulling, and shoving, suggesting that the classic advertising catchphrase, 'Sex sells' remains true (Roberts, 2010).

Regardless of whether one thinks that the media is to blame for societal problems, like sexual violence, research attests to the alarming rates at which these acts of aggression are committed in the United States. In a recent survey, “up to 22% of men in college or community samples report[ed] committing acts of sexual aggression” (Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2003, p. 201). Given this disturbingly high statistic of sexual violence, it doesn’t seem strange that “most theories ignore female-instigated aggression probably out of fear that this may be used to minimize the very real problem of wife abuse (and rape) or because of the myth of female non-aggression” (Ryan, 1998, p. 379). However, Ryan (1998) later found that men and women reported almost identical sexual victimization and aggression rates. Additionally, “. . .almost twice as many women as men reported inflicting physical aggression, and men reported more physical victimization than women” (Ryan, 1998, p.383).

These counter-intuitive findings suggest that aggression in romantic, physical relationships may be more complex than initially thought. Recent studies have shown interesting results that indicate that playful aggression is used for productive purposes in relationships, such as flirtation and building intimacy (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Moore, 1995). The current study seeks to further elucidate the phenomenon of playful aggression by examining its role in the context of romantic relationships in both genders, as well as examining the role that sexual orientation, response of the recipient, and severity of the aggression play in young adults’ perceptions of playful aggression.

### ***Defining Playful Aggression and Playful Force***

In the current study, terminology is especially important due to the very specific connotations that individual words have. The term “playful aggression” is used in this

study because of its expansive and encompassing connotations (Livingston, 2009). This term has been used in the two other studies that have examined the phenomenon of playful aggression in relationships (Ryan, 2005; Livingston, 2009). The term “playful aggression” has purposefully been chosen to maintain consistency and to avoid confusion of additional terminology. Re-defining the current terminology for this area of research could potentially not only be confusing and possibly detrimental to results, but it could also make comparisons between studies more difficult. Other terms that are synonymous with “playful aggression” that have been used in prior research literature and are utilized in everyday life include: “rough-and-tumble play,” “horseplay,” “roughhousing,” and “play-fighting” (Gergen, 1990). While these terms are synonymous they are “...limited in their application and constrained by their narrow definitions. Additionally, most of these terms are usually associated with specific aggressive behaviors which occur during childhood” (Livingston, 2009, p. 1). Previous studies that looked at play-fighting and playful aggression have outlined the behavior according to the presence of playful fighting simulations and the “as-if-mode” which refers to the representation of intention or motivation on the part of the initiator (Livingston, 2009). Given that the current study looks specifically at romantic relationships among college students, it is expected that simulated play “fighting” will not be as common as it is among children; instead, it will be an evolved and more flirtatious or sexual form of roughhousing. It is important to note that when adding a sexual component, behaviors associated with play-fighting versus playful aggression may be misinterpreted or perceived as non-playful. Therefore, the term “playful aggression” will be used to refer to a series of actions and reactions that imitate aggression and are performed consensually by both parties in a light-hearted manner. In Capaldi and

Crosby's (1997) research on observed and reported violence among young adults, they specify that playful aggression refers to acts where the "...physical force [is] not greater than the level of a firm touch" (p. 201); the current study will also use this criterion. An important distinction should also be made: playful aggression is a phenomenon that involves two people; it is not something that consists of one individual's actions (Livingston, 2009).

Previous research has examined whether or not the terms "playful aggression" and "playful force" are perceived to be synonymous. In Ryan and Mohr's (2005) study, they use "playful aggression" and "playful force" interchangeably; however, when they asked participants if they thought there was a difference, many participants wrote that playful force suggested the prospect of sexual force, deeming this unacceptable in any circumstance or context. Participants wrote comments such as, "force is doing something you don't want to, aggression is harmless" and "force is more dominating—maybe a step beyond aggression" (Ryan & Mohr, 2005, p.597). Given the discrepancy in definitions and the negative connotation of the word "force," only "playful aggression" will be used in the current study.

### *Playful Aggression—Primates*

While playful aggression has only recently been studied in humans, there is an abundance of ethological research, the majority examining the role of playful aggression among primates. This large base of research can perhaps provide a number of valuable ways to conceptualize and investigate this topic in human interactions throughout the lifespan. The general consensus among ethologists is that playful aggression in non-humans serves a variety of adaptive purposes specifically related to social development

(Enomoto, 1990; Pellis & Pellis, 1996, 1997). Playful aggression has typically been conceptualized as “...an adaptive mechanism which prepares youth for such necessary activities as fighting, sexual intercourse and social communication” (Livingston, 2009, p. 2).

Previous ethological research has attempted to delineate specific signals or cues that animals use prior to aggressive behaviors to alert their peers that their intentions are playful and not malevolent. Pellis and Pellis (1997) looked at the “open mouth face” as one such signal. However, they found that in the majority (75-80%) of playfully aggressive interactions, the monkeys relied on contextual or stylistic cues to identify intent (Pellis & Pellis, 1997). They noted that “...play promoting signals may need to be used when there is a risk of misinterpreting the intentions of the partner” (Pellis & Pellis, 1997, p. 55). One example of this is when the aggressor is larger or dominant; in this case, the recipient may be cautious of the aggressor’s advances and so the aggressor may use some self-debilitating move or a play signal to denote the playful nature and intention of ensuing advances.

Studies on Bonobo monkey behavior echo Pellis and Pellis’ results. Bonobo monkeys (*Pan paniscus*) are widely considered to have the closest connection to humans biologically, emotionally, and socially, certainly in comparison to other monkey species and animals. Not only do Bonobos and humans share more than 98% of the same DNA, but there is also substantial evidence that suggests they exhibit emotional complexity and sensitivity and that many of their behaviors closely mirror those of humans (“What is a Bonobo?,” 2011, <http://www.bonobo.org/bonobos/what-is-a-bonobo/>). In Enomoto’s (1990) study observing social play and sexual behavior of the Bonobo, it was concluded

from extensive observation that “certain traits of play behavior, such as the flexibility of behavior, self-handicapping, and lack of function, when accompanied by learning, may promote variations in the behaviors used during various social interactions in groups” (p. 479).

An important component to Enomoto’s (1990) study that Pellis and Pellis (1996, 1997) did not touch on was the role of playful aggression preceding copulation. Several situations were recorded in which adolescent couples engaged in scripted behaviors that were later coded as playful, prior to sexual intercourse. Enomoto (1990) noted that many of the play behaviors recorded before these sexual acts of older Bonobos resembled young Bonobo play, suggesting that rough-and-tumble play serves a purpose later on in life, especially in a sexual context. Even in a non-sexual setting, adult Bonobos engaged in playfully aggressive behavior; in “Case 3” Enomoto (1990) writes, “two adult males played together...they struck each other with their hands, held each other down, and then one pushed away with his pelvis twisted” (p. 475). What this suggests is that playful aggression is not isolated to the early developmental years and may play a significant role in sexual encounters and relationships among adults.

While ethological research on aggression, specifically playful aggression, has been widely documented and written about, there is debate about its generalizability to human subjects. Some argue that humans are far more complex and so comparisons between even the most “sophisticated” of species, such as the Bonobo and other primates, are irrelevant. However, Taylor and colleagues (2000) state that ethological research is too important to ignore, especially in areas such as playful aggression, where a large research base is lacking in human studies. Taylor et al. (2000) argue for a cautious but educated approach,

stating that “Clearly, there are risks in combining evidence from multiple sources that include behavioral studies with humans and nonhuman primates... however, any effort to understand stress responses [and subsequent aggression] requires integration across multiple sources of evidence. We suggest caveats in generalizing from one line of work to another when they are warranted” (p. 413).

### *Playful Aggression—Childhood*

Regardless of one’s opinion on the relevance or applicability of ethological research, the current and broad range of this research on playful aggression provides a starting point for similar research with human subjects. The foundation of playful aggression research with children is slowly expanding, but it is still a fairly new topic, and past studies have shown ambiguous and sometimes contradictory findings; however, what these studies do seem to agree on is the undeniable presence of playful aggression in childhood behaviors and relationships. There are several theories as to why children act aggressively and what the functional purposes of these behaviors may be.

#### *Theories of Childhood Aggression and the Function of these Behaviors*

Ethological and human evolutionary theories mirror each other in terms of the functional roles that aggression may have in childhood play. One such theory “...known as the “practice fighting hypothesis,” conceptualizes the behavior as a safe way for children to hone real fighting skills” (Livingston, 2009, p. 3). While this might not seem useful or adaptive in modern society, other theories, such as the “dominance hypothesis,” elaborate on this theory by arguing that this phenomenon transpires as a more general way for children to establish their role and specific place within a social hierarchy (Boulton & Smith, 1992; Livingston, 2009).

Playful aggression can also be “...conceptualized as a product of social learning” and a form of social problem solving (Hartup, 1974; Livingston, 2009; Pellegrini, 1992). According to Albert Bandura’s experiment with children and Bobo dolls, children who were exposed to aggression later mimicked that behavior (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). One could extrapolate from this that exposure to aggression would then be perpetuated by the child in other situations, due to modeling. However, Gergen (1990) points out that “...despite the logical allure and sound theoretical basis of this viewpoint, such a process has not garnered empirical support” outside of Bandura’s study in which he demonstrated the influence of modeling in an aggressive situation (Livingston, 2009, p. 3).

While the application of social learning to playful aggression in children may not be empirically supported, Pellegrini’s (1992) research finds many adaptive functions for rough-and-tumble play. Pellegrini (1992) writes that “...play stimulates creativity or ... creativity is expressed through play”; regardless of play’s role in creativity, play and creativity both “share the feature of flexibility” (Pellegrini, 1992). Flexibility is critical when it comes to problem solving, so it is undoubtedly useful in a social context. Pellegrini also points out that an alternative view suggests that social competition (often arrived at through play-fighting or playful aggression) can promote “higher order cognitive strategies” (Pellegrini, 1992). Essentially, individuals who have a more diverse social repertoire excel not only in areas of social intelligence, but also in regards to cognitive and emotional intelligence. Playful aggression in the form of play-fighting and rough-and-tumble play can thus provide children with a context in which to practice social intelligence. Some of the adaptive features of these contexts include “...exhibition of positive affect (e.g., play face), vigorous movements (e.g., running), and reciprocal role

taking (e.g., alternating between victim and victimizer in play fights)” (Pellegrini, 1992, p. 17).

Another theory, provided by Huesmann (1988) which is referred to as the information processing theory, continues the idea of generalization by suggesting that children form cognitive scripts based on childhood experiences. These scripts serve as flowcharts that children then rely on when in social situations and are continually retrieved later in life during similar interactions. As a result, “in a particular setting, a child may learn that playful aggression fulfills the useful functions of expressing emotions, illustrating dominance, or gaining affiliation in peer groups” (Livingston, 2009, p. 2). However, like Bandura’s theory, the information processing theory has little scientific evidence to support it in the context of playful aggression.

These theories, while all conceptually sound, illustrate an inconsistency in the literature, compounded with a general lack of research on this topic. There are not many studies to begin with that empirically examine playful aggression in children, and even fewer follow-up studies have been carried out. However, the few studies that have been done seem to suggest that, generally, playful aggression does serve a productive purpose in human development.

#### *Gender Differences within the Context of Playful Aggression*

While research is still somewhat inconclusive as to whether or not playful aggression is useful for children and healthy developmentally, one theme is consistent—“boys will be boys.” This common idiom is frequently used in everyday society and has carried over into research hypotheses; it generally refers to the assumption that boys are naturally more physically aggressive than girls. Some research supports this social

stereotype, finding that gonadal hormones may affect the development of rough-and-tumble play and aggressive tendencies, "...both of which show moderate to large sex differences" (Taylor et al., 2000, p. 413). Researchers know that there is some link between testosterone and aggression (both human and nonhuman studies show this), but the exact role it plays remains controversial (Taylor et al., 2000). While there are numerous theories, ranging from biological to social, as to why boys are more aggressive, recent studies have found that boys may not be as aggressive as American society has made them out to be.

In Scott & Panksepp's (2003) study on rough-and-tumble play in children, they found only modest gender differences in the occurrence of playful aggression. During their study, they videotaped 40 children between the ages of three and six. Children were allowed to play in same-sex pairs for 30 minutes with no toys. The only notable difference that they observed was that boys initiated "slightly more physical play than girls" (Scott & Panksepp, 2003, p. 539). Given that the difference between the boys' and girls' levels of initiated playful aggression was so minor, one cannot definitively conclude that boys are more aggressive based on this research.

Other studies' findings appear to contradict Scott & Panksepp's (2003) conclusions and support the assumption that boys are always more aggressive (both in a playful and non-playful context) than girls, but researchers such as Frey and Hoppe-Graff (1994) found that extreme aggressors (who are generally male) serve as outliers. Their observational study examined sex differences in serious and playful aggression among young Brazilian children, aged two to four, in a low-income nursery school and a middle-class nursery school run by a university. Results indicated that the boys aggressed twice as

much as the girls did, but this was in reference to serious aggression and not playful aggression; furthermore, of seven participants, there were two boys who aggressed frequently, which significantly affected the overall mean rate of aggression (Frey & Hoppe-Graff, 1994). Eliminating the outlier scores from these two aggressive boys then put boys and girls at relatively similar rates of aggression. This is consistent with Maccoby and Jacklin's (1980) conclusion that while

...a mean sex difference can be clearly documented, the distributions greatly overlap, and most males are seldom aggressive. The rates are low in both sexes. There is some indication that the range is greater in males, with males being quite heavily overrepresented among the small group of extremely aggressive children but with most males showing rates of aggression similar to those found among females (p. 977).

The gendering of aggression becomes even more complex when examined on a global scale. Cross-cultural research gives an interesting perspective on the nature vs. nurture aspect of aggressive behaviors in children. Aggression and other stereotypically sex-typed behaviors have been found to be especially malleable depending on the culture and socialization (Livingston, 2009). Whiting and Edwards (1973) found that in communities where roles are reversed, such as Nyansongo, Kenya, behaviors are also reversed; in Nyansongo, young boys are in charge of infant care and domestic chores. In this community, girls were found to be more apt to engage in rough-and-tumble play, whereas the boys retreated from aggressive play (Whiting & Edwards, 1973). This indicates that socialization plays a strong role in what is considered normal and acceptable in terms of aggression, both playful and non-playful.

### *Playful Aggression—Adolescence*

While the frequency of playful aggression among children exceeds that among adolescents, research shows that playful aggression extends into adolescence, but the purpose is no longer related to affiliation (Hilton, Harris, & Rice, 2003; Livingston, 2009). Playful aggression in the adolescent years is generally modified to ascertain authority in hierarchically structured peer groups and is used as a way to instigate opposite sex contact, with either friendly or romantic motives (Livingston, 2009; Moore, 1995). These uses are consistent with developmental research that shows that the adolescent years are marked by increased awareness of one's place in peer groups and expanding sexual interest and experimentation (Moore, 1995).

Research on playful aggression, especially in a sexual context, among adolescents is generally scant, due to their status as minors and the intimacy of the topic, especially if sexual questions are asked. However, the research that has been done all points in the same direction; playful aggression in adolescence appears to be repurposed and used in a variety of social settings (Livingston, 2009; Moore, 1995; Pellegrini, 1992). The dominance hypothesis that is generally applied to rough-and-tumble play among children continues to be relevant in the adolescent years, but the majority of playful aggression seems to be employed by youth in what has been referred to as *poke and push courtship* (Livingston, 2009). This specific type of courtship is generally characterized by chasing, poking, lightly hitting, grabbing, or teasing a person of interest in an effort to get their attention (Livingston, 2009). In comparison to more intentional and direct courtship observed among adults, poke and push courtship is most likely utilized as a low-risk strategy for inexperienced adolescents (Livingston, 2009; Moore, 1995; Pellegrini, 2003). Pellegrini

(2003) hypothesizes that poke and push courtship is "...probably utilized because [it is] indirect and ambiguous and thus, if such overtures are rejected, significant embarrassment does not result" (p. 1525). Also, this specific type of courtship comes naturally for many young teens because they are already very familiar and confident in using playful aggression after years of exercising it as children in a social context (Livingston, 2009).

Playful aggression, which evolves into poke and push courtship, is further defined and specialized the older one gets. In Monica Moore's (1995) study, "Courtship Signaling and Adolescents," she observed 100 girls between the ages of 13 and 16 in "natural" locations such as malls and schools. After careful observation, Moore (1995) noted that many of the girls employed similar flirting techniques that are employed by women, but the actions were exaggerated and executed with "broader movements and took longer to complete." Girls often mimicked their peers' courtship behaviors, especially that of the 'alpha' or leader of the group (Moore, 1995). Finally, girls relied heavily on playfully aggressive behaviors such as pinching, tickling, approaching the target of interest from behind and covering his eyes, and hitting him; over 20% of the girls observed used some form of playful aggression as a means of flirting (Moore, 1995). These findings suggest that adolescent girls are somewhat inexperienced in flirting—relying on overt behaviors, and cues from their peers as models or scripts to follow.

### ***Playful Aggression—Adulthood***

It is undeniable that playful aggression exists among young children and is present in adolescence, but research has revealed that the phenomenon of playful aggression extends into early adulthood as well (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Livingston, 2009; Moore, 1985; Ryan & Mohr, 2005). While research indicates that playful aggression

exists, the lack of research in this area (especially with adult participants), suggests that the purpose and functionality of this specialized aggression is not completely understood.

Much of the evidence for the role of playful aggression in adulthood echoes results found in adolescent research that suggest that playful aggression is used as a flirtatious device; however, Moore's (1995) study argues that this nonverbal courtship occurs far less frequently in adults. An interesting distinction that came out of Moore's (1995) research was the specific purpose for which women used playful aggression. Moore (1995) writes, "Although women use play signals, too, they appear to do so less commonly than girls and perhaps with the goal of assessing a man's receptivity to humor" (p. 327). In this sense, playful aggression becomes more of a way to gauge personality and compatibility as a partner, with less reliance on letting the individual know that one is romantically interested in them.

Other studies indicate that playful aggression among adults arises from a sense of security around another person and as a form of intimacy. Gergen's (1990) study found that young adults were very aware of the existence of playful aggression in their relationships and stated in self-reports that these behaviors were often increased by alcohol consumption and being in a committed relationship. Couples who were "going steady" had the highest rates of playful aggression, which Gergen (1990) attributed to the fact that these couples most likely had "higher levels of intimacy and decreased levels of inhibition" (Livingston, 2009, p. 8). Alcohol consumption would further diminish any remaining inhibitions, enabling playful aggression to occur.

Ryan (1998, 2005) has done a considerable amount of research on the topic through two studies that examined gender differences in courtship aggression and if courtship

violence was related to sexual aggression. In Ryan's most recent study, she and Mohr (2005) found that college couples reported a significant amount of playful aggression in their relationships. Playful aggression was often reported during sex, and while gender differences in initiation weren't statistically significant, it was discovered that men were typically the aggressor during playful aggression, while females were the recipients of these acts (Ryan & Mohr, 2005). The ways in which these college students conceptualized and communicated their use of playful aggression in their personal relationships was strikingly similar to descriptions of children's roughhousing. Words like "horseplay," "joking," "laughter," and "wrestling" were common among the students' descriptions (Ryan & Mohr, 2005).

#### *Aggression in Same-Sex Couples*

Given the limited amount of research examining the existence and function of playful aggression in heterosexual adults, it was not surprising to find that this specific area of aggression research is non-existent when it comes to homosexual samples. The current study specifically examines perceptions of aggression in same-sex couples so it was important that research dealing exclusively with aggression in gay and lesbian couples be included in the literature review for this study. However, fewer than 30 articles have collected data on aggression among same-sex couples, and these articles examine aggression exclusively in the context of domestic violence (Seelau & Seelau, 2005).

Merrill and Wolfe (2000) note that one of the reasons for the scarce coverage of homosexual couples in aggression research is due to the fact that "researchers have themselves fallen victim to the misconception that domestic violence is an exclusively heterosexual phenomenon" (p. 2). Additionally, "Merrill and Wolfe (2000) asserted that

some scholars, particularly those promoting feminist theories, may intentionally avoid the study and acknowledgement of lesbian domestic violence because popular feminist models “[fail] to account for lesbian battering” (p. 2)” (Burke, Jordan, & Owen, 2002, p. 234). Even in the broader research world, as noted earlier, there appears to be a hesitation when it comes to addressing issues of aggression when a woman is the aggressor for fear of inadvertently detracting from the very real and prevalent problem of violence against women. Another possible explanation for the scant research on this topic is perhaps due to gender-normative stereotypes that have been internalized by socialization, enforcing the idea that women are not aggressive. If this is the case, researchers may not be examining aggression among women and aggression instigated by women because it is not an idea that society considers normal or prevalent.

Despite the limited research on aggression in same-sex relationships, the studies that have been conducted show that the types and frequency of aggression don't vary between heterosexual and homosexual couples in terms of domestic violence so one might predict that the types and frequency of aggression wouldn't vary in regards to playful aggression among same-sex couples (Burke et al., 2002; Seelau & Seelau, 2005). In fact, some researchers are convinced that a strong identification with masculinity is “...a salient predictor of domestic violence... [they] found that the more a gay man or lesbian identified with masculine personality components, the more likely he or she was to become abusive” (McKenry, Serovich, Mason, & Mosack, 2006, p. 234). This could suggest several things, that heteronormative roles are still being assumed even in homosexual relationships, perhaps due to the strong forces of society that promote the idea that heterosexuality is normal; or, it could simply suggest that individuals who personally identify with a more

stereotypic masculine persona are more likely to aggress which would mean that even in lesbian relationships, one could still potentially see aggressive behaviors similar to those in gay and heterosexual relationships.

What does vary, however, is the perception of the aggression when it occurs in a couple of the same sex versus a heterosexual couple. Seelau and Seelau (2005) assert, “there is some evidence that the sex of the perpetrator and victim and the couple’s sexual orientation influence criminal justice system responses to domestic violence” (p. 364). For instance, Seelau and Seelau (2005) note that police are less likely to intervene when a domestic violence call does not involve “male-against-female” violence (p. 364).

Numerous studies have confirmed this finding; most people perceive violence committed against women, by men, as more serious than the reverse (Seelau & Seelau, 2005). Harris and Cook (1994) conducted research on this very idea by giving participants vignettes; the first vignette depicted a husband battering his wife, the second, a wife battering her husband, and lastly, a gay man battering his partner. What Harris and Cook discovered (1994) was that when the victim was male, participants evaluated the incident as less violent and reported that they would be less likely to call law enforcement.

Studies similar to Harris and Cook’s have found that there is little indication that people are less concerned about gay and lesbian couples’ protection in comparison to heterosexual couples however, there appears to be a distinct difference in how aggression is conceptualized outside of the stereotypic domestic violence scenario of a man abusing a woman (Seelau & Seelau, 2005). The disparity among the sexes has been a continuous point of discussion in society; this might explain why many participants’ responses implied that there is a more equal distribution of power in homosexual couples (McKenry et al.,

2006). McKenry and colleagues (2006) note that while same-sex couples may not have a difference in power distribution via gender, there are many other factors such as physical size, attractiveness, and job status that influence the power dynamic of a couple. However, participants' ratings still reflect the assumption that homosexual couples experience more equality because they identify as the same sex; this is also reflected in ratings regarding severity of violence which are consistently higher when a man is aggressing against a woman (McKenry et al., 2006).

Male-female domestic violence is consistently deemed more serious physically, emotionally, and legally. (Harris & Cook, 1994; Seelau & Seelau, 2005; Poorman, Seelau, & Seelau, 2003). Seelau and Seelau (2005) hypothesize that male-female violence is perceived as most serious in comparison to male-male, female-female, or female-male domestic violence due to participants' assumptions that this dyad would have the most potential for harm which is most likely influenced by societal assumptions (the man is larger, the man is more aggressive, etc...). Seelau and Seelau (2005) concluded from their research that it was not the sexual *orientation*, but instead, the sex of the victim that was the most reliable predictor of responses. Interestingly, Seelau and Seelau (2005) hypothesized that "it is possible that anything making the victim appear less vulnerable (e.g., relative size or weight; physically aggressive response) would have similar effects as sex did in this study" (p. 370). This bears striking resemblance to Livingston's (2009) study in which she manipulated the size of the aggressor, which she found to have a moderate effect in regards to aggression ratings.

The studies on adaptive aggression among adults creates a complex picture of playful aggression, suggesting a variety of different uses for these behaviors; however,

each study, especially the research on domestic violence among same-sex couples, ended with a note of caution, recognizing that aggression can be very dangerous and that even playful aggressive behaviors may be misinterpreted which could have harmful consequences. What these studies (or the lack of studies in some cases) suggest is that there is still much ambiguity as to what defines dangerous aggression such as domestic violence verses playful aggression. McKenry et al. (2006) discovered that "...when potential participants were asked if there was violence in their relationship, many (both men and women) would say, "I wouldn't really say violence, but there is some pushing and shoving"" (p. 240). This hesitation to classify aggression as violence may stem from a number of things but what it really suggests is a need for more research that examines the parameters of what is considered playful, aggressive, and violent.

***"Crossing the Line"—Playful Aggression and Violence***

*Rape Culture and Rape Myths*

Any discussion of aggression, whether it be playful or non-playful warrants a conversation regarding aggression in the society being examined. Ryan and Mohr's (2005) study indicated that often, playful aggression in adulthood occurs in a sexual context, so it is important to address the boundaries and difference between playful aggression and unwanted sexual advances. The United States has been accused by many of encouraging or at least tolerating a rape culture fueled by rape myths and problematic media representations. Sanday (1981) writes, "many interpretations of rape treat it as an inherent expression of human biological nature, which culture struggles to overcome [however] an alternative interpretation [can be] offered, stressing the role of cultural factors in encouraging or discouraging rape" (p. 5).

Rape myths are one such way that communities enable sexual violence. Rape myths consist of assumptions and beliefs that blame the victim of the assault, sexually objectify women, and trivialize rape. Sanday (1981) argues that while rape occurs in the wild, it is not a “natural” part of every community; this suggests that it is deeply imbedded in cultural and societal beliefs. Through historical analyses, Sanday (1981) notes that:

In rape-free societies, these behaviors (frequent rape, ceremonial rape, and using rape as punishment for women) are practically nonexistent. Women in such societies are treated with respect, & interpersonal violence generally is minimized; the sexes are seen as complementary. Rape thus does not appear to be a product of male frustration, but of male dominance and sexual separatism. (p. 5)

Psychologists have added to Sanday’s (1981) perspective by stating that recent pornography and even television and video content provides young people (the targeted audience) with distorted views of sexual aggression that are incredibly problematic because they “...perpetuate the “rape myth” (in which the target first expresses pain or resistance to male dominance but eventually expresses enjoyment” (Bridges, 2010, p. 1080). This idea is clearly manifested in the ‘Weeds’ episode that was mentioned earlier in which the main character conveys a mixed reaction to what many would consider rape.

#### *Media Representations of Aggression in Relationships*

Media plays a crucial role in societal acceptance of certain behaviors and beliefs. With drastically increased access to the Internet, television, movies, and music, American society is inundated with easy-access media. A simple Google search of “rough sex” retrieved numerous articles, one of which was “The Art of Rough Sex” on the AskMen.com website whose tagline simply states, “Ask Men, Become a Better Man.” The

article begins by writing that “Mildly sadistic behavior has become a widespread phenomenon in the bedroom and today's sex tip is all about showing your woman who the boss of the bedroom is. Uh, that would be you, buddy.” This specific article had 249 “likes” on Facebook and had been shared via several social networks. An ongoing poll was also present to the left of the article and asked readers if this article made men laugh (9%), furious (6%), sad (7%), think (22%), happy (16%), or “a better man (39%).”

This phenomenon of “rough sex” is not gender-exclusive. The same Google search found multiple articles by women, defending, and even advocating, the use of rough sex as a way to build intimacy and keep their sexual relationships exciting and fulfilling. The author, who writes under the pseudonym, “The Frisky”, struggles to explain to most people why she enjoys rough sex, but sums it up by stating that “rough sex takes me into a heightened state where it feels like anything can happen. I usually end up with tears in my eyes, but they are tears of intensity, pleasure, arousal, excitement, fear, uncertainty, and submission, all rolled into one” (The Frisky, 2009). Conversely, she acknowledges that despite the fact that rough sex has become somewhat of a trend or phenomenon as stated in the “Ask Men” article, it is still highly stigmatized, especially among women, perhaps because many of the behaviors are perceived to be uncomfortably close to those affiliated with rape and sexual assault (The Frisky, 2009).

#### *Pornography's Depiction of Sexual Aggression*

One specific form of media is pornography, which has become an even more lucrative business in the past ten years with both increased production and consumption. Annual sales of pornography in the US in 1996 were recorded at \$8 billion; in just less than a decade, sales skyrocketed to \$12 billion (Bridges et al., 2010). The number of

videos produced has increased by 60% in the same time span, but perhaps the most drastic increase, and form of consumption, is the video rental. In 1986, rentals at adult video stores brought in \$75 million in revenue; just 10 years later, rentals were accruing \$665 million. This steep rise in profit is a definite sign that pornographic viewing is on the rise and is now more accessible than ever before.

A recent study, conducted in 2010, sought to provide a more current content analysis of fifty popular pornographic videos (Bridges et al., 2010). Researchers coded specifically for aggression and degradation and recorded additional variables, (eg: gender, sexual acts). The films were coded using a broader definition of aggression that recorded acts as aggressive even when the target made no effort to avoid the act of aggression. Researchers compiled a list of 250 best selling and 250 most rented videos and then randomly selected 50 to screen. Using the PAT technique, which is used in the National Television Violence Survey, researchers tallied the acts of aggression by counting individual acts every time the aggressor, target (recipient of the act), or physical/verbal act changed within a scene. The results of their coding process showed that an overwhelming majority of these films displayed aggressive acts; only 10.2% did not (Bridges et al., 2010). Physical aggression was more common than verbal aggression, occurring in 88.2% of the scenes, while verbal aggression occurred in 48.7% of the scenes (Bridges et al., 2010). Spanking, slapping (defined as open-hand slapping), and hair pulling were the three most prevalent physically aggressive acts that consistently appeared in pornographic scenes (Bridges et al., 2010). Name-calling (e.g. “bitch,” “slut”) was the most common verbally aggressive act (Bridges et al., 2010). Women were the recipients of 94.4% of the verbal and physical aggression that was recorded, and men were consistently the

aggressors, performing 70.3% of the aggressive acts (Bridges et al., 2010). In the rare instances where women were the aggressors, they usually committed acts of aggression against other women instead of men (Bridges et al., 2010). Male-to-male aggression was the least common to occur, was generally verbal, and was present in only 0.3% of the recorded instances (Bridges et al., 2010). Researchers also found that women were “significantly more likely to express pleasure or neutrality when aggressed against (95.9%) than men. In contrast, men were four times more likely to show displeasure when aggressed against (16.0%), compared with women” (Bridges et al., 2010, p. 1070). Bridges and colleagues (2010) discovered that positive behaviors rarely were coupled with aggressive behaviors. They also found that “...when a scene contained some form of physical aggression, the odds of it also containing verbal aggression were increased by more than 350%” (Bridges, 2010, p. 1070).

Bridges and colleagues (2010) found significantly higher levels of both verbal and physical aggression in comparison to previous pornographic analyses. While these higher levels can be attributed to the more general definition of aggression used in this study, Bridges et al. defend their decision by arguing that previous studies that have emphasized consent in regards to aggressive sexual behaviors are perhaps “...complicit with naturalizing the presence of violence and aggression. In other words, treating violence or aggression as contingent on target consent masks the real asymmetries of power that exist in pornography” (Bridges, 2010, p. 1072). This study also sought to analyze a recent trend in pornography characterized by increasing depictions of sexual practices that are atypical and potentially harmful to women in real life and to the actresses that appear in these popular pornographic videos. While this study didn’t observe any scenes that depicted

rape, there was still the concern that these repetitive sexually aggressive behaviors could desensitize and effectively normalize sexual aggression against women. Bridges and colleagues (2010) note that recent studies have failed to find significant evidence to support a connection between pornography consumption and acceptance of sexual violence and the rape myth, which may be due to increased education about women's rights and sexual assault. However, these same researchers found that pornography increases benevolent sexism—the seemingly benign attitude that puts women on a pedestal but can also communicate the idea that a woman needs a man's protection.

One limitation that Bridges and colleagues (2010) note is that their three coders were all female. They recognize that historically, previous research has acknowledged that women generally hold different views about pornography (especially in regards to degradation and aggression) compared to men. The current study will not encounter this issue because both men and women will assess the same situations.

### *Current Study and Hypotheses*

The various facets of research on playful aggression among humans and nonhumans indicate that it is a phenomenon that is not simply outgrown as previously thought. Playful aggression appears to be repurposed as individuals grow and mature, and is implemented in different ways for different functions. Previous literature tells us very little in terms of how playful aggression affects young adult couples and how it is perceived in a sexual context between two partners.

The current study seeks to elucidate how playful aggression functions in young adult couples and what young adults perceive to be playful aggression. Additionally, this study will manipulate aggressive behaviors, sexual orientation, and subsequent responses

to those behaviors in an effort to better understand what is considered “acceptable” and what is considered abusive or unhealthy. This study will also attempt to examine the impact of porn consumption and how this could potentially influence an individual’s sensitivity to playful aggression and non-playful aggression. Currently, there is little research studying the effect of pornography on women, despite the fact that women are consuming more porn than ever before (Foubert et al., 2011). It is not unreasonable, given the drastic effects of pornography on men, to hypothesize that porn could impact women and their beliefs about sex, expectations, gender roles, and aggression, albeit potentially in different ways than men (Foubert et al., 2011).

This study will use an online survey administered through ‘SurveyMonkey’ to assess rape myth acceptance, sexual expectations, and acceptance of playful aggression. The survey includes a series of scenarios in which the sexual orientation of the couple, the aggressive behavior, and the response of the recipient to the aggression will change. The response will either be positive, in which the recipient smiles, or negative, in which the recipient frowns and removes him or herself from the situation. The following hypotheses will be tested:

- H1: It is hypothesized that in the positive response situations, the aggressive behaviors will be perceived as less aggressive than those in the negative response situations.
- H2: In scenarios with heterosexual couples, it is hypothesized that the behavior will be perceived as more aggressive when the man is the aggressor versus when the aggressor is a woman.

- H3: It is also hypothesized that in scenarios with a same-sex couple, aggressive behaviors will be perceived as less aggressive and less problematic for the couple.
- H4: The researcher also hypothesizes that, individuals who self-report high levels of pornography consumption will be more likely to perceive aggressive behaviors as less aggressive than individuals who watch less pornography.
- H5: Finally, individuals who score higher on the Rape Myth Scale are expected to perceive aggressive behaviors as less aggressive than individuals who score lower on the Rape Myth Scale.

## Method

### **Experiment 1—Pilot Study**

#### *Participants*

Participants for this study included individuals between the ages of 18 to 25 who were currently living in the United States; this age bracket and geographic requirement served as the only eligibility requirements. Thirty-five individuals completed the pilot study (see Appendix A); of these 35 participants, 68.8% ( $n = 24$ ) were female and 31.4% were male ( $n = 11$ ). The average age of the participants was 21 years ( $SD = 1.4$ ).

Participants were recruited using social networking sites (such as Facebook and Twitter), email, and through word of mouth; participants were asked to take a brief survey that involved rating a series of behaviors. On Facebook, an event was created and Facebook guests were invited to participate and share the link. The Facebook page contained a short description of the survey (essentially a condensed version of the informed consent) and the link to the survey on 'SurveyMonkey.' Participants were recruited and subsequently treated ethically and in accordance with the Scripps College Institutional Review Board. Exclusion of participants was based solely on incomplete survey responses.

*Materials*

Materials included a 25-question survey (see Appendix A). Demographics were very limited because this was a preliminary pilot study; participants were only asked to list their age and gender. Twenty-three behaviors were listed and each question listed one behavior (ie: hitting, pinching, etc...) in three contexts: family, friend, and sexual (in reference to interactions with a sexual partner). Participants were asked to imagine these behaviors in the different contexts as if a family member, close friend, or sexual partner was performing them on him or her and then rate the behavior on a 6-point Likert scale. The Likert scale ranged from -1: not applicable, 0: not aggressive, 1: mildly aggressive, 3: moderately aggressive to 6: severely aggressive. These behaviors (ie: hitting, chasing, slapping, pinching, etc...) were derived from prior research on playful and non-playful aggression among close relationships (both human and animal). This survey was very brief, generally taking about five minutes to complete. Participants' rankings allowed the researcher to see which behaviors were perceived as most aggressive and least aggressive and in what specific context. The behaviors were then analyzed with respect to the sexual context, since the experimental study examines romantic relationships. The family and friend contexts were given to delineate the differences of aggression perceptions for individual behaviors but results from the sexual context were the only data that was analyzed further. The conscious decision to include different contexts for the behaviors was based on previous aggression research that showed a difference in perceptions of aggression depending on who was involved in the behavior; for example: biting in the family context might be considered abusive and highly aggressive, whereas biting in the sexual context might be exciting for some and considered pleasurable in an erotic sense

and therefore less aggressive. The behaviors were then grouped into three categories: mild, moderate, and severely aggressive.

### *Design*

The pilot study did not have any variables or experimental hypotheses. The function of this study was purely to see how people perceived certain behaviors, specifically, how aggressive they perceived these behaviors to be. It was assumed that perceptions would vary, depending on the context; for example: a mother spanking her child (family context) connotes a different situation and level of aggression perhaps than a couple (sexual context) spanking each other during foreplay. Situations, such as the spanking examples above, were not written out because of the variability that these vignettes could potentially include, so only the behavior was listed with the three basic contexts listed afterwards. Additionally, the researcher wanted to gauge individuals' *general* perceptions of the behaviors, and was concerned that defining the behaviors in scenario-like ways would limit or sway the participants' responses.

### *Procedure*

To recruit participants, a Facebook event was created that invited the researcher's 500-plus friends to take the survey and to forward it to their friends. The Facebook event was open to the public so that anyone could take the survey, and it included a shortened version of the informed consent form (see Appendix B for the full informed consent form) to give possible participants information regarding the study. Most importantly, participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and anonymous and that, at any time, they could exit the survey without any negative repercussions. Additionally, they were informed that they would receive no compensation (other than

furthering psychological research). Participants were also made aware that this was a pilot study for a larger survey. The mass email that was sent out included the same information and provided a direct link to the survey, which was conducted via the popular survey engine, 'SurveyMonkey.' The survey was 25-questions long and took approximately 5-10 minutes to answer. It was assumed that most participants would be taking the survey at their convenience, most likely on their personal laptop or computer.

After accepting the terms and conditions of the study by clicking "agree" in regards to informed consent, participants were randomly assigned to one of two orders. In order to achieve random assignment, participants were presented with two numbers in a vertical line; participants were then asked to click on the first number that appeared (for example if it appeared: 2, 1, the participant would click on #2). Each time a different participant opened the survey, 'SurveyMonkey' would randomize the order of the numbers so that the top number changed. This served as a way to randomly assign participants to the two versions. Each version had the exact same questions but in a slightly different order to minimize the possibility of an effect that could be related to the specific order that the behaviors were listed in. After clicking on the top number, participants began the survey. There were no conditions or controls; the purpose of this survey was purely to see how people perceived these behaviors in different contexts. Demographics were simple and not open-ended: participants had to choose between an age of 18-25 and select either 'female' or 'male' for their gender.

Afterwards, participants were notified that they had completed the survey and were thanked for their time, and given contact information should they have any further questions or needs (see Appendix C for debriefing materials). Once the data was collected,

frequency counts were conducted, and behaviors were categorized into three groups: neutral, mildly aggressive, and severely aggressive. Tickling was consistently rated as the most neutral behavior (53%,  $n = 18$ ), pinching (41.2%,  $n = 14$ ) was reliably rated as a mild behavior (constituting a 1 on the scale) and choking (56%,  $n = 19$ ) was rated repeatedly as the most severe behavior (constituting a 5 on the scale).

## **Experiment 2—Playful Aggression Study**

### *Participants*

Participants for the experimental study included 336 individuals, over the age of 18, who were currently living in the United States. Of the 336 participants, 76% were female ( $n = 254$ ) and 24% identified as male ( $n = 82$ ). The average age of the participants was 21 years ( $SD = 1.62$ ). Ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 25; the majority of the sample (77%) consisted of 19-22 year olds. The sample was predominantly Caucasian/White (78.9%,  $n = 265$ ); the remaining participants identified themselves as Latino/Chicano/Hispanic (4.2%,  $n = 14$ ), Asian (8.9%,  $n = 30$ ), African-American/Black (6.1%,  $n = 7$ ), and Pacific Islander (0.6%,  $n = 1$ ). Lastly, 5.4% ( $n = 18$ ) of the participants selected “other” for their race and ethnicity. The majority of the sample was heterosexual (87.5%,  $n = 294$ ), while 10.1% of the participants identified as bisexual ( $n = 34$ ), and the remaining 2.4% classified themselves as homosexual ( $n = 8$ ). The vast majority of the sample attended college (98.2%,  $n = 330$ ), 1.8% did not ( $n = 6$ ). Of the participants, 16.7% ( $n = 56$ ) reported experiencing domestic violence; exposure to domestic violence was more prevalent among women, 17.3% ( $n = 44$ ) of female participants stated that they had experienced this form of violence as opposed to 14.6% ( $n = 12$ ) of male participants. Similarly, women reported more exposure to sexual violence (20.5%,  $n = 52$ ) in

comparison to male participants (9.8%, n = 8). A combined 45.5% (n = 153) of participants reported that they watch pornography, however, there were noticeable gender differences; only 34.6% (n = 88) of women stated that they watch pornography compared to the 79.3% (n = 65) of men who reported watching pornography. Participants' responses varied by gender in terms of whether or not they believed that pornography contained elements of aggression, dominance, and/or coercion; the findings are displayed graphically in figures 1-4.

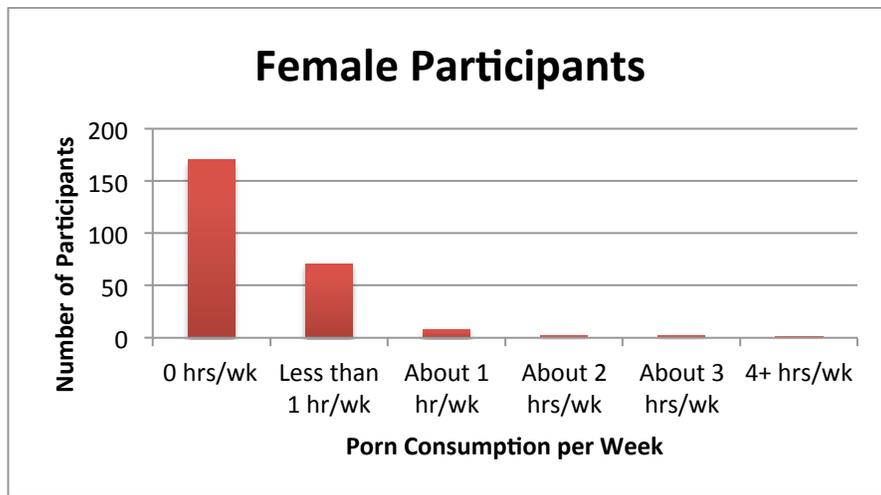


Figure 1. Weekly reported pornography consumption for female participants.

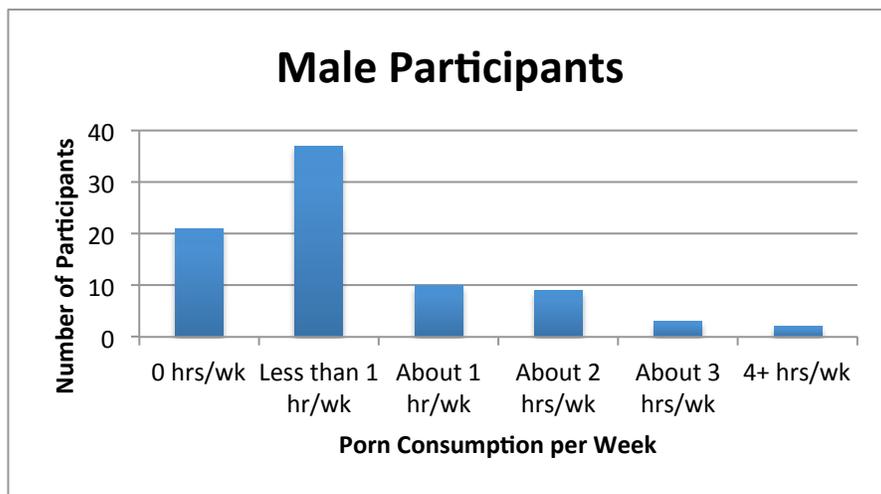


Figure 2. Weekly reported pornography consumption for male participants.

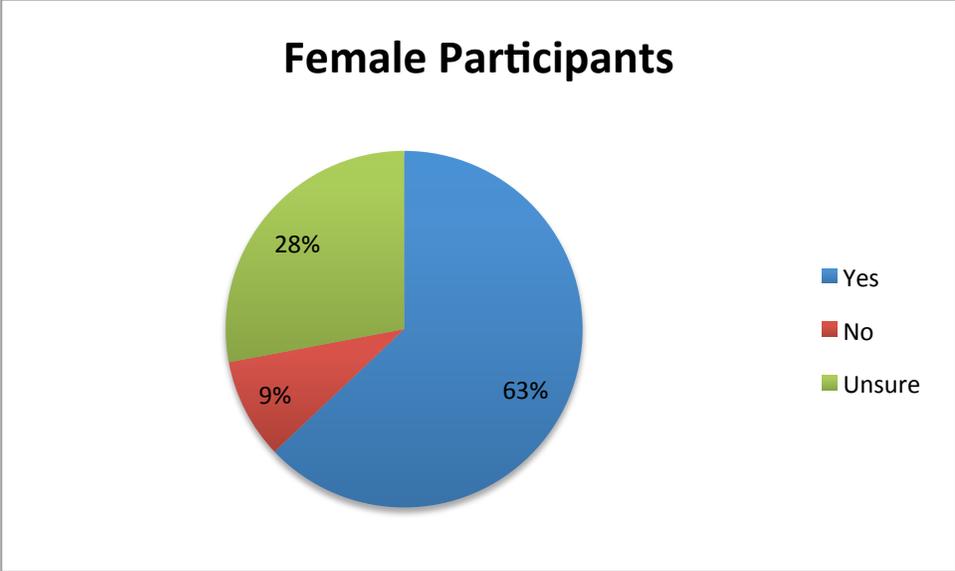


Figure 3. Female participants’ responses to the question: “Regardless of whether you watch or don’t watch pornography, would you say that pornography generally involves elements of coercion, dominance, and/or force?”

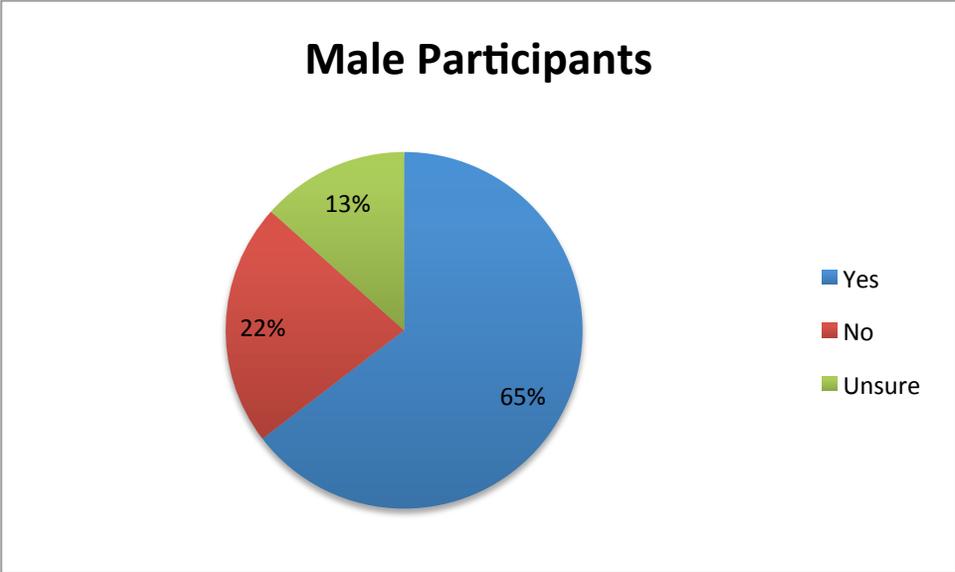


Figure 4. Male participants’ responses to the question: “Regardless of whether you watch or don’t watch pornography, would you say that pornography generally involves elements of coercion, dominance, and/or force?”

In terms of roughhousing, it appeared that most participants (69.6%, n = 234) roughhoused as children with peers who were similar in age (siblings, cousins, friends, etc...). Responses ranged in terms of roughhousing currently, as young adults, and as children with parents or guardians. Additional investigations into roughhousing among participants are shown below in figures 5-7.

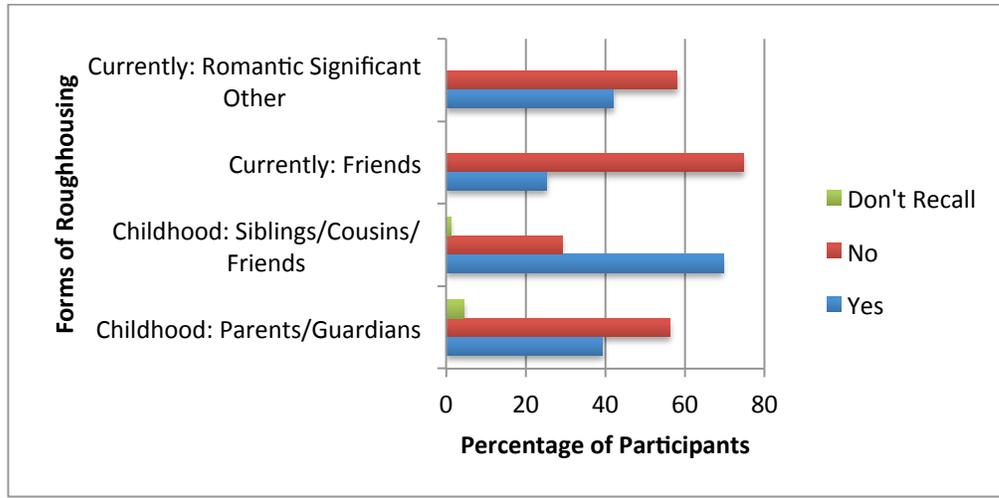


Figure 5. Combined (male and female participants) frequencies of roughhousing throughout childhood and young adulthood.

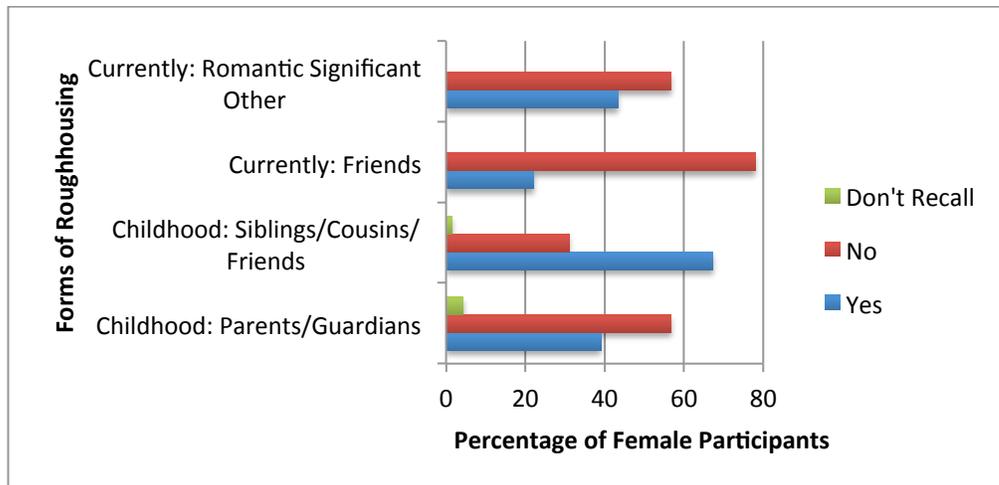
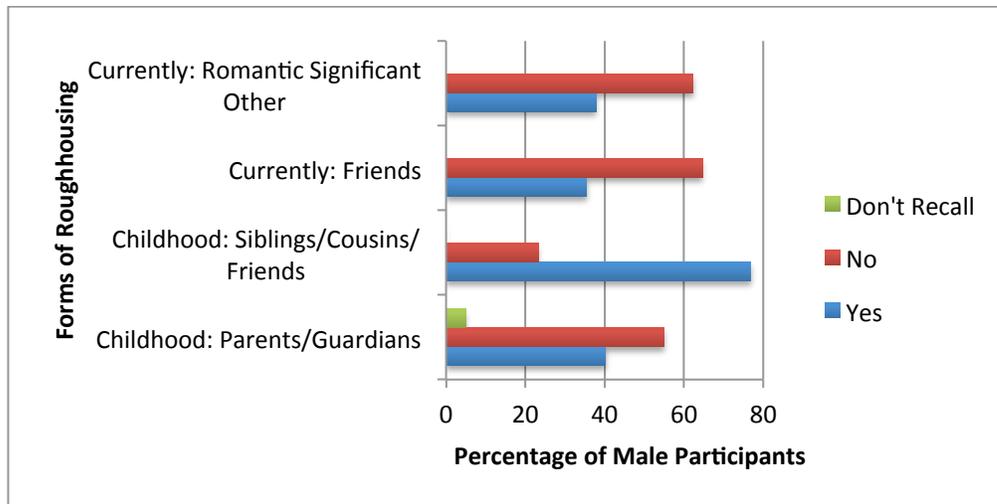


Figure 6. Reported percentages of female participants: Roughhousing throughout childhood and young adulthood.



*Figure 7.* Reported percentages of male participants: Roughhousing throughout childhood and young adulthood.

Participants were recruited in the same way as the pilot study, using Facebook, email, Twitter, and through word of mouth. A separate Facebook page was created for this survey, and Facebook friends were invited to join and invite their friends. The event was open to the public, which meant that anyone could view it and participate (as long as they were eligible). Eligibility was based on age and current location; participants had to be over the age of 18 but not older than 25 and currently living in the United States.

Participants and their data were excluded if they had taken the previous pilot study (in an attempt to avoid priming) or had failed to complete the entire survey, rendering their data incomplete and inconclusive. Participants were treated ethically and in accordance with the Scripps College Institutional Review Board.

### *Materials*

Materials included a survey (see Appendix D) that incorporated the data from the previously conducted pilot study, in addition to the validated psychological Rape Myth Scale (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995) and the Sexual Aggression and Expectations Scale,

created by the principal investigator for the purpose of this study (see appendices E and F). The function of the pilot study was to gauge how severe or intense certain acts of aggression were considered in different contexts. Participants were asked to rate 23 behaviors on a Likert scale that ranged from -1: not applicable, 0: not aggressive, 1: mildly aggressive, 3: moderately aggressive to 6: severely aggressive. The ratings from the sexual context for each behavior were collected and categorized as mild, moderate, or severely aggressive and were implemented into the experimental survey.

Demographic questions (15 total) included basic information such as the participant's age, gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation. More specific questions asked participants if they attended college, what state their college is/was in (used for geographical purposes), experience with domestic and sexual violence, consumption and perceptions of pornography, and if the participant had a history of roughhousing with family, friends, and significant others.

#### *Rape Myth Scale*

The Lonsway and Fitzgerald Rape Myth Scale (1995) is a 19-item scale that assesses "...attitudes and generally false beliefs about rape that are widely and persistently held, and that function to deny and justify male aggression." For example, the first item reads, "When women talk and act sexy, they are inviting rape" (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 706). Participants then record an answer on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 signifying "strongly disagree" and 5 signifying "strongly agree." All 19 questions are positively worded so that higher scores designate greater acceptance or internalization of rape myths. This scale was developed with the seven aspects of the rape myth in mind: victim precipitation, definition of rape, male intention, victim desire-enjoyment, false

charges, trivialization of the crime, and deviance of the act (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1995). The Rape Myth Scale can be found in its entirety in Appendix E.

#### *Sexual Expectations Scale*

The Sexual Expectations Scale was created for this experimental study by the researcher and consists of 9 questions that assess attitudes and beliefs regarding sexual aggression, its acceptability, gender roles, and gendered expectations within sexual relationships. For example, the first item reads, “Men want and enjoy aggressive sex.” Participants then record their answer using a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating “strongly disagree” and 5 indicating “strongly agree.” This scale was developed based on previous research that had been conducted on college-age populations and pornography analyses that examined the role that sexual aggression plays in intimate relationships (Bridges et al., 2010; Foubert et al., 2011; Ryan & Mohr, 2005). The Sexual Expectations Scale can be found in its entirety in Appendix F.

#### *Vignettes*

A 3 x 3 x 2 experimental model was implemented by using a series of scenarios that changed the sexual orientation of the couple (gay, lesbian, heterosexual), the degree of aggression (neutral: tickling, mild: pinching, severe: choking) and the response of the individual who the behavior was directed at (positive, negative). This was based on Livingston’s (2009) eight scenarios that manipulated the height of the aggressor, the gender of the aggressor, and the response of the recipient to the playful aggression. Unlike Livingston’s (2009) study, the current study varies the aggression level of individual behaviors, which were determined using the results of the pilot study. The vignettes were short and worded exactly the same with the exception of deliberate changes to the sexual

orientation of the couple, aggressive behavior, and the recipient's response to the behavior. Additionally, names were not included in the vignettes to avoid any kind of positive or negative connotation being assigned by the participant, even if the participant wasn't consciously aware of it. Below is "Vignette A" (a complete list of the scenarios can be found in Appendix G):

A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will pinch man 2. Man 2 usually reacts by smiling.

### *Design*

The design for this study used a 3 x 3 x 2 experimental model in which the sexual orientation of the couple, aggressive behavior, and recipient's response to the behavior were altered. A 3 x 3 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA and a series of paired samples t-tests and independent t-tests were run to determine whether any of the hypotheses were significant in relation to these three variables and if there were any significant main effects and interactions among the variables.

### *Procedures*

To recruit participants, a Facebook event was created that invited the researcher's 500-plus friends to take the survey and to forward it to their friends. The Facebook event was open to the public so that anyone could take the survey, and it included a shortened version of the informed consent form (see Appendix H for the complete informed consent form), to give possible participants information regarding their eligibility to take the study and to inform them of the nature of the survey. A mass email was also sent out to the Scripps College community. The Scripps College mass email system was used because of

the researcher's affiliation with that particular college. Also, the Institutional Review Board's approval of the current study did not extend to the other colleges in the consortium, which meant that the researcher could not directly target students from other schools to participate. The mass email included the same information that appeared on the Facebook event page and provided a direct link to the survey that was conducted via the popular survey engine, 'SurveyMonkey.' The survey was 68 questions long and took approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. All of the respondents were told that participation was voluntary. Complete honesty was requested, as well as conscientiousness with regard to answering all of the questions (so that full-scale scores could be calculated). Participants were told that they could exit the survey at any time and that their responses would be anonymous and confidential; no identifying information was to be placed on the questionnaires and there was no way for the participants to be identified after completing the survey by either the researcher or via the results. Participants were also informed that after completing the survey they could then opt to be entered into a raffle for a \$100 gift card to the business of their choice.

After accepting the terms and conditions of the study, participants were randomly assigned and were presented with three numbers in a vertical line and asked to click on the first number that appeared (for example: 3, 2, 1, the participant would then proceed by selecting #3). Each time a different participant opened the survey, 'SurveyMonkey' would randomize the order of the numbers so that the top number rotated. This served as a way to randomly assign participants to the same survey but with questions in different orders. The only questions that were randomized in these different survey types were the scenarios. All participants began their survey with the demographic section, then the Rape Myth Scale,

followed by the Sexual Expectations Scale, and concluded the survey with the various scenarios which appeared in random order. Participants could easily take the survey on their home computer or personal laptop, wherever they had access to the Internet.

Afterwards, participants were notified that they had completed the survey and were thanked for their time, debriefed, asked to please refrain from discussing specifics of the survey with others who may participate, and were given contact information should they have any further questions or needs (see Appendix I for debriefing materials). Contact information reiterated who the researcher was, what her affiliation was, gave a supervising professor's contact information, and access to Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services, an on-campus counseling center that provides psychological services to students. These services were made available to anyone who had participated in the survey.

## RESULTS

The first hypothesis stated that in positive response situations, in which the recipient reacted positively to the aggression by smiling, the aggressive behaviors would be perceived as less aggressive in comparison to the negative response situations in which the recipient frowned and walked away from the aggressor. A composite score of the positive response situations was created and a separate composite score was created for the negative response situations. A paired-samples t-test was run and as predicted, participants rated the behavior (regardless of the severity) as significantly less aggressive in positive response situations ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = .620$ ) than in negative response situations ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = .623$ ),  $t(323) = -14.70$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Hypothesis two postulated that in scenarios with heterosexual couples, the aggressive behavior would be perceived as more aggressive when the man was the

aggressor in comparison to when the woman was the aggressor. In order to run a paired samples t-test, composite scores were created for all situations in which the male was the aggressor (in the heterosexual vignettes) and a second composite score compiled all the data from vignettes in which the female was the aggressor. As predicted, participants rated the behavior (regardless of the severity) as significantly more aggressive when the man was the aggressor ( $M = 2.99$ ,  $SD = .547$ ) than when the woman was the aggressor ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = .562$ ),  $t(323) = 7.63$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Hypothesis three predicted that in scenarios with a same-sex couple, aggressive behaviors would be perceived as less aggressive and less problematic for the couple compared to the same situations with heterosexual couples. This hypothesis was separated into two parts and a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted for both the aggression perceptions (aggression) and the ratings of how problematic the aggression was for the couple (health). Composite scores of aggression and health ratings were created according to the sexual orientation of the couple (same-sex or heterosexual) and the severity of the aggressive behavior (neutral, mild, and severe), and the rating (rating of aggression or rating of how problematic it was for the couple). In total, there were six composite scores that were placed in a matrix. A 2-way within groups ANOVA follow up procedure was conducted.

The first part of hypothesis three hypothesized that in scenarios with same-sex couples, aggressive behaviors would be perceived as less aggressive, compared to identical situations with heterosexual couples. As concerns the first portion of hypothesis three, there was no significant main effect for sexual orientation of the couple, such that heterosexual couples ( $M = 8.80$ ,  $SD = .739$ ) were rated almost equally to homosexual

couples in terms of perceived aggression ( $M = 8.84$ ,  $SD = .750$ ),  $F(1,322) = .701$ ,  $MSe = .053$ ,  $p = .403$ . There was a significant main effect for the severity of the behaviors,  $F(2,644) = 1330.87$ ,  $MSe = .704$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up tests revealed that homosexual, neutral aggression scenarios ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = .744$ ) were rated significantly more aggressive than heterosexual, neutral aggression scenarios ( $M = 1.88$ ,  $SD = .728$ ),  $t(325) = 3.204$ ,  $p < .001$ . There were no significant differences in ratings between homosexual mild aggression scenarios ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .755$ ) and heterosexual mild aggression scenarios ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .758$ ),  $t(325) = .369$ ,  $p = .712$ . Additionally, there were no significant differences in ratings between homosexual severe aggression scenarios ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .748$ ) and heterosexual severe aggression scenarios ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = .727$ ),  $t(325) = -1.893$ ,  $p = .059$ . This last test almost qualified as a significant finding, suggesting that there may be a significant difference between the perceptions of how aggressive the behavior was among homosexual couples and heterosexual couples in regards to severe behaviors; however, additional studies would have to be conducted to confirm this. Further, there was a significant interaction effect between sexual orientation and aggression severity,  $F(2,644) = 6.274$ ,  $MSe = .047$ ,  $p = .002$ . Follow-up tests showed that, for homosexual scenarios, severe aggression ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = .750$ ) was perceived as more aggressive than mild aggression ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .755$ ) and neutral aggression ( $M = 1.93$ ,  $SD = .744$ ),  $t(325) = 33.86$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $t(325) = 41.57$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively. Additionally, for homosexual scenarios, mild aggression ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = .755$ ) was perceived as more aggressive than neutral aggression ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = .743$ ),  $t(325) = 18.73$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up tests also showed that, for heterosexual scenarios, severe aggression ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = .727$ ) was perceived as more aggressive than mild aggression ( $M = 2.64$ ,  $SD = .727$ ) and neutral

aggression ( $M = 1.88, SD = .727$ ),  $t(325) = -33.45, p < .001$  and  $t(325) = -42.234, p < .001$ , respectively. Lastly, for heterosexual scenarios, mild aggression ( $M = 2.64, SD = .759$ ) was perceived as more aggressive than neutral aggression ( $M = 1.88, SD = .727$ ),  $t(325) = -19.83, p < .001$ .

Table 1

*Ratings of aggression for individual behaviors in same-sex and heterosexual couples*

	Neutral	Mild	Severe
Homosexual	$M = 1.94, SD = .745$	$M = 2.65, SD = .754$	$M = 4.25, SD = .750$
Heterosexual	$M = 1.88, SD = .728$	$M = 2.64, SD = .760$	$M = 4.28, SD = .729$

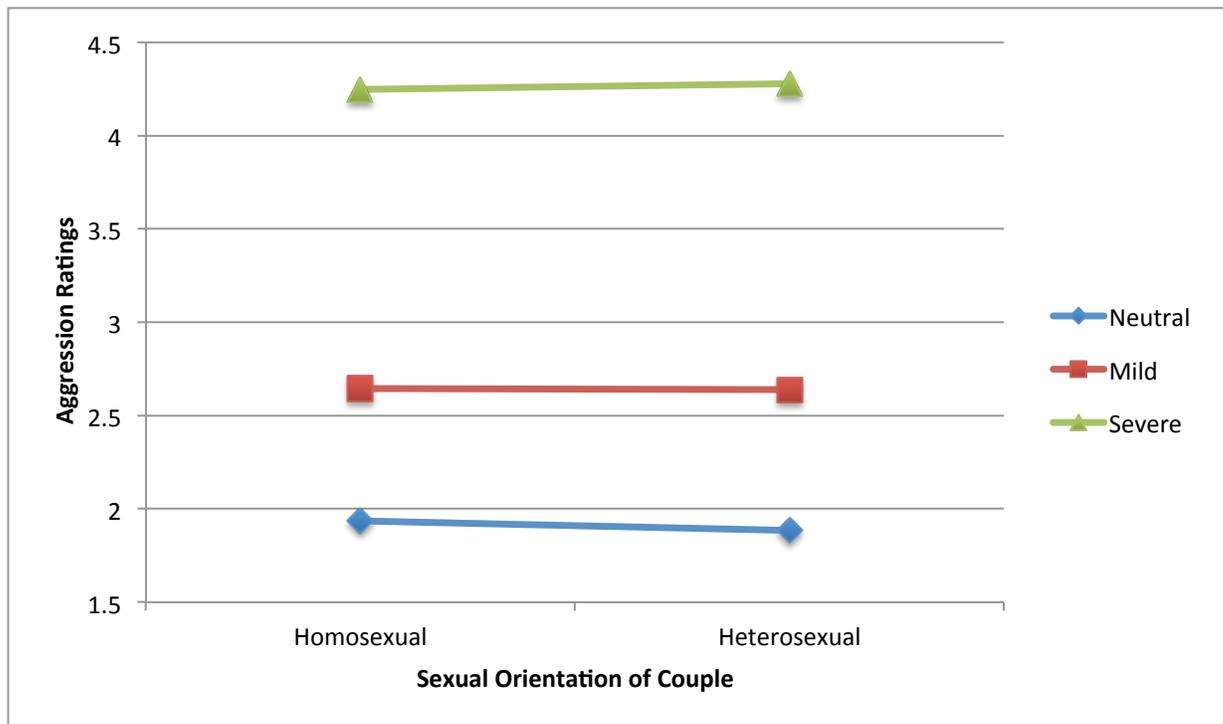


Figure 8. Effect of sexual orientation of the couple on subsequent ratings of aggression.

The second part of hypothesis three hypothesized that in scenarios with same-sex couples, aggressive behaviors would be perceived as less problematic for the couple, compared to identical situations with heterosexual couples. In order to test the second part of hypothesis three, a 2-way within groups ANOVA follow up procedure was conducted. There was no significant main effect for sexual orientation of the couple, such that

heterosexual couples ( $M = 8.36$ ,  $SD = .601$ ) were rated almost equally to homosexual couples in terms of perceived health of their relationship ( $M = 8.38$ ,  $SD = .605$ ),  $F(1,322) = .224$ ,  $MSe = .052$ ,  $p = .637$ . There was a significant main effect for severity of the behavior,  $F(1,322) = 593.576$ ,  $MSe = .379$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow up tests revealed that homosexual, severe health scenarios ( $M = 2.14$ ,  $SD = .649$ ) were rated significantly more healthy than heterosexual, severe health scenarios ( $M = 2.12$ ,  $SD = .626$ ),  $t(325) = 2.273$ ,  $p = .024$ . There were no significant differences in ratings between homosexual neutral health scenarios ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .569$ ) and heterosexual neutral health scenarios ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .589$ ),  $t(325) = -.522$ ,  $p = .602$ . Additionally, there were no significant differences in ratings between homosexual mild health scenarios ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = .594$ ) and heterosexual mild health scenarios ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .584$ ),  $t(325) = -.855$ ,  $p = .393$ . Further, there was no significant interaction effect between sexual orientation and health of the relationship,  $F(2,644) = 2.90$ ,  $MSe = .044$ ,  $p = .056$ . However, given that the significance was so close to .05, it was treated as a marginally significant finding. Follow-up tests showed that, for homosexual scenarios, severe aggression ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = .648$ ) was perceived as less healthy than mild aggression ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = .594$ ) and neutral aggression ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .569$ ),  $t(325) = -22.05$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $t(325) = -26.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively. Additionally, for homosexual scenarios, mild aggression ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .585$ ) was perceived as less healthy than neutral aggression ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = .590$ ),  $t(325) = 11.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . Follow-up tests also showed that, for heterosexual scenarios, severe aggression ( $M = 2.11$ ,  $SD = .625$ ) was perceived as less healthy than mild aggression ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .584$ ) and neutral aggression ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = .591$ ),  $t(325) = -23.47$ ,  $p < .001$  and  $t(325) = -26.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , respectively. Lastly, for heterosexual scenarios, mild aggression ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .585$ ) was

perceived as less healthy than neutral aggression ( $M = 3.28, SD = .590$ ),  $t(325) = 11.86, p < .001$ .

Table 2

*Ratings for how healthy the relationship appears in same-sex and heterosexual couples*

	Neutral	Mild	Severe
Homosexual	$M = 3.27, SD = .569$	$M = 2.96, SD = .595$	$M = 2.15, SD = .650$
Heterosexual	$M = 3.28, SD = .591$	$M = 2.97, SD = .585$	$M = 2.11, SD = .626$

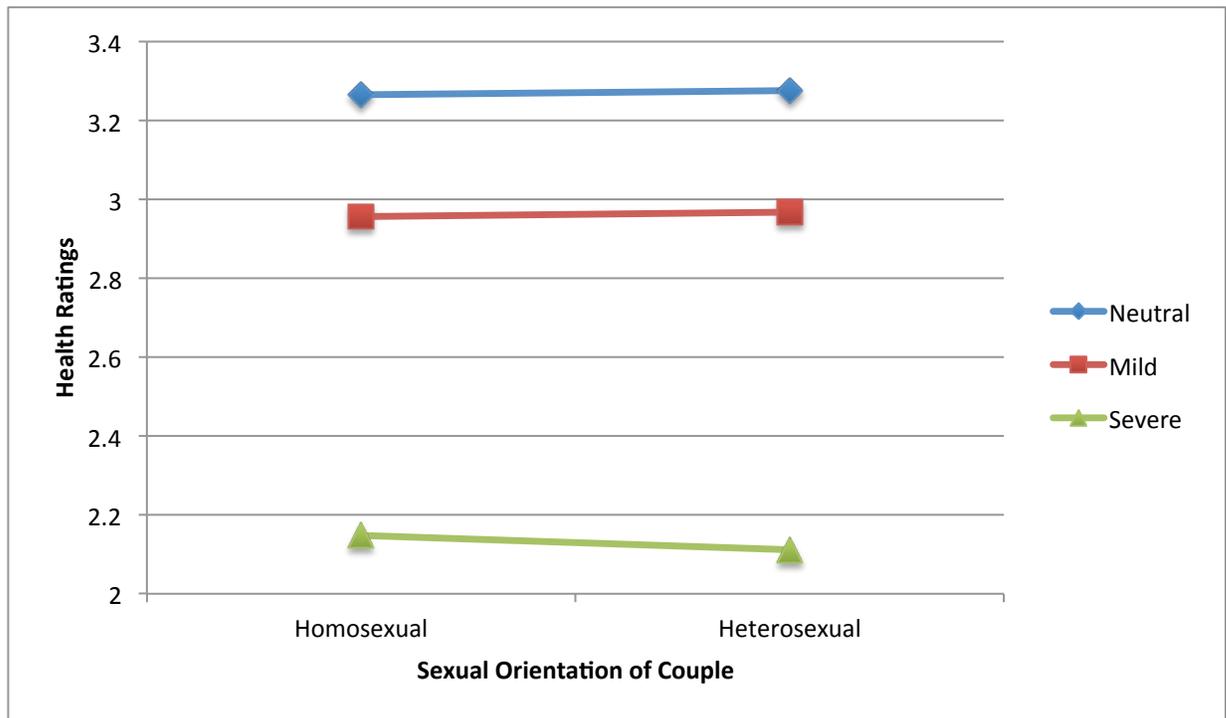


Figure 9. Effect of sexual orientation of the couple on subsequent ratings of how healthy the relationship was perceived.

The researcher also hypothesized (H4) that the individuals who self-reported higher levels of pornography consumption would perceive aggressive behaviors as less aggressive than individuals who did not report watching as much pornography. The total aggression scores from the scenarios for each participant were averaged which constituted the dependent variable. A categorical variable was created for porn consumption in which high

consumers were separated into one group and low consumers were separated into another group. An independent t-test was carried out on Aggression Composite Score values as a factor of porn consumption (low consumption, high consumption). There was no significant mean difference in Aggression Composite Score values between participants with low reported pornography consumption ( $M = 2.95$ ,  $SD = .517$ ) and those with high reported pornography consumption ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = .575$ ),  $t(318) = .804$ ,  $p = .422$ .

It was also hypothesized (H5) that individuals who scored higher on the Rape Myth Scale would perceive aggressive behaviors as less aggressive than individuals who scored lower on the Rape Myth Scale. Similarly to hypothesis four, the total aggression scores from the scenarios for each participant were averaged which constituted the dependent variable. A categorical variable was created for each participant's responses to the Rape Myth Scale in which high scorers (indicating higher acceptance of rape myths) were separated into one group and low scorers (indicating low acceptance of rape myths) were separated into another group. An independent t-test was carried out on Aggression Composite Score values as a factor of Rape Myth acceptance (low acceptance, high acceptance). There was no significant mean difference in Aggression Composite Score values between participants with low reported acceptance of rape myths ( $M = 2.97$ ,  $SD = .563$ ) and those with high reported acceptance of rape myths ( $M = 2.88$ ,  $SD = .517$ ),  $t(293) = 1.463$ ,  $p = .145$ .

Although not an original hypothesis, based on Livingston's (2009) findings that previous experience with a behavior impacted participants' ratings, it was decided to examine the effect that exposure to sexual and domestic violence would have on participants' responses to the scenarios. An independent samples t-test was carried out on

Aggression Composite Score values as a factor of participants' experience with sexual violence (have experienced sexual violence, have not experienced sexual violence). There was no significant mean difference in Aggression Composite Score values between participants with a history of sexual violence ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .495$ ) and those without a history of sexual violence ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = .554$ ),  $t(321) = .069$ ,  $p = .945$ .

Additionally, an independent samples t-test was carried out on Aggression Composite Score values as a factor of participants' experience with domestic violence (have experienced domestic violence, have not experienced domestic violence). There was no significant mean difference in Aggression Composite Score values between participants with a history of domestic violence ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .547$ ) and those without a history of domestic violence ( $M = 2.92$ ,  $SD = .542$ ),  $t(321) = 1.150$ ,  $p = .251$ .

Lastly, the researcher chose to run an independent samples t-test to examine gender differences in relation to men and women's ratings of aggression. It was informally hypothesized that women would rate the behaviors as more aggressive than men. An independent samples t-test was carried out on Aggression Composite Score values as a factor of gender (female, male). There was a significant mean difference in Aggression Composite Score values between female participants ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = .290$ ) and male participants ( $M = 1.54$ ,  $SD = .467$ ),  $t(334) = -5.29$ ,  $p < .001$ . Contrary to the hypothesis, men were found to rate aggressive behaviors as more aggressive than women.

## DISCUSSION

The term "aggression" conjures up numerous images in the heads of many. This diversity in definition is represented by the previous research that has been done on this topic which has successfully delineated aggression in the rawest, most malevolent forms—

research examining domestic violence, hate crimes, child abuse, rape, and other forms of violence have all been researched and analyzed, yet a fundamental form of aggression has yet to be studied extensively. Throughout a comprehensive literature review, it became apparent that there is a hole in the literature regarding aggression in playful forms, despite the fact that researchers acknowledge that playful aggression exists (Baxter, 1992; Livingston, 2009; Ryan & Mohr, 2005). Preliminary studies have started to spark an interest in the topic and examine playful aggression as a concept in and of itself, but also within the broader context of human aggression. Despite these studies, young adults are consistently underrepresented.

With technological advances making media even more accessible, young adults are consuming a large majority of this media. For this reason, it was important to address how this media is affecting behaviors in young adults' lives. This study sought to examine how pornography, due to its large increase in production and consumption, may be affecting young adults and their personal relationships, especially in women who have been historically ignored in studies that examine pornography's effects on behavior. More importantly, this study sought to examine how young adults perceive aggression in a romantic context—what they believe constitutes “normal” or “acceptable” forms of aggression and how these shape aggression-related boundaries, whether internalization of Rape Myths and frequent pornography viewing influence one's perception of aggression, and whether aggression in same-sex young adult couples is viewed differently.

This study examined five hypotheses, the first of which, postulated that, regardless of the severity of an aggressive behavior, if the recipient of the aggression responds positively, the aggressive behavior will be perceived as less aggressive than the same

situation with a negative response from the recipient. The second hypothesis predicted that in scenarios involving heterosexual couples, the aggressive behavior (regardless of the severity), would be rated significantly more aggressive if the aggressor was male. Due to widespread gender stereotypes, the third hypothesis theorized that aggressive behavior among same-sex couples would be perceived as less aggressive and less problematic for the relationship's health. The fourth hypothesis postulated that individuals who reported high levels of pornography consumption would be more likely to perceive aggressive behaviors as less aggressive, compared to those who reported low levels of pornography consumption. Similarly, hypothesis five speculated that individuals who scored higher on the Rape Myth Scale would rate aggressive behaviors as less aggressive compared to people with lower scores.

As predicted in hypothesis one, it was discovered that the response of the recipient significantly affected the subsequent ratings of how aggressive participants perceived the various behaviors to be. Specifically, when the recipient of aggression reacted in a positive way by smiling in response to the behavior, participants rated the aggressive behavior, regardless of how severe it was, to be less aggressive. This may indicate an increasing liberalism and acceptance of unorthodox sexual practices among young people, such as consensual choking. It might also signify a shift in sexual practices; aggressive acts like this may be becoming more normal; however, there is no evidence to support this, since participants were never asked whether they had engaged in behaviors like the ones that were depicted in the scenarios. It's most likely that young participants are less critical of different sex acts as long as the recipient of the act is not responding in a way that would cause concern, or indicate that s/he was not enjoying it.

Additionally, it was discovered that in heterosexual couples, when the man was the aggressor, participants perceived the behavior (regardless of the behavior), to be more aggressive than when the woman was initiating the same aggressive behavior. This is not surprising and is consistent with numerous studies (Seelau & Seelau, 2005). In Seelau & Seelau's (2005) study they hypothesized that these findings perhaps stem from participants' assumptions that men are more aggressive, larger, and, therefore, present more of a threat or more of a potential for harm, and are consistently depicted as perpetrators of rape and sexual assault in comparison to women.

Statistical analyses for hypothesis three indicated that there was no significant main effect for sexual orientation of the couple which suggests that homosexual and heterosexual couples were rated equally, relatively speaking, in regards to perceived aggression. Interestingly, it was discovered that homosexual neutral aggression scenarios that involved tickling were rated significantly more aggressive than heterosexual neutral aggression scenarios involving the same behavior. This result was completely unexpected and may be an anomaly; further research would be needed to examine why this was the case. More consistent with the original hypothesis was the marginally significant finding that heterosexual severe aggression scenarios were rated moderately more aggressive than homosexual severe aggression scenarios. Seelau and Seelau's (2005) research would support this finding, suggesting that participants view aggression in same-sex couples as less aggressive due to the fact that there is no gender difference among the partners. Lastly, results showed that severe behaviors were consistently rated as more aggressive than mild and neutral behaviors, and mild behaviors were rated as more aggressive than neutral behaviors in both same-sex and heterosexual conditions. This was to be expected given

that a pilot study had been carried out to assess, generally, what people believe constitutes these different levels of aggression.

Analyses conducted for the second part of hypothesis three found mostly similar results to the first part of hypothesis three. Similarly, there was no significant main effect for sexual orientation such that homosexual couples and heterosexual couples were rated almost equally in regards to perceived health of their relationship. Additionally, behaviors that were deemed severely aggressive were perceived as least healthy for the relationship of the couple in comparison to both mild and neutral behaviors. Scenarios that involved neutral behaviors received the highest ratings when participants were asked if the relationship seemed healthy. Lastly, follow up tests revealed that homosexual scenarios with severe aggressive behavior were rated significantly healthier than heterosexual scenarios with the same severe aggressive behavior. While this might suggest that participants were focused on the sexual orientation of the couple, this seems, instead, to suggest that participants are taking into account the genders of those involved. This is consistent with Seelau and Seelau's (2005) observations that aggression in same-sex couples is perceived differently based on the fact that both partners of the relationship are of the same gender which contributes to the stereotype that power dynamics are more equalized among same-sex couples.

This study did not find any significant results in regards to participants' pornography consumption and subsequent ratings. Contrary to the hypothesis, participants who reported high levels of pornography consumption did not differ in their ratings compared to their peers who reported low levels of consumption. Additionally, individuals who showed higher acceptance of rape myths did not exhibit significant differences in

terms of their ratings of aggression compared to participants who scored low on the Rape Myth Scale. Prior studies on pornography viewing and the internalization of rape myths (as illustrated by high scores on scales such as the Rape Myth Scale) would suggest that significant differences would be apparent; however, the current sample was fairly limited, so differences may not have been identifiable in such a small and non-diverse group (Foubert et al., 2011, Hilton et al., 2003). Perhaps in a sample with a more equal distribution of male and female participants, differences would be noticeable.

Surprisingly, results indicated that prior experience with sexual and domestic violence did not impact participants' ratings of aggression. It was thought that a history involving sexual and domestic violence, two examples of very negative aggression, would prompt participants to rate aggressive behaviors as more severe, especially for participants who had experienced domestic violence which occurs within relationships, similar to the scenarios that were presented in the survey. Perhaps, these types of aggression were experienced a long time ago and participants had recovered from the trauma of these occurrences, producing little effect on their ratings. It's also possible that despite these participants' experiences, they were still able to differentiate between healthy and safe forms of playful aggression versus aggression that was deemed unwanted or unsafe by the recipient's response to the behavior. It would be interesting to examine these results further in a follow-up study.

Additional analyses found significant gender differences in terms of aggression ratings. Surprisingly, men rated behaviors as more aggressive than women did. It was hypothesized that women would be more sensitive to aggressive behaviors and thus rate them as more aggressive because women are more frequently targeted for acts of sexual

and domestic violence. However, these results might suggest that in a romantic relationship context, men (in a heterosexual relationship) are especially aware of certain behaviors that could be perceived as aggressive and threatening by the woman, and therefore rated them as more aggressive. This heightened awareness on the man's part might be a factor of frequent social discussion surrounding rape and violence against women, making them more cautious when it comes to behaviors that are aggressive, even if the intent is playful, lest it be misconstrued or unwanted. This may have been the case, given that the majority of the male participants were college-educated and colleges nationwide are making a conscious effort to raise awareness surrounding sexual assault. Women may have also contributed to this gap in ratings by rating aggressive behaviors as less aggressive because, as previous studies have found, they are typically the recipients of these acts of aggression and so they may seem more normal (Hilton et al., 2003). In contrast, men, who are rarely the recipient, may have viewed these acts as more aggressive and less playful.

### *Implications*

When examined collectively, the results of this study offer several important implications for theory and practice regarding the phenomenon of playful aggression. The occurrence of playful aggression has been studied extensively in ethological research, particularly with non-human primates (Enomoto, 1990; Pellis & Pellis, 1996, 1997; Taylor et al., 2000). This primate research has urged scholars to examine playful aggression among children, with numerous theories resulting as to why children use playful aggression (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; Boulton & Smith, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Hartup, 1974; Huesmann, 1988; Pellegrini, 1992). Despite the numerous studies that examine the

presence and function of playful aggression in animals and children, there are only a few articles that address these complex questions of aggression with adults as subjects, and no articles to date, that examine playful aggression in same-sex relationships (Baxter, 1992; Gergen, 1990; Livingston, 2009; Moore, 1985, Ryan & Mohr, 2005). The present study's results strengthen researchers' previous findings that suggest that playful aggression does, in fact, extend into adulthood and is incredibly complex when in terms of the number of variables that are involved in defining the line that separates playful aggression and non-playful aggression.

Results from the scenarios showed that the response of the recipient, and not the behavior itself, was what participants responded to. If the recipient responded positively, by smiling, this seemed to be a signifier for participants that the behavior was considered less aggressive, and therefore more playful. Even in scenarios with the severest form of aggression, choking, participants continually rated the behavior as less aggressive if the recipient reacted positively.

Participants' ratings of aggression were also heavily influenced by the gender construct of each scenario. In other words, the gender of the aggressor was equally as important as the gender of the recipient. In male-on-female aggression scenarios in which the male was the aggressor and the female was the recipient, the aggressive behavior (regardless of how severe) was consistently rated more aggressive than other scenarios in which a woman was the aggressor or the man was aggressing against another man. This seems to reflect gender stereotypes that heterosexual male-to-female aggression is the most serious form of aggression due to the gender difference.

This finding was consistent with additional results that showed that participants rated heterosexual severe aggression scenarios as more aggressive than homosexual severe aggression scenarios. This means that in both situations, choking was occurring and the recipient was reacting the exact same way, the only difference was the sexual orientation of the couple. When the couple consisted of a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, choking was perceived as less aggressive than when a man was choking a woman or a woman was choking a man. When participants were asked how healthy these relationships appeared, they rated homosexual severe aggression scenarios as healthier than heterosexual severe scenarios. This suggests that they perceived the severe aggressive behavior as less detrimental for the health of same-sex relationships. Previous research suggests that this isn't related to lack of concern for the severe aggression occurring in the relationship, but instead, reflects a stereotype that same-sex couples, due to the fact that both individuals are the same gender, do not face as severe forms of aggression (Seelau & Seelau, 2005).

Lastly, severe behaviors were consistently rated as reducing the health of the couples' relationships regardless of the response of the recipient, which suggests that playful aggression has definite boundaries. Participants seemed to find choking as too severe a behavior to be considered "playful" which was indicated by the fact that, even in positive response situations, in which the recipient smiled in response to being choked, the participants rated this as unhealthy for the couple.

These findings make only a small dent in better understanding how couples utilize aggression in their relationships and what defines playful aggression. Due to the very minimal amount of previously conducted research on this topic, there have yet to be theories developed regarding this specific form and function of aggression. For this reason,

the results of the present study did not fit into an existing theoretical framework; they did, however, support previous findings, which validates these prior findings and lends validity to this experimental study.

A number of practical implications can be derived from this study's results. For instance, results suggest that the response of the recipient plays a huge factor in playful aggression. Being aware of one's partner's reaction to certain behaviors could help maintain aggression levels at a healthy and playful level. Additionally, these findings suggest that if one finds himself or herself the recipient of aggression, they should express clear reactions that signify how he or she really feels and whether he or she is enjoying the behavior, or are uncomfortable and would like it to stop. Obviously, speaking up if the behavior becomes dangerous or makes one uncomfortable is crucial in ensuring safety.

The findings specific to same-sex couples in the current study also suggest that homosexual couples may struggle with appropriate relief efforts should the aggression escalate to unhealthy aggression such as domestic violence. While this disparity in ratings is somewhat inconsequential if the aggression is playful, consensual, and enjoyed by both parties, it could be very detrimental for gay and lesbian couples if the aggression becomes harmful. Given that participants significantly rated aggression in homosexual couples as less serious, this could suggest that serious forms of aggression may be trivialized if the couple is homosexual. Burke and colleagues (2002) note that this is, unfortunately, often the case for many same-sex couples; aggression is perceived as less severe by law enforcement, judges, and relief workers, and there is a general lack of services provided for homosexual individuals fleeing domestic violence (Burke et al., 2002).

In conclusion, this area of aggression research needs to be studied more in order to better understand the complexities and functions of playful aggression and how they relate to adult relationships. Like any study, the current investigation had some limitations that could be remedied by future research. This study also raised many fascinating questions that merit additional research.

### *Limitations*

First, the results of this research should be considered carefully in light of its nonrandom sampling. Only respondents willing to take the survey completed the survey, resulting in a selection bias. This selection bias could more specifically be called a self-selection bias due to the fact that individuals selected themselves into the group of participants, thereby causing a biased sample with nonprobability sampling. Furthermore, these participants were from a somewhat small population, given that the survey was only advertised via the researcher's individual social networking site and through Scripps College. Generally, studies such as this one should have 20 participants per "cell." In this case, it was a 3 x 3 x 2 experimental model so there should have been at least 360 valid participants. While over 400 individuals opened the survey, only 336 participants fully completed it. The sample was also disproportionately female. For this reason, it is difficult to draw accurate conclusions about the perceptions of men versus women when it comes to playful aggression. The sample was not only uneven in regards to the gender of participants, but also in terms of the participants' sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and level of education. Since one of the main variables was sexual orientation, it would have been interesting to have more gay and lesbian participants. The sample was also predominantly White, so results lack generalizability across racial and ethnic groups.

Lastly, previous studies have demonstrated a significant difference between the participants' level of education and their acceptance of rape myths (Kassing, Beesley, & Frey, 2005). Many of the participants were currently in college, an environment that is focused on dispelling rape myths. While the problems with this study's sample limits firm conclusions and generalizations, the study's ability to overcome some of the weaknesses of prior studies suggests that the findings should be seriously considered, nonetheless.

Second, after looking at participants' responses, there was a curious and slight difference between male and female participants' roughhousing responses in regards to roughhousing with their significant other. While male participants roughhoused more frequently with their parents and peers as children, and roughhoused more with their friends as adults, female participants were shown to roughhouse more with their significant others. Upon closer examination, it was discovered that the questions prior to the roughhousing set of questions involved questions about participants' pornography consumption, with the last question asking participants if they thought that, generally, pornography involves elements of coercion, dominance, and/or force. This may have caused an unintentional framing effect in which the sequence of questions prompted participants to answer differently than they otherwise would have, had the prior questions not been asked. It is possible that male participants were especially conscious of their answers to the subsequent roughhousing section, especially if it could be construed as aggression against women (the sample of male participants was predominantly heterosexual).

Lastly, maintaining the participants' interest and attention was difficult given the repetitive nature of the vignettes at the end of the survey. While it would have been more

interesting and more realistic to include names and additional information, it was decided to keep the vignettes concise so participants would be more inclined to read the whole thing; names were excluded so as not to influence people unintentionally. Despite the efforts to make the vignettes reader-friendly, many participants later admitted to skimming the short paragraph looking for the changed words and phrases and then responding to the questions. This approach may have prevented the participant from making a true assessment of the content related to the questions. Additionally, and most concerning, this skimming resulted in the participants' ability to quickly identify the variables that were being tested, which may have influenced their responses. Often times, when participants are aware of the variables being adjusted, they attempt to choose the "right" or "expected" answer, which makes the data less valid.

#### *Directions for the Future*

This study and the research that went in to developing it offered many interesting opportunities for additional research. Obviously, an increased sample size, and a more diverse sample size, preferably with a more equal gender ratio, would make for a compelling follow-up to this study. Additionally, it would be interesting to examine generational differences in regards to aggression in sexual relationships. Given current pornographic trends that emphasize dominance and aggression and less conservative media representations of sex it might be hypothesized that younger generations would be more accepting of aggressive behaviors in sexual relationships compared to their parents' or grandparents' generations. Conversely, it could be argued that the recent increased discourse surrounding problematic rape myths and sexual assault would make the younger generation more sensitive to aggression.

In addition to diversifying the sample, a follow-up study would ideally include more gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Furthermore, it would be interesting and valuable, given the lack of data, to specifically look at only same-sex couples and their relationships to aggression, both playful and non-playful. While research indicated that gay and lesbian couples experienced similar levels, if not higher levels, of domestic violence in comparison to straight couples, there were specific differences that were exclusive to same-sex couples (Burke et al., 2002; McKenry et al., 2006; Seelau & Seelau, 2005); one such difference was the threat (or action) of “outing” as a source of power, which, for obvious reasons, is a distinct phenomenon only seen in same-sex relationships. “Outing” refers to one partner threatening or actually “outing” their partner by revealing his or her sexual orientation to family, friends, and/or co-workers. This can be particularly devastating for a gay or lesbian individual because their sexual orientation remains a part of their identity and they should have a say in how this information is disclosed and to whom it is disclosed to. Furthermore, in some instances, the individual may be shunned by an unaccepting family, lose their job as a result of homophobia and prejudice, or be at risk for hate crimes as a result of the forced outing. This powerful form of aggression is nonexistent in heterosexual couples and has yet to be closely examined in research concerning forms of aggression in homosexual relationships.

Another area of research within the gay community that was briefly mentioned in McKenry and colleagues’ (2006) article was the phenomena of internalized homophobia and its effect on levels of aggression. Internalized homophobia is a term used to reflect negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality held by a homosexual individual. Internalized homophobia is generally measured by scales, and includes factors such as:

“...public identification as gay, perception of stigma associated with being gay; ...[and] moral and religious acceptability of being gay” (McKenry et al., 2006, p. 237). Like “outing,” internalized homophobia is an issue specific to same-sex couples that results from societal prejudice and feelings of inadequacy or “non-normalcy.” While internalized homophobia has been connected to low self-esteem, feelings of helplessness, and self-destructive behaviors, no empirical studies have examined how these negative repercussions of internalized homophobia may manifest themselves in a same-sex relationship (McKenry et al., 2006). One might hypothesize that these identity issues could prompt an unhappy individual to aggress against his or her partner in frustration or that the self-destructive behaviors, such as drinking, may exacerbate the problem and result in violence.

As a result of either internalized homophobia or external homophobia, research has shown that some same-sex couples abuse alcohol in an effort to alleviate the physical and emotional toll of prejudice surrounding homosexuality (McKenry et al., 2006). It comes as no surprise to researchers that alcohol, in turn, is associated with higher levels of aggression and violence due to its ability to reduce inhibitions. While gay and lesbian couples showed more alcohol consumption in comparison to heterosexual couples, this association between alcohol and aggression is not unique to gay and lesbian couples; in Gergen’s (1990) research, they found that young adults reported increased levels of aggression when drinking was involved. A recent study stated that in a sample of U.S. college students “more than two of every five students reported at least one symptom of [alcohol] abuse or dependence” (Knight, Wechsler, Kuo, Seibring, Weitzman, Shuckit, 2002, p. 263). Given the extremely high levels of alcohol abuse among American college

students, it would be interesting and worthwhile to further examine the role that alcohol is playing in young adult sexual relationships and its impact on the subsequent levels of aggression that occur.

Lastly, simplifying the study by having groups of participants see only certain scenarios with no prior scales would make for a compelling follow-up study. Without the scales and all 24 scenarios (with every possible variable combination) the expectation bias may be limited. Despite the fact that this study had been carefully constructed to avoid any kind of expectation bias and leading questions, it was difficult to conceal the true nature of the study due to the somewhat obvious nature of the scales. Additionally, the scenarios were very short and straightforward so as not to introduce additional variables, however, this also made it easier for the participant to identify which variables were being examined which could have influenced how they responded to the scenarios.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

## Pilot Study Survey

1. By selecting “I agree” you are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this research study and have read and understood the information presented. This selection also means that you are between the ages of 18 and 25 and currently live in the United States. You may exit the window if you do not agree.
  - a. I agree (or exit the window if you do not agree to participate)
2. What is your age?
  - a. 18
  - b. 19
  - c. 20
  - d. 21
  - e. 22
  - f. 23
  - g. 24
  - h. 25
3. What is your gender?
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Other (please specify)

Directions: Please rate each behavior according to how mild, moderate, or severe it seems in terms of aggression. The researcher understands that many of these behaviors change

based on how intense it is (for example: biting lightly vs. biting hard and drawing blood) so please rate them based on your first instinct or your gut reaction to that behavior. Take note of the context in which the behavior occurs. There are three contexts: friend, family, and sexual. If you feel that something doesn't apply, rate it as "Not applicable (NA)."

- The friend context should be thought of as a close friend who displays this behavior towards you.
- The family context should be thought of as a family member who displays this behavior towards you.
- The sexual context should be thought of as a sexual partner who you are involved with who displays this behavior towards you.

4. Behavior: Biting. Please rate how aggressive "biting" seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.

0 –Not	-1-	-2-	-3-	-4-	-5-	NA
Aggressive	Mild	Moderate		Severe		

Friend Context

Family Context

Sexual Context

- 5. Behavior: Squeezing. Please rate how aggressive "squeezing" seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
- 6. Behavior: Spanking. Please rate how aggressive "spanking" seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
- 7. Behavior: Tickling. Please rate how aggressive "tickling" seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.

8. Behavior: Hitting. Please rate how aggressive “hitting” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
9. Behavior: Pinching. Please rate how aggressive “pinching” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
10. Behavior: Verbal teasing. Please rate how aggressive “verbal teasing” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
11. Behavior: Choking. Please rate how aggressive “choking” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
12. Behavior: Restraining with body. Please rate how aggressive “restraining with body” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
13. Behavior: Restraining with rope/handcuffs/tape/other means. Please rate how aggressive “restraining with rope/handcuffs/tape/other means” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
14. Behavior: Pushing/shoving. Please rate how aggressive “pushing/shoving” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
15. Behavior: Straddling. Please rate how aggressive “straddling” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
16. Behavior: Chasing. Please rate how aggressive “chasing” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
17. Behavior: Hair-pulling. Please rate how aggressive “hair-pulling” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
18. Behavior: Taking food. Please rate how aggressive “taking food” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.

19. Behavior: Name-calling: “bitch.” Please rate how aggressive “name-calling: “bitch”” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
20. Behavior: Name-calling: “cunt.” Please rate how aggressive “name-calling: “cunt”” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
21. Behavior: Name-calling: “whore.” Please rate how aggressive “name-calling: “whore”” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
22. Behavior: Name-calling: “slut.” Please rate how aggressive “name-calling: “slut”” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
23. Behavior: Whipping. Please rate how aggressive “whipping” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
24. Behavior: Verbal demands. Please rate how aggressive “verbal demands” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
25. Behavior: Ripping clothes off. Please rate how aggressive “ripping clothes off” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.
26. Behavior: Gagging. Please rate how aggressive “gagging” seems to you in the friend, family, and sexual context.

## Appendix B

## Informed Consent—Pilot Study

You are invited to participate in this pilot study about aggressive behaviors. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

This research is being conducted by Catlin Dennis, an undergraduate student of psychology at Scripps College. You are qualified to participate in this research if you are between the ages of 18 to 25 years old and you currently live in the United States. The purpose of this study is to identify how aggressive certain acts are perceived and whether the context surrounding these acts affects people's perception of how aggressive it is. Results from this preliminary study will be taken into consideration and used in a follow-up experimental study examining playful aggression in young-adult relationships.

Participation in this study will require approximately 5 minutes of your time. You will be asked to give your age and gender. You will then rate a series of behaviors according to three different contexts. The risks of this research are expected to be non-existent or minimal. The behaviors are simple stated; there are no visuals or scenario descriptions. However, some of the behaviors may be affiliated with abuse (ex: choking, whipping, etc.) which may make some people uncomfortable. If you find that the information makes you uncomfortable or feel that it will make you uncomfortable, you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. In the event of any problems resulting from participation in the study, you may seek counseling through a service that searches for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

You will not be compensated monetarily for your time.

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The information obtained in this study will be used to create the experimental survey scenarios, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your ratings are the only thing that will appear in the follow-up experimental survey. Results will be kept in a secure location which is only accessible to the investigator. You will not be asked to put your name on any of the responses you give during the study. Your responses to the questions will be anonymous.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or with Scripps College. Your decision not to participate will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may ask questions concerning the research before agreeing to participate or during the experiment. If you have any questions regarding this research, you may contact:

Catlin Dennis  
Catlin.dennis@scrippscollege.edu  
Scripps College

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator you may contact:

Pamela Rowland  
Administrator of the Scripps College Institutional Review Board  
Pamela.rowland@scrippscollege.edu  
(909) 607-3249

Should you feel during or after your participation that your participation in this study negatively affected you or caused you any kind of psychological distress, you may call Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services, the 5C Consortium Counseling Center, at (909) 621-8202. If you are not a 5C student, you can seek counseling through a service to search for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

## Appendix C

## Debriefing—Pilot Study

Thank you for your participation in this study. This debriefing is given as an opportunity for you to learn more about this research project, how your participation plays a part in this research, and why this research may be important to society. Please do not discuss this study with anyone else who might also participate in the future in either this pilot study or the experimental study. Knowledge about the study may influence their responses and, essentially, invalidate the information obtained from them. For this same reason, it is important that you tell the experimenter if you knew details about this study before participating.

There has been a considerable push in research to examine the beneficial or adaptive functions of roughhousing among children; however, this same phenomenon is generally not studied in young adults. Through basic observations of adult family members, friends, and couples, it is easy to identify acts of aggression in these relationships that clearly do not stem from malevolent intentions. It is important to see how humans conceptualize aggression in this “playful” context and what humans consider to be the boundaries between playful and non-playful aggression; additionally, this research seeks to discover which behaviors mark those boundaries.

This study is designed to examine how aggressive certain behaviors appear and if the context in which these behaviors occur influences the perceived level of aggression. We did not have any hypotheses for this study; the purpose was purely to gauge which behaviors were considered severely aggressive versus mildly aggressive. Essentially, this pilot study gave researchers a base line which will be used in an experimental study in which levels of aggression are manipulated. We did think that the context would change the level of perceived aggression for certain behaviors. This research is important in the field of psychology because it may provide information about the accepted form of aggressive behaviors and non-accepted forms of aggressive behavior, ones that are considered inexcusable in any given context. As stated earlier, this brief pilot study will help researchers to carry out a larger study that seeks to understand the non-malevolent nature of aggression in romantic relationships. In a society where domestic violence among intimate partners is a continuing problem, the researcher hopes to better understand boundaries of aggression and what point aggression crossed the line between playful and dangerous.

The results of this research will be presented at an academic presentation and published in an undergraduate thesis. Again, your individual responses will be kept anonymous during this process. If you are interested in the results of this study or if you have any additional questions or comments, please contact:

Catlin Dennis  
Catlin.dennis@scrippscollege.edu  
Scripps College

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator you may contact:

Pamela Rowland  
Administrator of the Scripps College Institutional Review Board  
Pamela.rowland@scrippscollege.edu  
(909) 607-3249

Should you feel during or after your participation that your participation in this study negatively affected you or caused you any kind of psychological distress, you may call Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services, the 5C Consortium Counseling Center, at (909) 621-8202. If you are not a 5C student, you can seek counseling through a service to search for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

Thank you again for your participation!

## Appendix D

## Experimental Survey (includes Appendices E, F, G)

1. By selecting “I agree” you are voluntarily making a decision to participate in this research study and have read and understood the information presented. This selection also means that you are between the ages of 18 and 25, currently live in the United States, and have not taken the previous pilot study. You may exit the window if you do not agree.
  - a. I agree (or exit the window if you do not agree to participate)
2. What is your age?
  - a. 18
  - b. 19
  - c. 20
  - d. 21
  - e. 22
  - f. 23
  - g. 24
  - h. 25
3. What gender do you identify with?
  - a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Other (please specify)
4. What is your sexual orientation?
  - a. Homosexual

- b. Heterosexual
  - c. Bisexual
  - d. Other (please specify)
5. What race or ethnicity do you identify yourself as?
- a. Caucasian/White
  - b. Latino/Chicano/Hispanic
  - c. Asian
  - d. African-American/Black
  - e. Middle Eastern/Arab
  - f. Pacific Islander
  - g. Other
6. Do you or did you attend college?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
7. If you currently attend college, which state is your college in? Please spell out the state (Ex: California). This question is used for locational purposes to see the geographic distribution of responses.
- a. (write in answer)
8. Have you experienced domestic violence? (Are currently in an abusive relationship, have previously been in an abusive relationship, witnessed domestic violence in your home)
- a. Yes
  - b. No

9. Have you experienced sexual violence? (Rape, molestation, etc...)
- Yes
  - No
10. Do you watch porn?
- Yes
  - No
11. On average, how much porn do you think you watch per week?
- 0 hours/week
  - Less than 1 hour/week
  - About 1 hour/week
  - About 2 hours/week
  - About 3 hours/week
  - 4+ hours/week
12. Regardless of whether you watch or don't watch pornography, would you say that pornography generally involves elements of coercion, dominance, and/or force?
- Yes
  - No
  - Unsure
13. As a child, did you roughhouse with your parents or guardians?
- Yes
  - No
  - Don't remember
14. As a child, did you roughhouse with your siblings/cousins/friends?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Don't remember

15. Do you roughhouse with your friends now?

- a. Yes
- b. No

16. Do you roughhouse with your significant other? (If you are not currently in a relationship, base your answer on your past relationships or how you think you would act)

- a. Yes
- b. No

## Appendix E

*Rape Myth Scale*

Please rate these statements according to how strongly you disagree or agree with them.

17. When women talk and act sexy, they are inviting rape.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
Strongly				Somewhat				Strongly
Disagree				Agree				Agree

18. When a woman is raped, she usually did something careless to put herself in that situation.

19. Any woman who teases a man sexually and doesn't finish what she started realistically deserves anything she gets.

20. Many rapes happen because women lead men on.

21. Men don't usually intend to force sex on a woman, but sometimes they get too sexually carried away.

22. In some cases, the woman actually wanted it to happen.

23. Even though the woman may call it rape, she probably enjoyed it.

24. If a woman doesn't physically fight back, you can't really say that it was rape.

25. A rape probably didn't happen if the woman has no bruises or marks.

26. When a woman allows petting to get to a certain point, she is implicitly agreeing to have sex.

27. If a woman is raped, often it's because she didn't say "no" clearly enough.

28. Women tend to exaggerate how much rape affects them.

29. When men rape, it is because of their strong desire for sex.

30. It is just part of human nature for men to take sex from women who let their guard down.
31. A rapist is more likely to be Black or Hispanic than White.
32. In any rape case one would have to question whether the victim is promiscuous or has a bad reputation.
33. Rape mainly occurs on the “bad” side of town.
34. Many so-called rape victims are actually women who had sex and “changed their minds” afterwards.
35. If a husband pays all the bills, he has the right to sex with his wife whenever he wants.

## Appendix F

*Sexual Expectation Scale*

Please rate these statements according to how strongly you disagree or agree with them.

36. Men want and enjoy aggressive sex.

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
Strongly				Somewhat				Strongly
Disagree				Agree				Agree

37. Women want and enjoy aggressive sex.

38. Aggressive sex is a sign of passion.

39. Aggressive sex is “sexier.”

40. Aggressive sex is natural.

41. Aggressive sex leads to rape and/or sexual violence.

42. When it comes to heterosexual sexual relationships, women expect men to take the lead.

43. When it comes to heterosexual sexual relationships, men expect women to take the lead.

44. Aggressive sex does not have to hurt or be scary.

## Appendix G

*Vignettes*

The following pages will include different scenarios. After reading each scenario, please answer the two questions that follow. Please read the scenarios carefully. The scenarios are randomized so do not pay attention to the scenario number.

**Scenario 1:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will pinch man 2. Man 2 usually reacts by smiling.

45. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
Not				Somewhat				Very
aggressive				aggressive				aggressive

46. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

1	-	2	-	3	-	4	-	5
No, definitely				Possibly				Yes, this is a
not								healthy relationship

**Scenario 2:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will pinch man 2. Man 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from man 1.

47. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

48. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 3:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will choke man 2. Man 2 usually reacts to this by smiling.

49. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

50. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 4:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will choke man 2. Man 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from man 1.

51. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

52. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 5:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will tickle man 2. Man 2 usually reacts to this by smiling.

53. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

54. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 6:** A man and a man have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, man 1 will tickle man 2. Man 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from man 1.

55. How aggressive is man 1's behavior towards man 2?

56. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 7:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will pinch the woman. The woman usually reacts by smiling.

57. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

58. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 8:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will pinch the man. The man usually reacts by smiling.

59. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

60. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 9:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will pinch the woman. The woman usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the man.

61. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

62. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 10:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will pinch the man. The man usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the woman.

63. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

64. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 11:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will choke the woman. The woman usually reacts by smiling.

65. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

66. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 12:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will choke the man. The man usually smiles.

67. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

68. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 13:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will choke the woman. The woman usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the man.

69. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

70. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 14:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will choke the man. The man usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the woman.

71. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

72. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 15:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will tickle the woman. The woman usually reacts by smiling.

73. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

74. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 16:** A man and woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will tickle the man. The man usually reacts by smiling.

75. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

76. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 17:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the man will tickle the woman. The woman usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the man.

77. How aggressive is the man's behavior towards the woman?

78. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 18:** A man and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, the woman will tickle the man. The man usually reacts by frowning and walking away from the woman.

79. How aggressive is the woman's behavior towards the man?

80. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 19:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will pinch woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by smiling.

81. How aggressive is woman's 1 behavior towards woman 2?

82. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 20:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will pinch woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from woman 1.

83. How aggressive is woman 1's behavior towards woman 2?

84. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 21:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will choke woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by smiling.

85. How aggressive is woman 1's behavior towards woman 2?

86. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 22:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will choke woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from woman 1.

87. How aggressive is woman 1's behavior towards woman 2?

88. Does this seem like a health relationship?

**Scenario 23:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will tickle woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by smiling.

89. How aggressive is woman 1's behavior towards woman 2?

90. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

**Scenario 24:** A woman and a woman have been dating for eight months. They met as sophomores through a mutual friend. Sometimes when they are together, woman 1 will tickle woman 2. Woman 2 usually reacts by frowning and walking away from woman 1.

91. How aggressive is woman 1's behavior towards woman 2?

92. Does this seem like a healthy relationship?

## Appendix H

## Informed Consent—Experimental Survey

You are invited to participate in this research study which investigates how playful aggression is perceived in young adults' romantic relationships. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

This research is being conducted by Catlin Dennis, an undergraduate student of psychology at Scripps College. You are qualified to participate in this research because you are between the ages of 18 to 25 years old, have not taken the pilot study that preceded this experimental study, and currently live in the United States. The purpose of this research study is to identify how young adults perceive acts of aggression in romantic relationships, both heterosexual and homosexual. Participation in this study will require approximately 20-30 minutes of your time. You will be asked to complete basic demographic questions such as your age, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. You will also be asked two questions regarding your personal history with domestic and sexual violence. These questions ask if you have witnessed or been a victim of domestic or sexual violence with a yes or no response. There are also several questions regarding your viewing and perception of the content in pornography. Participants will also be asked to rate general statements about rape (ex: When women talk and act sexy, they are inviting rape. Strongly agree, strongly disagree, etc...). Participants will then rate a series of general statements regarding sexual expectations. Lastly, participants will read short scenarios and rank them according to how aggressive they seem. The risks of this research are expected to be minimal. You will not be exposed to any images or graphic descriptions of sexual encounters, rape, or sexual assault. However, for some participants, answering these types of questions may make them uncomfortable, especially if they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence. If you find that the information makes you feel uncomfortable or feel that it will make you uncomfortable, you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time. In the event of any problems resulting from participation in the study, you can seek counseling through a service that searches for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

The benefits of your participation in this research include the chance to win a \$100 gift card to your business of choice.

Your confidentiality and anonymity in completing this study are ensured with the exception of information about ongoing or imminent harm. In accordance with the Scripps Institutional Review Board policy on human participant protections, if you share identifiable information about ongoing or imminent harm, the investigators may find it ethically necessary to report this information to advisors and others who would be able to help. The information obtained in this study will be analyzed and recorded in the researcher's senior thesis, but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Results will be kept in a secure location which is only accessible to the investigator, and your identity

will be kept separate from your responses to the questions you will be asked. You will not be asked to put your name on any of the responses you give during the research. Your responses to the questions the researcher asks you will be anonymous.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or with Scripps College. Your decision to discontinue participation at any time during the study will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may ask questions concerning the research before agreeing to participate or during the experiment. If you have any questions regarding this research, you may contact Catlin Dennis. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact:

Pamela Rowland  
Administrator of the Scripps College Institutional Review Board  
Pamela.rowland@scrippscollege.edu  
(909) 607-3249

Should you feel during or after your participation that your participation in this study negatively affected you or caused you any kind of psychological distress, you may call Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services, the 5C Consortium Counseling Center, at (909) 621-8202. If you are not a 5C student, you can seek counseling through a service to search for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

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Scripps College  
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## Appendix I

## Debriefing—Experimental Survey

Thank you for your participation in this study. This debriefing is given as an opportunity for you to learn more about this research project, how your participation plays a part in this research, and why this research may be important to society. Please do not discuss this study with anyone else who might also participate in the future. Knowledge about the study may influence their responses and, essentially, invalidate the information obtained from them. For this same reason, it is important that you tell the experimenter if you knew details about this study before participating.

There has been a considerable push in research to examine the beneficial or adaptive functions of roughhousing among children; however, this same phenomenon is generally not studied in young adults. Through basic observations of adult family members, friends, and couples, it's easy to identify acts of aggression in these relationships that clearly do not stem from malevolent intentions. It's important to see how humans conceptualize aggression in this "playful" context and what humans consider to be the boundaries between playful and non-playful aggression.

This study is designed to examine the effect that sexual orientation, aggression level, and response of the recipient to aggression have on one's perception of how aggressive the relationship is and how healthy the relationship seems. Additionally, this study measured participants' levels of acceptance of rape myths and their perceptions of sexual expectations and gender normative roles. As stated earlier, the researcher manipulated whether the couple in the scenarios was gay, lesbian, or straight, whether the behavior was mildly or severely aggressive, and whether the recipient of the aggressive act responded positively or negatively.

The results of this research will be presented at an academic presentation and published in an undergraduate thesis. Again, your individual responses will be kept anonymous during this process. If you are interested in the results of this study or if you have any additional questions or comments, please contact Catlin Dennis by email at [catlin.dennis@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:catlin.dennis@scrippscollege.edu). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject that have not been answered by the investigator you may contact:

Pamela Rowland  
Administrator of the Scripps College Institutional Review Board  
[Pamela.rowland@scrippscollege.edu](mailto:Pamela.rowland@scrippscollege.edu)  
(909) 607-3249

Should you feel that your participation negatively affected you or caused you any kind of psychological distress, you may call Monsour Counseling and Psychological Services, the 5C Consortium Counseling Center, at (909) 621-8202. If you are not a 5C student, you can seek counseling through a service to search for counselors provided by the American Psychological Association by visiting <http://locator.apa.org>.

