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The Effects of Sexualized Children's Media

On Pre-Adolescent Girl's Self-Esteem

And Body Image

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Abstract

The sexualization of girls permeates U.S. culture. One of the major cultural contributors to the sexualization of girls is the media. In this study, we examined the effects of sexualized content in children's media on pre-adolescent girls' self esteem and body image. Participants were girls from a local elementary school. The girls were randomly assigned to two groups. The first group viewed a clip of non-sexualized content from a popular children's television program. The second group viewed a clip with sexualized content from a popular children's movie. Before and after watching the clips, the girls reported on self-esteem and body image. Girls in the two groups were also interviewed about their responses to the clips and about their perceptions of sexualized media more generally. Although we anticipated that girls who watched the sexualized video would report greater declines in self-esteem and body satisfaction than girls who watched the non-sexualized clip, no significant differences between the two groups were found. These results are discussed in light of the interview data which suggested that girls may be getting mixed messages from adults in their lives and the popular media.

The Effects of Sexualized Content in Children's Media on

Pre-Adolescent Girls' Self Image

The sexualization of girls permeates U.S. culture. Toy manufacturers market dolls wearing black leather miniskirts, feather boas, and thigh-high boots to 8 to 12 year old girls (APA, 2007, p.2). Clothing stores sell thongs sized for 7 to 10 year old girls. In one particularly disturbing example, Abercrombie and Fitch marketed thongs to children imprinted with the phrases "eye candy" and "wink wink". On prime-time television, girls can watch fashion shows in which models made to resemble little girls wear sexy lingerie (APA, 2007, p.27). Many groups, organizations, and parents have become more aware of the increase of sexualization and have argued that this has become a harmful problem, especially for girls.

The American Psychological Association suggests that sexualization can be distinguished from the promotion of healthy sexuality. Healthy sexuality involves the mutuality of respect between partners who share a close intimacy, bond, and pleasure, which is important for both physical and mental health (APA, 2007, p.2). In contrast, sexualization can occur in one of four conditions. The first condition entails a person obtaining their values, not from other characteristics, but from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, the second condition involves a person seeing sexy as being a standard of physical attractiveness, the third condition engrosses a individual to be treated as if they were not a person with the capacity for independence and decision, but one who is made into a thing for others' sexual use, and the fourth condition appears when a sexuality is forced upon a person. (APA, 2007, p.2).

The APA (2007) proposes that the sexualization of girls occurs in a variety of contexts, including via the cultural norms, expectations, and values that are communicated through the media (APA, 2007, p.3).

Indeed, there is ample evidence that television helps to shape people's knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Farrar, Kunkel, Biely, Eyal, Fandrich, Donnerstein, 2003). Among other influences, television contributes to young people's knowledge about sexual relationships, their judgments about social norms regarding sexual activity, and their attitudes about sexual behaviors. (Farrar et al., 2003). Youth are major consumers of media and receive and engage with the messages of the media every day. According to Nielsen Media Research (1998), an average of 3 hours of television per day are watched by children (APA, 2007, p.5). This amount of exposure to media creates a higher risk of youth to compare themselves to those characters on television.

One way in which the media affects girls is by influencing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their body (Jung & Peterson, 2007). A study by Jones (2001) found that children have the tendency to compare their physical appearance with others of the same gender, including peers, models and celebrities in the media (Jung & Peterson, 2007). These girls idealize these characters because of their attractive features that are enhanced with cosmetics, clothing, and accessories (Robinson, 2004). Another study done by Harrison and Cantor (1997) found that adolescent females who view more television are more likely to be dissatisfied with her body than females who viewed less television (Jung, Peterson, 2007). These comparisons that girls make of themselves are to characters on the television that present body images that are unattainable. According

to Gunter and Wykes (2005), these media images take precedence over the real-life role models as a source of body comparisons (Robinson, 2004).

According to Jung and Peterson (2007), girls desire to be thinner than their perceived actual body size and have negative views of their own.   Studies have been done where pictorial scales containing seven body pictures of different body mass for healthy children and these were developed in order to see how these children view their actual body size (Truby & Paxton, 2002).   Media often sends out messages of our culture valuing females for their physical attractiveness rather than their abilities or achievements, which creates greater pressure among females to approximate the cultural ideal than among men (Jung & Peterson, 2007).   Thus, studies done on body image and gender images are consistent with findings that females are more dissatisfied with their bodies and less happy with their physical characteristics than are males. For one thing, research has been done and found that most prime-time characters have an average or thin body weight and only 24% of male characters and 13% of female characters are overweight (Robinson, 2004). This shows a percentage of fewer female characters that are overweight, which has an effect on females when all the female characters are petite and thin. In media, males are also seen for their intelligence and strength, while females are seen for their involvement in social behaviors and their attractiveness (Robinson, 2004).

According to Smolak (2004) and Tiggemann (2006), although adolescence is most commonly highlighted as the time at which body image concerns heighten, it is likely that the foundations for poor body image have been laid much earlier (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008). The relationship of media variables to body image in children has

been explored, but to a lesser extent (Clark & Tiggemann, 2008). Examining the media in which these adolescences view will deepen our understanding of the messages that children are sent and help us to better understand the way children are affected. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which sexualized content in children's media effects pre-adolescent girls' self image. Our hypothesis is that many girls exposed to more sexualized children's media will have lower self-esteem and more negative body image than girls exposed to less sexualized media. Girl's response to sexualized and less sexualized media will be examined both experimentally and via focus group interviews.

Method

Participants

Twenty-five individuals participated in this study. These participants were obtained through a local elementary school in the Madison, Indiana area. Participants were in either second or third grade in school, and all participants in the study were female. The mean age for participants was 8.28 years, ranging from 7-10 years of age. Ninety-two percent ($N = 23$) of participants were Caucasian, and 8 percent ($N = 2$) were African American.

Procedure

Parents or guardians of the participants were sent an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A) which stated that the study was designed to examine the effects of popular children's media on elementary school-aged girls. Parents were notified that their child would be asked to complete questionnaire measures and would participate in a group

interview that would be audio-recorded. Consent was received from approximately 62 percent of parents who were contacted.

Data were collected during a one-hour time block during regular class hours. Children were asked to give their written assent to participate (see Appendix B) and then completed a brief demographic questionnaire. Students completed additional questionnaires to assess their general self-esteem (see Appendix C), physical appearance self-concept (see also Appendix C), and body image satisfaction (see Appendix D). Participants completed each of these questionnaires at two time points: before watching a brief video clip and immediately after watching the clip. Each of the questionnaires in this study was read out loud to the participants; therefore, all participants were required to work at the same pace.

Girls' general self-esteem and physical appearance self-concept were assessed with a measure developed by Harter (1988). Participants were read two statements and first had to decide which statement was most like them. For example, a question measuring general self esteem would be: "Some kids are often *unhappy* with themselves" BUT "Other kids are pretty *pleased* with themselves." Likewise, a question measuring physical appearance self-concept would be: "Some kids are *happy* with the way they look" BUT "Other kids are *not* happy with the way they look." After choosing which statement was most like them, the participants then had to choose whether that statement was "really true of me" or just "sort of true of me." The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, 6 for each measure. Children's responses were averaged across items so that higher numbers indicated higher self-esteem or greater satisfaction with their physical appearance.

To assess girls' satisfaction with their body image, participants were given Truby and Paxton's (2001) *Children's Body Image Scale*. On this scale there were seven pictures of a young girl, each with a different body shape. The first picture shows the girl as very thin and then as the pictures progress the girl is shown as a much heavier child. The girl in the all of the pictures was identical (same hair and facial features) except for her body size. While looking at this display of pictures, participants were first asked to indicate which girl they most resembled, in regards to their body type. Participants were then shown the same seven pictures and were asked to indicate which of the pictures represented their ideal body type. Ideal body image was subtracted from actual body image so that higher numbers represented greater dissatisfaction.

After filling out the questionnaires, participants were randomly assigned to two different groups. The first group viewed a 5 minute clip of Disney's *High School Musical 2*, which represented a sexualized example of children's media. This video clip met the APA's criteria for sexualization in a couple different ways. To begin with, the clip displays a group of attractive teenage girls singing and dancing around the pool in their bathing suits and high heels. One of the girls in particular is using her looks and sex appeal to impress a boy. This example fits one of the APA's categories for sexualization which states "A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy" (APA, 2007). The second APA category that this video clip met was "A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics" (APA, 2007). In the example of sexualized media used in this study, the main character is valued only by her sexual appeal, a lot of which in this clip

comes from her skimpy wardrobe and the way she dances and behaves around the pool area.

The second group of participants in this study viewed a 5 minute clip of a popular television show, Disney's *Wizards of Waverly Place*, which did not meet the criteria for sexualized children's media. In this clip, high school aged characters of the opposite sex are interacting and presenting themselves in a way that is not sexualized. For example, the clothing in this clip is not sexualized. The girl is wearing a long sleeved shirt and a skirt with leggings underneath it and tennis shoes. She is also not using her looks and 'sex appeal' to impress the boy that she is hanging out with in the clip. The boy in this clip is interested in the girl because of her personality and genuineness rather than her physical appearance. The two characters don't form a friendship because of physical attractiveness and sex appeal but instead because their personalities are similar and they enjoy each other's company.

After filling out surveys a second time the two groups of girls were interviewed in separate group sessions. All group interviews were audio taped and consisted of questions regarding the media they had previously viewed and how that affected their thoughts on their self esteem, being a female, and their appearance (See Appendix E for full set of interview questions).

Results

Data were analyzed with mixed-model Analyses of Variance. For each of our three dependent measures (general self-esteem, physical appearance self-concept, and body image dissatisfaction), time (pre and post) was the within-subjects factor, and group (sexualized media and less-sexualized media) was the between-subjects factor. We

expected to find time by group interactions such that participants in the sexualized group would show larger declines in general self esteem, physical appearance self concept, and body satisfaction than the less sexualized group.

Means for general self-esteem are depicted in Figure 1. Means for physical appearance self-concept are depicted in Figure 2. Means for body image dissatisfaction are showing in Figure 3. Contrary to expectations, no main effects or interactions emerged for any of the three dependent variables, all $ps > .05$.

Although the experimental results were not significant, some interesting findings did emerge from our interviews. Of special interest were girls' responses to the question "What makes a girl attractive?" We anticipated that girls, especially those in the sexualized condition, would mention physical attributes, such as hair and body type. However, these responses were rare. Instead the majority girls agreed that "inner beauty" and "self confidence" were what made a girl attractive. These results were common among both groups of participants. For example, girls from the sexualized group agreed that "trying to be nice and kind" made a girl attractive. Similarly, girls in the less sexualized group agreed that "being your self and being nice to other people" made a girl attractive.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that girls exposed to more sexualized children's media would have lower self-esteem and more negative body image than girls exposed to less sexualized media. This hypothesis was not supported. There were, however, interesting responses found to some of the questions asked in the interviews.

Regardless of what media clip was watched, both groups seemed to have a similar view on how they viewed attractiveness. This may suggest that the girls actually believe in what they are saying and they really do believe beauty comes from the inside. If this is true, this also suggests that the girls are immune to the messages being sent by the media. Another possibility could be that the girls are getting mixed messages from adults in their lives and the popular media. From adults they are being told (and are listening, at least in part) to the message that looks and physical attractiveness don't matter. At the same time, they are being bombarded by with media (especially sexualized media) that suggests looks do matter. There is evidence from lots of different areas that girls are listening to this too. While the interview data is very interesting, there were some limitations to this study that may have contributed to a failure to support the hypothesis.

One limitation had to do with the sample. Only 25 individuals participated in this study, which is still quite a small sample. The diversity of the sample was also a limitation. A large majority (92%) of the participants were Caucasian, causing the sample to have less external validity. Because the sample size was so small, we may have lacked the power to detect a difference between the two groups.

Another limitation to this study was the limited exposure the participants had to the media clips. All participants watched a video clip of either sexualized or less sexualized children's media that was approximately 5 minutes long. Because the exposure was so limited and there was only around 10 minutes in between filling out the fist and second sets of questionnaires, it is probable that the exposure to the media clips really didn't have much effect on how participants answered the second set of

questionnaires. A future study would extend the participants' exposure to the media clips from just a five minute clip to the entire movie or a couple different episodes of the television show, depending which group they were in.

There were also demand characteristics that served as limitations in this study. Because the participants were at an age where body perception tends to become an issue, it is probable that they had been told what the right and wrong things to say regarding this topic are. For example, in the interviews when the participants were asked the question "What do you think makes a girl attractive?" virtually all of the participants answered or agreed with the answers of "inner beauty" and "self confidence." It is questionable if the participants really believed in what they were saying; or rather they knew that it was the "correct" thing to say when responding to that question. It is also quite possible that the participants had figured out what the study was about while filling out the second set of questionnaires and that had an effect on their answers and responses during the group interviews.

One idea for a future study would be to conduct a longitudinal study. As mentioned before, in this study, the participants did not have a sufficient amount of exposure to the media, and the entire study for each group lasted under one hour. By doing a longitudinal study, researchers could predict changes in girls' attitudes from their exposure to sexualized media content over a longer period of time. This would allow for more exposure to the sexualized or less sexualized media and the participants would be less likely to have memory of how they filled out the questionnaires initially.

One last future direction for this study would be to conduct individual interviews instead of the group interviews. There are a couple reasons for this. Because the

interviews were done in a group setting, some of the participants never spoke at all or responded to any of the questions. This was most likely because they were shy or nervous to speak in front of a group. Some others may have felt like they didn't have a chance to speak because there were individuals in every group that dominated the conversations. Also, because of being in a group the participants may have felt pressured to agree with what others were saying, so they did not voice their own opinions for fear of being different. With individual interviews, participants would not feel pressured by others to agree, and they would also not be afraid to speak up and contribute to the conversation.

In conclusion, previous research seems to indicate that there is a relationship between the media and female's body image and self-esteem. This study did not find a significant relationship between sexualized children's media and pre-adolescent girls' self-esteem and body image. This study did however find very interesting qualitative results regarding the interview data and responses. It was found through these interviews that what our participants think makes girls attractive is not physical appearance at all, but rather inner beauty. This shows that maybe the girls are getting the right message and are immune to the media's message, or maybe that they have just been told before that physical appearance is not what matters and have been taught to think that. Although the quantitative results for this study were not significant, perhaps further research will be able to more precisely determine or at least strengthen the relationship between these variables.

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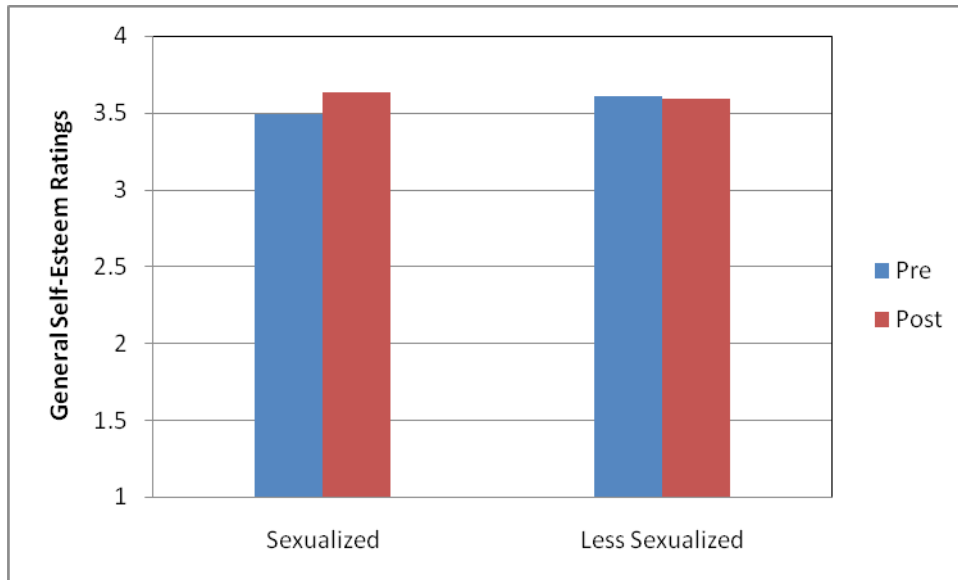   *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 41,* 185-203.

Figure 1. The Effects of Media Clips on General Self Esteem

Figure 2. The Effects of Media Clips on Physical Appearance Self Concept

Figure 3. The Effects of Media Clips on Body Image

General Self-Esteem Ratings (y-axis, 1 to 4)

Sexualized: Pre ≈ 3.5, Post ≈ 3.63
Less Sexualized: Pre ≈ 3.61, Post ≈ 3.59

Legend: Pre, Post

Physical Appearance Ratings (y-axis, 1 to 4)

Sexualized: Pre ≈ 3.23, Post ≈ 3.49
Less Sexualized: Pre ≈ 2.92, Post ≈ 3.16

Legend: Pre, Post

Body Image Ratings (y-axis, 0 to 3)

Sexualized: Pre ≈ 0.71, Post ≈ 1.0
Less Sexualized: Pre ≈ 0.2, Post ≈ 0.55

Legend: Pre, Post
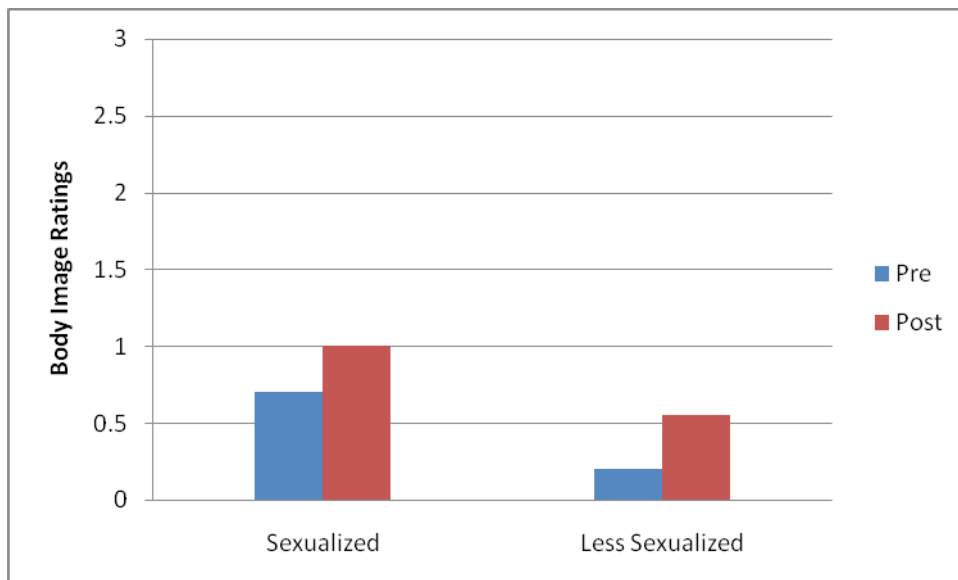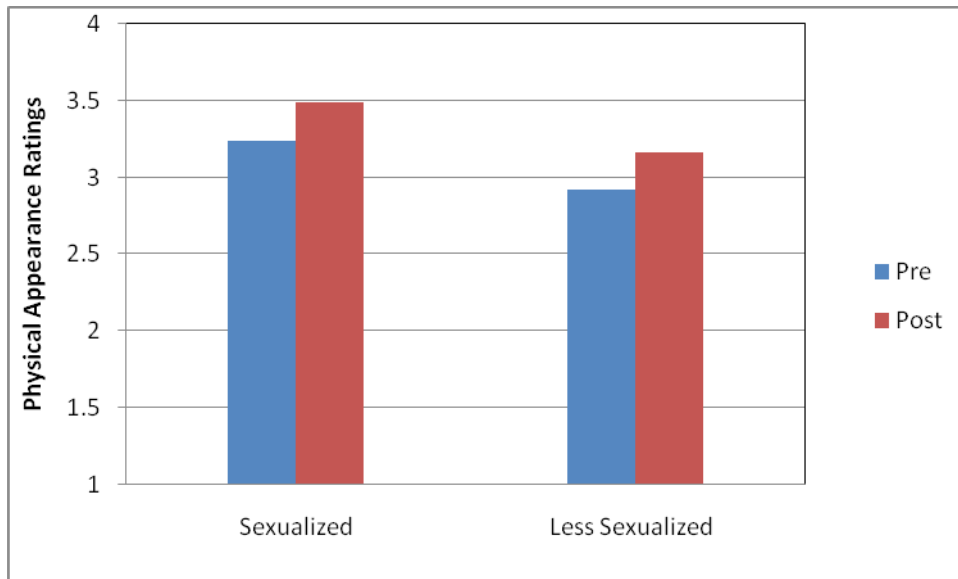
Parent/Legal Guardian Consent Form

Let us begin by introducing ourselves. We are Chelsey Cabatu and Erin Huntington and we are both senior psychology majors at Hanover College. To graduate from Hanover College, we are required to complete a research project. We are both very interested in how popular media influences girls' self-esteem and are excited to have the opportunity to talk with girls about their experiences. We have received permission from your daughter's principal and classroom teacher to conduct our study at Anderson Elementary. We are writing to request your permission to allow your daughter to participate.

The study in which your daughter is being asked to participate is designed to examine the effects of popular children's media on pre-adolescent girls' self-esteem. Your daughter will watch a short media clip from a popular children's television show (e.g. Hannah Montana), complete questionnaires about her television viewing habits, self-esteem, and body image, and participate in a group interview where the girls will be asked about their attitudes toward the video clip. Interviews will be audio taped. Audio tapes will be kept by the interviewer until the end of the study and then destroyed.

The entire study will not take more than an hour. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. At no time will your daughter's name be associated with the responses she gives. If you have any questions about what your daughter will be doing in the study or about the study itself, please contact Chelsey Cabatu at cabatuc@hanover.edu or Erin Huntington at huntingtone@hanover.edu. Also, you may contact our professor Dr. Ellen Altermatt at altermattel@hanover.edu or 812-866-7317.

I give my daughter permission to participate in this study. I understand that she may refuse to participate or stop participating at any time.

_____   _____

Parent/Legal Guardian Signature   Date

Appendix B

Child Assent Form
For Participation in Research

This study is being conducted by Chelsey Cabatu and Erin Huntington, students at Hanover College. The purpose of this study is to look at how popular television shows make girls your age feel about themselves.

If you decide to be a part of this study you will watch a short clip of a popular television show. Before you watch the clip you will answer some written questions about yourself and the kind of television you like to watch. After the video clip you will answer some written questions about your feelings about the video and yourself. You will also participate in a group interview where we will ask you questions about the clip you watched. This interview will be taped using a tape recorder. Your name will not be linked to your written responses or to your interview answers.

There are no known risks involved with this study, but it is entirely up to you and your parents whether you would like to take part in this research study.

I agree to take part in the study.

_____   _____
        Child's Name   Date

Appendix C

What I Am Like

SAMPLE

Really True for me	Sort of True for me				Sort of True for me	Really True for me
☐	☐	Some kids like to stay up late at night	**BUT**	Other kids like to go to bed early.	☐	☐

Really True for me	Sort of True for me				Sort of True for me	Really True for me
1. ☐	☐	Some kids are *happy* with the way they look	**BUT**	Other kids are *not* happy with the way they look	☐	☐
2. ☐	☐	Some kids are often *unhappy* with themselves	**BUT**	Other kids are pretty *pleased* with themselves	☐	☐
3. ☐	☐	Some kids are *happy* with their height and weight	**BUT**	Other kids wish their height or weight *was different*	☐	☐
4. ☐	☐	Some kids *don't* like the way they are leading their life	**BUT**	Other kids *do* like the way they are leading their life	☐	☐
5. ☐	☐	Some kids wish their body was *different*	**BUT**	Other kids *like* their body the way it is	☐	☐

6. ☐ ☐ Some kids are *happy* with themselves as a person **BUT** Other kids are often *not* happy with themselves as a person ☐ ☐

7. ☐ ☐ Some kids wish their physical appearance (how they look) was *different* **BUT** Other kids *like* their physical appearance the way it is ☐ ☐

8. ☐ ☐ Some kids *like* the kind of *person* they are **BUT** Other kids often wish they were someone else ☐ ☐

9. ☐ ☐ Some kids wished something about their face or hair looked *different* **BUT** Other kids *like* their face and hair the way they are ☐ ☐

10. ☐ ☐ Some kids are very *happy* being the way they are **BUT** Other kids wish they were *different* ☐ ☐

11. ☐ ☐ Some kids think that they are good looking **BUT** Other kids think that they are not good looking ☐ ☐

12. ☐ ☐ Some kids *are not* very happy with the way they do a lot of things **BUT** Other kids think the way they do things is *fine* ☐ ☐

Appendix D

My Body

1. Looking at the scale, which body type do you think you are? (use number)

2. Looking at the scale again, if you could choose any one of them, which body type would you like to look like? (use number)

Appendix E

High School Musical Clip

1. How many of you have seen any of the High School Musical movies?
2. What do you like about the movie or about Sharpay, the character?
3. What do you like about the other characters in the movie?
4. Is there anything you don't like?
5. How does watching this movie make you feel about being a girl?
6. What do you think makes a girl attractive?

Wizards of Waverly Place Clip

1. How many of you watch Wizards of Waverly Place at home?
2. What do you like about the show or about Alex, the character?
3. What do you like about the other characters in the show?
4. Is there anything you don't like?
5. How does watching the show make you feel about being a girl?
6. What do you think makes a girl attractive?