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“Me Getting Plastered and Her Provoking My Eyes”: Young People’s Attribution of Blame for Sexual Aggression in Public Drinking Spaces

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Abstract

Barroom sexual aggression—especially unwanted groping, kissing, and touching—is ubiquitous and largely unregulated. While research explicates how alcohol interacts with other precipitating factors to cause incidents like fistfights, the causes of less serious forms of sexual aggression remain understudied. Normalization of non-consensual sexual contact in bars means much of it goes unnoticed and is difficult to quantify or predict using conventional statistical methods. We use 126 young people’s narratives about experiences with barroom aggression to explore how/when it is tolerated or socially sanctioned. We find that alcohol, context, and gender shape attributions for sexual aggression in public drinking settings.

Keywords

alcohol, aggression, sexual assault, gender

Introduction

While rape and sexual harassment are taken quite seriously by the legal system, sexual aggression in public drinking settings—especially non-consensual groping, kissing, and touching—is ubiquitous and largely unregulated (Armstrong, Hamilton, &

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Sweeney, 2006; Graham, Wells, Bernards, & Dennison, 2010; Ronen, 2010). Most men and women who patronize nightclubs or bars have witnessed or directly experienced sexual aggression (Graham et al., 2010; Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks & Miller, 1997). In fact, the overwhelming majority of college-age men report using sexually aggressive tactics to “get women” at bars and parties (Thompson & Cracco, 2008), grabbing a woman from behind is a common and normalized form of aggression on the dance floor (Ronen, 2010), and many people perceive aggression by men to be an inevitable (albeit unpleasant) part of socializing in bars and clubs (Armstrong et al., 2006; Kavanaugh, 2013).

Although commonplace, the causes of these less serious forms of sexual aggression in public drinking settings remain understudied. Research tells us plenty about how alcohol works alongside other precipitating factors to cause aggressive behavior such as fistfights or bar brawls (Graham, Rocque, Yetman, Ross, & Guistra, 1980; Graham, West, & Wells, 2000; Leonard, Collins, & Quigley, 2003). Studies also reveal factors that predict more severe forms of sexual victimization in bars (Buddie & Parks, 2003; Parks, Miller, Collins, & Zetes-Zanatta, 1998). However, the ubiquity of non-consensual grabbing, touching, fondling, and kissing in public drinking settings means that much of it is so normalized that it goes unnoticed. This makes it difficult to collect quantitative data on victimization rates or to identify the factors that contribute to this type of sexual victimization. In this article, we use young people’s narratives about their experiences with sexual and non-sexual aggression in public drinking settings to examine the factors that encourage non-consensual sexual contact in bars and clubs. By looking at how people recall and attribute blame for such incidents, we are able to gain a better understanding of the conditions under which this behavior is tolerated or socially sanctioned. We find that alcohol, context, and gender moderate how people attribute responsibility and blame for sexual aggression in public drinking settings.

Alcohol and Aggression in Public Drinking Settings

Concern about alcohol consumption and violence has yielded a wealth of scholarship devoted to understanding how alcohol fuels aggression (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). Although people who drink heavily and/or frequently are disproportionately likely to be involved in aggressive confrontations (Barnwell, Borders, & Earleywine, 2006; Wells, Speechley, Koval, & Graham, 2007), research indicates that there is no straightforward physiological alcohol–aggression link (Graham, 2004, 2009). Instead, alcohol interacts with other variables to produce violent outcomes (Graham, 2009; Wells, Graham, & Tremblay, 2009). For example, individuals who see violence as situationally appropriate/necessary or who have aggressive personalities are more likely to experience alcohol-related aggression (Egan & Hamilton, 2008; Leonard et al., 2003; Quigley & Leonard, 2004). In addition, people’s beliefs about alcohol’s physical effects (i.e., their alcohol expectancies) affect the likelihood that consumption will lead to violence (Barnwell et al., 2006; Quigley, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 2002; Tremblay, Mihic, Graham, & Jelley, 2007). Believing alcohol has specific behavioral consequences—that it causes increased sensitivity to insult, heightened emotion(s),

inability to assess situations/risks, and enhanced toughness, bravery, or insensitivity to pain—makes violence more likely (Archer & Benson, 2008; Graham & Wells, 2003; Quigley et al., 2002).

Context also affects the likelihood of alcohol consumption fueling aggression. Studies of bars, pubs, and nightclubs reveal how specific setting characteristics can lead to higher levels of violent conduct. Structural factors like overcrowding, narrow hallways/doors, loud noise, poor ventilation, lack of or poorly trained security staff, and lack of proper seating have been linked to disproportionately high rates of aggressive behavior (Forsyth & Lennox, 2010; Graham, Bernards, Osgood, & Wells, 2012; Graham et al., 2004; Hobbs, O'Brien, & Westmarland, 2007; Roberts, 2007; Schnitzer et al., 2010). Social factors such as a permissive atmosphere or reputation for violent conduct (Graham et al., 2000; Quigley & Leonard, 2004), commercialism (Anderson, Daly, & Rapp, 2009; Kavanaugh, 2013), competition or heightened concerns about sexuality (Anderson et al., 2009; Egan & Hamilton, 2008; Wells et al., 2009), and the perception that fighting is normal, acceptable, or even expected (Bernburg & Thorlindsson, 2005; Wells, Graham, & Tremblay, 2007; Wells, Neighbors, Tremblay, & Graham, 2011) also contribute to barroom aggression.

Gender mediates the impact of these individual-level and environmental variables. Men, especially those who embrace hegemonic masculinity (i.e., adhere to norms that prescribe men to be aggressive, competitive, and risk-taking), are more likely to engage in barroom aggression than women are (Anderson et al., 2009; Quigley et al., 2002; Wells et al., 2011). The pressure men feel to be powerful or to be competent fighters fuels violence in bars (Graham et al., 2011; Graham & Wells, 2003; Peralta & Cruz, 2006). Indeed, in their study of young men's narratives about barroom aggression, Graham and Wells (2003) find that "the most notable explanatory factor for barroom aggression among young males in the study was an overriding acceptance and even positive endorsement of aggression in bars" (p. 546). Similar to other arenas of social life where a man's gender identity is called into question, men are much more likely than women to respond to relatively minor provocation in barrooms with aggression (Graham et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2006; Mullins, Wright, & Jacobs, 2004; Tremblay et al., 2007).

Alcohol and Sexual Aggression in Public Drinking Settings

Although women are not frequently aggressors in alcohol-related conflicts, they are often victims of aggression by men, especially sexual aggression (Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks & Miller, 1997; Parks & Zetes-Zanatta, 1999). Research on women's experiences with alcohol-related violence in bars, pubs, and other public drinking establishments focuses primarily on their victimization risks (Kelley-Baker et al., 2008; Parks & Miller, 1997; Parks et al., 1998). Like much of the early research on violence against women, these studies tend to focus more on victims' behavior than they do on perpetrators¹ and/or broader social, cultural, or institutional factors that help to produce sexual aggression in bars (Davis, George, & Norris, 2004; Katz, May, Sørensen, &

DelTosta, 2010; Testa & Parks, 1996). For example, studies have found that interacting with strangers at the bar, past experiences with physical and sexual abuse, and alcohol consumption increase the likelihood of a woman's violent victimization in public drinking venues (Buddie & Parks, 2003; Kelley-Baker et al., 2008; Parks et al., 1998; Parks & Zetes-Zanatta, 1999).

Fewer studies examine the broader social and structural factors that contribute to sexual aggression in barrooms. Those that do suggest that the individual-level, contextual, and social factors that contribute to other forms of barroom violence such as fistfights between men may also be related to sexual aggression. At the individual level, an offender's use of alcohol contributes to the problem (Graham et al., 2010; Kavanaugh, 2013). For example, research on alcohol myopia indicates that consuming alcohol causes offenders to focus on cues that communicate what they want (i.e., that are favorable to sexual advances) rather than those that communicate lack of consent (Graham et al., 2010), which makes sexually aggressive behavior more likely (Abbey, McAuslan, & Ross, 1998; Testa, 2002). In addition, victim alcohol consumption increases the likelihood of victimization (Buddie & Parks, 2003; Graham et al., 2014; Kelley-Baker et al., 2008; Testa & Parks, 1996) and alcohol's arousing/disinhibiting effects potentially fuel sexual violence as well (Graham, 2004).

The myopic and/or disinhibiting effects of alcohol do not operate in a vacuum, however. They work in conjunction with social and contextual factors—such as gender norms and barroom setting—that mediate alcohol's impact on behavior. For example, men are more likely to be sexually aggressive when they feel pressure to compete for sexual partners in a public drinking setting, feel the need to avoid looking weak, or have heightened concern with image (Graham et al., 2010). A bar's permissiveness, "vibe" and physical layout; social norms that facilitate sexually aggressive behavior by men (Kavanaugh, 2013); and the number of men in a bar (Buddie & Parks, 2003) also influence the likelihood of sexual aggression occurring. Studies of sexual harassment and assault in college students' partying spaces (other than bars and clubs) also support the notion that social factors contribute to sexual violence. A concentrated population of young adults with partying expectations, a highly sexualized peer culture, norms that encourage heavy drinking, and social expectations for women to be nice/deferent increase sexual victimization (Armstrong et al., 2006). In contexts like these, "Fulfilling the role of partier produces vulnerability on the part of women, which some men exploit to extract non-consensual sex" (Armstrong et al., 2006, p. 484).

In sum, research on sexual and non-sexual barroom aggression reveals that alcohol works in conjunction with a set of individual-level, contextual, and social variables to produce violent behavior. However, most of these studies focus disproportionately on serious forms of sexual/non-sexual aggression (Buddie & Parks, 2003; Katz et al., 2010; Parks & Miller, 1997; Parks & Zetes-Zanatta, 1999). Fewer works look closely at the factors that precipitate the less serious, more ubiquitous forms of sexual aggression such as non-consensual groping, grabbing, and/or fondling in barroom settings. This is a problem, considering how common it is (Graham et al., 2006; Kavanaugh, 2013). In this analysis, we build on the literature on barroom aggression by analyzing how young people perceive, account for, and attribute responsibility for their

experiences with sexual aggression in public drinking settings. Following the tradition of Graham, Wells, and colleagues (Graham & Wells, 2003; Graham et al., 2000), we use young people's stories about actual incidents to examine their views on what causes this type of aggression. We examine attributions because they are indicators of the sources of cultural tolerance for sexual aggression in public drinking settings. As our respondents' narratives indicate, broad cultural tolerance for this form of violence unifies the known factors that make aggression more likely in barrooms: alcohol's socially conditioned effects on behavior, the structural context of the setting, local culture, and gender norms that support and normalize men's aggression.

Data and Method

Our data come from 126 in-depth peer interviews conducted with young people between the ages of 21 and 25 in two cities with large state universities in the southern United States. Women comprise the majority (51%) of our sample, men 49%. In total, 72% of interviewees self-identified as White, 19% Black, 4% Other (e.g., Asian, Latino, American Indian, mixed race), and 5% were unknown (missing data). All were American citizens. The overwhelming majority (95%) of interviewees were college students or college graduates. With the exception of the absence of international students in our sample, these proportions roughly reflect student body diversity at the universities most of our interviewees were enrolled at. Three interviewees self-identified as gay or lesbian, whereas the others implied during the interview that they were straight or did not talk about their sexual orientation.

We used an IRB-approved peer interviewing strategy, where undergraduate students in Sociology of Law, Gender and Crime, and Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies courses conducted interviews with a friend who was not enrolled in the class and transcribed the interview for course credit. All participants in an interview participate in the production of meaning (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). For sensitive topics like alcohol consumption and sexual aggression, peer-facilitated interviewing is especially useful for co-producing knowledge because the pre-existing relationship between interviewer and interviewee helps establish the rapport necessary for candid discussion (Tinkler, 2012). This strategy has also been shown to produce comparable data with interviews conducted by trained graduate students with no prior relationship to the interviewee (England, Shafer, & Fogarty, 2008). Before conducting interviews, student interviewers attended a 2-hr training session on successful interviewing techniques.² The training covered strategies for maintaining neutrality, getting good responses (including prefatory statements and probing questions), gaining rapport, and maintaining control of the interview. Students were also provided with a document summarizing interviewing tips and were graded on their use of these strategies. This method allowed us to collect a large number of in-depth interviews, and as students were thoroughly trained and their interview transcripts were graded, the data quality was relatively high.

Interviews were semi-structured, ranged from 30 to 60 min, and followed an interview guide modeled after Graham and Wells' (2003) protocol. We piloted our

interview guide and training procedures in the first semester of data collection and coded data from these first 50 interviews for substantive themes and interviewer missteps. After the pilot study, we modified our training procedures and protocol to reduce interviewer errors and address interviewee fatigue. Data for the current analysis come from 126 interviews conducted using the improved interview guide and revised training procedures. Data from the pilot study were removed from the data set.

Because we were interested in whether or not people defined unwanted sexual contact as an act of aggression, we structured the interview so that respondents were first asked whether they had witnessed or been involved in any incident of aggression or violence in a public drinking venue. Interviewees were asked to provide a detailed account of the incident. After describing one incident in detail, they were asked to quickly (in one or two sentences) list/explain any other incidents of violence or aggression they had witnessed or been involved in. If the interviewees described no incidents of unwanted sexual contact in the first part of the interview, interviewers next asked them whether or not they had been involved in or witnessed an incident in a public drinking venue that involved unwanted or uninvited sexual contact. If they said "yes," interviewees then described those incident(s) in detail. To guide our student interviewers, the interview template included prefatory statements, transitions, probes, and follow-up questions.

The sensitive nature of the subject meant that protecting interviewees' identities and being prepared for their potential upset during the interview was necessary. Interviewers were exposed to course materials (readings, lectures, and discussion) on sexual assault and intimate partner violence prior to interview training and the training also included review of those materials (discussion of psychological trauma with intimate partner/sex offenses, for example). Interviewers were warned of the possibility that the person they chose to interview might disclose serious sexual assault victimization and therefore experience stress related to the interview process. We provided them with a form containing phone numbers and contact information for the city and university institutions that provide free counseling to survivors of sexual assault and/or intimate partner violence. We instructed interviewers to provide a copy of the informed consent form to the person they interviewed and to verbally explain the interviewee's right to stop the interview at any time for any reason. None of the 126 interviewees expressed upset during the interview process or asked to stop the interview or skip over specific questions.

For the current analysis, we coded interviews according to whether or not the person brought up unwanted sexual contact in the first half of the interview (when asked to recall incidents of violence/aggression), the second half (when asked to recall incidents of unwanted sexual contact), or both. A little over half of interviewees (57%) reported experiences with unwanted sexual contact. Not all of those interviewees provided narrative accounts about these incidents, however. Some reported experiencing unwanted sexual contact and suggested that it was ubiquitous, but could not recall the specifics of a particular incident. The current analysis therefore focuses primarily on the 43% of interviewees who provided detailed accounts of experiences with sexual aggression.

Data analysis focused on two components of the interviews: how respondents narrated their experiences with sexual aggression and their attribution of blame for what happened. Four coders worked with the data in Atlas.ti, coding interview excerpts with textual markers. Two graduate students did initial coding and then the authors refined that coding to identify errors and to eliminate redundant coding categories. The first author conducted the second phase of more thorough coding/refining and the second author reviewed the coding. We communicated about and resolved the few cases where there were questions about how codes were applied.

Our coding scheme was developed based on the prior literature and was modified as patterns and themes emerged from the data. We began by categorizing respondents by role (victim, perpetrator, and witness) and dividing their answers according to type (story, attribution). We used Kavanaugh's (2013) typology of sexual aggression in public drinking spaces to code respondents' narratives for type of unwanted sexual contact: competing definitions of the situation, opportunistic predation, and involuntary incapacitation. If an incident involved someone being supplied drinks to secure compliance with a sexual advance or a drink being spiked (suspected or known), we classified it as involuntary incapacitation. When an incident involved some consensual interaction (like talking or dancing), communication of disinterest, and continued advances on a victim, we coded it as competing definitions of the situation.³ Incidents where offenders used situational variables (like darkness or tightly packed crowds) to get away with groping someone in passing, we classified it as opportunistic predation.

For attributions, we read through respondents' answers and coded them according to pre-existing themes identified in the literature. For example, when respondents blamed factors like alcohol, bar context, gender norms, bar staff permissiveness, or a locale's reputation, we coded the passages accordingly. We also utilized an open coding strategy for attributions, whereby three additional themes emerged from the data: assigning blame to perpetrators, victim blaming, and self-aggrandizement. When respondents placed (partial/full) blame with a perpetrator or a victim, their answer was coded as such. Some male victims, when blaming themselves for what women aggressors had done, did so with a tone of pride, saying things about them being irresistible or too good looking, for example. Those passages were coded for self-aggrandizement in addition to being coded for victim blaming. Throughout the process, we used analytical memoing to keep track of the relationships between emergent concepts.

Narratives of Sexual Aggression in Public Drinking Settings

Sexual victimization in public drinking establishments like bars and clubs is a fairly frequent experience, especially for women (Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks & Miller, 1997). In total, 61% of women and 43% of men in our sample reported encountering unwanted sexual contact in public drinking settings. Women who reported incidents of sexual aggression by men against women were victims (68%) more often than they were witnesses (32%). The opposite is true for men. Four men in our data set reported being

victims of unwanted sexual contact (three at the hands of women, one by a man), while 83% of those who reported incidents were witnesses. All but one of those cases involved men witnessing a woman being victimized by another man. One man in our sample admitted being a perpetrator of sexual aggression in public drinking venues.

The proportion of women who reported experiencing sexual aggression in nightlife settings (61%) is lower than those reported in studies that focus specifically on women who regularly patronize bars/clubs, which indicate that up to 80% of women report such experiences and describe it as “frequent and annoying” (Parks & Miller, 1997) or as a regular/routine experience (Kavanaugh, 2013). Two factors help explain this. First, unlike other studies, our sample included people who did not patronize bars or clubs and therefore had zero experiences to share. Second, some said they knew it happened “all the time,” but could not discuss an event in detail. In addition, some of the people who reported sexual aggression in their early accounts said “no” when later asked if they had ever experienced or witnessed incidents of unwanted sexual contact in a public drinking venue. These patterns suggest that sexual aggression was so normalized and ubiquitous that unless they had experienced something particularly egregious, some respondents could not recall witnessing it at all or in enough detail to provide a narrative of the event.

In addition, interviewees’ failure to call incidents of sexual aggression to mind when asked about their experiences with aggression and/or violence in bars suggests that these events are not seen as true “aggression” or “violence” in the same way that fistfights and verbal conflicts between men are. Only three respondents brought up an incident of sexual aggression that did not lead to an additional conflict like a fight between men in the first part of the interview. When asked specifically about sexual aggression and unwanted sexual contact, however, the majority of women and nearly half of men had experiences to share. In the following sections, we detail the types of victimization respondents experienced/witnessed and explore how they narrate those experiences. We then move into an analysis of their attributions of responsibility for sexual aggression in barrooms by exploring who/what they identified as the cause(s) of the events.

Victimization Types

Interviewees spoke of a range of events involving unwanted sexual touching or groping in public drinking venues. We categorize their stories using Kavanaugh’s (2013) typology of sexual victimization in nightlife settings, which identifies three types of sexual aggression in these spaces: involuntary incapacitation, competing definitions of the situation, and opportunistic predation. Although cultural myths about women’s drinks being drugged suggest that involuntary incapacitation is common, research suggests that it is actually quite rare (Kavanaugh, 2013; Weiss & Colyer, 2010). Indeed, only one incident in our data set resembled this type of event. Most of the incidents people described were short in duration and involved aggressive touching, groping, or grabbing.

Nearly half (44%) of the detailed accounts offered by interviewees fit closely with what Kavanaugh (2013) labels “competing definitions of the situation.” In these cases,

there is some form of interaction with the offender like conversation, dancing, or accepting a drink he or she has purchased. The offender then misinterprets the victim's behavior (usually by seeing it as sexualized and directed at him or her) or ignores the victim's clearly communicated disinterest and pursues a forceful/coercive sexual encounter. For example, a 22-year-old mixed-race woman dancing at a bar with a group of girlfriends talked about a man who repeatedly tried to dance with them, persisting even after they communicated disinterest. Finally, he "came up to my—one of my best friends—and put his hands around her waist and pulled her in and she pushed him off and he called her out her name."⁴ He also splashed a bottle of water on them. A 21-year-old White woman shared a similar experience:

A gentleman kept trying to dance with us kind of—you know—intimately and it was kind of just disturbing. We told him to leave us alone three or four times and finally I—when he tried to grab my wrist—I just pushed on his elbow too hard and broke it.

Over half (54%) of unwanted sexual contact incidents involved sexual groping of a victim by someone he or she had no prior interaction with, or what Kavanaugh (2013) classifies as opportunistic predation. For example, one White woman was accosted while walking across the dance floor at a club with some of her friends.

We were making our way across the dance floor, but no one was dancing yet. And so it was just kinda people standing around and, you know, we were squeezing through people, then trying to make our way to the bathroom [when someone grabbed her butt].

She said this sort of thing happens frequently. She usually turns around and says something like "Dude, what's your problem?" but "they act like it's not a big deal because you're in a bar." This woman highlights how the bar setting gives license to men to behave in ways that would presumably be a "bigger deal" if they took place outside the bar. Another White female shared a similar story. She and her girlfriends were standing at the bar waiting for drinks when "some guy just walked straight past us and grabbed all of our butts on his way. He just kept right on walking." Indeed, incidents like these frequently involve offenders walking away, laughing, or disappearing into a crowd after assaulting someone (Kavanaugh, 2013). Women characterized such events as frequent, unpleasant, and oftentimes humorous to the men who perpetrated them.

Women were victims in the overwhelming majority of incidents in our data set, regardless of type. Only a few men recalled experiencing sexual aggression. More recalled witnessing it happening to a female friend. Some said they understood that this sort of thing happens to women frequently. For example, one 25-year-old Black man said,

Going out to clubs it has been many times where I've seen guys grab on women, the women get offended and [the offenders] outlash at the women, curse them out saying they think they "all that" or something, and you know—kind of verbally abuse them.

A young White man shared a similar sentiment: "I know a lot of girls who talk about it happening fairly regularly," he said. "I know girls who won't go to certain bars because it's such a problem." Although most people who shared their experiences with sexual aggression reported men victimizing women, only one man reported committing an offense and only two reported their friends doing so. For example, a mixed-race 22-year-old described a friend who "had a crush on the waitress" and "decided to grab her butt cheek as she was passing by."

Men's experiences with opportunistic predation, though very rare, closely resembled women's. For example, one White man recalled a time when "a girl grabbed [his] crotch." Another described being groped by a woman security guard. Cases involving competing definitions of the situation, however, revealed significant gender differences. Here, men's reported victimization was disproportionately likely to be linked to a pre-existing relationship between the interviewee and the aggressor and did not fit into Kavanaugh's (2013) definition of sexual aggression. Men defined the events as unwanted sexual contact not because they rejected the woman's advances and she persisted, but because she interfered with his relationship or his ability to socialize with other women. This pattern did not emerge with women interviewees.

For example, one 22-year-old White man talked about a young woman he had previously "hooked up with," but whose later advances in the bars they both frequented were unwanted because she interfered with his ability to interact with other women. On the night he talked about in detail, she was "definitely making advances on me, trying to dance on me, talk to me or whatever," he said. "Even to the point where like If I'm trying to talk to you [the female interviewer], she'll come up in the middle of the conversation and . . . mess it up." One 23-year-old Black man described going to a club with his girlfriend and a woman approaching him when she went to the bathroom:

So while she was in the restroom I stood up and begin to walk around on the dance floor. As I walked a female begin to try to dance on me. You can tell she was a little tipsy. She begins to touch all over me. I begin to get mad because I did not want my girl to see this random chick dancing on me. She kept touching me and I did not want her to. I know my girlfriend would get mad.

Significantly, these cases do not include discussion of interviewee resistance or communication of disinterest. While it is possible that resistance occurred (after all, the men classified these acts as unwanted sexual contact), the fact that explicit mention of resistance is missing from their accounts sets them apart from women's narratives, which consistently involved their (often repeated) communication of disinterest, lack of consent, and/or resistance to men's unwanted advances.

Although men and women's experiences with sexual aggression in bars and clubs were sometimes similar, clear gender differences in what people perceived as aggression emerged from interviewees' narratives. Gendered interaction norms around dating, flirting, and sexual encounters mean people expect men to be aggressive in their pursuit of women and women to be passive gatekeepers of men's moves (Bogle, 2008;

Kimmel, 2009; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). As such, unwanted contact from men remains largely invisible unless it rises to the level of physical threat. Women's accounts of unwanted sexual contact—which involved being groped, grabbed, and even assaulted after rejecting unwanted touching—reflect this. Unwanted attention from women, however, is visible to men when women violate gendered dating/flirting rituals by being too pushy or forward (Bogle, 2008; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). The perceived problem, in these men's narratives, is not that women's pushiness is physically threatening, but that it threatens their (men's) right to pursue women in normative (i.e., dominating) ways.

Accounting for Aggression

In addition to variant definitions of and experiences with unwanted sexual contact in public drinking settings, men and women also attributed blame for barroom sexual aggression differently. We use interviewees' first answer to the question "What do you think caused the incident?" to examine how people assign blame for sexual aggression. We focus on responses to this open-ended question to see how young people attribute responsibility for sexual aggression without any prompting. As is true in most work on barroom sexual aggression, alcohol figured prominently into people's answers (Peralta & Cruz, 2006; Wells, Graham, & Tremblay, 2007). The majority of respondents (71%) talked about alcohol when answering this question, but only a few (20%) talked about alcohol as the sole cause for what happened. One young White woman, for example, talked about a guy who "grabbed [her] butt" as she walked away after rejecting his advances and said that "just being drunk" caused the situation. Others, when asked what caused the incident, said something as simple as, "Alcohol. Definitely alcohol."

Previous research indicates that blaming alcohol in conjunction with other factors (rather than alcohol alone) is common for how people explain aggression in bars and other public drinking settings (Graham, 2004). Indeed, 80% of our interviewees who talked about alcohol also mentioned other factors such as the bar setting, the perpetrator's personality or beliefs, or a victim's behavior. Quantitative research, which indicates that alcohol facilitates aggression not independently, but in combination with other individual and contextual variables (Giancola et al., 2009; Graham, 2004; Graham et al., 2000; Wells, Speechley, et al., 2007), supports their nuanced explanations. In addition, because alcohol expectancies interact with other factors like beliefs about dating/relationships to contribute to the likelihood of a person committing sexual assault (Abbey et al., 1998), it makes sense that alcohol is not frequently identified as the sole cause of an incident of sexual aggression in a public drinking setting. Interestingly, however, gender influenced how people talked about alcohol working with other factors to cause violence. While men and women were equally likely to talk about alcohol and the setting producing sexual aggression, gender influenced their willingness to blame perpetrators or victims for the incidents they observed or experienced.

Blaming setting. Research indicates that particular aspects of the social and physical setting of a public drinking venue can be correlated with aggressive conduct and/or are

part of what people identify as causes of alcohol-related violence (Graham et al., 2004, Graham et al., 2006; Graham & Wells, 2003). Our interviewees talked about setting as a cause of unwanted sexual contact by invoking specific aspects of the bar's physical/social environment or by talking about the bar setting in general terms. For example, one young White 21-year-old man said a perpetrator's personality/behavior interacted with certain aspects of the social/physical setting to cause the incident of sexual aggression he witnessed. In this incident, he said he saw his drunken friend with two girls on a couch, where

in the beginning it was just laughing, having fun, you know pretend hugs, pretend kisses, it's fine, until he starts to look like he's climbing over them and their faces go from laughter to sheer . . . horror and "help me" eyes are searching through the crowd.

He said that "his [friend's] belligerence" and "the PDA⁵-friendly environment" caused the incident. In his account, normal consensual exchanges of affection in the bar setting are framed as part of the cause for his friend assaulting the women he sat with. This logic blurs the difference between wanted and unwanted sexual contact while buffering against his friend's "belligerence" being the sole cause of the incident.

In this type of account, the setting, alongside other factors like alcohol consumption, absorbs the blame for problematic behavior by presumably normal persons. Some women offered similar narratives of what caused the unwanted sexual contact they experienced or witnessed. For example, a 21-year-old Black woman who witnessed men grabbing a woman, placing her on their shoulders, and putting their faces between her legs said the cause was

definitely alcohol and setting. Like being in a crowd and being surrounded by people that were egging them on definitely caused the incident. I think also alcohol encourages it—because in people's normal day-to-day lives, they don't hoist people on their shoulders and simulate oral sex.

Here, the social and physical environment of the bar (i.e., "people that were egging them on") are to blame for something she thought these men would not have done in their "normal day-to-day lives."

Another 21-year-old Black woman who was groped repeatedly while walking with her friends one night offered a similar explanation:

If it were say, not in that setting—in the bar or in the dark. If it were, instead, walking down the street in the daylight, walking down Broad [Street], someone would certainly respond. So I think it was the setting. The alcohol is certainly a factor, but it being nighttime, darkness, and crowded and people just wanting to be out having a good time and consuming alcohol. It's just that if you were to do something like that, the bar would be where you do it. There's a time and a place.

Like the other respondents, she invokes an understanding of the offenders that frames them as otherwise well-intentioned persons who just "[want] to be out having

a good time” but are negatively influenced by the setting. There is one slight difference, however. She also suggests that they might be opportunistic. By arguing that if the behavior took place elsewhere, “someone would certainly respond,” she essentially frames the offenders as people who would be deterred from engaging in the behavior if others attempted to put a stop to it. This and her comment about the bar being the place that someone can/would do this (grope women) indicates that she believes offenders exercise agency in selecting when, where, and against whom to commit this sort of offense, a hunch that is corroborated by recent research on men’s sexual aggression in bars (Graham et al., 2014).

Kavanaugh (2013) finds similar rationales for sexual offending in barroom settings, especially incidents of opportunistic predation. Indeed, some of our interviewees suggested that the cause of unwanted sexual contact was a combination of motivated offenders and setting-specific factors like crowdedness and lack of light. These physical attributes of particular settings provided opportunity for people to get away with sexual aggression. As a White 21-year-old who was groped on a crowded street put it, “Everyone was just in a really good mood that night and most people were drunk.” She added, “There were just so many people that I’m sure they thought that they wouldn’t get caught because there’s no way of knowing who did it.” This sort of explanation, offered less frequently by respondents, departs from the previous arguments people made about the role of setting by framing offenders as motivated rather than “just looking for a good time.”

As these narratives reveal, some men and women argued that the events they witnessed or experienced were caused at least in part by the physical or social setting of the bar and the alcohol consumption that takes place there. Whether they cited norms for consensual interaction (i.e., “the PDA-friendly environment”), peer support (i.e., people “egging them on”), or physical aspects of the bar like darkness, they clearly framed the context as important in fueling sexually aggressive behavior. Other studies of barroom aggression suggest that bar context—especially when bars have certain characteristics such as poor lighting, overcrowding, or a reputation for tolerating violence—is an important factor in increasing victimization risk (Graham et al., 2012; Graham & Wells, 2003). Men and women’s seemingly equal willingness to assign blame to the social and physical environment of public drinking settings fits within this framework.

Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney’s (2006) work suggests that because the college partying scene produces fun in addition to heightened risk of sexual aggression, students tend to blame victims rather than attribute blame to aggressors or to the partying scene itself. Although we found men and women were equally likely to blame the bar scene, we observed gendered differences in willingness to blame perpetrators or victims for the sexually aggressive incidents respondents had seen and/or experienced. In other words, though men and women framed the bar/club context as part of the problem in fairly similar proportions, when it came to assigning blame to individuals operating within that context, gendered patterns in the attribution of responsibility emerged. The different roles men and women are expected to play in the context of the bar scene influenced how young people placed blame on offenders and victims. The

routinization of romantic/sexual scripts in bars, where men are expected to pursue women, women are expected to be gatekeepers, and men's aggressive tactics are largely normalized (Armstrong et al., 2006; Ronen, 2010), affects respondents' beliefs about who is to blame for the sexual misconduct that takes place there.

Blaming (alcohol and) perpetrators. Most interviewees (67%) placed at least partial blame on the person or people who perpetrated an incident of unwanted sexual contact. Most also mentioned other factors—primarily alcohol—when locating blame with perpetrators. In fact, the single most common response (56% of accounts) was discussion of alcohol working in conjunction with a perpetrator's behavior, personality, or beliefs to produce sexual aggression. However, willingness to blame offenders varied by gender and whether the interviewee was victim or a witness to the situation. Men victims were more likely to blame (women) perpetrators. Men who witnessed sexual aggression against women were less likely to blame (men) perpetrators. Women victims and witnesses, however, were equally likely to blame (men) perpetrators of the incidents they saw or experienced.

The men victims in our sample all blamed perpetrators for what happened to them. One, a 22-year-old White gay man who was groped by a man who had a reputation for sexual aggression at a local bar, talked about alcohol working together with the man's personality to produce an aggressive outcome. He said the person "was just being creepy, nasty . . . to be honest. I think, but I mean alcohol definitely probably had an effect on it." One 22-year-old White man, in reference to a group of older women who snuck into his room on a cruise ship and aggressively groped he and his friends, said, "Alcohol and horny old nasty women thoughts caused it." In contrast to men victims, who readily blamed perpetrators, men who witnessed sexual aggression by other men against women were less likely to blame the perpetrator even partially. Only a little over one third (36%) of the men who witnessed sexual aggression against women blamed aggressors. When they did, it was always in interaction with other factors such as alcohol or the environment. They said things like one 24-year-old White man: "The guy was just being drunk and acting like a jerk" or, as another put it, "him drinking and, you know, touching all over the woman" caused the event. Only one man who witnessed an incident of sexual aggression blamed the perpetrator without blaming alcohol, but he blamed the man's "belligerence" and the setting's "PDA-friendly environment."

Norms governing heterosexual interaction help to explain men's willingness to blame women and reluctance to blame men who were sexually aggressive. Heterosexual sexual scripts traditionally position men as aggressors who initiate intimate contact and sexual encounters (Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Strouse, 1987). The college "hookup" scene also helps explain men's sympathy for aggressors and blaming of alcohol (Bogle, 2008). In hookup culture, "alcohol use and alcohol-centered events (e.g., campus parties) play a critical role" as a social lubricant and, as such, it is normalized as part of male–female romantic interactions (Bogle, 2008, p. 47). Men who are socialized to pursue contact with women, especially in an immediate social context that involves consumption of alcohol, are likely to sympathize with other men who do the

same—even those who run afoul of the social norms that proscribe heterosexual encounters that go “too far” and involve aggression. Men’s comparative willingness to blame women perpetrators can also be explained by sexual scripts and heterosexual dating norms. Although dating practices have changed over the past few decades to allow room for more agency on the part of women, women are still expected to be gatekeepers who accept or reject men’s advances (Armstrong et al., 2006; Bogle, 2008). Those who step outside these norms by initiating contact and (in some cases) also violating norms that prohibit sexual aggression invite blame more easily.

The gap observed between men victims’ willingness to blame (women) aggressors and men witnesses’ hesitance to blame (men) aggressors did not apply to women. Women victims and witnesses were similarly inclined to blame perpetrators. Again, they usually did so in conjunction with blaming alcohol or drunkenness. Fifty-two percent of women offered explanations like the one a White 22-year-old did: “I guess it was just a drunk guy who thought he could get away with it, probably thought I wouldn’t react.” As a 22-year-old Black woman similarly claimed, “I think he was a dirty old man to begin with (laughs), but anyway, I think it was the marijuana he smoked and the alcohol just made him more bold with his actions.”

Interestingly, however, when compared with men, women were more likely to place blame solely with a perpetrator without citing additional factors as causes. Eleven percent of women victims and 13% of women witnesses straightforwardly said the perpetrator(s) was what caused the incident they experienced/witnessed. One White 21-year-old victim, for example, simply said that “him harassing us” caused the event. Another blamed, “his personality, cause he was trying to boast about it after.” A third said, “[They] probably [did it] to think they’re cool, big heads.” A mixed-race 22-year-old woman said, “the guy that disrespected us” caused the event, adding, “I think he was being too aggressive toward my best friend.” By comparison, no men witnesses and only one male victim in our sample offered a similar explanation.

Women’s willingness to fault the perpetrator—usually in combination with alcohol—can also be explained by the pervasiveness of drinking in campus hookup culture (Armstrong et al., 2006; Bogle, 2008). In addition, sexual scripts that frame women as gatekeepers or permission granters in heterosexual interactions position women to see themselves and one another as responsible for filtering desirable and undesirable sexual advances. If it is their “job” to navigate sexual advances and men’s “job” to make those advances without violating norms against sexual aggression, it makes sense that women are more likely to blame aggressors without citing additional intervening factors than men are.

Victim blaming. After alcohol and its interactions with perpetrator’s personalities, beliefs, or choices, victim blaming was the second most commonly offered explanation for sexual aggression in bars and clubs. Approximately one quarter (23%) of interviewees pointed to victims’ actions when attributing responsibility for the incidents they observed or experienced. Here, too, gender and role (i.e., whether someone was a victim, perpetrator, or witness) influenced the likelihood that an interviewee would blame victims. Women witnesses and men victims blamed victims (or themselves)

less. However, nearly one third of men who witnessed men's sexual aggression against women (29%) and women victims of men's aggression (27%) blamed victims (or themselves) at least partially when asked what caused the incident(s) they experienced.

The sole admitted perpetrator in our sample blamed himself and the woman whose buttocks he had grabbed for his actions. He said, "Me and her having fun out there, me getting drunk" and "whatever signal I had gotten" caused the incident. He added that when assigning blame, "we [should] mix me getting plastered and her provoking my eyes" as well and joked that the blame could be assigned in a "90 to 10 percent ratio—me being the 10 percent, of course. [Laughter] Just kidding." Many men witnesses did something similar—suggesting that factors such as "both of them drinkin'" or "them lookin' for a good time" caused a man to commit an act of sexual aggression against a young woman. One 23-year-old White man focused entirely on the victim when assigning blame: "She was kind of trying to act [like] more of a party person. So she was kind of overdoing it," adding that, "she wasn't very cautious about anything." Another White man, who saw his girlfriend get victimized, said, "My girlfriend having a nice butt and alcohol impairing people's judgment," caused the incident.

Men victims' lack of self-blame and men witnesses' higher rates of victim blaming support findings from research on sexual assault and intimate partner violence, which consistently reveals that men are more likely than women to use the victim-blaming logic when attributing causality (Cavanagh, Dobash, Dobash, & Lewis, 2001; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). In addition, when men are socialized to be sexual initiators and are regularly exposed to victim-blaming logic, it makes sense that they would deflect blame away from perpetrators and onto female targets. Interestingly, women victims had similarly high rates of victim- (i.e. self-) blaming explanations. Like other studies that suggest women focus on their own intoxication, sexual provocation (or "leading men on"), aggression, and "calling attention to one-self" when explaining sexual victimization in bars (Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks et al., 1998), many of the women victims in our study (27%) attributed partial blame to themselves or other women victims.

For example, a 21-year-old Black woman started out talking about the perpetrator and alcohol when asked what caused her victimization, but quickly shifted gears: "I mean, people get alcohol in their system and they get bold and think they can touch. And it's been proven that the girl's not really going to react, so why not?" Her explanation, which suggests that women "don't really react," posits women's lack of reaction as a justifiable rationale for men committing these offenses. Other women victims were subtler in how they blamed themselves or other women for sexual aggression in public drinking settings. One, for example, said that drinking probably caused what happened, then added, "I feel if we had been more sober, that wouldn't have happened" (emphasis added). Here, the interviewee focuses on her own consumption of alcohol, suggesting that she has at least partial responsibility for controlling men's behavior.

Some women brought clothing into the equation when attributing blame. A White 22-year-old said "flirting" and "being nice" caused her victimization, adding, "He was

probably all caught up. You know, kinda drunk. I had a short dress. I mean, it wasn't hoochie. I mean, you could see a good part of my thigh . . ." Another said, "I think he had overconsumed," and added, "I was wearing a skirt, but it was long. It wasn't like I was wearing a mini-skirt." Reading physically revealing clothing as a sign of sexual intent (i.e., framing it as sexually suggestive) is commonly part of victim-blaming logics for sexual assault (Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Maurer & Robinson, 2008).

Competing norms around male–female sexual relations contribute to women victims' willingness to invoke self-/victim blame when attributing responsibility for sexual aggression in public drinking settings. Traditional norms not only prescribe male pursuit and female passivity but also proscribe sexual aggression. Women are socialized not only to fear and avoid sexual assault and to be on the lookout for it (Brooks, 2011) but also to enjoy the less "scary" ways that men dominate their bodies (Laws & Schwartz, 1977). These norms lend themselves to a narrative that holds women responsible for avoiding unwanted sexual contact. In addition, women (like men) are exposed to widespread victim-blaming logic. Finally, the immediate context of the nightlife setting, where sexual aggression is largely normalized (Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks & Miller, 1997; Parks et al., 1998) and where partying norms encourage women to drink, be nice and deferent to men, and to engage in sexualized interaction, also contributes to victim blaming (Armstrong et al., 2006; Strouse, 1987).

Just like men defined some incidents as unwanted sexual contact because of their interference with the courtship processes (i.e., him having a girlfriend or him trying to flirt with other women) rather than lack of consent, a pattern emerged in victim blaming that only applied to men interviewees. In a few cases, men victims talked about themselves when attributing blame, but rather than blaming and locating responsibility for preventing victimization with themselves or other victims, their answers had a tone of self-aggrandizement. For example, one framed he and his friends being "young bucks" that attracted "horny old nasty women." Another simply said, "I'm attractive," when asked what caused a woman to grope him. The third jokingly explained a woman dancing on him and touching him after he indicated disinterest (and her boyfriend's reaction to it) in terms of his prowess: "Well, I am a great dancer, so the boyfriend could have gotten jealous." These self-esteem-focused answers are tied to masculinity norms that deter expressing vulnerability (Kimmel, 2009), beliefs about male sexuality that frame men as active agents rather than targets of women's sexual agency (Laws & Schwartz, 1977), and the stigmatization of men victims of sexual assault (Davies, 2002; Sable, Danis, Mauzy, & Gallagher, 2006).

Discussion and Conclusion

Our work builds on previous scholarship by analyzing young people's narratives about the contours and causes of barroom sexual aggression to explore the conditions that underlie widespread cultural tolerance for this type of conduct. Our findings indicate that unwanted sexual contact in bars and clubs is largely perceived as an inevitable part of participating in that social setting (Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks et al., 1998) and that women are disproportionately victims and men aggressors (Graham et al., 2010;

Parks & Miller, 1997; Parks & Zetes-Zanatta, 1999). Gendered dating, flirting, and heterosexual interaction norms contribute to the perception that unwanted touching, groping, and/or grabbing in bars are both normal and unavoidable. By framing men as pursuers whose sexual impulses are rooted in nature and difficult to restrain (Bogle, 2008; Kimmel, 2009; Laws & Schwartz, 1977), these beliefs render men's aggression against women largely invisible—it is just a “normal” part of barroom interaction. Indeed, respondents (even those who said they know “it happens all the time”) had difficulty recalling incidents in detail unless they rose to the level of physical threat. At the same time, gendered norms for heterosexual interaction make women's non-coercive advances hypervisible. While women's narratives frequently involved repeated communication of disinterest and men's continued coercive contact, men sometimes classified women's non-coercive advances as sexual aggression. When women violated interactional norms (by being too pushy or forward, for example) and/or interfered with men's ability to interact with other women in normative (i.e., controlling) ways, men narrated it as aggression.

These understandings of what aggression is or is not contribute to the ubiquity of male-on-female sexual aggression by rendering it less visible to victims and bystanders. Respondents' articulations of blame also allow us to identify factors that fuel widespread cultural tolerance for the conduct. When asked to articulate the causes of sexual aggression in public drinking settings, interviewees identified many of the factors that commonly emerge in people's narratives about other forms of alcohol-related aggression: alcohol, its interaction with aspects of a perpetrator's personality or behavior, the social/physical environment, and a victim's appearance or conduct (Graham et al., 2013; Graham & Wells, 2003; Kavanaugh, 2013; Parks & Zetes-Zanatta, 1999). However, there were gendered patterns in how men and women articulated these variables as causes for sexual aggression. Men and women were equally likely to blame the physical/social context of a public drinking setting for sexual misconduct, but when it came to attributing responsibility to people operating *within* those contexts, gender influenced how/when they framed victims and/or offenders as culpable.

First, men were less likely to blame men offenders than women were. Men's sympathy with those who engage in this sort of conduct is tied to the roles men occupy in public drinking settings. They are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual aggression (Graham et al., 2014, Graham et al., 2010; Kavanaugh, 2013) and/or to feel pressure to regulate sexual aggression (as a fellow bar-goer; a boyfriend, friend, or bystander who intervenes; a bouncer; or a security guard, for example)—a task that is daunting, given the ubiquity of the conduct (Graham & Wells, 2003; Roberts, 2009; Wells et al., 2011). In addition, heterosexual dating scripts normalize men's aggression and encourage women's passive reciprocation (Armstrong et al., 2006; Bogle, 2008) and gender norms discourage men from seeing themselves as victims (Davies, 2002; Kimmel, 2009; Tinkler, 2012). As such, men are more closely oriented to (and probably understand) the role of an aggressor better than they do the role of a victim.

Second, women victims frequently used victim-blaming ideology. Of course, men are generally more likely to blame victims of sexual assault and domestic violence

(Cavanagh et al., 2001; Grubb & Harrower, 2008; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010) and the men in our sample who witnessed male-on-female aggression were disproportionately likely to blame victims. However, a similar proportion of women victims blamed themselves. Like men's sympathy for offenders, this can also be tied to gender roles in the bar/club scene. Women, like men, are socialized to expect men's aggressive sexual conduct and to engineer their own behavior so as to avoid its most serious manifestation (rape) while enjoying the less catastrophic ways that men control/dominate their bodies (Brooks, 2011; Laws & Schwartz, 1977). This contributes to women holding themselves responsible for avoiding unwanted sexual contact.

The logics our respondents used when defining sexual aggression and talking about what causes it normalize the conduct and attribute responsibility more to alcohol, setting, and victims' behavior than to offenders. These understandings stem from deeply routinized gendered interaction norms in barroom settings. Our expectations for normal, non-deviant, male-female sexual interaction strongly encourage the blaming of women victims and, worse yet, men's dominance over women's bodies. This contributes to the continuing ubiquity of sexual aggression in public drinking settings. As men experience this type of victimization less frequently, tend not to see themselves as potential victims, and sexual scripts encourage men to welcome any/all sexual attention from women, they are less likely to have empathy for the harm caused by unwanted sexual contact. Women, while they attribute blame to aggressors more (especially when they witness incidents), are faced with interactional norms that make sexual aggression seem normal, something they should tolerate, or behavior they are responsible for controlling or avoiding. For this sort of conduct to be addressed, people would need to problematize it rather than seeing it as an inevitable by-product of alcohol-fueled nightlife. In addition, many of the men who witness it would have to step in and either sanction it (as bartenders, bouncers, or bystanders) or support the women who sanction/resist it. Our work suggests that addressing the underlying logics that fuel sexual aggression in these contexts could make informal sanctioning by victims and bystanders and formal sanctioning by agents of social control more common, thereby making it less ubiquitous.

Although our study allowed us to capture young men and women's narratives about a form of barroom aggression that is frequently so normalized that it is rendered nearly invisible and/or seen as an unavoidable and unremarkable part of social life in bars, it has some important limitations. First, our interviewees were all young people between the ages of 21 and 25. Although this is common in research on alcohol and violence because young people are often the majority of patrons in these settings and are at the highest risk of alcohol-related violence (Graham & Wells, 2003; Quigley & Leonard, 2004), future research might address how age affects the experiences individuals have with unwanted sexual contact and sexual aggression in public drinking venues. In addition, our sample is mostly White heterosexual college students and/or graduates in the Southern United States. Future work should draw on the experiences of a more diverse group of respondents/interviewees to address how social class, race, sexuality, and/or gender identity affect how people experience, perceive, and attribute responsibility for sexual aggression in bars and clubs. Working with a diverse sample of

respondents would allow researchers to get a more comprehensive understanding of the multiplicity of factors that underlie cultural tolerance for unwanted sexual contact in these venues.

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Notes

1. For an exception, see Graham et al. (2014).
2. The training, conducted by the authors, was based on the qualitative interviewing chapter from Michael Patton's (2001) textbook *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*.
3. Although we use Kavanaugh's terminology to describe events like these, we do acknowledge that it seems to imply that offenders misunderstand (rather than intentionally ignore) the victim's attempts to make clear that sexual contact is unwanted. We use the term for continuity's sake, but do not imply that these events are simple misunderstandings. Instead, they often involve deliberate ignoring of signals victims send to communicate lack of consent.
4. "Call [her] out [her] name" is slang for cursing a person by using an insult in the place of his or her name.
5. It is slang for "public display of affection."

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