

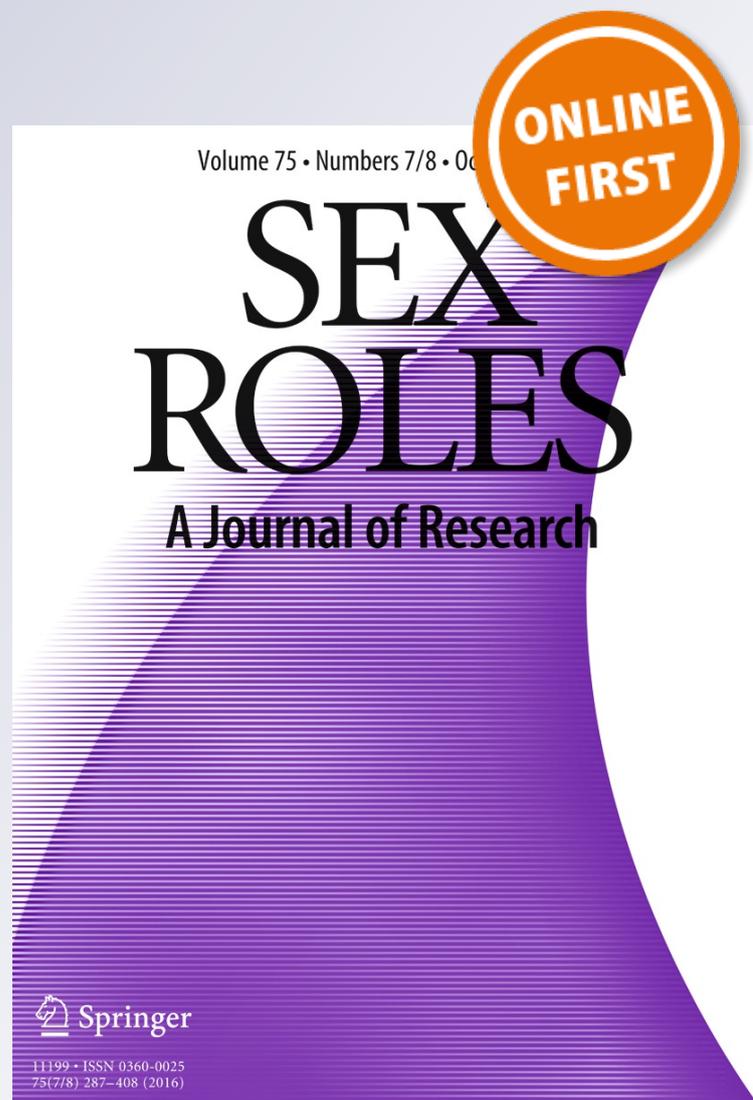
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# Sexualization in U.S. Latina and White Girls' Preferred Children's Television Programs

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**Abstract** Sexualization is associated with negative mental and physical health consequences for girls. Media exposure, particularly television (TV), is a pervasive source of sexualizing messages yet little work has quantified sexualization in children's media, particularly in media popular with minority youth. The current research examines the prevalence of sexualization in children's TV programs popular among U.S. Latina and White girls aged 6 to 11 through a quantitative content analysis of 32 episodes from the ten most popular children's TV series. Results indicated that sexualization was present in every coded episode, with at least three instances present per episode, and a combined total of 770 instances across all episodes. Female characters were more commonly portrayed in a sexualized manner than were male characters and were sexualized in 72 % of instances. Characters of color were generally sexualized at the same rate as White characters. Although sexualized clothing was the most common form of sexualization in the children's programs, a broad range of sexualizing content was present. Instances of sexualization included sexualizing comments, body exposure, self-sexualizing physical behaviors and activities, sexualizing physical behaviors toward others, verbal and physical

objectification, and body/appearance modification. These findings suggest that sexualization is present in children's media popular among both Latina and White girls and that identifying means to counter this influence should be a priority.

**Keywords** Content analysis · Children's media · Latina girls · Sexualization · Mass media · Objectification

Evidence shows that sexualization is associated with significant negative consequences for girls including mental health disorders, low self-esteem, body image issues, and impaired cognitive performance (American Psychological Association [APA] Task Force Report on the Sexualization of Girls 2007). Exposure to sexualizing media in particular has been found to predict intercourse initiation (Martino et al. 2006) and dating violence victimization (Raiford et al. 2007) in young women and it is associated with greater acceptance of dating violence and sexual harassment among youth and adults (APA 2007). *Sexualization* occurs when a person's value or worth is primarily linked to his or her sexual appeal, sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person, a person is sexually objectified, or a person is held to narrow standards of beauty that equate attractiveness with sexiness (APA 2007).

The sexualization of girls and women occurs on multiple levels, including through interpersonal interactions and dominant popular culture often shared via media. Media with sexualizing content is perhaps the most pervasive source of sexualization in the United States and includes television (TV) programs, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, video games, and the internet, among others (APA 2007). Latinas (and other women of color) are more commonly portrayed in a sexualized manner in popular media than are White women (Lacroix 2004; Rivadeneira and Ward 2005). The extent of sexualizing content within mainstream media is

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largely unknown, yet with high media exposure rates among children, even low proportions of sexualizing content may have substantial effects. Children are exposed to an average of 10 h and 45 min per day of media, an increase of more than 2 h daily since 2004 (Rideout et al. 2010). The hours viewed per day equates to over 3900 h per year, which is more than the time a child spends in school. TV viewing remains the dominant media exposure among children and adolescents ages 8–18, who watch an average of 4.5 h per day. Thus despite the new media landscape facing today's children, TV remains the dominant source of daily media exposure and yet very little is known regarding the presence of sexualizing content in popular TV.

### The Role of Ethnicity

Research suggests that Latinas may be particularly vulnerable to messages of sexualization in media for a number of reasons. First, Latino/a (and Black) children watch significantly more TV than White children do on average, with Latino/as watching almost 5.5 h per day on average compared with White children, who watch approximately 3.5 h per day on average (Rideout et al. 2010). Second, exposure to mainstream Spanish-language TV in the United States is associated with greater acceptance of traditional gender roles (Rivadeneira and Ward 2005) in part because the content of Spanish-language TV has been shown to reinforce stereotypical gender roles (Rivadeneira 2011; Fullerton and Kendrick 2000). Third, research based on cultivation theory has demonstrated that Latino/as who view English-language television are likely to accept the negative, stereotyped portrayals of Latino/a characters as real (Mastro and Tukachinsky 2012; Ortiz and Behm-Morawitz 2015). Finally, Latina characters in mainstream media are often marginalized and sexualized in a centuries-old process of “exoticizing” or “tropicalizing” Latinas (Guzman and Valdivia 2004). Guzman and Valdivia (2004) present an analysis of Latina characters who are a part of modern U.S. culture, including Salma Hayek, Frida Kahlo, and Jennifer Lopez. Their analysis demonstrates the recurring manner in which these women are portrayed, by “a tradition that serves to position Latinas as continual foreigners and a cultural threat” (p. 217), characterized as exotic, overly sexual, and foreign.

Research on the impact of exposure to sexualized media among Latina viewers is limited yet studies available on the topic have found that sexualization in media appears to affect Latinas at least as much as White girls and women. Martino et al. (2006) found no significant differences among White, Black, and Latino/a adolescents in their study's longitudinal association of exposure to sexually degrading music with intercourse initiation. Longitudinal research has indicated that young Latina women who watch more mainstream TV

experience decreases in positive body image over time whereas young Latina women who watch more Black-oriented TV experience an increase in body satisfaction over time (Schooler 2008). Disordered eating, which is associated with exposure to sexualized media (APA 2007) disproportionately affects Latina adolescents, who demonstrate higher rates of weight loss efforts (Neumark-Sztainer et al. 2002) and higher lifetime prevalence of binge eating episodes (Marques et al. 2011) than White adolescents do, although rates of anorexia nervosa have been found to be similar across U.S. ethnic groups (Marques et al. 2011). In addition to negative impacts on body image, prior analyses have revealed that Latino/a characters are underrepresented in popular media (Greenberg and Mastro 2008). This lack of representation may make sexualized portrayals even more impactful. If, for example, a young Latina sees very few Latina characters portrayed in media, and high numbers of these Latinas are portrayed in a sexualized manner, these limited portrayals may more likely be internalized as reality (Greenberg and Mastro 2008).

### Sexualized Media, Identity, and Behavior

The influence of sexualized media on children's identity and behavior has been explained in part through social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986), which identifies the role of modeling on the development of behavior and identity. Young girls' identities are shaped in part by the messages they receive, through media and society, on what it means to be a teenager or woman (Bussey and Bandura 1992; Huston and Wright 1997; Lips 1989). When society's messages typically portray women or girls in sexualized manners, children and adults exposed to these communications will internalize the conceptualization of women as sexualized beings and develop outcome expectancies (e.g., relationship or sexual expectations) based on these perceptions.

Additionally, research on ethnic identity development has found that the presence of characters of their same race or ethnicity on TV reflects, for children, the value of their ethnic/racial group and is used for learning about ethnicity (Greenberg and Mastro 2008). Children seek out role models from TV who are similar in both ethnicity and gender (Greenberg and Mastro 2008) and adopt their gender roles—including physical appearance standards, sexual beliefs and behaviors, and messages of dominance—based on these models (Hust and Brown 2008). The process of media influence on girls' gender identity and body image begins early, with longitudinal research demonstrating a negative influence on body image among girls as young as ages 5 and 6 (Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006). Thus the presence or absence of similar models and the characterization of these models in sexualized terms likely affects children's own developing sense of

self. Latina girls in particular may be faced with even fewer positive role models than other girls given the stereotypical portrayal of “exoticized” Latinas in popular media (Guzman and Valdivia 2004).

### Sexualization in Children’s Media

Some research has examined sexualization of girls through children’s media yet none is known to have examined sexualized content in TV programs popular among Latina girls in particular. Content analyses of other media have revealed clear gender differences in sexualization and increases in sexualizing content over time (Aubrey and Frisby 2011; Hatton and Trautner 2011). Only two known studies have examined sexualization in children’s media (Lacroix 2004) and products (Goodin et al. 2011). Lacroix’s qualitative analysis of heroines from five Disney films revealed that more recent heroines of color (i.e., Jasmine, Pocahontas, and Esmeralda) are more likely to be defined by the sexuality expressed in their physical appearance, dress, and behaviors than are White heroines (i.e., Belle and Ariel). The result is consistent with a theme of exoticizing women of color in adult media (Guzman and Valdivia 2004). Goodin et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative content analysis of girl’s clothing (sizes 4 to 16) in 15 popular stores in the United States. Every item of girls’ clothing on each store’s website over the course of 10 days in June 2010 was coded, for a total of 5666 clothing items. Results indicated that 29 % of girls’ clothing items contained sexualizing characteristics such as being revealing or emphasizing a sexualized body part or containing sexualized writing (e.g., “juicy”) (Goodin et al. 2011). In addition, a content analysis of popular family films (i.e., G-rated films) demonstrated that female characters are grossly underrepresented and are more likely to be portrayed as beautiful compared to male characters (Smith et al. 2010). The scholarly examinations of sexualization in children’s media and popular culture suggest that sexualization is present and may be particularly prevalent among female characters of color, including Latina characters. The underrepresentation of female characters combined with their more sexualized portrayal may increase the internalization of sexualization as normative for young viewers.

A number of content analyses have examined portrayals of gender and race in children’s media beyond sexualization. Baker and Raney’s (2007) content analysis of children’s cartoon superheroes found that female superheroes were underrepresented relative to male characters, and gender-based differences were present, although fewer differences were present than anticipated. Gerding and Signorielli (2014) examined gender-role portrayals in tween TV programs marketed towards male or female young teens. Results demonstrated that female characters were underrepresented only in male-

oriented shows, but they were portrayed in more stereotypical manners than were males (e.g., appearance-oriented portrayals) across all programs. Robinson et al. (2008) explored the portrayals of body weight in children’s TV programming and found that children are exposed to diverse body types in popular programming. However, overweight characters are generally portrayed in relatively marginalized roles.

Additional research has examined the gender and race of characters in popular primetime TV programming. For example, Lauzen et al. (2008) conducted a content analysis of primetime television programs during 2005–2006 programming and found that women were portrayed in more stereotypically female roles (i.e., interpersonally oriented) than were men. Interestingly, programs with female writers were more likely to portray both men and women in interpersonally oriented roles. Mastro and Behm-Morawitz (2005) conducted a content analysis of primetime programming in 2002. Results indicated that Latino/as were significantly underrepresented and more likely to be portrayed in stereotypical roles. Lastly, Signorielli and Bacue (1999) examined primetime programming from the 1960s to the 1990s, coding for careers of male and female characters. The authors found that women have been underrepresented since the 1960s but that there has been an increase in the diversity of female careers portrayed. Lastly, Signorielli (2009) conducted a content analysis of primetime programming from 2000 to 2008 examining representations of race and ethnicity as well as messages of diversity and tolerance. Results revealed that the representation of minority characters decreased during this time period and that there were very few messages related to diversity across primetime programming.

Despite ongoing documentation of sexualization, there is no single operational definition for use in guiding content analyses, and the multifaceted nature of the concept complicates the issue (APA 2007). Sexualization of girls and young women can occur via external influences (e.g., objectifying comments, glances, or other behaviors) and through self-sexualization, which includes behaviors such as monitoring appearances, wearing revealing clothing, and participating in beauty contests. Content analyses have often focused on particular domains of sexualization relevant to the specific type of media under study, such as sexually revealing clothing seen in fashion catalogues (Goodin et al. 2011) or sexual poses in magazine cover photos (Hatton and Trautner 2011). In an analysis of sexualized behavior in 4–10 year-old daughters, Tiggemann and Slater (2014) coded for mothers’ ratings of behaviors such as attention to clothes, use of beauty products, and personal grooming. The authors found that engagement in such behaviors was predictive of poorer well-being among girls (Tiggemann and Slater 2014). Despite the appearance of both self- and other-imposed sexualization in television and movies, we are aware of no study to date that has

examined this wide range of sexualizing content in popular children's television programs.

## The Current Study

Despite a few recent studies on the presence and impact of sexualization in certain media, a number of critical research gaps remain. Very little is currently known regarding sexualization of children's TV programming despite the high number of hours viewed per day by children and despite clear links between exposure to certain themes and adoption of those themes by children (Hust and Brown 2008). Although children are increasingly exposed to additional media channels today, TV viewing remains highly popular. In addition, although Latinas may be particularly vulnerable to sexualizing content in media, no known research to date has examined the content of media most popular among Latinas. Although several negative outcomes associated with exposure to sexualizing media occur during adolescence, the influence of media begins well before adolescence. Research has demonstrated a significant influence of TV on gender identity development among children (Hust and Brown 2008), and viewing of appearance-oriented media is predictive of body image issues in girls as young as 6 years-old (Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006). Given the impact of media on younger girls' gender identity and body image, it is likely that sexualized media also negatively affects young girls. However, no known research to date has documented the presence of sexualizing content in children's TV nor examined at what age sexualizing content begins to influence children. In order to understand influences of childhood exposure to sexualization on developmental outcomes, research is first needed that captures the quantity and nature of this exposure.

The current study thus fills an important gap in knowledge by analyzing the presence of sexualizing content in the most popular children's TV programs viewed by Latina girls aged 6 to 11. Our method was to conduct a content analysis of these TV programs with the goals of describing the characterization and prevalence of sexualization within these programs. We addressed four hypotheses regarding TV programs popular among Latina girls: (a) Female characters will be sexualized more often than male characters will be (Hypothesis 1); (b) Female characters who are Latina, Asian, or Black will be sexualized proportionately more than White characters will be (Hypothesis 2); (c) Given findings of gender portrayals in children's movies (Smith et al. 2010), female characters will be underrepresented in the targeted programs compared to males (Hypothesis 3); and (d) Based on research on adult media (Greenberg and Mastro 2008; National Latino Media Council 2012), Latino/as (regardless of gender) will be underrepresented in these programs compared to White characters (Hypothesis 4).

## Method

### Sample of Children's TV Programs

The sample of children's TV programs selected for analysis were the ten most viewed by a nationally representative sample of 380 Latina girls and 1274 White girls aged 6–11 years-old surveyed during the 2009 and 2010 broadcast seasons. The children surveyed were part of a national consumer study (i.e., Simmons National Consumer Study purchased through <http://www.experian.com/simmons>) that uses random digit dialing to select approximately 2500 participants per year, including English- and Spanish-speaking Latino/as. All children (6–11 years-old) of adult participants were invited to take part in the "kids study" by completing an age-appropriate questionnaire on media habits, product uses, fashion, and more. Children indicated which TV programs, from a list of over 200 children's programs, they had viewed in the past week. After completing the survey, they returned it, along with their other family members' surveys, to the consumer research corporation.

The top 15 programs among Latina and White girls were similar based on this survey and are shown in Table 1. Although these top series were all aired on cable networks, 84 % of U.S. children aged 8–18 have cable/satellite TV in their home (Rideout et al. 2010). The top five programs were identical across ethnicities, although there were differences in relative rankings. TV series were included in the present content analyses if they contained predominantly human characters and if they were a regularly occurring series rather than a special or original movie. As a result, four series were eliminated from the content analysis, leaving 11 eligible series for analysis. A random sample of episodes was then selected for each of the top 10 series of these 11 from all seasons that were released before March 2010 when the survey data were available. We aimed to code a minimum of three episodes per TV program, for a total of 30 episodes, and completed coding on 33 episodes during the project period. All episodes were 30 min programs. Although there is no gold standard in terms of an acceptable number of episodes to sample from a TV series, previous studies have sampled anywhere from 1 to 13 episodes (Manganello et al. 2008). We selected a minimum of three episodes given that we anticipated that instances of sexualization would be somewhat commonly occurring throughout the selected series.

### Coding System

Coding categories were generated through a review of content analyses of sex and sexualization in music videos (Aubrey and Frisby 2011), girls' clothing catalogues (Goodin et al. 2011), primetime TV (Lampman et al. 2002; Parents Television Council 2010; Ward 1995), magazine advertising (Plous and

**Table 1** Most viewed TV programs among U.S. Latina and White Girls

	Ranks for		Show	% of Latinas	% of White	OR
	Latinas	Whites				
1	3		The Suite Life of Zack & Cody <sup>a</sup>	66.3 %	61.6 %	1.23
2	2		iCarly <sup>a</sup>	63.9 %	66.8 %	.88
3	1		Hannah Montana <sup>a</sup>	59.7 %	67.2 %	.72
4	5		SpongeBob Square Pants	59.6 %	55.9 %	1.16
5	4		The Suite Life on Deck <sup>a</sup>	59.3 %	56.1 %	1.14
6	7		Disney Channel Original Movies	53.8 %	52.2 %	1.07
7	8		Phineas & Ferb <sup>a</sup>	53.6 %	51.7 %	1.08
8	9		Wizards of Waverly Place <sup>a</sup>	49.0 %	50.9 %	.93
9	12		Tom & Jerry	48.3 %**	34.2 %	1.80
10	6		Drake & Josh <sup>a</sup>	46.2 %	52.3 %	.78
11	10		Fairly OddParents <sup>a</sup>	43.1 %	44.3 %	.95
12	14		Cory in the House <sup>a</sup>	42.3 %*	32.9 %	1.50
13	16		That's So Raven <sup>a</sup>	42.2 %**	28.7 %	1.81
14	17		Penguins of Madagascar	37.8 %**	26.3 %	1.70
15	19		True Jackson	35.4 %*	25.3 %	1.62

$n = 380$  Latina girls,  $n = 1274$  White girls. Programs are rank-ordered based on percentage of Latina viewers in the past week. Proportion of viewers significantly different across samples were compared with Chi-square tests. OR is odds ratio of Latina girls viewing show relative to White girls

<sup>a</sup> indicates show was included in final analysis

\* $p < .01$ . \*\* $p < .001$

Neptune 1997), and maternal reports of other sexualizing behavior among girls (Tiggemann and Slater 2014). In addition, categories were generated based on APA's's (2007) task force report and by observations of behaviors portrayed by characters in a pilot study of episodes from the top ten programs not selected for inclusion in the final sample as well as programs airing on children's cable network channels in fall 2011. Coding item generation was guided by a goal of being overly inclusive (Clark and Watson 1995) to include all possible content that may be related to intrapersonal and interpersonal sexualization. As a result, 65 content categories or items related to ten general themes were created, which are detailed in Table 2. In addition to these 65 items, research assistants coded 16 more items reflecting positive youth activities (e.g., school involvement) and healthy romantic relationships (e.g., mutual respect), for a total of 81 items. These 16 additional items are not reported here.

Of these ten themes, five were associated with self-sexualization, including wearing sexualized clothing, body exposure, sexual bodily/physical behaviors, body/appearance modification, and sexualized career/hobby-related behaviors. The remaining five themes captured interpersonal sexualization including objectifying behaviors, physically sexualizing behaviors, sexualizing statements about the body, sexualizing statements about attractiveness or relationships in general, and sexual innuendo or harassment (see Table 2 for detail). Items were coded as 0 (*not present*), 1 (*present once*), 2

(*present twice*), 3 (*present three times*), and 4 (*present four or more times*). In addition, coders documented each instance of sexualization across each item regarding demographic status (gender, sexual orientation, approximate age, race, and ethnicity) for both the character who received (i.e., the recipient or target) as well as the character who delivered (i.e., the source) the sexualizing comment or behavior. For the majority of the self-sexualizing behaviors, the target and source were the same individual. Categories such as sexualized clothing that could repeat across multiple scenes (e.g., a character wears the same outfit across scenes) were only coded once within an episode. If demographic variables were unclear to coders for characters within a particular show, coders gathered information on the characters (not actors) from websites related to the TV series in question. For example, Latino/a characters were coded based on website descriptions of the characters as Mexican American (e.g., Teresa of Wizards of Waverly Place) or other Latino/a (e.g., Esteban of The Suite Life on Deck, from Peru).

### Coder Training

Seven research assistants (RAs) received 24 h of training in eight 3-h group sessions and completed 12 h of individual practice, for a total of 36 h of training before data collection began. Reliability was examined on the 81 items (16 of which do not capture sexualization) from episodes not included in

**Table 2** Total prevalence of sexualizing items

Behavior category	Total frequency	Average # per episode (0–4 scale)	Total # female characters	Total # male characters	Chi-square–test's <i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
1. Clothing						
1. Reveals/exposes sexualized body part (chest, waist/pelvis, buttocks, upper legs, back)	133	2.94	122	11		
2. Emphasizes sexualized body part (i.e., chest, waist/pelvis, butt, upper legs) by being tight	23	.69	16	7		
3. Made of lingerie-like material or corset/underwear appearance	1	.03	1	0		
4. Features animal print	7	.22	6	1		
5. Underwear/Bathing suit	30	.81	10	20		
6. High heel/platform shoes	92	2.06	90	2		
7. Fishnet tights	5	.16	5	0		
8. Writing with sexual content (flirt, hottie, etc.)	0	0	0	0		
9. Adult woman dressed sexily in child's clothing	0	0	0	0		
Total	291		250	41	< .001	.70
2. Body Exposure						
10. Partial Nudity; Includes views of buttocks and unintentional views of body, rather than clothes that are revealing	13	.41	2	11		
11. Full Nudity	0	0	0	0		
12. Implied Full Nudity (e.g., standing behind shower curtain)	2	.06	0	2		
Total	15		2	13	.05	.36
3. Bodily/Physical Behaviors						
13. Behaviors to elicit arousal or be sexually alluring; physical forms of flirting	22	.47	20	2		
14. Seductive dancing	2	.06	2	0		
15. Animal-type behaviors (crawling, growling, purring)	28	.72	19	9		
16. Acting as though a trophy, prize, or decorative object	0	0	0	0		
Total	52		41	11	< .001	.60
4. Body/Appearance Modification						
17. Plastic Surgery	1	.03	1	0		
18. Tanning	4	.13	0	4		
19. Fake nails/manicure/pedicure	38	1.13	38	0		
20. Cologne	0	0	0	0		
21. Hair extensions	2	.06	1	1		
22. Fake eyelashes	0	0	0	0		
23. Fake teeth/whitening/modifications to teeth	0	0	0	0		
24. Hair removal	0	0	0	0		
25. Hair dying/styling/cutting or unnatural color	34	1.00	28	6		
26. Spa treatments	3	.09	2	1		
27. Breath spray/breath mint	1	.03	0	1		

**Table 2** (continued)

Behavior category	Total frequency	Average # per episode (0–4 scale)	Total # female characters	Total # male characters	Chi-square–test's <i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
28. Heavy make-up on young girl/preteen	23	.47	23	0		
29. Lying about age	0	0	0	0		
30. Body/appearance monitoring	29	.88	19	10		
31. Weight monitoring, excessive exercise, dieting, disordered eating	0	0	0	0		
32. Tattoos	0	0	0	0		
33. Padded bras	2	.06	1	1		
34. Mole removal	0	0	0	0		
35. Sweat control	1	.03	0	1		
Total	138		113	25	< .001	.64
5. Career/Work/Hobby-related behaviors						
36. Participation in beauty pageant	6	.16	5	1		
37. Participation in other beauty contests (homecoming, prom)	0	0	0	0		
38. Modeling	0	0	0	0		
39. Exotic dancing/stripping/prostitution/other sex work	0	0	0	0		
40. Other performance-related occupation where appearance is emphasized (e.g., singer, cheerleader, beauty product salesperson, background dancer)	102	2.00	63	39		
Total	108		68	40	< .001	.36
6. Objectifying Behaviors						
41. Move, reposition, grab, place things on, throw, or otherwise physically treat character as a physical object rather than person	57	1.56	19	38		
42. Refer to other person as trophy/prize/decorative or other object or animal; refer to person by single attribute rather than name	10	.31	10	0		
43. Manipulating/tricking or attempting to manipulate/trick a person into a romantic relationship	7	.22	6	1		
Total	74		35	39	< .01	.14
7. Physically Sexualizing Behaviors						
44. Leering, ogling, staring, raising eyebrows, jaw dropping suggestively; "Checking out" someone	10	.31	7	3		
45. Catcalling, whistling, other verbal comments such as "yum" or "nice"	2	.06	2	0		
46. Unwanted sexual touching, kissing, hugging, caressing, or fondling, pinching, brushing up against in sexual way	4	.13	1	3		
47. Unwanted sexual gesturing (e.g. licking one's lips or grinding hips in a suggestive manner)	3	.09	1	2		
Total	19		11	8	.07	.29
8. Sexualizing statements about the body/weight/appearance/age						
48. Comments about weight/weight loss/fatness/thinness/eating/dieting	7	.25	4	3		
49. Comments about puberty development	0	0	0	0		
50. Comments about particular body parts	13	.41	5	8		

**Table 2** (continued)

Behavior category	Total frequency	Average # per episode (0–4 scale)	Total # female characters	Total # male characters	Chi-square–test's <i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
51. Comments about age, appearing young, being young, the importance of looking young	5	.16	0	5		
52. Comments about hotness, attractiveness, beauty, or evaluative comments about appearance	33	1.00	18	15		
53. Statements encouraging person to dress sexy	1	.03	1	0		
Total	59		28	31	.13	.14
9. Sexualizing statements about the value of physical attraction, relationships, selecting/pursuing a partner, and being single	0	0	0	0		
54. Statements or actions whereby men value, select, or pursue women based on their physical appearance	1	.03	1	0		
55. Statements whereby women value other women or themselves based on appearances	0	0	0	0		
56. Statements whereby physical attraction is equated with being sexy or hot (including the thin ideal)	7	.22	2	5		
57. Comments about the importance of getting married or finding a partner or that frame being single in a negative way	3	.06	2	1		
58. Comments implying possession of a person as a girlfriend/boyfriend/partner	0	0	0	0		
59. Statements or behaviors of “acting dumb” for the purpose of appearing more attractive	11		5	6	.61	.11
Total						
10. Sexual innuendo, harassment or sexist, degrading, or sexually aggressive comments or behaviors toward others	2	.09	1	1		
60. Sexual innuendo or suggestion; alluding to sex, jokingly turning a non-sexual comment into a sexual one	0	0	0	0		
61. Sexual aggression (undressing, abusing, molesting, rape, forced prostitution, other aggressive physical contact)	1	.03	0	1		
62. Sexual harassment, stalking, obsessing over love interest, or reference to weapons or violence in the context of securing/obtaining a romantic relationship	0	0	0	0		
63. Flippant or inappropriate talk about sexual harassment, coercion, or assault	1	.06	1	0		
64. The use of sexual slurs, name-calling, sexist comments (e.g., calling someone honey, gorgeous, etc)	4		2	2	.62	.17
Total	770		554	216	< .001	.49
11. (item 65) Other sexualizing comments about sexuality, sexual orientation, or sexual	0	0	0	0		
Total Instances:	770		554	216	< .001	.49

Additional information provided for each item in training as well as in coding sheets that elaborate and define items. Cramer's *V* (i.e. Phi in a 2 X 2 table) is an indicator of effect size

the final sample before final coding began. The Krippendorff's alpha, which is particularly suited to content analysis data (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007), was .75 at the end of training. Kalpha was computed across the 81 items from each episode such that each episode received a single reliability rating, based on ratings by two or more raters. Although items were grouped into themes or subscales of sexualization, it was not possible to calculate Kalpha across all subscales and all episodes due to the absence of variation for some episodes (e.g., no instances of sexual innuendo or harassment in an episode). Therefore only episode-level alphas were examined. Episodes were randomly and individually assigned to RAs to code each week (two episodes per week per RA on average) such that no episode was being viewed by more than one RA at a time to ensure independence of ratings. Once coding began, reliability was examined each week for all episodes that had been coded by two or more RAs. At least two coders separately viewed and coded each episode. Uncertain items were discussed and resolved each week during group meetings. Across the 33 episodes that were coded by two or more coders, one episode from 33 was discarded from the final analysis due to low reliability ( $\alpha = .59$ ). The final average reliability across the final sample of 32 episodes was  $\alpha = .81$  and ranged from .66 to .99, yet all but three episodes had reliabilities of .71 or higher. Because each episode was coded by at least two RAs, the coding from one randomly selected RA for each episode was included in the analyses.

### Analyses

Data were summarized in two primary ways. First, instances of each of the 65 sexualizing items were summed across all 32 episodes and averaged to describe the prevalence of sexualization on average per episode. Second, the total frequency of each item was then examined by gender and by race/ethnicity of sexualized characters. For each instance of sexualization, the gender and the race/ethnicity of the sexualized character were coded and the total number of males, females, White, Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and multi-ethnic (no other race/ethnicity was represented within the characters of the ten programs included in analysis) characters were summed across items. For comparison, these demographic classifications were summed across the ten series (e.g., for the Hannah Montana series, the main cast members include Miley/Hannah, Jackson, Lily, Oliver, and Robby, for a total of two female characters, three male characters, and five White characters).

The number of male, female, White, Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and multi-ethnic characters were calculated as a percentage of the total number of primary recurring characters across all ten programs. These percentages reflect the population, so to speak, of characters on children's TV programs and

were used as the population proportion in Chi-square tests to examine the proportion of sexualized females across categories. Given the large number of subcategories of sexualization, we conducted a Bonferroni correction to adjust the  $p$ -value within each category based on the number of subcategories/items within each broader category. Next, the numbers of female, male, White, Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and multi-ethnic characters sexualized across items were summed and calculated as a percentage of the total number of characters. These percentages were then compared with the expected percentages of female, male, White, Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and multiethnic characters (calculated as previously described, reflective of the overall "population" or representation within these TV series) using Chi-square tests.

## Results

### Presence of Sexualization

As seen in Tables 2, 43 of 65 sexualizing items were present at least once across the 32 episodes, and the total frequency of sexualizing instances was 770 (average = 24.1 per episode). Every episode coded had instances of sexualization, with a frequency range of 3–55 instances. The largest number of instances was seen among sexualizing clothing items (293 or 38 % of all instances), followed by body/appearance modification items (138, 18 %), career/work/hobby-related behaviors (108, 14 %), objectifying behaviors (75, 10 %), sexualizing statements about the body/weight/appearance (59, 8 %), and bodily/physical behaviors (52, 7 %). The remaining five categories of items were less prevalent. These less commonly occurring forms of sexualization (occurring only once or twice) included self-sexualizing behaviors of wearing lingerie-like clothes, implied full nudity, seductive dancing, plastic surgery, hair extensions, breath spray, padded bras, and sweat control. In addition, sexualizing behaviors of catcalling, encouraging someone to dress sexy, comments where women value other women based on appearances, sexual innuendo, sexual harassment/stalking, and sexist comments were relatively rare. Categories that were completely absent included self-sexualizing behaviors of wearing clothes with sexy writing, an adult woman dressed as a sexy child, acting like a prize/trophy, wearing cologne, fake eyelashes, fake teeth/tooth modifications, hair removal, lying about age, weight monitoring, tattoos, mole removal, beauty contests, modeling, and exotic dancing. Other sexualizing behaviors and comments that were completely absent included comments about puberty development, comments about men valuing women based on appearances, comments where beauty is equated with sexiness, and acting dumb to appear more attractive. Some of the more severe forms of sexualization were not present at all in any of the episodes, such as full

nudity, sexual aggression, and inappropriate talk of sexual harassment. Although these sexually aggressive/severe items were not present at all, there were four instances of unwanted sexual touching (item 46) and one instance of sexual harassment (item 62) in the 32 episodes.

### Female Vs. Male Sexualization

As seen in Table 2, the findings largely supported Hypothesis 1 that female characters will be sexualized more frequently than male characters will be. Female characters were sexualized in the majority of instances, with 554 (72 %) instances targeting female characters versus 216 (28 %) targeting male characters. The proportion of female characters who were sexualized, relative to the overall proportion of female characters in the programs, was significantly greater across 18 items. However, the proportion of female characters sexualized across 13 items was *lower* than the overall proportion of female characters, although not reaching statistical significance. These items included, for example, move, reposition, grab, etc. (item 41); underwear/bathing suit (item 5); and partial nudity (item 10). Several more aggressive forms of sexualization were more prevalent among male characters, such as sexual harassment and unwanted sexual touching and gesturing. Among those categories with over 100 observations (Clothing, Body Modification, and Career/Hobby-related behaviors), we examined whether or not Latinas were sexualized more often than White characters were, and two of three Chi-square tests were significant, include clothing and body modification. These differences suggested that White characters were significantly more likely to be sexualized than were Latinas.

### Non-White Vs. White Sexualization

In order to test Hypothesis 2 that non-White female characters will be sexualized proportionately more than White female characters will be, we examined those items that occurred at least 16 or more times among female characters and less frequently among male characters. Selecting items with 16 or more instances allowed for a minimum expected frequency of five instances per cell and resulted in 11 items for analysis. We then summed the number of characters sexualized within that item, across all episodes, based on ethnicity of characters. For example, for item 1 (revealing clothing), there were a total of 133 instances of characters who were sexualized. Examining the race/ethnicity of the characters sexualized in each instance for this item, 59 % (79) were White, 17 % (23) Black, 4 % (5) Latino/a, 14 % (19) Asian American, and 5 % (7) multiethnic.

All non-White characters were summed to allow for comparison of White vs. non-White characters, which, in this example, was 59 % ( $n = 79$ ) vs. 41 % ( $n = 54$ ). These

percentages were then compared to the total percentages of White (68 %,  $n = 90$ ) versus Black, Latino/a, Asian American, and multiethnic characters (total = 32 %,  $n = 43$ ) in the ten programs. As seen in Table 3, there were only two items for which non-White female characters were overrepresented: wearing revealing clothing (item 1) and wearing high heels (item 6). Thus White characters were the majority of characters represented in sexualizing items and represented 66 % of sexualized characters within these items. White characters were significantly disproportionately represented in two of the categories, including clothing and heavy make-up on a young girl.

### Representations of Girls and Latino/as

To examine Hypotheses 3 and 4 that girls/women and Latino/as, respectively, would be under-represented in the characters across the programs, all characters who were major recurring characters for each of the programs were coded based on the apparent gender and race/ethnicity of the character portrayed in the program. Table 4 displays the percentages of characters across gender and racial/ethnic categories as well as the U.S. population percentages for comparison. There were a total of 66 major recurring characters across the ten programs, including 62 % ( $n = 41$ ) males and 38 % ( $n = 25$ ) females. Thus females were underrepresented as major characters in these programs,  $\chi^2(1, n = 66) = 4.91, p = .02$ , Cramer's  $V = .19$ . As seen in Table 4, across races/ethnicities, Latino/as composed 8 % of the total characters, compared to 16 % of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2010), but the Chi-square test was not statistically significant across racial/ethnic categories. Thus, hypotheses 3 was supported, and female characters were significantly underrepresented in the present sample of shows. The test of hypothesis 4, however, was not statistically significant, although the number of Latino characters was less than expected based on the U.S. population.

### Discussion

The present study examined the presence of sexualization in children's TV programs most popular among Latina and White 6–11 year-old U.S. girls, as well as the representation of gender and race/ethnicity within sexualizing content. Understanding the prevalence and types of sexualization that occur in children's media is important given the impact that media content has on children's developing sense of self (Bandura 1986). Results indicated that every one of the 32 sampled episodes, from a total of ten TV programs, contained at least three instances of sexualization and a combined total of 770 instances. The most common form involved sexualizing clothing. Although clothing may seem less impactful for

**Table 3** Prevalence of sexualization by TV characters' race/ethnicity among select items

Item	Total frequency	# White (%)	#Non-White (%)	Chi Square test's <i>p</i>	Cramer's <i>V</i>
1. Clothing reveals/exposes sexualized body part (chest, waist/pelvis, buttocks, upper legs, back)	133	79 (59 %)	54 (41 %)	.033*	.130
2. Clothing emphasizes sexualized body part	23	14 (61 %)	9 (39 %)	.464	.108
6. High heel/platform shoes	92	41 (45 %)	51 (55 %)	< .001*	.355
13. Behaviors to elicit arousal or be sexually alluring; physical forms of flirting	22	16 (73 %)	6 (27 %)	.635	.072
15. Animal-type behaviors (crawling, growling, purring)	28	23 (82 %)	5 (18 %)	.109	.214
19. Fake nails/manicure/pedicure	38 <sup>a</sup>	24 (63 %)	13 (37 %)	.664	.050
25. Hair dying/styling/cutting or unnatural color	34	27 (79 %)	7 (21 %)	.154	.173
28. Heavy make-up on young girl/preteen	23	23 (100 %)	0	.001*	.485
30. Body/appearance monitoring	29	17 (57 %)	12 (43 %)	.279	.142
40. Other performance-related occupation where appearance is emphasized	102	75 (74 %)	27 (26 %)	.231	.084
52. Comments about hotness, attractiveness, beauty, or evaluative comments about appearance	33 <sup>a</sup>	20 (61 %)	12 (39 %)	.497	.084
Total observed representation within sexualizing items	557	359 (65 %)	196 (35 %)	.090	.051
Total expected representation based upon major characters across programs by race/ethnicity (%)		379 (68 %)	178 (32 %)		

Race/ethnicity determined by storyline of TV show. Frequencies for items 1, 2, 13, 15, 25, 30, 40, and 52 include male instances of sexualization, with the majority of instances including female characters

<sup>a</sup> Ethnicity of one character was unclear for these two items

\*indicates that the proportion of sexualized non-White characters is significantly lower than expected based on the population proportion of non-White characters

children's well-being, wearing sexualized clothing may contribute to sexual harassment of girls and young women (APA 2007) and self-objectification (Goodin et al. 2011). Self-objectification is associated with several negative consequences for young women including reduced performance in physical activity and reduced mathematics, logical reasoning, and spatial skills (APA 2007). In addition, considerable research has demonstrated that attention to appearances negatively affects young women ability to attend to other tasks, and wearing revealing clothing contributes to this appearance anxiety (APA 2007). Thus TV that socializes young girls to wear more revealing clothing may be harmful to girls and young women for multiple reasons.

Although sexualized clothing was the most common form of sexualization in the children's programs, a broad range of sexualizing content from each of the ten categories was present. Instances of sexualization included sexualizing comments, body exposure, self-sexualizing physical behaviors and activities, sexualizing physical behaviors toward others, verbal and physical objectification, and body/appearance modification. Some more severe forms of sexualization were not present in these programs, including sexual aggression, yet items such as sexist comments, sexual harassment, attempts at manipulating a person into a romantic relationship, and unwanted sexual touching were present. Additional degrading behaviors such as behaving like an animal, being treated as a physical object, sexual gesturing, comments about

weight, and others were present in these children's programs. The presence of these degrading behaviors has the potential to shape what a young girl perceives as acceptable or normal in her interactions with others, how she behaves, and how she

**Table 4** Representation of gender and race/ethnicity among main TV characters

	Males	Females <sup>a</sup>	Total (%) <sup>b</sup>	U.S. % <sup>c</sup>
White	27	18	45 (68 %)	64% <sup>d</sup>
Black	9	1	10 (15 %)	13 %
Latino/a	3	2	5 (8 %)	16 %
Asian American	0	3	3 (5 %)	5 %
Multi-Ethnic/Racial	2	1	3 (5 %)	3 %
Total (%)	41 (62 %)	25 (38 %)*	66	—
US %	49 %	51 %		

Classifications of were based on the story of each character's race/ethnicity rather than by the actor's race/ethnicity or on obvious stereotypical phenotypical appearances of the characters. Race/ethnicity determined by storyline of TV show. Ethnic category sorted by percent overall representation, largest to smallest percentage, within programs

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  test compared expected and observed frequencies for males and females. <sup>b</sup> The expected and observed portrayals of characters based on race/ethnicity were not significantly different using the Chi-square test (Cramer's *V* = .14). <sup>c</sup> From U.S. Census Bureau (2010). <sup>d</sup> Includes White, not Hispanic, identified individuals

\**p* < .05, Cramer's *V* = .19

conceptualizes her identity (Bussey and Bandura 1992; Huston and Wright 1997; Lips 1989).

The proposed hypotheses were generally supported by results. Female characters were sexualized in the majority of instances (72 % of instances), consistent with Hypothesis 1, although male characters were more commonly sexualized in 13 behavior categories as well. Two of these behavior categories included physical mistreatment (unwanted sexual touching and physical objectification) and others included comments about the body, youthfulness, and problems with being single. Although sexualization has been demonstrated to disproportionately affect girls (APA 2007), boys are likely not immune to such portrayals. In order to limit the impact of sexualization in media, it will be important to consider both male and female sexualization.

Hypothesis 2 regarding sexualization of non-White characters was only partially supported. There were two items where non-White characters were disproportionately represented, and there were two items where White characters were disproportionately sexualized. The oversexualization of White characters may reflect the centrality of White characters in these programs. The more central the character, the more often they will appear throughout the show engaging in various behaviors, including sexualized behaviors.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 were somewhat supported: Female characters were significantly underrepresented in these programs, representing only 38 % of the characters across all shows. However, the Chi-square comparison of the proportion of Latino/a characters in these programs (8 %) versus the proportion of Latino/as in the U.S. (16 %) was not statistically significant. White, Black, Asian American, and multi-ethnic characters were present in proportion to the U.S. population demographics. Children are socialized into gender roles in part through media exposure (Hust and Brown 2008). The limited availability of positive female role models on TV, particularly for Latina girls, could increase the influence of the few Latina characters on TV.

The 32 episodes examined here represent approximately 16 h of TV viewing, or 3.6 days worth of exposure for the average child, given the average 4.5 h of TV viewing per day. Multiplying this rate of exposure to sexualization across a year suggests that children are exposed to approximately 78,069 instances of sexualization per year in children's programming alone. The number of instances of exposure for the average child is likely quite higher than this estimate given that children also watch adult and primetime TV, which is likely to have more sexual content in general (Ward 1995). The impact of this repeated exposure likely contributes to children's developing attitudes toward gender roles, race and ethnicity, and romantic relationships and could lead to acceptance of sexualization toward girls and boys.

The impact of exposure to various media content on children is growing and extends beyond sexualization.

Strasburger et al.'s (2010) review of media health effects summarizes evidence that exposure to violent media is associated with increased aggression, exposure to sexually explicit media is associated with impacts on sexual attitudes and behaviors, and exposure to substance use in media is associated with substance use among adolescents. One of the major questions behind the impact of media on children is how media leads to changes in attitudes and behaviors among children. As stated previously, social cognitive theory (Bandura 1986) provides an explanation for media influence, which centers around viewers' perceptions and interpretations of media. Exposure to particular behaviors through media (including TV, video, music, and print media) shapes viewers' perceptions of reality. Images and lyrics, for example, are perceived as reality, particularly with repeated exposure. Younger children under age 8 are particularly vulnerable to perceiving media as reality (Strasburger et al. 2009). When media are perceived as reality, they shape an individual's expectations for his/her own behavior, as well as the behavior of others. When the "reality" portrayed by media includes frequent sexualization, sexualization will become normative for young girls and boys in their own actions, as well as in what they expect from those around them.

## Limitations

Although our study addresses several critical research gaps, some limitations must be acknowledged. First, our study includes a sample of only 10 children's programs among a landscape of hundreds. Although these were the most popular programs among Latina and White girls in a defined time period, it would be valuable to examine other programs as well that might have greater levels or more serious instances of sexualization, including popular primetime programs. The analysis is also limited by the lack of Latino/a characters represented in the selected shows. The lack of Latino/as makes it difficult to identify patterns of representation or recurring storylines among Latino/a characters. Although most of these programs are still airing on cable TV, future research would benefit from examining current TV programming, as well as changes in sexualizing content on TV over time.

Another limitation of the current research is that the programs included in our study were all cable network programs. Although 84 % of children in the U.S. have access to cable (Rideout et al. 2010), up to 16 % of children are viewing other TV programming. There could be important differences in the types of programming available on cable vs. non-cable networks, as well as differences between children who do and do not have cable. One final limitation with the current study is the absence of several proposed forms of sexualization, which impacted our ability to test interrater reliability at the category-level rather than episode-level. However, nearly all of the absent forms of sexualization were present in training

episodes during coder training. A couple of these absent forms represent more extreme forms of sexualization, specifically full nudity and sexual aggression, and were discussed during training, but they were not anticipated to be present in the children's programming and were not seen in the training episodes. Nevertheless, these categories were included in the coding schema given their relevance to sexualization.

### Future Directions

Future research should explore the nature of sexualization to determine those aspects of intra- and inter-personal sexualization that may be more or less predictive of negative outcomes. Research could also examine if frequency of sexualization versus types of sexualization are more impactful for children's well-being. The development of standards for acceptable levels or types of sexualization, if they exist, could be developed and established for TV programming. The mechanisms by which exposure to sexualization in media leads to negative outcomes for children and adolescents are unclear, and future research should test possible mediators of this association. In addition, developmental processes of sexualization are unclear, such as the age at which girls begin to internalize sexualizing messages and when prevention and intervention efforts might be most effective. Opportunities for intervention and prevention of negative effects from sexualizing media should be explored, such as parental mediation of media exposure or media literacy interventions.

Given the documented influence of sexualization on children's and adolescents' health and well-being, it is important to understand when exposure to sexualization in media begins for children and to advocate for the types of portrayals we wish to see in children's programming. Based on our results, it is obvious that exposure to sexualization begins with popular children's programming, which is viewed by 6–11 year-olds and, most likely, younger children as well. Researchers, policymakers, and parents and children should advocate for storylines and characters that provide positive messages for youth, rather than socializing youth into sexualization at an early age.

### Practice Implications

The implications of our study extend to children, families, other concerned adults, media executives, and policymakers. A number of steps could be taken to reduce children's exposure to sexualization in media, as well as minimize the impact of such exposure. Parents can use results of our work, for example, to screen and select programming with minimal amounts of sexualization. Children can advocate for characters and relationships that teach respect and equality. Media executives could work towards changing the types of characters, storylines, and scripts from sexualizing to empowering.

Policymakers can work to establish standards and improved rating systems for children's media. If action is taken from multiple perspectives within society, the negative impact of sexualizing media could be mitigated.

### Conclusions

Sexualization in popular children's media is quite common despite documented negative impacts of exposure to sexualization. The current study established the targets, frequency, and types of sexualization present in children's television programs popular among White and Latina girls. The findings reveal that there is considerable work to be done to advocate for and empower youth to demand positive portrayals of all genders in popular media, as well as examples of healthy interpersonal relationships.

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**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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