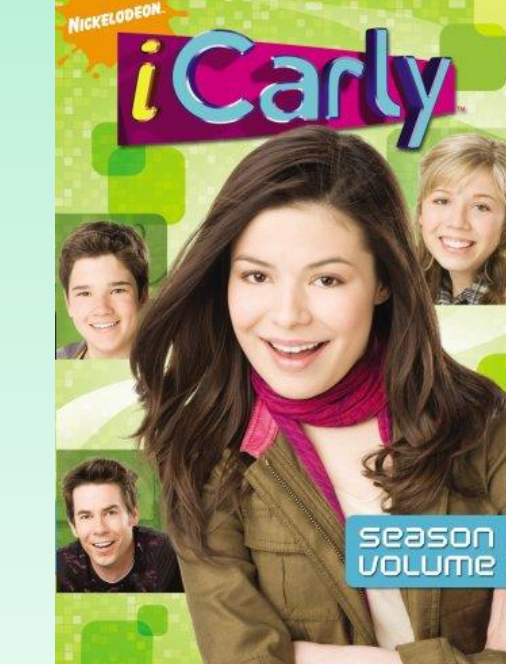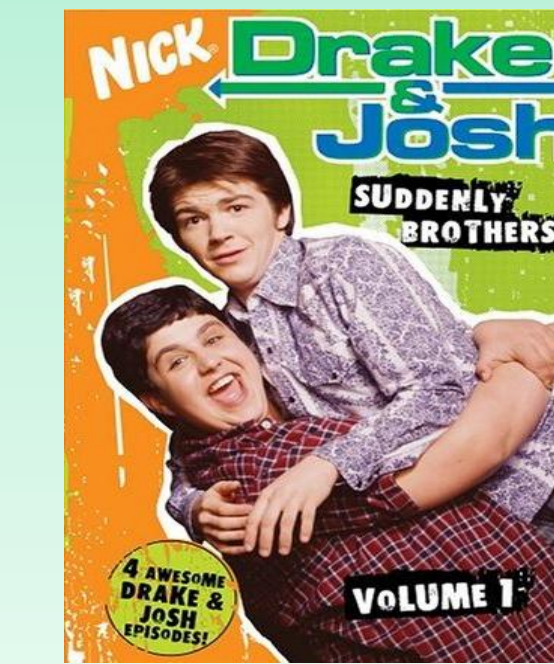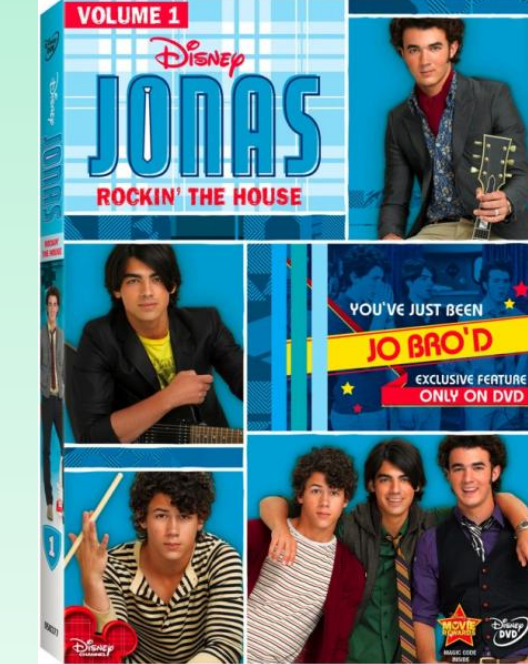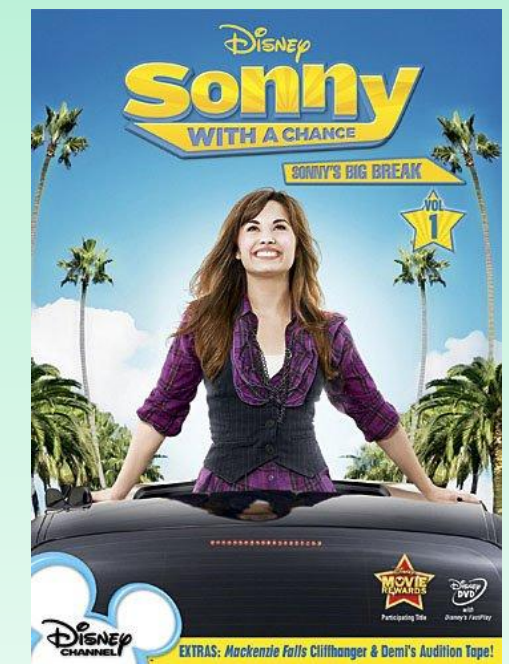# Examining the Prevalence of the Heterosexual Script in Children's Television Media

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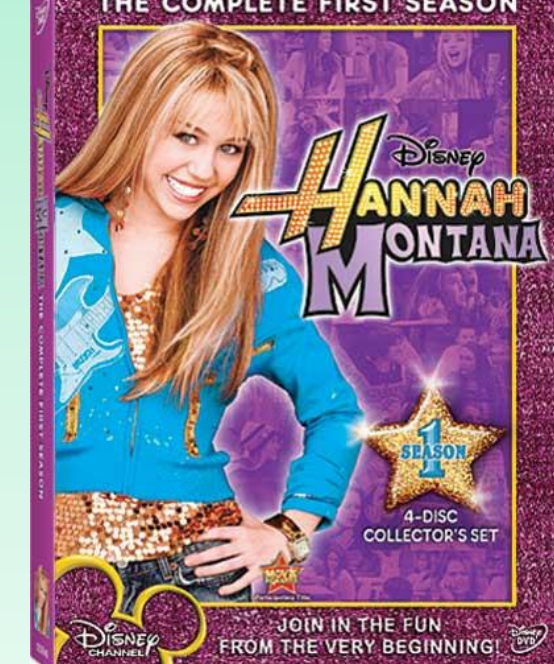
Abstract

The heterosexual script is a set of codes related to gender, sexuality, and relationships developed by Kim et al. (2007). In this study, researchers applied the heterosexual script to seven popular children's television shows. Researchers coded the gender and age of the speaker/actor for each instance of the script and the gender and age of the audience/listener to examine who is propagating these messages and in what context. Researchers found variability in prevalence of the heterosexual script across shows. The most common elements of the script across shows involved men objectifying and valuing women solely for their appearance, feminine courtship strategies that involved self-objectification and ego-stroking, and masculine courtship strategies that depicted males as making the first move or showing physical or material strength to court a female. Shows with male lead characters were more likely to have instances of the heterosexual script. The script was most enacted in the presence of different sex peers indicating that the script is tied to expectations in the heterosexual relationship.

Introduction

• Children are currently watching more television than at any point prior (Nielsen Company, 2009). It is important to know what messages children are viewing

• The heterosexual script is a specific set of 8 complementary codes that depict expectations of males and females in romantic and sexual relationships (Kim, Sorsoli, Collins, Zylbergold, Schooler, & Tolman, 2007)

• Presence of the heterosexual script perpetuates ideas of male dominance and female submission as the script represents a traditional understanding of gender

• Previous studies (Kim et al.,2007) have demonstrated that "sex as masculinity," which includes males valuing females solely for their looks, is the most common code on prime-time tv shows popular among adolescents

• The American Psychological Association's Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls has linked increased sexualization of girls and the pressure to be "sexy" to low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders (APA Task Force, 2007)

• Previous research has shown that acceptance of the idea that women are sexualized objects and of gender stereotypes is linked to watching overly sexualized images of women in the media (Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Ward & Friedman, 2006)

Methods

• The coding system was adapted from that of Kim et al. (2007)

• Episodes of 7 of the most popular children's shows were coded: *Drake and Josh*, *iCarly*, *Jonas*, *Hannah Montana*, *Wizards of Waverly Place*, *Sonny with a Chance*, and *Suite Life of Zack & Cody*

• Three randomly chosen episodes from the first season and the pilot episode were analyzed. Across all shows, 28 episode of children's television were coded

• Each episode was broken down in terms of interactions as in previous content analyses. Multiple codes could occur in a single interaction

• Coders watched each episode and coded any instance of the heterosexual script recording the time, the specific element of the script that was warranted, a description of what occurred, who was speaking, and who was the audience

• Other coders were trained. Two outside coders analyzed 6 of the 28 episodes coded by the first author

• Inter-rater reliability was 84% on whether an interaction should be coded, and 100% on the particular code that was chosen. (The primary author's coding was used if there was disagreement)

Code Descriptions

	Codes about masculinity	Codes about femininity
Sexual double standard	**Sex as Masculinity:** Sexuality is a defining component of masculinity; men initiate sexual encounters and will go to great lengths to have sex; men sexually objectify women.	**Good Girls:** Women are sexual limit-setters; women are passive partners in sexual encounters; women are judged by their sexual conduct (e.g., "sluts").
Power in romance and courtship	**Masculine Courtship Strategies:** Men are protectors and providers in relational and dating encounters; men use active displays of power to attract women; men make the first move in dating relationships.	**Feminine Courtship Strategies:** Women use passive and indirect means to attract and romance men; women present themselves as sexual objects and rely on their bodies and physical appearance to attract men.
Attitudes toward commitment	**Masculine Commitment:** Men attempt to avoid relationships, commitment and marriage; men involved in monogamous relationships are mocked or pitied by other men; men avoid emotional attachment to women.	**Feminine Commitment:** Women prioritize their romantic relationships and make sacrifices for the sake of their relationships; women seek more commitment and need a boyfriend/husband to make their lives complete.
Attitudes toward homosexuality	**Male-Oriented Homophobia:** Men avoid behaving in manner that could be construed as homosexual and become embarrassed if caught in that type of situation; men make jokes or ridicule another man's sexuality	**Appropriation of Female Homosexuality:** Female homosexuality as erotic or a "turn on" for men

Results

Average number of interactions containing the script per hour

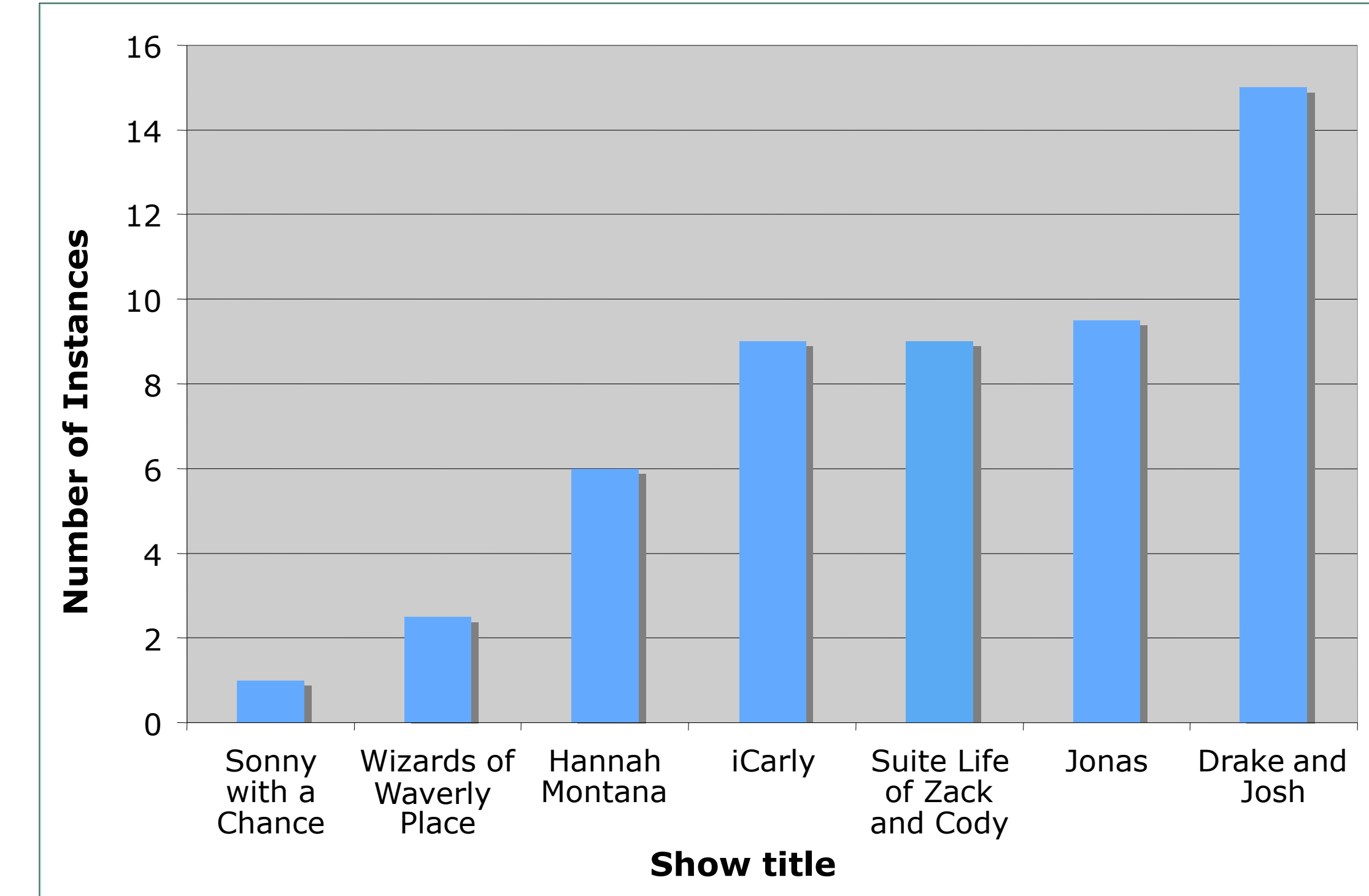Percentage of specific elements of the script coded across all shows

Results

• Of the 908 interactions present in the episodes, 104 (11%) contained elements of the heterosexual script

• Shows ranged from 1 to 15 instances on average per hour demonstrating variability across shows

• Of the 121 instances of the heterosexual script, 74 instances were said or performed by males (61%) while 47 instances (39%) were performed by females

• The most common elements in order were Sex as Masculinity, Feminine Courtship Strategies, and Masculine Courtship Strategies

• Excluding male-oriented homophobia, within the top three elements of the script, 88 of the 108 instances (81%) were said or performed in the presence of members of the other gender

• Shows with male lead characters presented 62% of the instances of the heterosexual script while female-led shows presented 38% of the instances which is due to the large amount of the script represented by "sex as masculinity"

Discussion

• The heterosexual script was prominent in children's television shows, with 1 in 9 interactions warranting coding for the script across all shows

• Sex as Masculinity represented the most common element of the script indicating that it has become acceptable to sexualize the young girls who are in these children's shows

• Further, this indicates that young girls are viewing sexualized images of girls on television which has been shown to have negative consequences (APA Task Force, 2007; Peter & Valkenburg, 2007; Ward & Friedman, 2006

• Males were the primary perpetrators of this script indicating that it is possibly more acceptable for males to act in ways that reinforce traditional gender roles

• Most of the instances of the heterosexual script were coded within interactions involving boys and girls together indicating that these ideas of gender might be most accepted within the heterosexual relationship
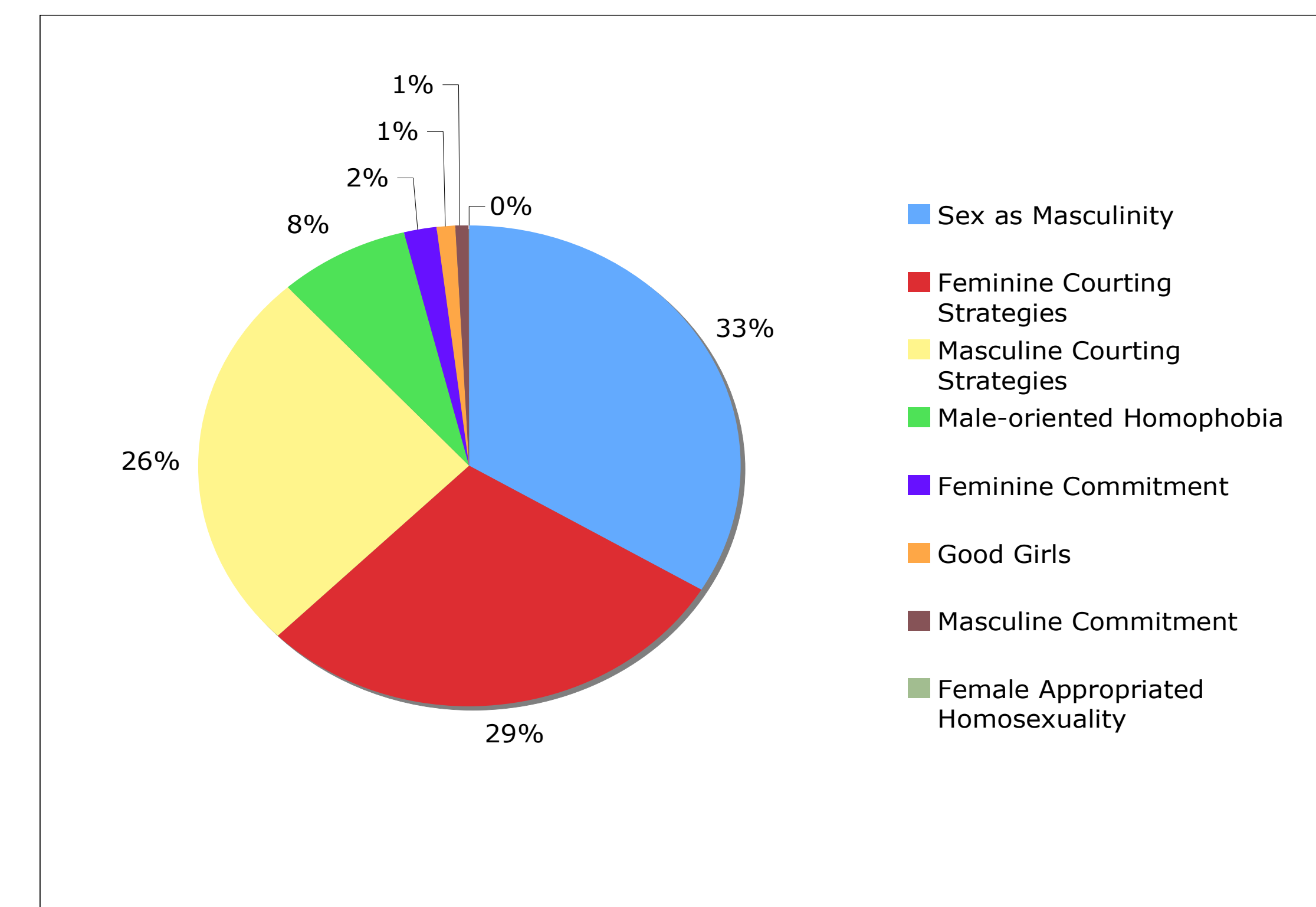
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Acknowledgments