"YOUNG LADIES SHOULD BE VIRGINS AND ALWAYS DRESS NICE": EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF FEMININITY AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

by

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ABSTRACT

Public Health Significance: During early adolescence, girls experience a rapid rise in mental and sexual health problems. Adherence to feminine ideology and feminine gender role stress have been associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, disordered eating and poor sexual health. While emerging research points to rigid constructions of gender norms as a potential target for public health interventions to improve the health of adolescent girls, few existing programs have attempted to do so. This study sought to gain insight into adolescent females' perspectives on femininity with the goal of developing a framework for tailoring prevention curricula to meaningfully incorporate gender norms change.

Methods: An arts-based approach was used to explore femininity norms with adolescent females between the ages of 11 to 17 (n=64) recruited from a local high school and community organization in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Qualitative data collected through the Visual Voices sessions (artwork and discussion transcripts) were analyzed using NVivo 10.

Results: Participants emphasized common femininity scripts that they felt were most influential such as hypervigilance to social media, policing of appearance, conflicting messages, as well as their navigation of expectations regarding femininity. Participants were critical of the objectification of women, mixed messages, and double standards that are prevalent in society.

However, they also expressed ambivalence in regard to adhering to the messages they are receiving about femininity.

Conclusions: This study provided a foundation that will inform efforts to incorporate gender norms change into prevention programming for girls. Findings from this work point to the need to also address the ambivalence that young people express trying to adhere to these societal rules. This might include interventions which not only promote critical thinking about the social messages but also developing skills in when and how to resist these messages, and more directly addressing the perceptions young people have about the consequences of not adhering to these norms.

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PREFACE

Acknowledgements: I would like to take this opportunity to thank the faculty of the Graduate School of Public Health for imparting knowledge and skills that have significantly contributed to my growth as a public health professional. Specifically, I would like to thank Dr. Jessie Burke and Dr. Mark Hawk. Jessie, thank you for consistently providing guidance and encouragement throughout my time as a Masters student and particularly over the last few months as I have worked on this thesis. Mary, thank you for the knowledge and insight you have provided throughout this process. I so appreciate the support you have both provided and the time you have invested in making this possible.

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I would like to acknowledge the National Institutes of Health for the funding support (grant number: R24HD080194) for this project.. In addition, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the stakeholders who assisted in the project design and helped to guide the research, the staff at each of our community sites for their partnership, and most of all, our participants for their time and infinite wisdom.

Lastly, my acknowledgements would not be complete without thanking my family and friends for their continued encouragement and support throughout my graduate school career. I am forever grateful for the collective wisdom and guidance that you have surrounded me with throughout this process.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

During early adolescence, girls experience a rapid rise in mental and sexual health problems. Emerging literature points to the rigid constructions of gender norms and strong adherence to feminine ideology as potential risk factors in these adverse outcomes. Research on the role of feminine norms and gender norm stress, defined as the stress associated with not living up to the feminine role, has primarily focused on women's mental health outcomes, such as eating disorders (Murnen & Smolak, 1997; Sitnick & Katz, 1984), particularly related to striving for thinness (Martz, Handley, & Eisler, 1995). Greater conformity to feminine norms and feminine role socialization has also been found to be associated with symptoms of anxiety (Carter, Silverman, & Jaccard, 2011; George, 2016; Palapattu, Kingery, & Ginsburg, 2006). Furthermore, feminine gender role stress has been associated with self-reports of depressive symptoms, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disordered behaviors, and shame among women (Efthim, Kenny, & Mahalik, 2001; Richmond, Levant, Smalley, & Cook, 2015).

Adherence to rigid constructions of femininity has similarly been associated with poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes in adolescent girls, with several pathways implicated in this association. Femininity ideologies are related to decreased sexual-risk knowledge, decreased body esteem during sex, decreased sexual assertiveness, and lower levels of condom use self-efficacy (Curtin, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2011). Particularly, stronger adherence to female gender ideologies related to emotional strength and caretaking may be

linked to a heightened desire for male intimacy or being in a heterosexual relationship (being tied to a man)and tolerance of male sexual risk behavior (Kerrigan et al., 2007).

An emerging body of research identifies the rigid constructions of gender norms, often tied to poor body image, as a potentially modifiable risk factor in several adverse health outcomes that girls experience and a potential target for public health interventions to improve the health of adolescent girls (Alexander & Walker, 2015; Núñez et al., 2015; Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, & Ojie, 2011; Wingood, DiClemente, Harrington, & Davies, 2002). Despite these recommendations, few prevention programs integrate gender stereotypes and girls' adherence to feminine ideology into curriculum. In particular, existing evidence-based and research-informed programs that focus on girls have not tackled the intersections of gender with race and social class through examination of power in relationships. And none of these programs have incorporated the role of social media use in the performance of gender by adolescents.

This master's thesis examines perceptions of femininity among adolescent females with the aim of creating the framework to incorporate gender norms change into prevention curricula for girls. Following this introduction, will be a single, stand-alone journal article, which will be submitted for publication in *Sex Roles.* The journal articles describes the use of an arts-based approach to explore how adolescent girls think about, interpret and perform femininity. Common themes that emerged through artwork and associated discussions, such as hypervigilance with social media, policing of physical appearance, conflicting messages and the navigation of expectations are presented. The article concludes with recommendations for tailoring prevention programming to include strategies to promote gender norms change among adolescent girls that may improve their overall health and well-being. Following the stand-alone journal article is the final thesis conclusion.

2.0 JOURNAL ARTICLE

2.1 "YOUNG LADIES SHOULD BE VIRGINS AND ALWAYS DRESS NICE": EXPLORING PERCEPTIONS OF FEMININITY AMOUNG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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2.2 ABSTRACT

Abstract:

During early adolescence, girls experience a rapid rise in mental and sexual health problems. Adherence to feminine ideology and feminine gender role stress have been associated with depressive symptoms, anxiety, disordered eating and poor sexual health. While emerging research points to rigid constructions of gender norms as a potential target for public health interventions to improve the health of adolescent girls, few existing programs have attempted to do so. This study used an arts-based approach to gain insight into adolescent females' perspectives on femininity with the goal of developing a framework for tailoring prevention curricula and interventions to meaningfully incorporate gender norms change. Findings from this work point to the need to also address the ambivalence that young people express trying to adhere to these societal rules. This might include interventions which not only promote critical thinking about the social messages but also developing skills in when and how to resist these

messages, and more directly addressing the perceptions young people have about the consequences of not adhering to these norms.

Keywords: Gender norms; femininity; arts-based approach; adolescence

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The authors would like to thank all of our creative and incredibly insightful adolescent research partners, as well as our community partners without whom this work would not have been possible. We would also like to extend our sincere gratitude to the administrators and staff at the participating community sites for their enthusiastic cooperation and collaboration.

This study was funded by the National Institutes of Health (grant number R24HD080194). The study sponsor did not have any influence on study design, data collection procedures, analysis, interpretation, or manuscript publication.

2.3 BACKGROUND

During early adolescence, girls experience a rapid rise in mental and sexual health problems. Symptoms of depression(Hilt & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema & Girgus, 1994; Petersen et al., 1993), anxiety (McLean et al., 2011) and disordered eating (Fairburn & Harrison, 2003; Hoek, 2006; Hudson et al., 2007), as well as suicidal ideation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014) are all highly prevalent among adolescent girls. Similarly for sexual health, adolescent girls experience adverse sexual health outcomes including unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs) (Forhan et al., 2009), and violence victimization (Hanson et al., 2008). While the risk and protective factors associated with negative health outcomes for adolescent girls are myriad and the pathways leading to these mental and sexual health disparities are complex, emerging literature points to the rigid constructions of gender norms and strong adherence to feminine ideology as potential risk factors in these outcomes.

Feminine ideology identifies qualities to which girls are expected by their society to adhere to including being caring, striving to avoid conflict and anger, preserving relationships, having a body that conforms with particular standards of beauty, and not expressing sexual desire or pleasure (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 2004; Brown & Gilligan, 1993). Research on the role of feminine norms and gender norm stress, defined as the stress associated with not living up to the feminine role, has primarily focused on women's mental health outcomes, such as eating disorders (Murnen & Smolak, 1997; Sitnick & Katz, 1984), particularly related to striving for

thinness (Martz et al., 1995). Emergent research using the *Conformity to Feminine Norms Inventory (CFNI)* (Mahalik et al., 2005) indirectly relates feminine ideology (specifically norms of thinness, investment in appearance, and expectations for romantic relationships) to depression through self-objectification, defined as preoccupation with other's perceptions of one's body (Hurt et al., 2007). Greater conformity to feminine norms and feminine role socialization has been found to be associated with higher levels of anxiety symptoms (Carter et al., 2011; George, 2016; Palapattu et al., 2006). Furthermore, feminine gender role stress has been associated with self-reports of depressive symptoms, anxiety, low self-esteem, eating disordered behaviors, and shame among women (Efthim et al., 2001; Richmond et al., 2015).

Adherence to rigid constructions of femininity has similarly been associated with poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes in adolescent girls, with several pathways implicated in this association. Historically, female sexual behavior has been denied, suppressed, restricted, commodified, and exploited (Steinem, 1995). According to Tolman (2009), two factors in feminine ideology – inauthenticity in relationships (notions of 'playing nice', avoiding conflict, suppressing anger) and body objectification have been implicated in adolescent girls' and young women's decision-making about their bodies and have been associated with lower self-esteem and poor sexual health (Impett et al., 2006; Tolman, 1998; Tolman, 2009). Femininity ideologies are related to decreased sexual-risk knowledge, decreased body esteem during sex, decreased sexual assertiveness, and lower levels of condom use self-efficacy (Curtin et al., 2011). Particularly, stronger adherence to female gender ideologies related to emotional strength and caretaking may be linked to a heightened desire for male intimacy or being in a heterosexual relationship (being tied to a man)and tolerance of male sexual risk behavior (Kerrigan et al., 2007).

The pathways connecting feminine ideology to these associated negative health outcomes in women and girls are not well defined. However, as a social determinant of health, gender norms play an important role in the health of individuals and documenting and exploring this relationship can inform approaches to improve health at a population level. There is a strong theoretical basis for aiming to shift gender norms as way to improve health. This project is guided by the socioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which posits that gender norms strongly influence both the developmental trajectory of adolescents (at the individual and family level) as well as the institutions such as schools and community organizations in which these young people are embedded (see Figure 1). This project also draws largely from the theories of Gender and Power (Connell, 1987) and Intersectionality, to address how the interconnections of gender, race, and class all intertwine to influence power imbalances that are pervasive throughout society and contribute to these adverse health outcomes.

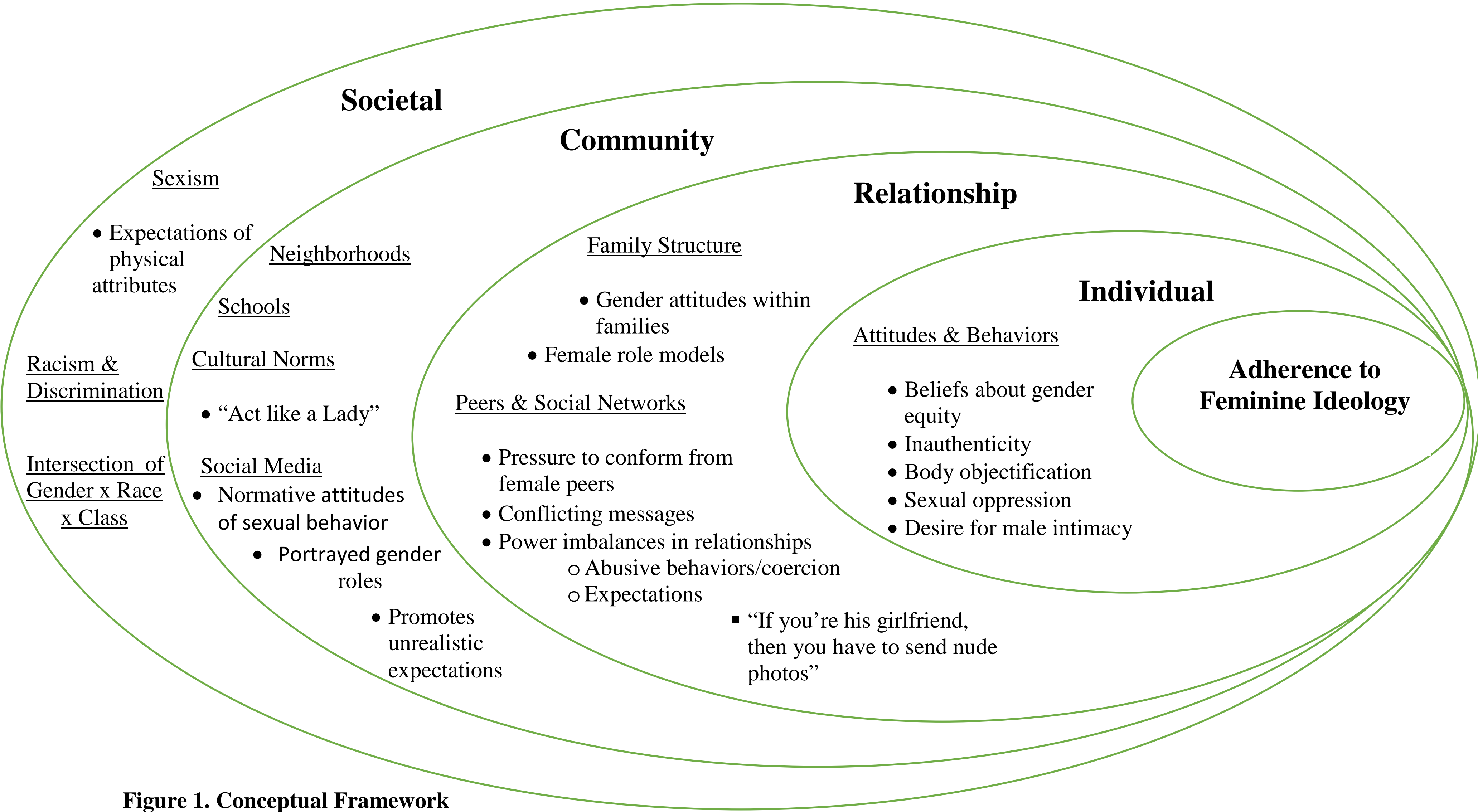

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

In addition, an emerging body of empirical research points to the rigid constructions of gender norms, often tied to poor body image, as a potentially modifiable risk factor in several adverse health outcomes that girls experience and a potential target for public health interventions to improve the health of adolescent girls (Alexander & Walker, 2015; Núñez et al., 2015; Wallace et al., 2011; Wingood et al., 2002). For example, Wingood & DiClemente (2000) conclude that interventions designed to improve women's risk for disease will be less effective if they do not consider and address women's social environments (G. M. Wingood & DiClemente, 2000). Further, Wingood et al. (2002) called for the increasing adolescents' awareness of body image perceptions in pregnancy and STI prevention programs (Wingood et al., 2002). A study done by Wallace et al. (2011) recommends incorporating gender- and race-specific issues in curricula designed to improve risk behaviors such as substance use (Wallace et al., 2011).

However, despite these recommendations, few prevention programs to date actually integrate gender stereotypes and girls' adherence to feminine ideology in their day to day interactions into their curriculum. For example, "Hardy Girls Healthy Women" (see http://www.hardygirlshealthywomen.org/) integrates critical analysis of media messages and builds advocacy skills. SiHLE (Sisters informing, Healing, Living, and Empowering), an HIV prevention program for African American adolescent girls, also incorporates positive gender messages combined with racial pride (Wingood, Sales, Braxton, & Diclemente, 2007). While these programs have shown improvements in self-efficacy and HIV risk reduction, respectively, they do not specifically target shifting gender norms. In particular, the existing evidence-based and research-informed programs that focus on girls have not tackled the intersections of gender with race and social class through critical examination of power in relationships. And none of

these programs have incorporated the role of social media use in the performance of gender by adolescents.

2.3.1 Present study

While there is existing research on adolescent girls perceptions of femininity, most studies are quantitative and rely heavily on survey data, particularly in regard to how perceptions of femininity influence mental health outcomes (see review by Shea and Wong, 2011; (Shea & Wong, 2011). While there is a growing body of qualitative literature on how perceptions of femininity influence sexual health of individuals, these studies typically focus on how femininity norms influence one particular aspect of an individual's life -- inauthenticity in relationships, for example (Tolman, Davis, & Bowman, 2015). However, before curricula can optimally incorporate meaningful gender norms change, it is imperative to fully understand how adolescent girls think about, process and interpret, and perform and navigate this complex terrain of "femininity."

Thus, this study aimed to achieve this insight through participant driven conversations about femininity and what it means to be a woman to further comprehend what adolescent girls believe about femininity, the messages they receive about femininity, and how these different contexts interact to shape their lives. This qualitative analysis will allow for greater knowledge as to why certain harmful gender norms persist and the difficulties and complexities that accompany resisting these norms, thus allowing for refinement of strategies to dismantle them. For the purpose of this project, researchers also sought to begin to explore the intersections not only between race and gender but also athlete status and gender. Several recent studies demonstrate differences in the performance of femininity between female athletes and non-

athletes due to stereotypes ascribed to girls and women who play sports (Adams, Schmitke, & Franklin, 2005; Kauer & Krane, 2006; Ross & Shinew, 2008). For example, interviews conducted with adolescent females athletes as part of a study by Adams, Schmitke & Franklin, describes how female athletes are required to spend a great deal of time proving to others that they are heterosexual. Additionally, the participants describe having to balance proving their athlete status with also demonstrating that they are "girly girls"(Adams et al., 2005). Thus, while the researchers acknowledge that many of the gender norms around femininity will be similar for all women, we hypothesize that contextual differences, such as the stereotypes that surround female athletes, will influence the performance of femininity within groups.

Our overall aim was to lay the groundwork for more in-depth examination of the influences of existing gender norms on adolescent girls to influence curriculum development. The study described in the present paper presents one portion of a larger NIH funded R24 research infrastructure development project (grant number R24HD080194) focused on understanding the mechanisms for the emergence of gender inequitable practice in early adolescence and how to potentially shift cultural norms around gender. While the focus of the NIH-funded research infrastructure development was on adolescent males, as part of this exploration, we secured funding to conduct a similar exploratory study with adolescent girls. This paper focuses on the use of an arts-based approach to explore perceptions of femininity with middle and high school aged adolescent females (n=64).

2.4 METHODS

This community-partnered project built off existing partnerships with both an economically and ethnically diverse school district in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and a local community organization, the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh, which serves to empower African-Americans in the Pittsburgh area. This project was guided by the principles of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), which suggests that people in communities where research is conducted must be part of defining the focus of research, designing and implementing interventions (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; Viswanathan et al., 2004). We worked specifically with the director of and members of a youth leadership initiative that is housed within the Urban League organization. All members of this leadership initiative are female adolescents between the ages of 11 and 17. The individuals conducting this research had strong working relationships with both organizations due to previous community research partnerships. Academic researchers partnered with stakeholders from the participating school and the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh as well as community partners throughout the research project. Stakeholders from the school included administrators, teachers, coaches and parents. Stakeholders from the community organization included the president and CEO, as well as the director of the leadership initiative. Researchers and stakeholders, through a consensus guided format, made all project related decisions, from the content and implementation of research materials to the timing and content of the sessions. Other key stakeholders, including local

domestic violence advocates, foundation personnel and CBPR experts were consulted and helped inform the research.

2.4.1 Setting

This research was conducted during the winter of 2015-2016 with adolescent girls recruited from two distinct community sites, with a focus on lower income, African American girls. This small-scale exploratory study built from existing partnerships with both sites; thus a convenience sampling design was used to recruit participants. Half were recruited from a lower income suburban high school in southwestern Pennsylvania. Approximately 1,220 students were enrolled in the school at the time of this project, with 61% Black or African American and 35% White or Caucasian students. Sixty-nine percent of students were considered economically disadvantaged and qualified for free or reduced school lunch (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2016). The other half of the participants were part of an African American leadership initiative through the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. There were 43 students enrolled in this initiative at the time of this project, 48% of members had a household income less than $25,000 annually, 40% were 15 years old while 40% were ages 11-14 years old. Most members were in the 9th or 10th grade (54%). All study procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board (IRB protocol # PRO13080534).

2.4.2 Participants

A total of 64 participants enrolled in this study. Twenty-nine female students were recruited from the local school district; 35% identified as black or African American, 28% identified as White

or Caucasian and 20% identified as Multi-racial or other (see table 1). Students participated in one of two groups (student athletes or non-athletes). The student athletes were comprised of members of the school's female basketball team (n=19)

Thirty-five female participants were members of the Urban League's leadership initiative. Of participants recruited from the Urban League, 63% identified as Black or African American, 34% identified as Other and 3% identified as Multiracial (see table 1). Participants were divided into three groups by age/grade, the first was comprised of students in 6th-9th grades (n=13), the second included students in 9th-10th grades (n=10) and the final group included students in 10th-12th grades (n=12).

Table 1. Participant demographics from High School and Urban League Leadership Initiative

	High School (n=29)	**Urban League Leadership Initiative (n=35)**	**Total (n= 64)**
	% (n)	**% (n)**	**% (n)**
***Grade**			
6th	0.0 (0)	2.86 (1)	1.6 (1)
7th	0.0 (0)	2.86 (1)	1.6 (1)
8th	0.0 (0)	20.00 (7)	10.9 (7)
9th	13.8 (4)	31.43 (11)	23.4 (15)
10th	34.5 (10)	17.14 (6)	25.0 (16)
11th	13.8 (4)	11.43 (4)	12.5 (8)
12th	20.7 (6)	14.29 (5)	17.2 (11)
***Race**			
Black or African American	34.5 (10)	62.86 (22)	50.0 (32)
White/Caucasian	27.6 (8)	0.0 (0)	12.5 (8)
Multi-Racial	10.3 (3)	2.86 (1)	6.3 (4)
Other	10.3 (3)	34.29 (12)	23.4 (15)
***Athlete**			
No, I am currently not an athlete who plays on a school sports team	27.6 (8)	68.57 (24)	50.0 (32)
Yes, I am currently an athlete who plays on a school team	55.2 (16)	31.43 (11)	42.2 (27)

*Some percentages do not add up to 100% due to missing data

2.4.3 Procedures

Within the high school, all basketball athletes were recruited with the assistance of their head coach. The non-athletes were recruited with the assistance of a teacher within the school. For both the athlete and non-athlete groups, members of the research team met with those interested in participating, explained the research activities and distributed parental permission forms. Only those students who returned a signed parental permission form or were 18 years of age were able to participate.

Within the community organization, the Director of the leadership initiative assisted with participant recruitment. The director provided a verbal description of the study as well as an informational letter to all members of the group. An informational letter was also sent home to parents. A waiver of written parental consent was approved for this group, at the request of the community organization. All participants completed a written assent form prior to participation in research activities.

Prior to beginning all sessions, all participants were asked permission to audio-record the sessions. Facilitators assured participants that all names and identifying information would be omitted from transcripts and that audio-recordings would be destroyed upon the completion of the transcription. All participants verbally assented to the use of audio-recorders during the sessions.

2.4.4 Arts-based approach

This project used an arts-based approach guided by the Visual Voices method. Visual Voices is a mixed-media research method, grounded in qualitative research practice (Yonas, Burke, &

Miller, 2013). Using this method, participants draw, paint, write, and/or speak to address a focal topic, typically established by community stakeholders and/or researchers (for more information about Visual Voices method see Yonas et al. 2009 (Yonas et al., 2009)). Due to the limited time framed needed for implementation within programming at our community sites, the usual 11 to 12 hours applied in previous implementation of *Visual Voices* was condensed with the guidance of school and community partners.

For students recruited from the school district, there were two weekly sessions over a span of two weeks, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes. Session prompts included "What makes a woman a woman?" and "What messages do you get about being a woman from the media, your peers and adults in your life? These messages can be positive or negative" (See Table 2).

Due to additional time constraints, all research activities with participants from the Urban League were completed within one session lasting approximately 120 minutes. Because of the large number of participants, the academic researchers with the guidance of the community organization, divided participants into three groups by age/grade. Research activities were completed with all three groups simultaneously. Because only one session was held with each group of participants from the community organization, only one prompt could be addressed. Academic researchers (with the approval of the community organization) chose to have participants respond to the prompt "What messages do you get about being a woman from the media, your peers and adults in your life?" (Table 2).

Table 2. Participant recruitment and prompt questions

Group:	Grade range:	Recruited by:	Number:	Prompts addressed:
School District Participants				
Basketball athletes	9th-12th	High school basketball coach	14	1) What makes a woman a woman? 2) What messages do you get about being a woman from the media, your peers and adults in your life? These messages can be positive or negative.
Non-athletes	11th-12th	High school teacher	10	
Urban League's Leadership Initiative Participants				
Group 1	6th-9th	Director of leadership initiative	13	What messages do you get about being a woman from the media, your peers and adults in your life? These messages can be positive or negative.
Group 2	9th-10th		10	
Group 3	10th-12th		12	

The prompt question for each session was introduced to participants and facilitators answered any questions participants had while staying neutral in their responses so as to not guide participants in a certain direction when responding to the prompt. During the sessions, the youth sat on a large tarp that covered the ground and painted on white craft paper or canvases. Paint and paint brushes were provided for each participant. To encourage discussion among participants, the number of paint cups distributed was restricted. Pens and markers were also placed around the tarp in case participants did not want to paint or wanted to use a combination of media. In every session, the facilitators encouraged participants, based on their comfort level, to paint, draw, and write.

After the art activity, facilitators initiated a semi-structured discussion as they encouraged and guided youth participants to lead the discussion sessions at the end with minimal interjection from the researchers. During these participant facilitated discussions, volunteers first displayed their artwork in front of the group but were asked not to interpret their art so the group could

collectively reflect upon the content of the painting (See Figure 2) (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2012; Yonas et al., 2009).

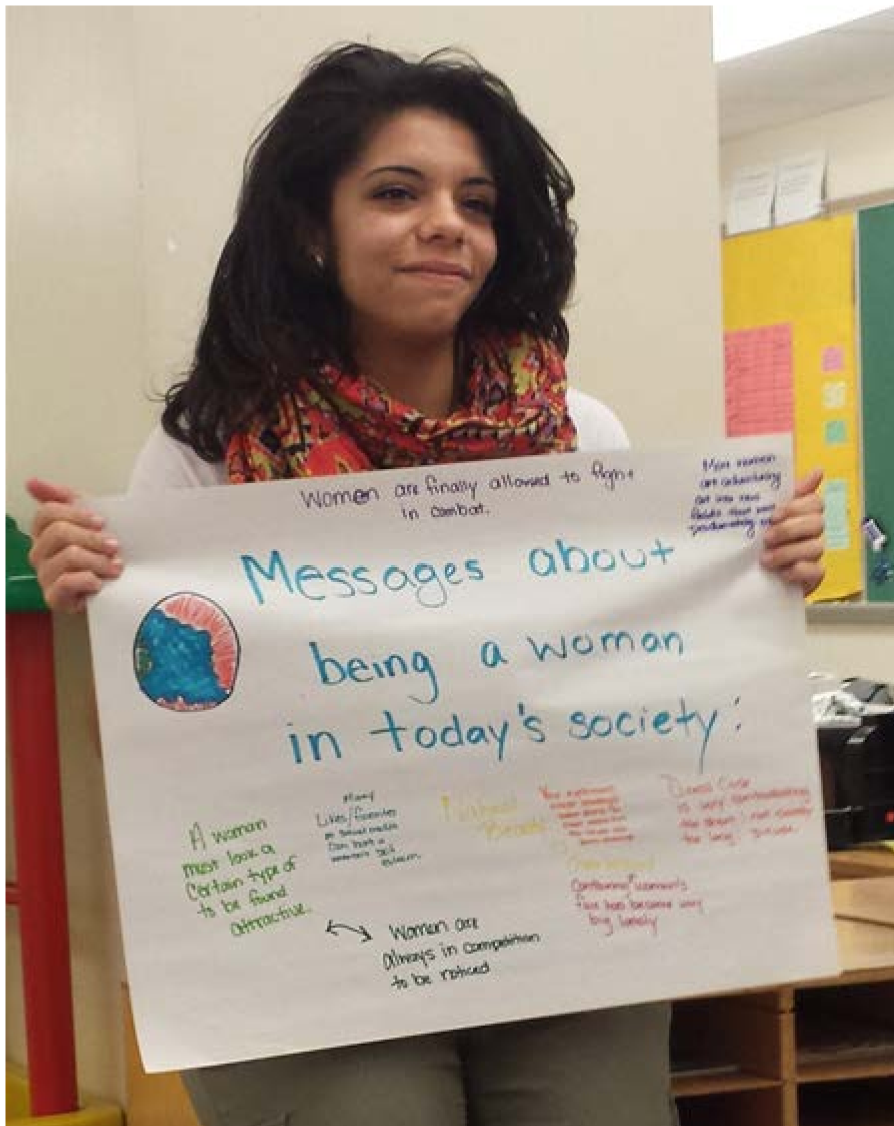

Figure 2. Participant volunteer presenting artwork

The purpose of the discussion was not to focus on the appropriate techniques regarding the elements of art used, but rather to openly discuss the meaning of the art through the interpretation of the group. Following the group discussion, the facilitators then invited the artist to share their thoughts on the piece they created in relation to the topic and why they created it,

sparking further group discussion, reflection, and learning. This process was repeated until no additional participants volunteered to share their artwork. Photographs were taken of the participants and academic and community partners throughout each session as they worked together during the creative activities, to visually document the process.

2.4.5 Analysis

The audio-taped group critiques and discussion groups were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. In addition to the transcripts, photographs of each piece of art were uploaded to NVIVO 10. Although the Socioecological framework and theories of Gender and Power and Intersectionality were guided the research, we utilized a grounded theory approach to analyze the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1998). The first author (and coder) of this manuscript iteratively reviewed data across all media (i.e., transcripts, paintings and writings) and identified concepts that were most common and dominant across the sessions (Bernard, 2012) to create a codebook. After the initial codebook was created, the coders, the Primary Investigator and two additional stakeholders met to review and edit the codebook. At this point, additional codes that were developed a priori based on the initial study questions about gender norms and feminine ideology were added to the codebook. The two independent coders then coded the first three transcripts and met with additional authors to edit the codebook. Codes were added to the codebook as needed and further description was added to codes where there was discrepancy between the two coders. The coders repeated this process with two additional transcripts and found thematic saturation had been attained. Therefore, all additional transcripts were coded using the finalized codebooks and the original three transcripts were re-coded using the finalized codebook.

Upon completion of coding the discussion transcripts, the two independent coders coded the artwork from all participant sessions. To increase the consistency of the coding, the photograph of each entire piece was coded as each theme is portrayed (for example, if one side of a photo described social media use while the other illustrated the importance of physical appearance, the entire photo was coded as both "hypervigilance to social media" and "Importance of physical appearance"). For this exploration of girls' perceptions of gender messages, we focused on codes about attributes and characteristics the participants identified, as well as codes related to gender expectations that were identified by researchers and stakeholders a priori (Appendix 1). Table 3 includes a full code list with descriptions. The thematic coding structures applied by the investigators were highly consistent (See Appendix 1 for Kappa scores) and any coding discrepancies in both the transcripts and photographs were resolved through consensus consistent with the coding process described in other works (Yonas et al., 2013; M. A. Yonas et al., 2009). The results presented here are the themes mentioned most frequently in this study.

2.5 RESULTS

In this section, we present themes that emerged from the analysis of responses to open-ended prompt questions. The goal of this study is to better understand how the experiences of adolescent girls shape the ways in which they conceptualize, process and perform femininity. The results presented here focus on what participants most frequently cited as having an impact on their interpretation of femininity. An overview of the data suggests that participants remain critical observers of messages they receive regarding gender norms, often

expressing disagreement and frustration with the narrow definition of what is considered feminine. However, while the participants often critically assessed the messages, they believed that the majority of their peers were affected by and prescribed to the messages they were receiving regarding gender norms. The first section describes several key themes which emerged related to femininity and gender role expectations, including hypervigilance with use of social media, policing of appearance, conflict in messaging, and strategies for navigating these expectations. The second section outlines several emergent themes that are particularly salient in informing prevention programming, such as feedback on the arts-based approach, differences that emerged between groups, and important distinctions in how messages are processed based on the source of the message.

2.5.1 Theme: Hypervigilance with social media

Hypervigilance, or an increased monitoring, of various social media sites was expressed in all participant sessions. Several key concepts stemmed from discussions around social media including both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects around social media usage included the availability of a community of women who build each other up and the sense of empowerment that stems from having that support network. It was also noted that social media can increase self-confidence among users if their photos or posts receive a lot of positive feedback. However, there were caveats to this, as participants remarked that they felt it was okay to share photos in order to boost self-confidence as long as the poster did not "just get rid of your natural self just so you can get likes or guys can comment," alluding to the narrow definition of what is considered acceptable.

Overwhelmingly, participants pointed out what they considered to be the negatives aspects inherent to social media consumption. The four areas of focus were bullying, competition, distrust and unrealistic expectations.

Sub-theme: Bullying

Participants described instances of bullying that they themselves had experienced and that their peers had experienced online. The consensus was that most bullying on social networking sites involved some form of anonymity, in that either an individual would use a fake account to post mean or hurtful comments to the victim or the poster would use their own account to post mean or hurtful things that were described as being targeted toward an individual or group of individuals without mentioning names. Social media was described by participants as a space where people feel comfortable saying things that they would not necessarily say to an individual in person. Participants described these experiences as common and noted that a name calling situation that starts between two individuals online can often grow to involve more peers and carry over into in-person interactions. For example, "we do things such as call each other 'hoes' and that leads to guys, it makes guys think it's okay to do that to us."

Sub-theme: Competition

Another major theme that emerged from discussions around social media included the intense sense of competition it creates among peers. Several discussions among participants centered around "likes," "favorites" and "followers" on various social networking sites. The participants explained that their peers often posted images solely for the purpose of receiving a high number of "likes" and positive feedback. Upon elaborating, the participants told the facilitators that if

people did not receive enough positive feedback, the poster would remove the image or post from the site, described below:

> **Participant:** Some people are just too worried about how many followers they get, how many likes to the pictures they get. If you're just there to post for your friends and family to see how you're doing, it's awesome. But if you're just posting to see how many likes you get, it's not right. And then just delete the picture if it doesn't get enough likes.
> **Interviewer 2:** Really, why would they do that?
> **Participant:** Because they don't have enough attention.

The conversation focused mainly on a sense of competition among female girls. “Likes” and “favorites” were equated to physical attractiveness. The females creating the posts that receive the most positive feedback were the most attractive and, therefore, were not only receiving the most male attention but were also seen as having high social standing. As one participant stated “everybody wants to be the queen bee; everybody wants to be the one at the top.” Conversation about this sense of competition occurred in other groups as well:

> **Participant:** Haters. They just don’t like you for some reason.
> **Participant 2:** I think it’s because of jealousy. People always wanna be in competition with each other.
> **Interviewer 2:** And is that over boys? Or is it over other things?
> **Participant:** Girls don’t like to be pretty with each other. They want, you know, they don’t want to see a pretty, educated girl.
> **Participant 2:** If it’s not them.
> **Participant:** If it’s not, yeah. Like they want, yeah-
> **Interviewer 2:** So they see this pretty, educated person as competition. But competition for what?
> **Participant 2:** Just in life.

Participants in all groups readily identified the competition that exists among adolescent girls in the realm of social media and attributed this to “envy” and the “need to fit in.”

<u>Sub-theme: Distrust</u>

Participants also remarked how social media has enhanced a sense of distrust among peers. Several girls described experiences involving the sharing of private or personal

information with a friend only to have that information made very public a short time later. Furthermore, social networking sites were referred to as "an outlet" for some of the girls but many participants explained that they were hesitant or fearful of posting too much on social media. This is articulated by one participant as follows:

> **Participant:** I'm like every time one little thing happens I just go on FB [Facebook] and I want to type it but like I don't so I'll type it and then I'll just delete it and get off of it. 'Cuz I wanna post it so bad but you know you can't I just want to post everything but I don't want to, I can't now, so I'll just type it and then I'll delete it and that's it.
> **Interviewer 2:** Why can't you, why do you feel that way?
> **Participant:** Because I don't trust people.

Sub-theme: Unrealistic Expectations

The last major theme that emerged in discussions around social media was the unrealistic expectations that it sets for young women. Many of the young women felt that social media creates an image of an idealized person and lifestyle which puts pressure on users to all "be the same person." A lot of the conversation around this focused on individuals who are famous on various social media sites solely based on their appearance of lifestyle. Participants describe one instance of this below:

> **Participant:** Sometimes there's people on Instagram that are famous for like- being on Instagram, like their lifestyle.
> **Interviewer:** Oh they're just famous for being on Instagram.
> **Participant:** Yeah there's this couple that people obsess about. Like they travel together and they're only like 18.
> **Participant 2:** Right. Like [model name] and them!
> **Participant:** Yeah and what's her name [model name], she's like a model and her boyfriend. They have millions of followers and they don't- she's a model.
> **Interviewer:** Because they're on Instagram?
> **Participant:** Because they're pretty people on Instagram.
> **Participant 3:** Because they're pretty and people all leave in the comments 'goals, goals, I want her lifestyle.'

From further discussion, it became apparent that participants believed that images on social media often portrayed women who are very similar in appearance conveying that there is a very

narrow definition of what is considered beautiful. Participants were critical of the pressure that society puts on young women to portray this standard of beauty but noted that they themselves and their peers often still strive to mirror the body or physical characteristics of these women, often saying that it is their "goal" to appear like this individual.

Pressure surrounding expectations to perfectly fit into this narrow window of feminine appearance appears to create an intense sense of anxiety among young girls which manifests in behaviors such as constantly monitoring social media sites to ensure there is positive feedback, only portraying images of their "best" selves on social media – including only pictures where the girls are wearing make-up, have their hair done, and are wearing stylish clothing that shows off their bodies without showing too much skin, and changing their appearance to make them feel more "secure."

2.5.2 Theme: Policing of appearance

The policing and constant attention to appearance was another theme that was present in all of the participant sessions. The pressure to hold a certain standard of beauty and "perfection" was described in great detail and applied to several aspects of physical appearance such as clothing, body type, and make-up and hair (see figure 3). This pressure was attributed to males, females, and the media.

Figure 3. Standards of beauty

Several conversations about the different aspects of physical appearance emerged. One common sentiment expressed in several of the sessions was the notion that females must dress in a certain way. It became clear that if these young women go to school wearing something not deemed "feminine" by their peers (such as tee shirts or sweatpants), they would have comments made about them or be ridiculed. The young women shared that they felt they were expected to wear dresses and clothing that are "classy" and "appropriate." However, this did come with several caveats, such as the expectations among male peers and the examples put forth in certain media sources that women should wear tight fitting clothing and show off their bodies. Additionally, the young women expressed that there is some pressure to have expensive and name brand clothing among peers within the school. The young women described a narrow view of what is acceptable attire and gave several examples of instances where they were not dressed according to these expectations and the comments that were made in response. Comments were made by both female and male peers.

> **Participant 1**: So say if like a girl's belly is out because she has her belly button pierced and she wants to show it off. Maybe that's okay, maybe it's not. But like, people will look at her and be like 'oh look at her, she's dressed crazy. She just wants attention'. So that's a big part of that. Girls are just smacked with that stuff. Like 'oh you're not classy, or oh look at her trying to grab everyone's attention'. Just walking around and talking to people, socializing. Talking loud. Oh she wants everybody's attention.
> **Participant 2:** I came to school one day in like jeans and a T-shirt and didn't have no like jewelry on, and someone said I looked like a lesbian.

There was also discussion among all the groups about body type and the policing of body type. It was commonly expressed that the ideal body shape was the "hour-glass shape" and that there is huge media influence saying that women have to be skinny. These messages, however, were often times blurred because participants in the group felt that boys "want girls to be skinny but also thick," demonstrating the conflicting images that both girls and boys are experiencing regarding girls' appearance.

There were several other aspects of physical appearance that emerged as important aspects of femininity throughout our discussions, such as the importance of wearing makeup and styling hair to portray one's best self and increase self-confidence. One participant described how changing your physical appearance, by putting on false eyelashes for example, can help quell feelings of insecurity.

2.5.3 Theme: Conflict in messaging

Pervasive throughout our discussions with the girls were their reflections on messages that seemed to conflict, both receiving contradictory messages about what is acceptable and expected for women and the awareness of double standards that exist among men and women. The two main themes discussed in terms of conflicting messages were physical appearance and sexuality. Participants in every session mentioned to some extent that there are a lot of mixed messages coming from both the media and their peers around physical appearance. Girls reported being inundated with the messages that allow a very narrow definition of what is acceptable for the physical appearance of women. They described hearing that women should be thin, but then if they were too thin, being called "anorexic" and "gross." Additionally, the participants discussed make-up, saying that society tells girls they are "ugly" if they do not wear make-up. However, they are also subjected to peer scrutiny if they wear too much make-up, being called "cake-face" (see figure 4).

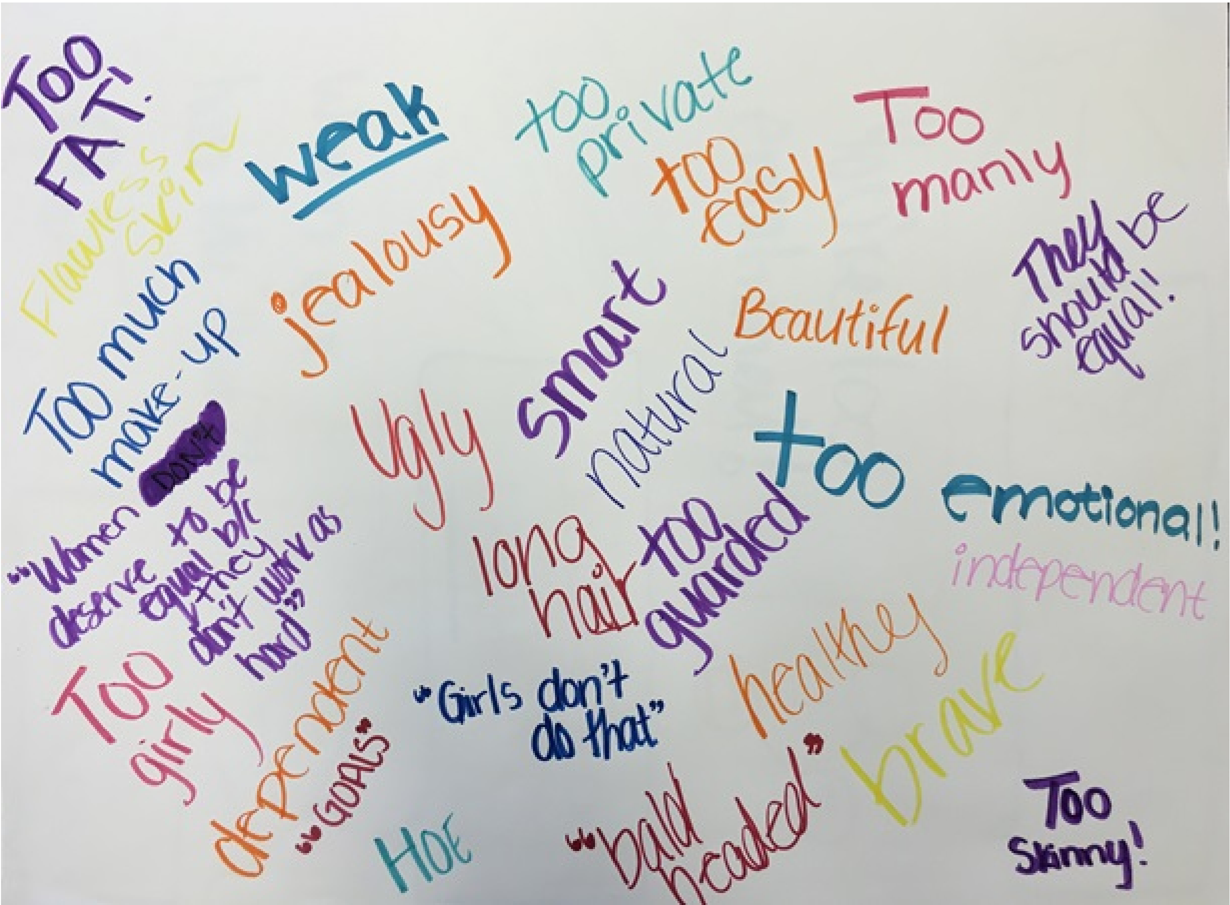

Figure 4. Conflicting messages

Participants also noted that there is a lot more pressure placed on women to look good and "be perfect" all the time as compared to men. They stated that even in terms of clothing, there was a very fine line about what is acceptable. Male peers put pressure on girls to wear tight-fitting and revealing clothing. However, this puts the girls at risk of being called names such as "whore" and "slut" by female peers and sometimes even the same males that are pressuring the girls to wear the revealing clothing. Furthermore, if the young women wear something that is less stereotypically feminine to school, such as sweatpants or a loose fitting tee-shirt, they are often times called a "lesbian" or "bisexual" by peers, which the girls perceived to be negative labels. Adding an additional layer of complication, the girls remarked that there is

also pressure from adults in their lives to dress "appropriately." There was critical reflection on what is appropriate and the girls remarked on the school dress code mandating that skirts and dresses be fingertip length and that spaghetti strapped shirts are prohibited. They remarked on the arbitrary guidelines asking "what is so terrible about a shoulder?" and saying that they did not understand how a "shoulder was affecting your learning."

Mixed messages around female sexuality were also present throughout the discussions. As discussed previously, adolescent females described a culture of competition for the attention of male peers. This competition is complicated by confusion around the expectation of male peers. Participants talked in detail about how there was a lot of pressure from males to send nude pictures and that in terms of social media, males give attention to girls who post "very sexual" photos and images – "the girls who show their bodies a lot." However, when the girls send nude or sexual photos or post photos of a sexual nature on social media, they are often ridiculed for being "attention seekers" and called "a whore." Girls remarked that they feel that males want the girls who are "conservative" but give attention to those who are "very sexual and stuff on social media."

There was also a critical discussion of the double standards that exist around the sexuality of young people. Participants remarked that boys are often praised for posting sexual images on social media and are encouraged by peers to engage in sexual activity, such as having sex with multiple partners, while girls are often shamed and ridiculed not only for engaging in the activity, but simply if they are perceived as having engaged in sexual behavior. One participant summarized this as "social media makes people think that we should be an open book. And the thing is, when guys post naked pics- they're glorified for it, and or a video or something with their shirt off. But you know, girls do with their sports bra on and they're like 'you're a slut.'"

Another participant, described her perception of this as "men want women to be seen as sex symbols without acting on this. If a woman acts on her sexuality, she is talked down on by both male and female peers."

2.5.4 Theme: Navigation of expectations

The final major theme to emerge from participant discussions addressed the various ways young women navigate and negotiate the expectations of femininity that they encounter daily. One major response to the pressure girls felt to be "perfect" and "flawless," was to "put on a show" and be very careful not to allow others to see their authentic selves both on social networking sites and during in-person interactions. When discussing this in the context of a school setting, many participants agreed dressing up nicely and putting make-up on was common for female peers at school, stating there are some people they've "known for a long time" and have "never ever seen without makeup." Some participants also stated that presenting their best selves at school is personally important to them.

Additionally, the notion of becoming "independent" as a mechanism to control some of these societal expectations was prevalent among participants. Many participants relayed the importance of "not depending on anyone for anything" and being able to "provide for yourself." As high school students, this independence manifested in voluntary social isolation which included being guarded around peers, not forming friendships and behaviors such as eating lunch alone. This isolation was described as a way of avoiding conflict and ridicule that are prevalent in high school. One participant summarized this as follows:

> **Participant:** I don't trust people, if everybody knows your business they're gonna use it against you, like I don't consider anybody my friend at all. You can be my associate or we could be cool but I distance myself from everyone. I feel like if you trust people

they'll take advantage of you, they'll talk about you behind your back, they will simply not like you they will hate you, they want what you have but since they can't have it they try to get close to you and secretly don't like you. I just I don't like females a lot or males at all.

The participants also believed that "setting boundaries" is an effective way to navigate certain sexual expectations. This stemmed from the notion that delaying sexual activity with a partner will create respect. Participants endorsed and seemed to prescribe to the notion that there are rules for how far you can go with a man sexually, including "no doin' something on the first night, ya know, make a man wait." The reasoning behind this seemed to stem from social pressures and a way to avoid judgment and name calling by peers.

2.5.5 Perspectives on prevention programming and interventions

<u>Feedback about utilizing an arts-based approach</u>

Our participants were engaged in the painting activities and shared their artwork readily. While in our sessions, most participants chose to use words to express themselves rather than pictures, there were consistently lively discussions around each piece and a high level of participant engagement. Participants often remarked on how they had never been given the opportunity to discuss such things among their peers and were pleasantly surprised that their peers felt similarly to them, as highlighted by the conversation below:

Participant 1: I feel like everybody understands me.
Interviewer 1: Elaborate for us.
Participant 2: No it's like we all have the same mindset. It's crazy.
Participant 1: Because we're all crazy.
Participant 2: Yes! It's crazy how we all really think the same. I feel like everybody understands me right now.
Participant 3: I feel like it's important to get a good solid group of girls together that can relate on things like this because there are a lot of people who don't think like- this group

right here is probably about it for our school, and that's sad. I feel like it's just nice that we get to do this.
Interviewer 2: Well I'm glad that you're enjoying this. And I'm not sure how (Woman 2) picked this group or if you're in her class. But I mean potentially there are other girls who feel like this and it's just not something that gets talked about a lot, which is sad. Because it could be what a lot of people are thinking but again it's just not something that's talked about because it's not positive and it doesn't look good on Instagram.
Interview 1: That's why we're asking you, I'm sorry I don't mean to cut you off. But when you say you feel like everyone gets you, is that surprising to be hearing other people saying these things that you are thinking too?
Participant 2: Yes, I did not know. It's about guys especially. About even girls being in competition. I always feel this way and I did not know other people felt that way.
Participant 3: That's what I don't understand- why girls always want to be in a competition with another female. Meanwhile, we understand each other so why are we competing when we could be working together to help build confidence.
Participant 2: Like I'm always, when it comes to a group of females, I'm always secluded. I always feel like I cannot be around a group of females. Meanwhile, we all understand each other.

Differences among groups:

Throughout the discussions several differences emerged between groups. As researchers were interested in exploring the intersections of race and gender, the group recruited from the Urban League was comprised entirely of girls who identified as Black or African American, Multi-racial or other while the group recruited from the school included individuals who identified as Caucasian or White as well to match the racial makeup of the school. Two themes regarding race emerged in the Urban League group that were not present in the high school group's sessions: the importance of hair and skin color in standards of physical attractiveness. Discussions with the girls in these groups seemed to have a greater focus and critique on white standards of beauty that participants described as being prominent in the media. For example, the "idealized woman" was described as "blonde" and "skinny." Upon further discussion, the girls described that as African American or Black women, the standard of beauty put forth is that of a light-skinned woman with "pretty eyes." As one participant put it: "'Team light-skin', you know, nothing

against light-skins or nothing. I'm just saying people make it seem like that's the color you want to be." Additionally, there was rich discussion among all three groups about hair as an important part of being physically attractive. Messages from the media indicate that women should have "straight, long, beautiful, flowy hair." The girls described the difficulties that accompany not having this type of hair, including getting your hair straightened or being referred to as "bald-headed," if you choose to wear your hair naturally.

Furthermore, within the participant's recruited from the high school, differences emerged between those who were athletes and those who were not. For example, while most participants agreed that wearing make-up and dressing up in stylish clothes is an important strategy for navigating expectations of attractiveness, many of the basketball players rejected this notion. One said that "if we have an 8AM practice, I'm not gonna get up to put on a face of makeup to go." During this discussion with the athletes, they pointed out the age differences in this norm that they have seen among their peers. They noted that "freshman year everyone caked on makeup and stuff, but senior year they come to school without it."

<u>Perspectives on the origins of specific expectations about being a woman</u>

Lastly, our participants were often readily able to articulate the harmful nature of a patriarchal society. For example, the girls critically addressed the objectification of the women they see in the media. There was in-depth discussion about how the media and society teaches young women that their value is in their physical appearances. One woman described the messages as reinforcing the idea that women are "always gonna shadow the man, we have to follow behind them, men only like us for our bodies or our face, not our personality." Additionally, some of the discussion focused on the lack of female role models in the media and that physical appearance always overshadows other accomplishments of women. One participant remarked

that a lot of women who are famous are "more sex idols than actual women that have done stuff. You never see a woman who is making breakthroughs in diseases on TV, you never see women who have solved a new physics problem or something like that."

This notion that a woman's value is in her appearance or relation to a man was not only described as being perpetuated by the media, but also by adults and peers in their lives. As one participant described,

> **Participant 1:** And there's some people that don't know how to step up for their selves because there's a man behind them telling them to don't speak or some older women always say be quiet let the man talk so what they're telling us is to do, is they are telling us to be quiet because men are more superior than women are.

The girls went on to address the unfair expectations that their male peers place on them, insisting that in order to be beautiful women must have "an hour-glass body" and "dress to impress men, only," which in the girls' opinion meant wearing tight fitting clothing. Additionally, while girls were critical of the strict standards of beauty that must be upheld, they also admitted to taking part in the policing of other's appearance. For example, one participant described an incident in school that happened the day of the session where an acquaintance of hers remarked that another female student's eyebrows were "so messed up." The participant admitted to laughing at the comment and thinking it was funny but also reflected on the incident saying "but it's not funny cause in a way we're [women] tearing each other down instead of helping each other build up." In sum, the participants were acutely aware of and easily identified examples of sexism that occur in the media and in their everyday lives.

Still, while the girls were critical of these instances, they did not always question the underlying inequities behind these exchanges. One example involves a discussion that was had around the pressure to send nude photos. The girls readily identified that they were in an unfair

position when their male peers ask them to send nude photos. They talked about grappling with this decision saying that if they sent the photo they risked having the photo spread around school or being perceived as a 'sluts,' however, if they did not send the photo, they would lose the attention of that male. They noted how unfair it was that girls are labeled as 'sluts' for deciding to send the photo that they were being asked for. However, they did not question why it was okay for their male peers to ask and expect these photos. The description of these occurrences by the participants seemed to portray this as the "norm" and something they were somehow obligated to uphold without questioning the underlying patriarchal meaning.

2.6 DISCUSSION

To better understand how shifting attitudes around femininity and gender roles might potentially improve health outcomes for adolescent girls and to better inform future interventions, our first step with this exploratory study was to elucidate how adolescent girls perceive societal expectations around gender roles. Data from the sessions offered a unique opportunity to explore adolescent female perspectives related to gender norms and allowed for the emergence of themes that were participant driven. Findings from this research provide an in-depth view into the ways adolescent girls perceive, analyze, discuss and perform constructs of femininity and gender norms and thus provide valuable insight into why certain harmful gender norms persist. Ultimately, such explorations may be a potential avenue for working to dismantle these harmful norms among adolescent girls in the context of prevention programming and to test the impact of developing critical analytic skills and behaviors which resist harmful gender norms on actual health outcomes.

Many of our findings are confirmatory of other work that has been done with adolescent girls around femininity and further underscore the importance of addressing these topics with adolescent girls. As has been noted in prior studies, the adolescent girls participating in our study described a narrow definition of "appropriate" femininity that included strict adherence to cultural standards of beauty and appearance, expectations of "perfection," and inhibited expression of sexuality(Impett et al., 2006; Sanchez, Crocker, & Boike, 2005; Tolman, 2009; Tolman, Impett, Tracy, & Michael, 2006). Additionally, participants described how the performance of femininity in a way that is deemed socially acceptable is further complicated by contradictory messages and double standards about their appearance and sexuality.

Our work extends the existing research on girls and gender norms in some important ways. First, our results demonstrate the enormous impact social media has had on and the transformation it has created in the performance of femininity among adolescent girls. Social media has created a space where twenty-four hour policing of appearance is now the norm. Adolescent girls now not only have to appear "perfect" during the school day and when out with friends and peers, but at home as well. There is no "safe space" where these young girls can escape the bullying and competition well documented among adolescents in public spaces for a long time. Emerging studies are linking increased social media use with heightened feelings of loneliness and decreased perceived emotional support (Rai & Gill, 2016; Shensa, Sidani, Lin, Bowman, & Primack, 2016) . Antidotes from participants in this study provide valuable insight as to why this might be. Participants described eating lunch alone, going out of their way to avoid talking to others in school and described not having any friends in school (male or female). They attributed this to a fear that if they disclosed personal information about themselves in an in-person setting, that another person would make this information available on an online site.

They discussed this in terms of “bullying” and “competition,” that if anyone knew anything private about you they would use it against you.

Additionally, our findings build on existing literature regarding how youth are able to critically reflect on messages they are receiving (Burns, Futch, & Tolman, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose, 2013; Tolman et al., 2015). Participants in the current study described messages they receive about femininity on a daily basis to be “unrealistic,” “wrong” and overly restrictive. Most participants were keenly aware and able to articulate that many of the messages they are receiving portray women’s position in society to be less than that of a man and described scenarios where the measure of value in a woman are always in relation to a man. Furthermore, in most groups there was some mention of women being over-sexualized and thought of as “property” and objects to “bring men forward.” However, what was particularly striking was the amount of ambivalence the participants expressed surrounding adherence to the messages. While most of the girls outwardly objected to at least some of the messages they were receiving, very few made any mention of efforts made to resist or reject the norms in practice.

One reason for the ambivalence appears to be that the girls do not agree with the messages but do accept them as the norm without questioning why certain things are acceptable within society. It seems that, often times, girls navigate these imbalances by placing blame on one another rather than questioning why these inequities exist. While there is critical examination of messages, an underlying perpetuation of the gender hierarchy imposed through many facets of society became apparent.

Another reason for their ambivalence may be the perception that social consequences and the loss of social capital that may be associated with stepping outside what is considered “appropriate” femininity may be worse than attempting to adhere to these constructions. For

instance, many of the participants spoke about individuals who are famous on social networking sites, such as Instagram, because of how they look or the lifestyle they portray. Most of the girls identified these images as “fake” and “unrealistic,” but still later described that when they saw these images, they commented “goals,” meaning that they were striving to be like this person. This drive to attain something identified as idealized appears to stem from fear of the social consequences (i.e., being called a “slut” or whore”) and the loss of social capital (i.e., being ostracized by peers at school) that accompany not adhering to these societal norms. In other words, much is at stake for girls who do not adhere.

2.6.1 Limitations

As this is a small scale exploratory study, there are several limitations to note. This was a small, non-generalizable sample of adolescent females from a suburban school district and youth program. While the researchers purposefully decided to oversample Black and African American women because of the additional health inequities they often face, this sample is not generalizable across the population. Additionally, due to time constraints of the programming, the length and number of sessions varied between those participants recruited from the high school sample and those recruited from the community organization. These differences may be reflected in different focus and content of discussions between the sites. Lastly, this was also a convenience sample of girls so is not broadly generalizable. Because of the existing partnerships with both organizations, key stakeholders at each assisted in the recruitment of participants who were perhaps more socially connected (recruited by teachers and coach) thus biasing the sample towards girls with more critical analytic skills and social supports.

2.6.2 Conclusions

These limitations notwithstanding, there are several important implications for this work. First using innovative, participatory methods to engage in discussions around social constructions of gender and gender norms may be an integral step in public health prevention programming. The use of an approach guided by the Visual Voices method as an alternative method to traditional interviews and focus groups proved to be successful in encouraging discussion about societal expectations placed on the young women and how they navigate these expectations. Using this method, facilitators were also able to distinguish how group differences may influence and impact perceptions and performances of femininity. For example, in this work there were subtle differences in ways the girls talked about some aspects of femininity between groups based on race, athlete status, and age. Participatory methods, such as Visual Voices, may be helpful to implement prior to engaging in prevention programming to tailor curriculum to be relevant and meaningful to the target population. Additionally, our discussions with participants point to the utility of incorporating participatory arts-based methods into prevention curricula and interventions for adolescent girls to encourage discussions about complex topics such as femininity and race. The use of an arts-based approach created an environment where each participant could safely share their own unique perspectives and allowed others to learn about how messages may be interpreted in various ways and created a sense of comradery between participants.

Furthermore, the insight gained through this work about the ambivalence girls seem to struggle with around harmful expectations should guide future curriculum development. Current interventions, covering a variety of health concerns from self-esteem to pregnancy prevention, have incorporated activities aimed at teaching young girls to critically reflect on the messages

they are receiving and the harmful effects they may have. This research may be used to guide future intervention development. Current interventions emphasize teaching young people to critically interpret messages they are receiving regarding gender norms. However, findings from this work point to the need to also address the ambivalence that young people express trying to adhere to these societal rules. This might include interventions which not only promote critical thinking about the social messages but also developing skills in when and how to resist these messages, and more directly addressing the perceptions young people have about the consequences of not adhering to these norms.

Recognizing the importance of inequitable gender norms as a determinant of health and creating and tailoring prevention curricula to shift these harmful gender norms is an important step in improving the lives of girls. Inequitable gender attitudes and behaviors have long been acknowledged as key-modifiable risk factors in violence perpetration among boys and men and shifting these attitudes is recognized as an important public health strategy for improving health outcomes for men and women. Thus, many prevention programs aimed at young men are beginning to target gender norms change as a mechanism for improving health outcomes with preliminary success. Because emerging literature implicates adherence to rigid constructions of gender and femininity in an array of adverse health outcomes for adolescent girls ranging from depression and disordered eating to sexual risk taking behavior and substance use, a similar approach could be used with adolescent girls. Prevention programming specifically designed to enhance gender equity may improve the health and well-being of adolescent girls.

3.0 THESIS CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study allowed researchers the opportunity to elucidate how adolescent girls perceive societal expectations around gender roles. Findings from this research provide an in-depth view into the ways adolescent girls perceive, analyze, discuss and perform constructs of femininity and gender norms. Such explorations may be a potential avenue for working to dismantle harmful norms that persist among adolescent girls in the context of prevention programming and to test the impact of developing critical analytic skills and behaviors which resist harmful gender norms on actual health outcomes.

Many of the major themes that emerged through this work are confirmatory of other studies examining femininity and further underscore the importance of addressing these topics with adolescent girls. This work extends the existing research on girls and gender norms in some important ways. First, our results demonstrate the enormous impact social media has had on and the transformation it has created in the performance of femininity among adolescent girls. Social media has created a space where twenty-four hour policing of appearance is now the norm. Additionally, our findings build on existing literature regarding how youth are able to critically reflect on messages they are receiving (Burns et al., 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2008; Ringrose, 2013; Tolman et al., 2015). However, what was particularly striking was the amount of ambivalence the participants expressed surrounding adherence to the messages. While most of

the girls outwardly objected to at least some of the messages they were receiving, very few made any mention of efforts made to resist or reject the norms in practice.

The insight gained through this work about the ambivalence girls seem to struggle with around harmful expectations should guide future curriculum development. Current interventions emphasize teaching young people to critically interpret messages they are receiving regarding gender norms. However, findings from this work point to the need to also address the ambivalence that young people express trying to adhere to these societal rules. This might include interventions which include skill building in when and how to resist these messages, and more directly addressing the perceptions young people have about the social consequences of resisting these norms.

APPENDIX: CODEBOOK

Code	Description	Kappa
Sources of Expectations/Beliefs	4 Categories 1. Media 2. Adults 3. Male Peers 4. Female Peers	
-Sources of Expectations/Beliefs/Behaviors-Media	Any text involving Expectations/Beliefs surrounding femininity or women that come from social media, TV, movies, music, ads	.92
Sources of Expectations/Beliefs/Behaviors-Adults	Any text involving Expectations/Beliefs surrounding femininity or women that come from adults	.63
Sources of Expectations/Beliefs/Behaviors-Male Peers	Any text involving Expectations/Beliefs surrounding femininity or women that come from	.91
Sources of Expectations/Beliefs/Behaviors-Female Peers	Any text involving Expectations/Beliefs surrounding femininity or women that come from female peers	.69
Negotiation of Expectations	How girls act to negotiate their roles (this can be in person or via social media) -things they do to respond to pressures	.72
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs	Categories 1) Conflict in Messages 2) Prestige/Reputation/Status 3) Homophobia/Homonegativity/ Heterosexism 4) Presentation of Emotions 5) Sexism 6) Boundaries 7) Goals 8) Priorities 9) Racism	
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs – Conflict in messages	Any mention of 'double standards' contradictory expectations Example: If you are having sex, you are a whore but if you are not, you are a prude.	.63

Code	Description	Kappa
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs – Homophobia/Homonegativity Heterosexism	Any mention of homophobia, homonegativity, heterosexism	.71
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs – Presentation of emotions	Any mention of emotions, emotion presentation, or lack of emotion	.81
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs - Sexism	Any mention of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. It can be linked to gender roles	.69
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs - Goals	Educational attainment, career or lifestyle goals	.90
Subject of Expectations/Beliefs – Racism	Any mention of prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination on the basis of race.	.95
Attributes	10 Categories 1) Physical appearance 2) Intelligence 3) Nurturing/Caring 4) Strength 5) Self-respect 6) Independence 7) Bold/Brave/Courageous 8) Provider 9) Protector 10) Determination	
-Attributes – Physical appearance	Any text involving hot the girls perceive a woman to look. Sub-categorized as: • Body type • Hair • Make-up • Being attractive to men • Skin color	
-Attributes – Intelligence		.83
-Attributes – Nurturing/Caring		.61
-Attributes – Strength		.76
-Attributes – Self-respect/Self-worth	Code text referring to having respect for oneself or finding worth or value in oneself	.82
-Attributes - Independence	Use to code any text around independence/freedom and what that means to them (i.e. making their own decisions)	.90
-Attributes – Bold/Brave/Courageous	Use to code any text around being bold, brave or courageous	.77
-Attributes – Provider	Code when text indicates providing, supporting, or taking care of family or others.	.77
-Attributes - Protector	Code text identifying woman as a means toward safety and security	.82
-Attributes – Determination	Code text illustrating how a woman overcomes adversity, struggles, or obstacles to achieve a goal or purpose; persistence.	.83

Code	Description	Kappa
Gender	4 categories: 1) Androcentrism 2) Gender Polarization 3) Biological Essentialism 4) Heterosexual Complementarity	
Gender - Androcentrism	Used to code text depicting maleness and masculinity as the norm/human as well as any conversation illustrating or implying women as the "other," inferior; men being naturally superior to women. (Hegemony/ Patriarchy). Male-centeredness.	.91
Gender – Gender Polarization	Used to code text illustrating men and women being mutually exclusive categories. Code takes into account men being different from women or women being different from men in all aspects of life and experiences: social roles, emotional expression, dress, and sexual desire. Conversations will include men and women possessing specific behaviors and values, which if strayed away from, will be deemed as wrong and inappropriate. "Men" and "women" should explicitly be in the conversation	.93
Gender – Biological Essentialism	Used to code text portraying a difference between men and women due to inherent biological factors. This difference, due genetic makeup, finds itself in all areas of life and experiences.	.78
Gender – Heterosexual Complementarity	Used to code text depicting the difference between men and women as complementary genders predicated on the binary between sex and gender. Wholeness requires a man performing one action and the woman performing the other action – (Man should initiate sex and the woman should say no or yes, man should work and woman should stay home and take care of the children). There needs to specifically be a man and a woman involved performing these actions to achieve wholeness.	.81

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