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Media Literacy and Girl Empowerment: The Midriff, Lolita and the Pseudo Empowered

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*Media Literacy and Girl Empowerment:
The Midriff, Lolita and the Pseudo Empowered*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the cooptation of authentic girl power by mainstream media designed to sell normative sexuality, consumption practices and a pseudo empowered self. It explores the sexualization of girls in the media and girls' educational and community engagement with media in the context of empowerment. From an expansive feminist and girls' studies foundation this project seeks to emphasize the importance of media literacy for girls and aims to address the gap in feminist scholarship on media literacy and educational programming for girls' empowerment. The thesis examines and connects women's studies literatures, Rosalind Gills' Midriff Theory and Gigi Durham's notion of the Lolita Effect, to ultimately contribute to the feminist legacy of blending theory with practice; the synthesized findings of this project offer a developed curriculum for girl-centered organizations on media literacy and empowerment.

Key words:

Girls, sexualization, empowerment, feminism, post feminism, media, media literacy, sexual empowerment, self-sexualization

“Who run the world? GIRLS!”

Beyoncé

Run The World (Girls)

“‘Raunchy’ and ‘liberated’ are not synonyms.”

Ariel Levy

Female Chauvinist Pigs:

Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture, 5

Introduction

“Who run the world? GIRLS!” Beyoncé’s girl power anthem boldly declares an exciting and progressive step in mainstream media to recognize girls’ agency and strength in contemporary culture. Despite the lyrics promotion of seemingly empowered activities, such as “I’m reppin’ for the girls who taking over the world / Help me raise a glass for the college grads... I work my 9 to 5 / this goes out to all the women getting it in” (Run the world girls 2:54-3:10); the song and music video send mixed messages about *how* girls and women “run the world.” The lyrics suggest girl power is visible through individual hard work and a challenge to the status quo, and yet, the music video’s story line, choreography and costumes illustrates otherwise.

These contradictory messages reinforce the paradox of pseudo empowerment in mainstream media. On the one hand, the costumes suggest that empowered girls wear exposing lingerie, including bras or corsets, garters and thigh-high tights; their empowerment is articulated through provocative gestures and choreography. Beyoncé is empowered and powerful because her body is captivating – she defeats men through her alluring and sexy dance moves. But the lyrics also include the theme of seeking male attention and approval stating, “Boy I know you love it... Oh, come here baby / Hope you still like me” (Run the world girls 2:00-2:03). Taken together, these messages construct a specific type of girl empowerment, defined by hegemonic constructs of femininity, sexuality and power. This notion of pseudo empowerment encourages girls to proudly show off their empowered selves by standing tall, punching a fist into the air, and simultaneously spreading their legs to suggest that power is rooted in their sexuality. Beyoncé’s song epitomizes the cooptation of authentic girl power by mainstream media

designed to sell normative sexuality, consumption practices and a pseudo empowered self.

Beyoncé's "Who Run the World (Girls)" is just one example of many media influences girls learn to navigate as they develop and cultivate their sense of self. It sends a conflicting message about what empowerment looks and feels like, as well as what is required to *be* empowered. These mainstream representations leave girls to interpret, and perhaps mimic, problematic messages of sexuality and empowerment demonstrated through hyper-sexualized lyrics, music videos, and other media sites. Given mainstream media's pervasive influence, girls often mirror the messages and images from the media and aspire to be empowered- just like their favorite celebrities.

In this project, I endeavor to consider the impact of these messages and in turn, think about how feminist activists might counter the narrative of what I call, pseudo empowerment to help girls' build an authentic sense of girl power and empowerment. Ariel Levy called attention to this problematic routine in her text *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*; in this work, she declared, "we need to allow ourselves the freedom to figure out what we internally want...instead of mimicking whatever popular culture holds up to us as sexy. *That* would be...liberation" (Ariel Levy, as cited in Durham 131). Levy's discussion of media representation and critical feminist scholarship moved me to consider how girls engage with and think critically about the media in their everyday lives. What does it mean when representations of girls' empowerment are so mainstream in popular culture? How does the trend of objectification and passivity shape girls' self-esteem or understanding of empowerment? Moreover, how do catchphrases like empowerment, confidence, and girl power emerge in

media representations that range from “girls gone wild” to “waking up like this-” to “flawless”? In other words, what does it mean for feminist activism or girls’ empowerment when mainstream media coopts these ideas within clever marketing and crafted rhetoric that ultimately construct images of *pseudo empowered* girls?

In this project, I define pseudo empowerment as the media’s cooptation of empowerment, which commodifies feminist ideals and reinforces limiting gender expectations to promote a false sense of agency under the guise of choice. Because media frames empowerment under limiting and problematic conditions, I distinguish between authentic and pseudo empowerment represented in the media. This study of pseudo and authentic empowerment is ultimately informed by feminist studies of girlhood and personal experience. I considered how these topics related to girls in middle and high school educational settings asking: How do girls navigate the media? How do girls interpret representations of empowerment in the media? How are girls influenced by mainstream media specifically hyper sexualized representations of girlhood? And what media literacy skills do girls need in order to counter media messages and build authentic confidence and empowered self-esteem?

Given my passion for working with girls and facilitating effective educational programs, I sought to develop an engaging curriculum for girls on media literacy and empowerment – ultimately hoping to contribute to feminist legacy of blending theory with practice. This thesis thus emphasizes the importance of media literacy for girls, but it also aims to address the gap in feminist scholarship on media literacy and educational programming for girls’ empowerment. I present an overview of feminist and girls’ studies literature, followed by a discussion of Gills’ Midriff Theory and Durham’s notion

of the Lolita Effect, which form the basis of my girls' empowerment curriculum, and then conclude with a discussion of how my work contributes to the authentic empowerment of girls.

For the purpose of this thesis, I define girl as a child, who identifies herself as female, occasionally described as “tween” in the ages of 9 to 14. I propose this age is the ideal time to engage girls in critical thinking and media analysis because it is when girls begin navigating their independent relationship with media, budding sexuality and cultivating their sense of self.

Literature Review

Girls' Studies provides significant insight into the experiences and challenges of girlhood with scholars, educators, and other professionals expressing interest in research, discussion and work with girls. As a subset of women's and gender studies, the study of girls emerged in the early 1990's due to adult's growing concern about girls' low self-esteem and the intersections with gender inequality. This project builds from key girls' studies and feminist literatures on the increasing sexualization of girls and the project of girls' empowerment.

The initial visibility of girls and girl's issues is marked by the American Association of University Women's 1991 report "Shortchanging Girls, Short Changing America." At the time, the report documented the most extensive national survey connecting gender to a dramatic gap in self-esteem for girls versus boys, and rising gender inequality in education systems. The AAUW survey sparked public and academic interest in girls' lives and soon many feminists, journalists, and other professionals focused on girls' empowerment as a strategy or solution to girls' low self-esteem. In fact, in response to AAUW's report, Peggy Orenstein worked with middle school girls in California to write *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap* in 1994, which exposed the confidence gap and girls' low self-esteem due to gendered societal and cultural expectations as well as in relationships with family and peers.

Mary Pipher's book, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, in 1994 similarly discussed the societal pressures faced by American adolescent girls. Pipher argued that girls needed protection from harmful experiences of sexism, violence and eating disorders; she stated, "the culture is just too hard for most girls to understand

and master at this point in their development...what can we do to help them?" (Pipher 12-13). Based on the findings from AAUW's Report "Shortchanging Girls, Short Changing America," Orenstein's *SchoolGirls: Young Women, Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap* and Pipher's, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, scholars suggested that the pressures girls face, in terms of gendered expectations in school and at home, negatively shaped their sense of self. These texts reinforced the notion that schools and extra curricular activities or organizations must develop more effective programs to discuss these issues and support girls. In short, these pivotal girls' studies texts underscored the broad cultural narrative that girls were at risk, traumatized, and in need of saving from harmful society.

At the same time as girls' studies texts bring visibility to girls' lives, Naomi Wolf's 1991 international bestseller, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, explored the impossible beauty standards that dominate American society. Wolf explained her Beauty Myth with the imagery of the "Iron Maiden," or "the modern hallucination in which women are trapped ...[in the] rigid, cruel, and euphemistically" depictions of femininity (Wolf 17). The Iron Maiden alluded to the "medieval German instrument of torture" to represent women's and girls' overwhelming pressure to conform to expectations as well as the fear of failing to achieve them (Wolf 17). Additionally, the Iron Maiden implies women must conform to beauty standards and do not have the freedom to choose to opt out of such practices or make their own decisions about how to engage in the beauty world. Wolf suggested there is a gap in conversations about how women may be authentically empowered to engage in beauty norms; she

asserts:

The real issue has nothing to do with whether women wear makeup or don't, gain weight or lose it, have surgery or shun it, dress up or down, make our clothing and faces into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. *The real problem is our lack of choice* (Wolf 273).

This canonical feminist text offered key insights into how the media develops and projects ideal beauty standards that not only impact adult women's lives, but girls' lives as well.

Elline Lipkin's book, *Girls' Studies*, from 2009 likewise explores the socialization of girls within the context of gender expectations, body image, media influence, and empowerment within the growing field of Girls' Studies. The book identifies how girls receive confusing messages about (pseudo) empowerment and media literacy. For instance, Lipkin calls out the contradictions of the *Dove Real Beauty Campaign*, which sells cellulite-firming cream and a growing "disconnect between promoting women's self-acceptance and selling a product that diminishes the size of women's thighs" (Lipkin 53). Overall, the text identifies the challenges girls face navigating the expectations of girlhood; Lipkin synthesizes:

In the years since [girls' studies developed], concern about girls have swung a wide pendulum: Some voices maintain their self-esteem is ever in peril, others insist that girls have never been as strong and outspoken as they are now; some voices decry that girls

are sexualized too soon, others claim it's great that they feel ownership of their bodies in ways previously disallowed (Lipkin viii).

In addition, Lipkin critically offers a notably feminist framework with which to analyze the contradictory messages of (pseudo) empowerment presented by the media:

At a time when many people think that we're 'beyond' gender restrictiveness - that the glass ceiling has been shattered and girls can do anything - it's important to look closely at how understandings of gender have been shaped, and whether they have shifted from traditional expectations into new definitions, or whether they are just slightly changed variations.

This discussion of shifting traditional expectations into slightly altered variations of the same is a useful element to this project's analysis of pseudo empowerment. It demonstrates a growing body of literature dedicated to thinking more deeply about the intersections of gender, age, sexuality, empowerment and feminism.

Additionally, Jessica K. Taft's 2010 article, "Girlhood in Action: Contemporary U.S. Girls' organizations and the Public Sphere," provides an excellent framework for understanding girls' engagement in girl-centered organizations through two analytical models dubbed: "normative" and "transformative". Taft describes the "normative" model as organizations that focus on girls' psychological concerns as well as "imagine the public as a space of threat and as being full of barriers girls must learn to overcome, and emphasize service over political action" (Taft 11). Taft argues that a contrasting

“transformative” model is more effective in that it engages girls by preparing them for challenges in the real world; transformative organizations “engage girls in a sociological analysis of the conditions of their lives, believe that girls should have public authority, and encourage girls’ involvement in social change projects” (Taft 11). Both Orenstein and Pipher’s work support the normative approach to girls’ engagement, looking to save and protect girls from patriarchal society rather than preparing girls with the tools and skills needed to navigate the world on their own. In this way, Taft suggests that shifting from normative to transformative models of girls’ engagement encourages intersectional analyses and community-based action rather than individual reflection exclusively. For example, she argues,

As girls learn to assess their lives through the language of self-esteem, they are more likely to see their problems as personal troubles, rather than as issues of public concern. This can lead girls to greater self-blame for what they see as their failings. And, if their problems are not seen to be publicly relevant, they are also much less likely to engage in social action to remedy them (Taft 19).

Similarly, Taft asserts, “the reliance upon a psychological analysis of girls’ problems does not give girls the tools needed to engage in social analysis and to see their issues as those of public concern” (Taft 22). In this project, I look to build upon Taft’s theorization of transformative girls’ engagement within the context of media sexualization. Ergo my curriculum discusses girls’ hyper-sexualization and pseudo empowerment in the media, with an explicit focus on the context of “social analysis,” whereby girls become media

literate in order to challenge broader societal issues represented in the media.

Additionally however, I maintain that in order to engage in the transformative model, girls must *also* identify and embody their own authentic empowerment. Transformative engagement thus includes not only discussing the public context of medial literacy and how girls may take action to challenge media, but also girls individually feeling empowered to do so.

The normative approach to girls' engagement can also lead to an understanding of hyper-sexualized media as inherently disempowering and harmful to girls. This approach may lead to media censorship and "calls to more heavily regulate young people's use of various media" (Ringrose 99). Dana Boyd, for example, references the normative approach in her critique of media censorship; she notes, "'protecting' girls to enable heavier sexual repression or to impose further control or surveillance on young people's use of the web... would likely be unsuccessful" (Boyd 137-138). In other words, in context of hyper-sexualized media, the normative approach suggests controlling and repressing girls' engagement with the media.

In contrast, the transformative approach suggests that girls are not simply passive observers, but instead actively engage with media, choosing their responses and reflections on media itself. Because of this assessment, Boyd endorses a transformative approach proposing, "we need to guide and educate teens to navigate social structures" (Boyd, 138). Similarly, Ringrose states, "finding spaces to engage young people in discussions... would be a crucial starting point for helping guide young people. Feminist guidance would mean building up a critical literacy around [hyper sexualized media] which teens have to increasingly navigate" (Ringrose 113). Lipkin, likewise endorses

Lyn Mikel Brown's work as a transformative approach which "urges teaching media literacy so that girls can deconstruct the plethora of cartoons, films, ads, billboards, and so on that infiltrate girls' minds with messages about gender" within the context of sexualized media (Lipkin 121).

Taken together, this literature supports the importance of media literacy education, which arms girls with the tools to navigate their environments and engagements with the media in order to discover their own authentic empowerment. Moreover, the transformative model allows for effective discussions and education about hyper-sexualizing media and the ways that media literacy can, and should, offer girls effective tools by which to challenge media influence in a way that feels authentically empowering to each individual. This project therefore aims to take a transformative approach in teaching girls how to resist the media's pseudo empowerment message by building authentically empowered selves engaged in the public sphere.

The transformative approach requires an in-depth understanding of how systems of power operate in girls' everyday lives; in developing this project, I therefore sought to understand the impact of girls' sexualization in the media. Girls' Studies scholars confront the challenges faced by girls within the context of media sexualization in a variety of ways. The 2002 collection, *Sexual Teens, Sexual Media: Investigating Media's Influence on Adolescent Sexuality*, by Jane D. Brown, Jeanne R. Steele, and Kim Walsh-Childers discusses research on media's sexual content and highlights the connection between the media and sexual development of adolescents.

The book explores how the media influences the development of sexual activity, relationship standards, gender roles, standards of beauty, and sexual orientations for

adolescents. In addition, it provides insight on how adolescents process messages of sex and sexuality from the media and how they apply what they have learned in their daily lives. This theme of how adolescents internalize and apply the sexualized media messages they are exposed to continues to be discussed by scholars, feminists, and other professionals in the field of Girl's Studies and media literacy, often coming from both normative and transformative approaches.

In 2007 the "Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls" highlights the intersections of the normative and transformative models. This resource, originally formed in response to public concern, suggests that the sexualization of girls in the media is a broad and increasing problem. The report defines sexualization, provides examples in the media and society, exposes the negative consequences of sexualization on girls and the rest of society, and additionally provides positive alternatives or ways to combat the influence of media sexualization. The report also identifies the term, *self-objectification*, "as a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires...girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance" (Russell 2). This concept of self-objectification is at the heart of the debate on media hyper sexualization from concerned parents to scholars to girls themselves. The APA report brought the context of girls, media, and sexualization to the forefront of the mainstream agenda, laying the groundwork for further discussions on this topic as it relates to girls' present or future empowerment.

Another text that highlights the connection of empowerment to sexualization is Ariel Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*;

Levy discusses the contemporary outcomes of self-objectification presented as empowerment through the media. This book debunks the myths of pseudo empowerment and suggests that girls who engage in sexualized behavior under the guise of empowerment are ultimately manipulated by “raunch culture.” She declares: “women who buy the idea that flaunting your breasts in sequins is power - I mean, I’m for all that stuff - but let’s not get so into the tits and ass that we don’t notice how far we haven’t come. Let’s not confuse that with real power. I don’t like to see women fooled” (Levy 76). Notably, Levy’s text offers an effective framework for how to critically analyze the media and recognize “real power,” while further emphasizing the urgency of media literacy in an educational setting.

Levy connects engagement in raunch culture to the concept of “Tomming,” as inspired from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which describes: “conforming to someone else’s- someone more powerful’s distorted notion of what you represent. In so doing, you may be getting ahead in some way...but you are simultaneously reifying the system that traps you” (Levy 106). Within the framework of Tomming, Levy suggests that girls engage in sexualized culture to achieve (pseudo) empowerment. Similarly, Levy quotes Susan Brownmiller on this subject of engaging with raunch culture, “you think you’re being brave, you think you’re being sexy, you think you’re transcending feminism. But that’s bullshit” (Levy 82). At the same time however, I suggest that this perspective employs a normative approach, *telling* girls how to or how to not engage with media, or understand sexualization. It is important to educate girls with a transformative framework, teaching them how to think critically for themselves, make informed decisions, and engage with the media in an authentically empowering way.

In fact, girls' studies research evidences how girls navigate the space of raunch culture. Jessica Ringrose's 2011 Article, "Are you Sexy, Flirty, Or a Slut? Exploring 'Sexualization' and How Teen Girls Perform/Negotiate Digital Sexual Identity on Social Networking Sites" presents the positive and negative aspects of youth engagement with media. Her work considers how social media can be used as a space to create one's own identity and one's own media. Yet, she also talks about the normalization of sexualization and how that manifests within girls' identities and sense of self. She calls attention to contradictions folded into pseudo empowerment. For instance, the phenomena of aiming to appear empowered in order to "be sexy", or emulating a certain look or behavior that represents (pseudo) empowered "sexiness" rather than achieving one's own unique and authentic empowerment.

Ringrose offers a transformative viewpoint that suggests girls can critically engage in social media "to disrupt conventional meanings of sexualized discourses and images in surprising ways" (125). Principally, the article highlights the nuanced discussion that sexual exploration and identity is important, but not if it is narrowly guided by the expectations of society and the media. This article helps to further identify a lacuna in Girl Studies': in the hyper-sexualized world of raunch culture, girls need not be protected from it nor told specifically how to resist it or how to act. Instead, a more beneficial and transformative approach to tackling media literacy and girls' empowerment would include teaching girls how to feel authentically empowered and how to make decisions for themselves. In other words, it is important for scholars and teachers to educate girls on issues of media literacy with raunch culture, and how to

distinguish authentic empowerment from pseudo empowerment, in order to navigate the media saturated world for themselves.

Similarly, the article *Technologies of Sexiness: Theorizing Women's Engagement in the Sexualization of Culture* by Adrienne Evans, Sarah Riley and Avi Shankar, offers that “there are multiple discourses of female sexuality”... and that there are “more than one discourse of being ‘up for it’” especially within the context of agency. (Riley 127) This text begins to address the contradictions that women and girls are told to “be empowered” in specific ways and then are constantly judged and critiqued for it. Overall, the text insists, “in relation to the sexualization of culture, agency has become central to discussions” (Riley 116). A conversation about how girls find agency through knowledge and freedom to make their own choices in a hyper sexualized culture is necessary. Discussion about agency to find authentic empowerment, and an authentic version of female sexuality, is lacking in Girls' Studies and girls' education, but this text highlights how the discussion of girls' and women's agency is vital in any transformative discussion about hyper-sexualization in society and the media.

Building upon this work, my project suggests that there continues to be a gap in discussions about girls' empowerment, the media's influence, and how to combat it in an effective way. Scholars have discussed the challenges that girls face, analyzed if girls need saving from the sexualization of culture or if girls need to be reprimanded for engaging with raunch culture, and have suggested that girls may have agency to navigate the space of media on their own. My contribution is this: the project aims to work with girls in a transformative way, by offering media literacy education in order to help girls identify and feel authentically empowered; thus giving them the tools to make their own

decisions about how they interpret and engage with our media saturated and hyper-sexualized society.

Method

This project was created as my Senior Honors Thesis for Pace University's Pforzheimer Honors College in May 2015. I developed my work through the Independent Study Course WS 395 with my thesis adviser, Dr. Emily Bent, as well as with support from my second reader, Dr. Sid Ray. In the process of developing this project, I drew from my own educational experiences with media literacy and empowerment, as well as girls' studies and feminist literatures. This process included personal reflection on my own experiences in a media saturated society, my education and involvement with extra curricular activities and girl-centered programs. Because of my experience working with and teaching girls, ages six through 21 years, I sought to develop a project that reflected my passion for education, outreach programs, and engaged feminist dialogue.

Throughout the Spring 2015 semester I reviewed a variety of girlhood and feminist studies resources to inform my theoretical analysis and curricular development. I conducted extensive academic research focused on the sexualization of girls and girl empowerment, including academic journals, textbooks, published articles, reports, books, blogs and relevant media images. After this literature review, I compiled this information under contextual themes and then selected two theoretical pieces, Gill's Midriff Theory and Durham's Lolita Effect to help frame my contribution to the field. These theories helped me frame and develop a series of educational workshops focused on media literacy and empowerment, which resulted in the creation of six unique girl-centered lesson plans.

Each lesson plan builds upon previous facilitation experiences with girl empowerment and media literacy workshops. Prior to developing the curriculum, I

volunteered at a Girl Scouts event in Queens, NY for middle school aged Girl Scouts and facilitated pre-existing activities about the use of Photoshop in the media and the (mis)representation of girls in popular TV shows and movies. I also organized and facilitated a workshop about media literacy and the pressures to be “the perfect girl” for high school aged Girl Scouts. Additionally, I reflected on a series of empowerment activities I had developed and facilitated in the past, specifically drawing upon my work at the Girl Scouts in San Diego, CA and La Jolla Playhouse for an “Empowerment Theatre” Camp, and my experience as Vice-President of Member Education for Kappa Delta Sorority at Pace University. Together, these personal experiences enhanced my understanding of girls’ studies and feminist literatures on girls’ empowerment, media literacy and sexualization in the media. The six-part curriculum demonstrates these intersections in the design, outcomes, and structure of each lesson plan.

Feminist Methodology

This project creates a series of interactive workshops and lesson plans that build from two pivotal texts in feminist and girlhood studies: Dr. Rosalind Gill's concept of the Midriff Theory and Dr. Gigi Durham's concept of the Lolita Effect. Gill discusses the Midriff Theory in "Empowerment/Sexism: Figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising" (2008) and "Beyond the 'Sexualization of Culture' Thesis: An Intersectional Analysis of 'Sixpacks', 'Midriffs' and 'Hot Lesbians' in Advertising" (2009). These articles offer an analysis of the "Midriff" figure to identify pseudo empowerment in the media and advertising. Durham's book titled *The Lolita Effect* provides a framework to break down media myths of the described Lolita Effect, which folds into expectations that challenge girls with pseudo empowerment.

Taken together, I suggest Gill and Durham's work offer a unique perspective on hyper-sexualized media. I contend that when used in combination, these sources offer a stronger framework by which to teach girls how to identify an authentically empowered self against the backdrop of pseudo empowerment narratives and images. By using the Midriff Theory and the Lolita Effect as a curricular framework, this project endeavors to educate girls about pseudo empowerment and hyper sexualization, as well as enhance girls' media literacy skills. The curriculum follows a transformative approach to encourage girls to think critically about these concepts, and to engage girls in navigating and taking action in their communities and lives.

Gill's theory of the Midriff is a new form of media sexualization focused on how female sexuality is paired with empowerment and agency, under the guise of choice, while reinforcing gendered expectations. Gill defines the representative figure of the

“Midriff” as a “young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for’ sex” (Gill, “Beyond the Sexualization of Culture” 245). Gill identifies four central themes that make up the Midriff: “an emphasis upon the body, a shift from objectification to sexual subjectification, a pronounced discourse of choice and autonomy, and an emphasis upon empowerment” (Gill, “Empowerment/Sexism” 41).

Critically, Gill’s project defines a social phenomenon, exemplified in advertising, which frames women’s and girls’ empowerment only when they reinforce expectations and stereotypes in an over-sexualized manner. For example, “a mid 1990s advert for Wonderbra pictured model Eva Herziogva’s cleavage, and hailed us with a quotation from Mae West: ‘Or are you just pleased to see me?’ ... This was no passive, objectified sex object, but a woman who was knowingly playing with her sexual power” (Gill, “Beyond the ‘Sexualization of Culture” 148). In 2015, girls are exposed to a plethora of sexualized representations of women through a variety of media outlets including youtube advertisements and magazine covers. The more girls are exposed to such images and content, the more they are influenced by the media’s messages. Media literacy is therefore crucial for teenage girls who may lack fully matured understandings of female sexuality and / or a sense of personal authentic empowerment.

The Midriff Theory also challenges scholars to consider the impact and influence of media on girls’ sense of self. It offers a critical perspective about how girls navigate the media as a result of hyper-sexualization, and suggests girls interpret and respond to the media by trying to exemplify (pseudo) empowerment. At the same time, I am interested in how girls learn about media analysis and media engagement, and further,

how these conversations can be framed against different perspectives. For example, while early Girls' Studies literature focused on girls' low self-esteem and society's harmful hyper-sexualization, the Midriff Theory offers an alternative framing whereby girl's empowerment and choice is coopted by mainstream media messages. Gill's research exposes how this shift reflects clever usage of rhetoric and strategic media manipulation, rather than authentically improved media representations of women and girls.

Gill combines the concepts of self-objectification with hyper-sexualization to connect them with a pseudo empowerment framework: "a crucial aspect of the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification...through the discourse of playfulness, freedom and, above all, choice....[is] a discourse of empowerment" (Gill, "Beyond the 'Sexualization of Culture'" 246). The Midriff Theory reveals the ways in which girls and women are tricked into thinking that they are (pseudo) empowered, but only if they conform to societal expectations and engage in mainstream behaviors. For example, the media sends the message that it is (pseudo) empowering to look physically attractive and adhere to unattainable beauty norms. This framework makes succumbing to media pressures and engaging in beauty standards seem like (pseudo) empowering activities rather than conforming to societal expectations. Likewise, Gill asserts, "the emphasis upon choice simply sidesteps and avoids all the important but difficult questions about how socially constructed ideals of beauty are internalized and made our own" (Gill, *Empowerment/Sexism* 44). The framing of choice, freedom and (pseudo) empowerment make hegemonic expectations difficult to recognize and consequently more difficult to challenge. This difficulty, I suggest, further evidences and necessity of media literacy

education programs in order to empower girls to navigate the contemporary landscape of (pseudo) empowerment media.

The Midriff Theory lastly builds on Naomi Wolf's concept of The Beauty Myth by connecting the relationship between beauty and female identity with pseudo empowerment. For instance, gendered expectations of beauty are framed with the rhetoric of (pseudo) empowerment including phrases like "pampering" and "self-indulgence" (Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism" 44). This rhetoric connotes an enjoyable experience of self-care, which reinforces the presumed joy of not only engaging in beauty practices but also the production of a (pseudo) empowered self. This problematic framework defines how girls are supposed to feel and think about participating in beauty norms. By limiting how girls think they can look, feel or behave, girls are distanced from finding their own authentically empowered selves. Overall, it is crucial for girls to gain media literacy skills which encourage challenging normative beauty standards and (pseudo) empowered self (re)production.

In addition to Gill's research, Durham's *The Lolita Effect* serves as an excellent source and analysis of media's early sexualization of girls. Durham describes the Lolita Effect as the hyper sexualization of young girls. For this project, the Lolita Effect is helpful in applying the Midriff Theory to girls because Durham emphasizes how the Lolita Effect is "framed in a clever rhetoric of empowerment and choice. But they skillfully conceal the narrow, restrictive, and ultimately disempowering definition of sexuality" (Durham 27). Durham calls attention to the issue that "rather than offering girls - and the rest of their audiences - thoughtful, open-minded, progressive, and ethical understandings about sexuality, our media and our culture have produced a gathering of

‘prostitots’-hypersexualized girls whose cultural presence has become a matter of heated public controversy” (Durham 27). Rather than arguing for the moral crusade against the hyper sexualization of girls, Durham insightfully divides the Lolita Effect into five myths that may be used to challenge the concept of pseudo empowerment as theorized by Gill. Moreover, the Lolita Effect offers five myths which provide a framework for how to combat pseudo empowerment encouraged by the Midriff Theory: “If You’ve Got It, Flaunt It”, “Anatomy of a Sex Goddess”, “Pretty Babies”, “Violence is Sexy” and “What Boys Like.” This project will combat these five pseudo empowerment myths by offering lessons of authentic empowerment that address each of these topics.

Durham asserts that myths develop when a “complicated, multilayered, and diverse” concept is “reduced to expression through a single channel” (Durham 70); for this thesis, the concept considered is the relationship between hyper sexualization and pseudo empowerment. For instance, “how, then, are women sexually empowered, when the only path to empowerment lies in attracting male lust by conforming to the conversations of the striptease?” (Durham 76). Durham identifies the crux of why the Midriff figure is problematic; the media creates a specific and narrow depiction of (pseudo) empowerment. This representation limits the opportunity for girls to see different versions of authentic empowerment in the media. Consequently, girls may find it too challenging or intimidating to express themselves in unique ways that differ from mainstream culture. In other words, girls may stick to the status quo if there are few differences visually represented in the media. The 2011 documentary *Miss Representation*, which exposes the under representation of women in the media, captures this idea in their film tagline, “You can’t be what you can’t see,” which suggests that

visual representations in the media profoundly influence girls' daily experiences.

Therefore, limiting the complicated, multilayered and diverse experience of authentic empowerment to a single channel of (pseudo) empowerment ultimately reinforces the hegemony of hyper sexualized culture. Durham asserts the media manipulates rhetoric to reinforce pseudo empowerment:

Girls are told constantly that body displays are empowering. There is power, they are told, in revealing their physical assets...it is the only recognizable way for them to express sexuality in contemporary culture. This limited and in many ways disempowering construction of female sexuality is framed as liberating, assertive, a form of self-expression that rejects old fashioned prudery - and in the case of very young girls, and perhaps more insidiously-as routine (Durham 79).

Here Durham emphasizes how (pseudo) empowerment is narrowly portrayed to suggest that girls must uphold the looks and behaviors of (pseudo) empowerment "as routine." Thus, although advertised as choice, girls may not in fact have choice in the decisions they make on a day-to-day basis, because pseudo empowerment reinforces the expected norm. Durham notes, "there's a difference, though, between sexual agency and sexualization: sexualization is a version of sex that is disempowering and objectifying" (Durham 118). This difference is key; it is the confusion and misrepresentation between pseudo empowerment and authentic empowerment. This project aims to bring this crucial conversation, generally dominated by scholars, to girls in an educational and transformative way.

Because this thesis aims to bridge the gap between the scholarly analyses and educational realities of media literacy and girl empowerment, this work offers a curriculum designed for girls' programming which bring attention to the Midriff Theory and the Lolita Effect in order to combat the construction of pseudo empowerment. The Midriff Theory is an enlightening framework for the media and pseudo empowerment, and the Lolita Effect offers insights on how to improve media literacy against the backdrop of girls' hyper sexualization. Subsequently, this project connects these topics so as to educate girls about problematic pseudo empowerment presented in media and to encourage girls to develop an authentic notion of self-empowerment, to better navigate our hyper-sexualized society.

Findings and Analysis

Scholarly discussions about the challenges of girlhood include notions of saving girls from a media saturated society and concerns over girls' engagement with hyper sexualized culture. I argue that respect for girls' agency and choice must be at the forefront of this discussion. My project aims to address the gap in media literacy education in terms of girls' empowerment. More can be done in school and community-based programs for girls to learn media literacy skills to think critically *for themselves*. Through media analysis, girls learn to challenge limiting representations in the media, and with a transformative education program, girls also have the opportunity to use what they learn in order to take action in their communities.

My contribution to media literacy education creates the opportunity for girls to think critically about the media and in doing so, identify their authentically empowered selves. This project provides curriculum that offers girls tools to make decisions about how they interpret and engage with media and our hyper-sexualized society. In summary, this project intends to provide an effective curriculum to educate girls on these nuanced and complex conversations in an applicable way. Against the backdrop of the Midriff and pseudo empowerment, the curriculum empowers girls to identify their authentically empowered selves, via the framework offered by *The Lolita Effect's* five myths: "If You've Got It, Flaunt It", "Anatomy of a Sex Goddess", "Pretty Babies", "Violence is Sexy" and "What Boys Like."

The Lolita Effect's first myth, "If You've Got It, Flaunt It" identifies the construction of pseudo empowerment as an exclusive representation of female sexuality and behavior. Durham exposes how the media "tie[s] ideal femininity and attractiveness

to a very specific mode of sexuality, one that involves exhibitionism and a submissive appeal to the male gaze, without any consideration of the girls' own interests, ideas, or sense of wellbeing" (Durham 84). This myth encourages girls to define (pseudo) empowerment as flirting, dancing or dressing a certain way, as exemplified in the media. I suggest however that in identifying authentically empowering activities, girls might combat the first myth. In other words, girls might challenge the limited representations of (pseudo) empowerment if they can distinguish from media driven activities versus those they find personally or authentically empowering.

The first lesson plan highlights a series of alternative activities for girls to engage in that counter those ideas shown in music videos or suggested in magazine articles. Questions that are helpful in this analysis include: "What does real empowerment feel like?" "Are you authentically empowered by doing x?" (X refers to example identified by girls in lesson) "What other activities lead to feeling authentically empowered?" This discussion allows girls to brainstorm activities and their interests together. The variety of hobbies and examples that emerge highlight the importance of respecting a variety of choices and different feelings of authentic empowerment. After the group discussion, the lesson plan includes a workshop for girls to identify and write down the activities that make them feel authentically empowered.

The second myth, "Anatomy of a Sex Goddess," exemplifies how the media reinforces girls' striving for a Barbie-like, "voluptuously thin" body. Akin to Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*, "Anatomy of a Sex Goddess" advises girls to reach (pseudo) empowerment by achieving the paradoxically "voluptuously thin" body, and if they fail to reach this figure, they must do everything in their power to "fix" themselves. This

myth translates into marketing schemes that play on girls' insecurities in order to sell endless consumer products. The (pseudo) empowerment found in striving for the perfect "voluptuously thin" body is "built on insecurity, the constant anxiety that one's body is not good enough" (Durham 104). Rhetoric in the media therefore suggests it is empowering to improve your physical appearance. The myth perpetuates girls' insecurities about their physical appearances; consequently enabling media advertisers to sell engagements in beauty practices, like "cosmetics, plastic surgeries and dieting," as the path to reach (pseudo) empowerment. Durham argues, the reason girls "feel good [engaging in beauty practices] is often the result of initial feelings of inadequacy and body dissatisfaction that are appeased only by consuming these products" (Durham 107). This myth defines girls' empowerment through consumption practices.

I suggest that in order to combat the myth of "Anatomy of a Sex Goddess," girls need to cultivate a healthy body image and recognize their motivations behind engaging in consumption beauty practices. By learning to identify what feels good in their own body, I contend girls reach a more authentically empowered self. I suggest that although the beauty industry is not inherently damaging for girls, engaging in it to quell overarching insecurities is harmful. Moreover, if girls feel authentically empowered and enjoy beauty practices, girls can use beauty products with confidence. Through the lesson, girls will understand this crucial distinction and are encouraged to notice how they authentically feel motivated to follow beauty norms: as a fun and empowering practice versus as a tactic to satisfy insecurities. Some questions to help facilitate this group discussion include: "How do you feel about your body after looking at a fashion magazine?" "Are you putting on make up because its fun and builds confidence (or

because you are trying to hide something you feel insecure about?)” My lesson plan involves activities for girls to identify how their bodies feel good physically. For instance one activity includes a movement exercise that focuses on strong body language, which allows girls to explore a variety walks, postures, and even eye contact, helping build confidence. The activities aim to prepare girls with tools to critique media representation of beauty standards, to allow girls to choose how they engage in beauty practices, and to help girls cultivate a healthy body image through movement.

The third myth is the construction of “Pretty Babies,” which suggests, “ideal female sexuality is youthful, or even childlike” (Durham 119). This myth arises from gender norms framed with clever rhetoric of sexiness and (pseudo) empowerment. Durham exposes how sexualized pseudo empowerment limits girls and reinforces hegemonic gender norms:

“little girls fit more easily into a conventional mold of female sexuality: a perspective in which she lacks authority over her own body and is therefore less threatening than any adult woman today. Because of this, little girls epitomize a patriarchal society’s ideal of compliant, docile sexuality” (Durham 129).

Because this myth reframes hegemonic norms as (pseudo) empowerment, I suggest that to combat the “Pretty Babies” Myth, it is imperative we criticize and resist limiting gender expectations. It is likewise crucial to discuss limiting representations of girls in the media and teach media literacy skills.

Therefore, my third lesson plan looks at mainstream media to highlight how gender expectations restrict authentic empowerment. In a group discussion, girls share popular T.V. show characters in which they notice the “Pretty Babies” Myth. Together, the group calls attention to how characters reinforce this myth through clothing, dialogue, behaviors and so forth. The lesson plan then employs a transformative approach to advocate for media representations of girls who are authentically empowered. For example, girls brainstorm depictions of empowered girls that they think are lacking in the media. The lesson concludes with a letter-writing workshop where girls have the opportunity to speak out in the community through drafting letters to magazine editors or television programming networks. This activity encourages girls to think about how to research applicable online contacts and structure a complaint or feedback letter.

The fourth myth, “Violence is Sexy,” strengthens the “persistent linkage of violence and girls’ sexual objectification” (Durham 139). Media representations of “sexy violence,” highlighted in music videos, advertisements, entertainment and more, reinforce violence against women and girls in society. Additionally, the myth suggests that engaging in “sexy violence” is a heightened state of (pseudo) empowerment. This dangerous myth encourages and normalizes domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of violence against women and girls. Furthermore, girls must navigate the confusing and threatening perception that (pseudo) empowerment may be gained through “sexy violence.” A strong tactic to combat this myth is to reframe authentic empowerment as engaging in local activism to counter violence against women. This practice incorporates publically challenging norms of violence against women and girls, and protecting oneself in unsafe or uncomfortable situations.

My fourth lesson plan aims to educate girls on how to call out the myth of “sexy violence” as (pseudo) empowerment for themselves. This transformative application includes girls’ feeling authentically empowered to bring attention to this myth when it manifests in daily life. Letting people know that what they are watching or saying is problematic can be a useful tactic in challenging the perceptions of violence against women and girls locally. Girls gain the language and strength to confront the myth in specific, real-life situations. For example, one activity includes a simulation to practice confronting people and speaking out about violence against girls and women. Girls will role-play with suggested scenarios as well as come up with their own scenarios.

Two examples of these scenarios include how to interject when people talk positively about rape culture in a movie or T.V. show, or how to respond when someone makes a rape joke and suggests “feminists should have a sense of humor.” Practicing these tough conversations arms girls with the skills to tackle daily forms of violence against women and girls in a safe way. The lesson plan emphasizes the importance of remaining calm and safe; it is crucial to gauge one’s personal safety and comfort levels when engaging in these discussions. We will also discuss strong body language and tactics that may assist girls’ sense of control if confronted with unsafe or uncomfortable situations, and how to remove oneself when necessary.

The extended lesson for the fourth myth educates girls on how to engage as activists to end violence against girls and women in their community. In the extended lesson, girls brainstorm different types of campaigns and strategies they would like to see happen at their school, organization or in their local area. After discussing ideas and tactics, the girls will break up into small groups to organize and implement a campaign.

Although the actual lesson plan will include girls' own ideas and creativity, I provide several suggested campaigns including: a T-shirt event at school in which girls, boys, teachers and admin wear shirts in solidarity with the campaign's hashtag or catch-phrase to raise awareness; a social media campaign that urges students to tweet with the campaign's hashtag exposing harmful lyrics in songs or lines in movies and cyber-linking the aforementioned media example; or a poster campaign in front of grocery stores, malls or other community centers where girls hold signs with facts about violence against women next to images from relevant TV shows or music videos, possibly pressing the community to boycott a certain show or song.

These examples evidence how the transformative workshop allows girls to think creatively about how to take action and lead an organized activist event in their community. Overall, these conversations prepare girls to engage in their local community and urge others to think critically about the connection between violence, sexiness and (pseudo) empowerment. The objective is for girls to feel authentically empowered in order to advocate for healthier depictions of women and girls in the media.

The last myth, "What Boys Like," suggests that ultimately, all girls share the same purpose: to appeal to men and boys. This myth invalidates girls' well-rounded interests, goals, and lifestyles independent of men, and consequently reinforces gender inequality. Additionally, it strengthens heteronormative privilege and silences all LGBTQIA+ experiences and discussion. The feminist concept of the "male gaze" includes media's "phantom male's influence," which sells girls the idea that "their only power is in...behaviors that are supposed to attract male attention" (Durham 173). Durham suggests that "girls and women internalize this imaginary male gaze: they learn

to see themselves as they think men would see them” (Durham 166). This practice is problematic because girls are encouraged to incessantly consider male preferences, as opposed to following their own desires or goals. Suggesting that girls’ lives revolve around men and boys strips them of their agency and authentic empowerment. Moreover, the societal expectation that girls focus their attention on men and boys reinforces a patriarchal dynamic, where girls may feel inferior to males and thus perpetuates systematic gender inequality.

In order to overcome the myth of “What Boys Like,” the fifth lesson plan emphasizes authentic empowerment as the strength to identify one’s value outside of another’s approval and to advocate for gender equality. Some questions Durham suggests to critique this myth, includes: “Why does she worry about what the prince thinks? Why doesn’t the prince worry about what she thinks? Does he like her because she’s pretty or because she’s smart and kind?” (Durham 176) and “are there any indications that girls might be interested in anything besides self-adornment and boys?” (Durham 173). My lesson plan incorporates a workshop for girls to identify what personal characteristics or goals they feel embody their own sense of self. Girls reflect on moments in the past where they were proud of themselves and or when they felt authentically empowered extraneous of validation from another person.

Additionally, because everyone can work together for gender equality, the lesson plan also contends that advocating for equal rights is an authentically empowering experience and fulfilling way to engage with others in the public sphere. To conclude the lesson we discuss opportunities for daily positive change including how girls can work effectively with boys at school, in group projects, or on sports teams. Next, girls

brainstorm tactics to bring boys and girls together as allies in order to advocate for gender equality. Overall, this authentic empowerment workshop provides girls with the opportunity to see their own agency and sense of self, independent of boys or men, while simultaneously recognizing the importance of gender equality.

Conclusion

This project endeavored to synthesize the findings from Gill's concept of the Midriff Theory and Durham's work on the Lolita Effect to develop an interactive curriculum for girls' empowerment. My contribution connected the Midriff Theory's framing of pseudo empowerment to the Lolita Effect's insights on media literacy; additionally, this approach employed Taft's notion of transformative girls' engagement in order to critique mainstream media, build an authentically empowered self, and encourage individual and collective action. The main objective of this project included guiding girls in how to distinguish between pseudo empowerment and authentic empowerment models. Pseudo empowerment reflects media's coopted idea of empowerment, which commodifies feminist ideology to promote a false sense of agency and reinforce limiting gender expectations under the guise of choice.

In contrast to the notion of pseudo empowerment, I defined authentic empowerment as more nuanced and complex, a life long process unique to each individual and relationally informed by girls' experiences of the world around them. Throughout the workshop series, girls were encouraged to foster an authentically empowered self by identifying and embracing their feelings, thoughts and interests independent of the media's influence and the message of (pseudo) empowerment. This curriculum, I propose, might be implemented by girl-centered organizations, including the Girl Scouts, Girls Inc., Ms. Foundation, SPARK Movement, and the Media Foundation Project. It illustrated my ongoing work in the field of Women's and Gender Studies, as well as reflects my goal to work with girls through transformative education and outreach programming.

In future iterations of this project, I would like to expand the curriculum to include a more mature conversation about sex. Because the current project focused on an analysis of media representations of girls along the lines of pseudo versus authentic empowerment, but did not necessarily address girls' sexual desires or representative sexuality in the media, it would be interesting to follow up with research on how the media and pseudo empowerment influences girls and young women's experiences of sex, using a similar approach. I am interested in exploring "the missing discourse of desire" and its connection to media representations of sex (Fine).

In this way, the framework that guided this project might be adapted or expanded, to discuss sex, desire, and sexuality, specifically enabling girls to feel authentically empowered to identify their sexual desires, rather than or as opposed to problematically mimicking media representations of sex and sexual pleasure. Moreover, this educational framework could improve sex education by focusing on building healthy relationships and an authentic embodied experience of desire and sexuality in sex and relationships. In sum, I propose the language of pseudo empowerment traced through media literacy education serves as a useful framework for scholarship and activism in the fields of women's and gender studies, media literacy and girlhood studies.

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Appendix: Curriculum

Intro Lesson: The Midriff Theory – Pseudo Empowerment

Overview:

This lesson provides an introductory workshop for girls about women's and girls' studies, media literacy and empowerment. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To understand media literacy and how to critique media advertisements within the context of the Midriff Theory
- To have a clear understanding of pseudo empowerment versus authentic empowerment

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Magazine examples of the Midriff Theory

Activities:

Authentic Empowerment Brainstorm (10 min)

- Girls brainstorm in groups to identify the characteristics of an authentically empowered girl
- Come together as a group to discuss, and list everyone's ideas on the white board

The Midriff Theory Lesson (15 min)

- Instructor teaches quick lesson on the Midriff Theory
- Girls analyze magazine ad examples
- Discussion Questions:
 - Who produced this advertisement?
 - Why do they want me to consume this product?
 - What is the ad trying to portray?

- What makes the woman or girl in the ad look like she is empowered?
- What is the ad trying to motivate you to do?
- Identify media influences
 - What kinds of media do you see or use daily?
 - Invite girls to brainstorm active and passive media examples:
 - Active media examples: watching their favorite TV show or reading a fashion magazine.
 - Passive media examples: the advertisement before the YouTube video they are going to watch, seeing billboards go by as they are in the car, etc.
 - Discussion of environment, friends, and family consumption practices.
 - Do your friends and family support these messages in the media?
 - Examples: Do your friends often talk about what is going on in the media, like fashion or style trends, and gossip about who is keeping up with the trends at school?
 - Does your mom make comments about celebrities or her own weight and style when passing the magazine section in the grocery store check out line?

Define Empowerment (15 min)

- As a class or in small groups, reflect on original empowerment brainstorm and concepts of pseudo empowerment from the lesson.
- Create our own definitions for authentic empowerment and pseudo empowerment

Wrap Up (5 min)

- Facilitator explains that the Midriff Theory and pseudo empowerment will frame the workshop series. Introduces Durham's the Lolita Effect and previews how each lesson will be constructed from the Lolita Effects' five myths.
- Girls share their thoughts about the upcoming workshop series.
 - What are they excited about?
 - Is there anything in particular they would like to cover and/or explore?
 - Do they have any questions about the workshop series?

Helpful Vocabulary

- **The Midriff Theory:** a new form of media sexualization focused on how female sexuality is paired with empowerment and agency, under the guise of choice, while reinforcing gendered expectations.
- **Pseudo empowerment:** Reflects media's coopted idea of empowerment, which commodifies feminist ideology to promote a false sense of agency and reinforce limiting gender expectations under the guise of choice
- **Authentic empowerment:** Nuanced and complex, a life long process unique to each individual and relationally informed by girls' experiences of the world around them.
- **Girls:** I define girl as a child, who identifies herself as female, often described as "tween" in the ages of 9 to 14. I propose this age is the ideal time to engage girls in critical thinking and media analysis because it is when girls begin navigating their independent relationship with media, budding sexuality and cultivating their sense of self.
- **Self-objectification:** as a key process whereby girls learn to think of and treat their own bodies as objects of others' desires...girls internalize an observer's perspective on their physical selves and learn to treat themselves as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance

Lesson #1**Myth One: “If You’ve Got It, Flaunt It”****Overview:**

The first myth identifies the construction of pseudo empowerment as an exclusive representation of female sexuality and behavior; it encourages girls to define (pseudo) empowerment as flirting, dancing or dressing a certain way, as exemplified in the media.

Girls might challenge the limited representations of (pseudo) empowerment if they can distinguish from media driven activities versus those they find personally authentically empowering. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To develop media literacy skills
- To identify what activities girls personally find authentically empowering

Materials:

- White board or poster for facilitator to write on
- Examples of “If You’ve Got It, Flaunt It” Myth (magazines clippings, music video, YouTube ads etc.)
- Examples of alternative activities (soccer, theatre, fencing, volunteering etc.)
- Paper (at least 8x11, bigger preferred)
- Pencils, pens, colored pencils and markers

Activities:**Mini WGS Lesson (10 min)**

Brief overview of Myth One: “If You’ve Got It, Flaunt It”

- Facilitator presents media examples and explains the myth (may use PowerPoint to show examples/clips or highlight key phrases like pseudo empowerment)
- Girls share what they observe and offer examples of the myth (popular TV shows or movies etc.)

Group Discussion (15 min)

Identify feelings of authentic empowerment and discuss engaging in alternative activities to counter limiting representations shown in the media

- Facilitator highlights how girls might feel authentically empowered by engaging in activities they enjoy and by respecting how they feel about various activities
 - “What does real empowerment *feel* like?”
- Facilitator may guide girls to recognize that positive feelings include: feeling, proud, happy, excited, enthusiastic, fulfilled, challenged, passionate etc. Negative feelings may include: overwhelmed, embarrassed, pressured, dread, upset etc.
 - “Authentically empowering activities are those you feel positively about. What are positive feelings you could have about an activity?”
 - “Activities you do not like, or (pseud) empowering activities are those you feel negatively about. What are negative feelings you could have about an activity?”
- Emphasize that individuals have different feelings and preferences towards certain activities. All feelings are okay and valid. Authentically empowered girls respect their feelings and preferences, and those of others.
- Show examples of alternative activities and girls brainstorm more
 - “What activities do you are proud of or have fun participating in?”
 - “Do you feel authentically empowered by doing “x”” (Question with both pseudo empowering activities and alternative activities)
 - Notice and respect girls’ differing answers.
Facilitators could ask the girls to create a list of activities that make them feel good vs. activities that they do not enjoy. This could lead the group to talk about why they don't enjoy certain activities potentially leading to a deeper sense of what they authentically enjoy vs. those that they are maybe encouraged to participate in, but don't necessarily enjoy.

Authentically Empowering Feelings and Activities (15 min)

Notice positive feelings to identify authentically empowering activities

- On a sheet of paper, girls make a table with five columns and at least four rows

- Next to each activity, girls write down what they feel before, during, and after that activity as well as if the experience is positive or negative overall
- Girls independently fill out the table to identify how they feel about activities
- Activities that feel positive overall help girls identify which are authentically empowering for them personally
- See example below:

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Feeling Before</u>	<u>Feeling During</u>	<u>Feeling After</u>	<u>Overall Feeling</u>
Surfing	Dread	Stressed	Embarrassed	Negative
Dancing	Excited	Challenged	Happy	Positive

If there is time, move on to extended activity:

- On the back or on a new sheet of paper, have girls draw a picture of their authentically empowered self, participating in their authentically empowering activities or with suggesting drawings or words. (A girl next to a piano or computer or a girl volunteering etc.)
- Around the picture, girls write down the positive feelings they associate with feeling authentically empowered. May include “excited, challenged, happy” or more creative phrases like “fierce, on top of the world, kick it up, on fire etc.)
- Share as a group

Lesson #2**Myth Two: “Anatomy of a Sex Goddess”****Overview:**

The second myth advises girls to reach (pseudo) empowerment by achieving the paradoxically “voluptuously thin” body, and if they fail to reach this body, they must do everything in their power to “fix” themselves. This myth defines girls’ empowerment through consumption practices. **Girls might challenge beauty norms of (pseudo) empowerment if they build a strong body image.** (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To understand how the media defines girls’ empowerment through consumption practices
- To cultivate a healthy body image

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Examples of “Anatomy of a Sex Goddess” Myth (magazines, beauty product commercials)
- Open and clear space to move

Activities:**Mini WGS Lesson (10 min)**

Brief overview of Myth Two: “Anatomy of a Sex Goddess”

- Facilitator presents media examples and explains the myth (may use PowerPoint to show examples/clips or highlight key phrases like pseudo empowerment)
- Girls share what they observe and offer examples of the myth (popular TV shows or movies etc.)

Group Discussion (10 min)

Discuss how media makes us feel about our bodies- may focus on magazine ads

Guide girls to understand that feeling positive about engaging with beauty practices helps to cultivate and maintain a health body image, which can be authentically empowering

- Guide girls through media analysis
 - What do you think the magazine ads are trying to accomplish?
 - Who is developing and paying for the magazine ads?
 - Who is being shown and/or represented in the magazine ads?
 - How do you feel about your body after looking at a fashion magazine?
What is your response to the fashion magazine? What does it make you think about? What does the magazine motivate you to do?
- Question girls about their thought process as they look at magazines. Allow conversation to flow to support their medial literacy skills development
- Facilitator may refer to the previous lesson, “If You’ve Got It, Flaunt It,” and the analysis of positive or negative feelings to supplement this discussion
 - Consider make up ads.
 - Do you use make up because its fun and makes you feel good?
(these may be positive feelings)
 - Or because you are trying to hide something you feel insecure about? (may be negative feelings)
 - Consider clothing ads.
 - Do you feel inspired by the artistic expression or fashionable trends of cloths? Do you enjoy putting outfits together? Is it fun to keep up with fashion trends?
(These may be positive feelings)
 - Do you feel pressure to have the perfect outfit or designer brands?
Do you feel jealous of the magazine models’ bodies?
(These may be negative feelings)
- Highlight how the beauty industry and reading magazines is not inherently negative. The key point for girls to reach here is the significance of identifying *how they feel* when they engage with the media.

- Connect authentic empowerment to engaging with the media and the beauty world. Guide girls to make the connection between authentic empowerment and feeling positive about engaging with the media.
 - How do you think a girl who is authentically empowered engages with the media/reads magazine ads/the beauty industry?
 - If you are reading a magazine and feel motivated to try out the new make up technique or are inspired to try some bold new accessories or haircut style, do you feel authentically empowered?

Movement Exercise (10 min)

Girls explore what feels good in their bodies and how to cultivate a healthy body image through movement

- “Mill” around the room (Neutral walking with soft focus)
- Girls adjust as instructions are called out
 - Explore different Walks (facilitator may call out suggests on body parts to lead with, for instance lead with your shoulders, now with you forehead, lead with your chest etc. Have girls notice which walks feel more empowering to them)
 - Explore different postures (facilitator may call out theatrical suggestions like walk like a prince or walk like pauper etc)
 - Have girls walk around the room making strong eye contact with one another. Urge them to just notice how this feels for them (uncomfortable, intimidating, exciting, powerful?)
 - Explore gestures and/or still poses that feel good. Facilitator may call out examples:
 - Gestures- cross your arms, have your arms by your sides, put your hands in your pockets, reach up to the sky etc.
 - Positions- like stand with your hand on your hips, or stand with your feet planted to the ground, stand with your weight on one foot and lean into your hip etc..
 - Continue various movements and pedestrians gestures

- Ask girls to notice how they feel in these different gestures or positions. Encourage girls to observe what feels more authentically empowering to them.
- Check in with the group by sitting in a circle and sharing experiences
 - Initial thoughts on that activity?
 - Did it help you notice how to connect feelings of empowerment to your body?
 - How does this movement exercise connect to cultivating a healthy body image?
 - What can you take away from this activity?

Lesson #3**Myth Three: “Pretty Babies”****Overview:**

The third myth arises from gender norms framed with clever rhetoric of sexiness and (pseudo) empowerment. It suggests “ideal female sexuality is youthful, or even childlike.” Thus, it is crucial look at mainstream media to highlight how gender expectations restrict authentic empowerment. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To criticize and resist limiting gender expectations
- To call out limiting representations of girls in the media
- To advocate for more well-rounded representations of girls that are authentically empowered in the media

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Examples of “Pretty Babies” Myth (magazines clippings, music video, YouTube ads)
- Paper, Envelopes
- Pencils, pens, colored pencils and markers
- Access to at least one computer or iPad with internet

Activities:**Mini WGS Lesson (10 min)**

Brief overview of Myth Three “Pretty Babies”

- Facilitator presents media examples and explains the myth (may use PowerPoint to show examples/clips or highlight key phrases like pseudo empowerment)
- Girls share what they observe and offer examples of the myth (popular TV shows or movies, celebrity figures, popular retail store advertisements etc.)

Group Discussion (10 min)

Discuss popular ads, TV, movies that pigeon hole girls into this one representation

- What popular shows or media examples have you noticed reinforce these limiting representations of girlhood?
- Which characters do you think embody this myth?
- How do characters portray this myth? (clothing, dialogue, behaviors?)
- What patterns of this myth do you see in the media?

Do you see them mimicked by people in your own life? (at school, at parties?)

Take Action: Letter-Writing Workshop (15 min)

Advocate for media representations of girls who are authentically empowered

Facilitator shifts the educational lesson into a transformative workshop that provides girls with the opportunity to engage in activism by writing to media producers

- Girls brainstorm depictions of empowered girls that they think are lacking in the media. Facilitator may guide girls to address a lack of minority, LGBTQIA+, age range representation in the media, as well as other concerns. Allow girls to feed off of each other to organically figure out what kind of representations of girls they would like to see in the media
- Discuss how to reach out to the media in order to make effective change.
 - What people do you reach out to? (Magazine editors, T.V. Channel producers)
 - What do you think is important to say in these letters?
 - Would it be helpful to have multiple people sign your letter, or have many letters sent out?
 - Allow girls to develop their critical thinking and problem solving skills here.
- Girls draft letters to magazine editors or television programming networks
Use templates to learn how to structure the complaint or feedback letter
- Swap letters with a friend and give feedback

- In small groups, research applicable online contacts
Resource examples: <http://abc.go.com/feedback>,
<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2010/10/14/contact-us/>.
- Facilitator congratulates the girls' work and celebrates their engagement in local activism!

Lesson #4**Myth Four: “Violence is Sexy”****Overview:**

The fourth myth strengthens the “persistent linkage of violence and girls’ sexual objectification” and encourages and normalizes domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of violence against women and girls. Girls may reframe authentic empowerment as countering violence against women and girls. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To challenge the connection between violence and girls’ sexual objectification
- To gain the tools to confront violence against women and girls on a daily basis

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Examples of “Violence is Sexy” Myth (advertisements, YouTube videos, movie posters)

Activities:**Mini WGS Lesson (20 min)**

Brief overview of Myth Four “Violence is Sexy”

- Distinguish between forms of violence against women (sexual assault, rape, domestic abuse etc.)
- Learn tactics to make a convincing and powerful argument in a calm manner
 - Assertive voice and confident body language
- Emphasize the importance of safety and personal comfort levels in confronting situations

Group Discussion (10-15 min)

- What questions do you have about this topic?
- What do you know about violence against women and girls?

- Do you see “Sexy Violence” in the media?
- Do you think that media messages of sexy violence encourage or normalize different forms of violence? (like domestic abuse, rape culture, cat-calling etc.)

Role Play (10-15 min)

Girls participate in this role-play activity to learn how to challenge violence against women and girls in everyday situations and practice those conversations as local activism. Emphasize that violence against women and girls are challenging topics and that it is important to respect each other and be gentle with yourself during this exercise.

- Girls improvise suggested scenarios:
 - How to interject when people talk positively about rape culture in a movie or T.V. show
 - How to respond when someone makes a rape joke and suggests “feminists should have a sense of humor”
- Girls come up with their own scenarios.
 - Facilitator prompts the group for suggestions to build the scenario and asks for volunteers to improve the scene.

Encourage girls to be creative and specific. Enjoy some theatre improve.

- What media are we talking about here?
Music video? T.V. Show? Commercial?
- Where does this scene take place?
Cafeteria, on a school bus, at the movie theatre, at Disney Land?
- Who is involved? (Three boys and a girl who are classmates, two sisters and their male cousin, three girl friends and a stranger standing next to each other in line etc.)
- What is the “Sexy Violence” concern in this scene?
Girls come up with their own examples
- Make sure to conclude the role-play activity with a check in discussion with the group.
 - What are your initial thoughts on after those scenarios?
 - How did you see girls combatting their nerves or pressure?

- What did you notice ‘work’, or ‘didn’t work’? (This could be the tactics and ways girls tried to talk about the issue, or how girls removed themselves if the situation was feeling too intense, whatever is appropriate to reflect on the improved scenarios)
- Highlight that these conversations are challenging and practicing these moments are helpful tools to prepare for real life moments and to improve self-confidence.
- Facilitator congratulates girls on their practice of confronting violence against women and encourages them to take pride in their local activism.
- Emphasize that the workshop covered a lot of challenging material and if any other concerns or feelings come up about the activities, girls may reach out to the facilitator or another trusted adult to talk more about these topics.

Lesson #4 Extended Workshop on Activism: Take Action

Myth Four: “Violence is Sexy”

Overview:

This workshop builds on the Lesson Four. Girls continue the lesson through a transformative approach and learn how to take action in their local community as activists. Educates girls how to engage as activists to end violence against girls and women in their community. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To question and critique gender expectations and limiting representations of sexuality
- To advocate for more well-rounded representations of girls that are authentically empowered in the media

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Magazine examples of “showing off” or a music video example
- Magazine clippings highlighting various activities (playing soccer, being with friends, volunteering)

Activities:

Review of Mini WGS Lesson (10 min)

Review of Myth Four “Violence is Sexy”

- Distinguish between forms of violence against women (sexual assault, rape, domestic abuse etc.)
- Learn tactics to make a convincing and powerful argument in a calm manner
 - Assertive voice and confident body language
- Emphasize the importance of safety and personal comfort levels in confronting situations

New discussion of Activism

- Learn about local activism and feminism
- Overview of effective tactics of activism using Alison Brysk's Framework in *Speaking Rights to Power: Constructing Political Will*
 - Human agency
 - Solidarity
 - Difference
 - Self-Awareness
 - Global Power politics

Group Discussion (5 min)

Discuss thoughts on activist efforts to combat violence against women and girls

- What do you think?
- How do you feel about activism and feminism? Does it feel unfamiliar? Exciting? Nerve raking?

Take Action (30 min)

How to take action and challenge limiting representations of girls in the media

- Brainstorm different types of campaigns and strategies girls would like to see happen at their school, organization or in their local area.
- Discuss ideas and tactics (campaigns, activist events, raising awareness etc)
- Girls break up into small groups to organize and implement a campaign.
- Facilitator may suggest campaigns like
 - T-shirt event at school in which girls, boys, teachers and admin wear shirts in solidarity with the campaign's hashtag or catch-phrase to raise awareness
 - Social media campaign that urges students to tweet with the campaign's hashtag exposing harmful lyrics in songs or lines in movies and linking said media

- Poster campaign in front of grocery stores, malls or other community centers where girls hold signs with facts about violence against women next to images from relevant TV shows or music videos, possibly pressing the community to boycott a certain show or song.
- Girls are encouraged to think creatively about how to take action and lead an organized activist event in their community.
- Emphasize that these conversations prepare girls to engage in their local community and urge others to think critically about the connection between violence, sexiness and (pseudo) empowerment.

Wrap up discussion

- Guide girls to discuss how they feel authentically empowered to advocate for healthier depictions of women and girls in the media.

Lesson #5**Myth Five: “What Boys Like”****Overview:**

The fifth myth suggests that ultimately, all girls share the same purpose: to appeal to men and boys. This myth invalidates girls’ well-rounded interests, goals, and lifestyles independent of men, and consequently reinforces gender inequality. Additionally, it strengthens heteronormative privilege and silences all LGBTQIA+ experiences and discussion. This practice is problematic because girls are encouraged to incessantly consider male preferences, as opposed to following their own desires or goals. Suggesting that girls’ lives revolve around men and boys strips them of their agency and authentic empowerment. The societal expectation that girls focus their attention on boys reinforces a patriarchal dynamic, where girls feel inferior to boys and thus perpetuates systematic gender inequality. (35-45 min)

Objectives:

- To identify authentic empowerment by seeing one’s value outside of another person’s approval
- To advocate for gender equality overall

Materials:

- White board or poster for instructor to write on
- Paper and pens for writing activity
- Disney Princess pictures or video clips
- Magazine examples that show girls’ catering to “the male gaze” or focusing themselves on men and boys

Activities:**Mini WGS Lesson (7-10 min)**

Brief overview of Myth Five “What Boys Like”

- Facilitator presents media examples and explains the myth (may use PowerPoint to show examples/clips or highlight key phrases like pseudo empowerment)

- Girls share what they observe and offer examples of the myth (popular TV shows or movies, celebrity figures, popular retail store advertisements etc.)

Group Discussion (10 min)

Disney Princess Examples (Questions adapted from Durham)

- Why does she worry about what the prince thinks?
- Why doesn't the prince worry about what she thinks?
- Does he like her because she's pretty or because she's smart and kind?

Other media examples and discussion points

- What does this media example imply about girls' interests?
- What is the girl focusing on and/or aiming for in this example?
- What do these media example say about girls and boys relationships?
- Does this media influence how you think about boys?
- Do you think the media influences how boys think about girls?
- What experiences are missing from the media? LGBTQIA? Minorities? Boy and Girl friendships?

Explore Independent Sense of Self: Journal Activity (5-7 min)

Girls explore their authentically empowered sense of self and consider their independence extraneous of validation from another person.

- Girls journal and write down their thoughts after this discussion.
- Facilitator encourages girls think of this as a free write and journal session, to explore and honestly think about how they identify their sense of self
- Facilitator may prompt girls to:
 - Identify personal characteristics or goals that embody their sense of self.
 - Reflect on moments in the past where they were proud of themselves and when they felt authentically empowered

Gender Equality (15-20 min)

Everyone can work together for gender equality; advocating for equal rights is an

authentically empowering experience and fulfilling way to engage with others in the public sphere.

- Discuss opportunities for daily positive change including how girls can work effectively with boys (school, group projects, sports teams etc.)
- Brainstorm tactics to bring boys and girls together as allies in order to advocate for gender equality
- Identify ways girls and boys to work together towards gender equality
- If time, discuss and organize campaigns or other forms of local activism that could be implemented, similar to the previous activist extended workshop

Additional Facilitator Resources:**Ensemble Building Activity: Compliments****Overview:**

Ensemble Building Activity (5-15 minutes)

Often, compliments are exclusively about girls' looks or clothes. So this activity encourages girls to support each other and applaud each other for authentically empowered reasons. The group will notice and compliment each other on qualities that are not focused on physical appearance.

Objectives:

- To practice supporting each other and noticing each other's awesome qualities in an authentic way
- To combat the notion of pseudo empowerment by noticing alternative qualities about each other

Materials:

- Energy

Activities:

- All girls sit in a circle
- Facilitator emphasizes the objectives and overview of the activity
- Each girl and facilitator goes one by one to compliment another person in the group. Facilitators and any teaching assistants be mindful of who is being complimented, so to compliment other girls and make sure everyone has a fair share of attention and compliments sent their way.
- Compliments may include reflections or comments on:
 - a girl's work ethic through out an activity
 - a girls' focus in a specific activity
 - how a girl handled a challenging moment
 - how a girl showed compassion or was especially inclusive etc.

Ensemble Building Activity: Pulse Check

Overview:

Ice Breaker (30 seconds-2 minutes)

Objectives:

- To welcome girls
- To have everyone 'land' in the room and have their voices heard

Materials:

- Energy

Activities:

Go around the circle and respond with the first thing that comes to mind from the prompt:

- My name is...
- I love to ...
- I feel confident when I...
- Right now I am feeling...
- Today I am looking forward to/excited about...
- Something I took away from today was...

Ensemble Building Activity: The Nautilus – Shell (Also known as “Essence”)

Overview:

Ensemble Building Activity

(10 minutes minimum per round, depending on how many girls are in the circle)

Objectives:

- To get to know each other better in a fun and creative way

Materials:

- Energy

Activities:

- All players sit in a circle
- Facilitator chooses someone to be “The Nautilus” or a girl may volunteer
- The Nautilus silently and independently picks another girl in the circle to be “The Shell” but does not tell anyone who the Shell is
- The group tries to figure out who the Shell is by asking the Nautilus questions
- Go one by one down the girl, and girls ask the Nautilus questions about the essence of who the Shell is
- Encourage girls to be creative and have fun with their questions. Sample questions include:
 - “If the shell/this girl was a holiday, which holiday would she be?”
 - “If the shell/this girl was a type of flower, which flower would she be?”
 - If the shell/this girl was a food, which food would she be?”
- Questions continue around the circle until everyone has asked a question, or when someone guesses who the Shell is

Ensemble Building Activity: Object Exchange

Overview:

Ice Breaker

(time ranges drastically depending on how much time is spent mingling/introductions and how many girls are in the group. For a group of twenty girls, anticipate 30-40 minutes. 5 minutes of explanation and set up, 5 minutes mingling, 20-30 minutes introducing each other's objects)

Objectives:

- To welcome girls
- To get to know each other better in a fun and creative way
- To practice active listening and public speaking

Materials:

- Energy
- Personal objects

The facilitator may decide to tell girls in advance about the activity and to bring an object or, girls can just use any personal object that they happen to have with them. If told in advance, girls may bring an object that is significant to them personally, or represents their empowerment or shows that they are empowered in some way.

Activities:

- Girls introduce themselves in pairs by explaining the story behind their personal object.
 - For example, Amanda and Cathy meet each other:
 - “Hi I’m Amanda and my object is this swim team trophy and it’s a funny story because the day my team won the award we were late to the meet

and...”

-“Hi I’m Cathy and this is my ballet shoe. I have been dancing since I was four and I want to dance in college so I am auditioning...”

- After the introduction, the girls then swap objects.
- Girls proceed to meet other girls and introduce themselves to each other, but the girls tell the story of the previous girls’ object and emphasizes who the object belongs to.
 - For example, Amanda meets Olivia, tells her about Cathy’s object and then gives Cathy’s object to Olivia

“Hi Olivia, I’m Amanda. This is Cathy’s swim team trophy and on the day she won it, her team and her were late....”
- Let introductions and object swaps go on for 2-3 introductions/object swaps.
- Once the group is back in a circle, girls one by one introduce the girl whose object she has.
- For instance, “Hi everyone, I’m Olivia and I have Cathy’s swim team trophy and it’s funny because she got it for being late to a swim meet...”
- Often, the stories will be changed and the activity turns into a warped version of telephone, while introducing and getting to know each other
- Girls keep introducing one another until everyone is introduced and their objects are returned.

Ensemble Building Activity: Love Tap

Overview:

Ensemble Building Activity (5-15 minutes)

Objectives:

- To get to know each other better in a fun and creative way

Materials:

- Energy

Activities:

- All players sit in a circle
- Facilitator chooses 2-3 girls to go into the middle
- Girls sitting in the circle close their eyes
- Girls in the middle “Love Tap” someone, using two fingers on their shoulder, depending on the facilitator’s prompt, and then sits back down
- Facilitator calls out prompts, for example:
 - “Tap a girl/friend who makes you smile”
 - “Tap a girl/friend who you want to get to know better”
 - “Tap a girl/friend who you admire”
- Once everyone is sitting back down, facilitator tells the girls who were just tapped to open their eyes and come into the middle of the circle
- Facilitator repeats and continues until the end of the activity

Ensemble Building Activity: “I like my neighbor who...”

Overview:

Ensemble Building Activity (5-10 minutes)

Objectives:

- To warm up our bodies
- To get to know each other better in a fun and creative way

Materials:

- Chairs for each person
However, if there are not enough chairs, activity can be done just standing up in a circle. Places may be marked with tape, or players can be aware of the last person to join the circle or find a space is the new person in the middle
- Energy

Activities:

- Set up a circle of chairs with one less chair per the amount of people
(If there are 20 girls, set out 19 chairs)
- Have one person start in the middle and say “I like my neighbors who...” and finish the prompt with something that they like to do. (I like my neighbors who... loves cats, who’s favorite dessert is chocolate, who has never left the country etc.)
- Facilitator may encourage girls to theme their ideas, for instance, activities that feel authentically empowering, or hobbies that are connected to confidence etc. (I like my neighbors who...love computer programing, who have run for student government, who sticks up for LGBTQIA rights etc.)
- All the girls who agree with the statement have to get up and safely find a new chair to sit in
- The person left in the middle without a chair is the next person in the middle.