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Embodying sexualisation: When theory meets practice in intergenerational feminist activism

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Abstract
This interchange explores the role of girl (ages thirteen to twenty-two) activism in the USA organisation SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge). Some of the many initiatives and programmes SPARK has enacted with girls, including online forums, blog spaces, marches, and summits directly address recent calls to attend to the complexity in understanding and resisting 'sexualisation' with teen girls. Several of the girls' media appearances are explored in detail to illustrate the dynamics of girls' agency and resistance that emerge in their embodied engagements with 'sexualisation'.

Keywords
Activism, girls, intergenerational, sexualisation

Emma, a teenage feminist activist, strides into a politically conservative American television studio, delicately pulls down the skirt of her strapless baby blue mini-dress, perches on the couch in the waiting room, takes out her make-up compact and begins applying black eyeliner and shiny red lip gloss. She is preparing to speak on a national morning show about her work with SPARK (Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge), a movement to challenge the sexualisation of girls. She and fellow SPARKteam member, Carina, have been invited to talk

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about their campaign to pressure *Teen Vogue* to publicly proclaim that they will never digitally alter girls' faces and bodies. The adult women collaborating with Emma wince as they fleetingly glance at the strip of skin where the hem of her miniskirt does not quite reach the top of her black thigh-high knee socks, hoping the camera will not reveal what we fear might be thought a contradiction between her appearance and her message.

Such moments enflesh the complexity of theorising the sexualisation of girls in the presence of girls' agency, subjectivity, activism, desire and, yes, self-sexualisation. It is much easier to theorise the intent, meaning, and implications of girls' choices to self-sexualise *without* girls than to develop a theoretically informed practice *with* girls. As a feminist intergenerational movement, SPARK invites girls to join us in sustained conversation, reflection, and action about the discourses, experiences, choices, and dilemmas we confront as we work together in the service of liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 2003).

A feminist understanding of the sexualisation of girls has to address agency, while simultaneously acknowledging that, '[f]or young women today in postfeminist cultures', as cultural theorist Rosalind Gill writes, 'a ''technology of sexiness'' has replaced ''innocence'' or ''virtue'' as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace' (Gill, 2007a: 72). Partnering with girls to challenge sexualisation requires that we directly engage the contradiction between girls' celebration of and confidence in their own 'girl powered' autonomy and the realities of a commodified hyper-heterosexual discourse that mediates their choices and shapes their lived experiences. Partnering with Emma, a veteran SPARKteam member at seventeen, requires us to step fully into these contradictions as she explains her choices on the day of her television interview:

> I think that people would find a certain hypocrisy like, 'what is this girl doing wearing this short skirt on this interview when she's supposedly fighting sexualization?' Even in my own school with my own classmates, like 'what are you doing wearing *that* shirt? Like, I can see your bra. Aren't you supposed to be about covering it up?' da da da da da. Which I'm *not*. I'm not about that at all. I'm about women having choices. (Emma, personal interview)

In this article, we explore the concept of sexualisation as an energising but fraught mobilising issue for girl activists that brings feminist women into collaboration with girls. We investigate the ways in which we, as adult allies, partner with girls to interrogate the sexualisation of girls and create 'enabling conditions' (Correa and Petchesky, 2010) for young women's positive sexuality and well-being, where girls fight to listen to how their bodies *feel* from the inside while critically examining the influence and impact of outsiders' attention, compliments, harassment and 'choice'. To do so, we illuminate how recent calls for complexity, in both understanding and resisting sexualisation and as Emma's perspective illuminates, inform our alliance with girls.

Sexualisation has been defined as the commodification of a specific glorified and objectified female body for the consumption of what is presumed to be a heterosexual male gaze (de Lauretis, 1984; Mulvey, 1975). A person is sexualised when 'made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making' (American Psychological Association, 2007: 2). Despite significant advances in girls' educational achievement, leadership opportunities and legal protections (Rosin, 2012), girls continue to be bombarded with negative, narrow, sexualising and objectifying imagery and expectations about female sexuality that are associated with negative psychological and societal outcomes (American Psychological Association, 2007). They are denied access to information and discourse about their sexuality and relationships that supports their growth into embodied women (Tolman, 2002, 2012a). But a simplistic assessment of an inevitable cultural imposition on to girls does not capture the complexity of real girls' engagement with sexualisation.

Sexualisation is also understood to have the effect of 'producing a narcissistic neo-liberal self-policing gaze, in which the contemporary woman does not seek male approval for her apparently ''freely chosen look''' (Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010: 116; see also Gill, 2007b; McRobbie, 2009). As Duschinsky (this issue) writes, 'The frame of ''sexualisation'' provided legitimacy for feminist discourses on the role of sexism in society at large, which may otherwise have been dampened by liberal retorts about personal choice'. These overlapping and contradictory analyses of sexualisation critique a consumer-driven portrayal of 'sexy' that is grounded in White, thin, heterosexual and 'up for it' (Evans et al., 2010).

Girls in power

Some have suggested that sexualisation has become entangled with 'empowerment' for a generation of girls determined to create their own version of feminism that rejects hairy legs and no make-up (Evans et al., 2010; Tolman, 2012a; Valenti, 2007), a feminism in which 'the overt presentation of sexuality is thus laid down as a marker of independence, of liberation from repressive societal codes' (Duits and van Zoonen, 2006: 112). Whelehan reframes self-sexualising young women as enacting a feminist backlash, taking on a vulgar, sexualised culture as subversive, edgy and hip (Whelehan, 2000). Yet to leave out how self-sexualisation is associated with negative outcomes leaves out a vital part of girls' lives.

Teenage girls today have grown up with mass media messaging that freedom underpins college students' 'choice' to peel off their t-shirts in *Girls Gone Wild* videos (Levy, 2005), Snookie and Deena's kissing for the cameras on *Jersey Shore*, dancers' participating in what Sharpley-Whiting calls the 'public celebration and commercial trafficking' of African American girls in mainstream hip hop videos (Sharpley-Whiting, 2007: 12) and the fun of joining your boyfriend for a Saturday night date at a strip club. What McNair refers to as the 'pornographication of the mainstream' (McNair, 1996: 23) has metaphorically layered a 1970s

porn groove beat under today's pop culture (Dines, 2010). Women are portrayed as wanting to be sexy *and* powerful (by being sexy) and every pouting billboard, stiletto heel, and push-up bra is selling a narrow streamlined package that they can purchase with a swipe of their credit card (Gill, 2007c; Lamb and Brown, 2006; Harris, 2004; McRobbie, 2009). Growing up bombarded by these images, girls are given a message that performance of this commercialised conception of sexiness and power is expected, necessary and desirable (Tolman, 2012a, 2012b). Yet there is also evidence that girls are not simply taking the message but are actively negotiating it, sometimes in problematic but also in subversive ways (Renold and Ringrose, 2011). Ringrose suggests further unpacking this complexity empirically *with* girls 'to explore what the ''performative'' (Butler, 1993) strategies of girls might be as they use and make sense of ''sexualized'' discourses in these media contexts' (Ringrose, 2012: 67).

Though girls today are certainly not lacking in activist energy (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Taft, 2011), there remains a simmering belief that third wave feminism has crashed ashore, leaving a calm sea. In her study of seventy-five girl activists across the Americas, Jessica Taft found that feminist discussions were missing from most of the youth activist groups she encountered (Taft, 2011). When girls realise that they and their girlfriends are earning better grades, more leadership positions and greater college acceptances than their male peers (Rosin, 2012), many believe the battles their mothers fought are dusty victories (Angyal, 2010). However, these advances serve to obscure the ways in which girls are also still embedded within larger social contexts and cultural discourses that continue to position them as sexualised commodities (Gill, 2007a). This complex stew troubles any simple claim of choice about modes of sexuality and bodily display when we recognise that such choice is from an impoverished set of options. Rendered invisible by the popular proclamations of freedom to booty-shake and shimmy is the convenient privileging of male fantasy and desire over the entitlement of women and girls experiencing pleasure in their own bodies (McRobbie, 2009; Tolman, 2011). This mandate of uncritical individual choice now constitutes a well-disguised form of oppression. As Gill writes, 'seductive as the call to ''respect'' girls' ''choices'' is, it remains trapped in precisely the individualizing, neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique' (Gill, 2007a: 72).

Renold and Ringrose theorise that we need to 'move beyond the static, binary positions that locate girls as either savvy sexual agents or objectified sexualized victims, to see instead the complexity and difficulty in navigating and performing schizoid sexual subjectivities and female desire in our contemporary moment' (Renold and Ringrose, 2011: 403–404). Girls need spaces to discuss the contradictions between critiquing the sexualised landscape around them and at the same time relishing in their own embodied desire to look and be sexy. With the girls in SPARK, we are fostering online and in-person spaces where girls publicly (on their blogs) and privately (in closed chats) recognise and discuss these contradictions and explore their personal struggles as young women.

SPARKing change: Girls partnering with women to end sexualisation

SPARK's goal is to end sexualisation through collective social action. SPARK operates at the micro and macro levels, working with both a team of thirty trained girl activists (the SPARKteam) and over sixty community-based and national organisations that serve tens of thousands of girls (Brown, 2011; Tolman, Brown and Bowman, 2013). As an intergenerational partnership, SPARK engages girls in conversations about sexualisation and sexuality, creating space for their analyses and actions in ways that contribute to our collective understanding of these phenomena. The SPARKteam then blogs about these issues for a wider audience. Our goal is to create opportunities for peer-to-peer and cross-generational interactions that enable new knowledge, and then to provide girls with skills and a platform for social change, i.e., creative, forceful and convincing reactions to the sexualisation they see and experience within their own lives. In this way, SPARK is both vehicle and inspiration for passionate, creative girls and young women to publicly struggle with, question, 'out' the sexualisation that is hidden in plain sight and channel their critique and brewing frustration about the sexualisation of girls into online and on the ground social action.

SPARK has proactively launched a series of actions, initiatives and programmes, providing safe spaces for girls to train as activists and empower themselves to be part of the solution instead of passively participating in the problem. The girls on the SPARKteam live in rural, suburban and urban communities throughout the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Indonesia. 20 per cent are Latina, 20 per cent of African, 20 per cent of Asian and 40 per cent of European descent. 33 per cent identify as lesbian, bisexual or queer. The adults are six feminist academics, activists and girl advocates between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-six who offer both collaborative and financial support, access to networks, research and historical perspective, and who represent organisations that support SPARK by providing resources, online platforms, meeting space, and fiscal guidance.[1] Adults and girls together develop goals, debate issues, suggest blog topics and plan actions on a closed Facebook page and weekly private online chats. SPARK training includes an annual intensive three days in New York City where the girls learn about feminist history, activist strategies, blogging, and social media and the adults learn from girls about how sexualisation impacts their lives.

Success in SPARK's unique, intergenerational partnership depends on a discourse of participation, equality and respect, including an understanding that girls are experts on their own experience and not only full participants in, but co-leaders of SPARK. Differences of approach and opinion are negotiated, opened up for exploration. Adults provide infrastructure and scaffolding when necessary and employ a problem-posing approach designed to surface contradictions, problems and possibilities. The partnerships and mentorships that emerge from deep relationships between girls and women are truly the unseen web of veins

that keep this heart pumping. Scholars and activists have been writing for the past decade about intergenerational tensions among women in the feminist movement (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000; Martin, 2007; Siegal, 2007). The girls and women of SPARK challenge these presumed tensions by working together, each offering expertise at different moments.

When worlds collide: One story

How does this intergenerational partnership operate on the ground in those moments when realities collide? What does it mean that Emma chooses thigh-high black stockings and red lip gloss for her interview, while the adults she works with sit in discomfort nearby? The answers require us to consider Emma's decision in the larger context of the *Teen Vogue* action and its history.

Months earlier, after discussions about teen magazines' rampant and irresponsible use of Photoshop to make girls' bodies appear thinner, bustier and Whiter than they are, SPARK member Shelby Knox, Director of Women's Rights at Change.org, put out a call to the younger SPARKteam activists to draft a petition. Thirteen-year-old ballet dancer Julia responded immediately. After chatting with Dana Edell, SPARK's Executive Director, about the strategy and content for the petition, Julia wrote a beautifully crafted call to action asking *Seventeen* to offer one 'un-Photoshopped' model spread per issue. Change.org promoted the petition. SPARK sent out numerous calls to our coalition of organisations. SPARKteam girls blogged about the issue and pushed out the petition to their personal networks. SPARK and Change.org released dozens of press releases and began to book local and national media appearances.

The response was explosive. Julia's petition clearly struck a nerve, inspired more than 85,000 people to sign, and led to interviews with local, national and global media outlets pushing Ann Shocket, *Seventeen*'s Editor-In-Chief, to request a meeting with Julia and Dana. In response to the global outpouring demanding change, in the August, 2012 issue's *Letter from the Editor*, Shocket announced that *Seventeen* would never digitally alter girls' faces or bodies and would commit to diversity in its pages.

What first looked like a successful public end to SPARK's intergenerational campaign soon became a new set of concerns and conversations within SPARK. The girls and adults together interrogated the gendered, racialised, neo-liberal contours of the recalcitrant lens through which the media commodified and sold the action as 'Julia's campaign'. Julia and her teammates came to understand that it was not insignificant that this global media revolution was attributed to a thin, White, soft-spoken, articulate, middle-class girl from a small town in Maine. In protesting the sexualising, 'perfection'-inducing digital wand of Photoshop, Julia's body was turned into a safe canvas upon which to project our desires for 'Everygirl' – a squeaky clean 'average' girl whose desire for her friends in ballet class not to stress about their weight seemed empathic and sweet, fitting into accepted norms of femininity. This image of Julia (which leaves out her defiance

and outrage) did not disrupt what Gill calls 'a particular kind of sexualized (but not too sexualized) self-presentation [that] has become a normative requirement for many young women in the West' (Gill, 2007a: 72).

Following the *Seventeen* 'win', SPARK strategically launched a second petition demanding *Teen Vogue* follow suit. To interrupt the problematic patterns we had observed, this petition was co-written by two New York City SPARKteam members: Emma, tall, thin, White, with curly hair and sea green eyes who could have walked off its pages in her six-inch heels, and Carina, a sixteen-year-old, full-figured Puerto Rican with glasses, Converse sneakers and a fuchsia stripe running through her black ringlets. As these two teenage activists began to make the rounds of local, national and global media, we tracked clear differences in the media's engagement. Contrary to our intent, reporters interviewing both Emma and Carina would often centre Emma as the leader of the campaign and position Carina as 'friend' and side-kick, perpetuating race and size discrimination, despite clear articulations of their co-leadership both from SPARK and from the girls themselves.

Emma's decisions about clothing and make-up that day of her television interview were the result of a conscious awareness that her body is a highly visible site for both youth protest and celebration of sexuality. The SPARK adults sitting with Emma, worrying about the potential for misunderstanding, also knew the history, Emma's intent, and her urgent passion to challenge assumptions and express the complexities that she and her peers are up against as they try to disrupt expectations and the pressure to change themselves. As we recognise in our work, sitting with Emma that day, this activism itself has a relational anchor.

Yet the contradictions sizzle as Emma writes sharp critiques of self-sexualisation in her blogs, protests sexualisation as a SPARKteam activist, and at the same time chooses to dress and perform a highly sexualised, while consciously embodied, affect in her daily teenage life. As adult allies, we stand with Emma and support her choice to express herself in the ways she wants. Staying with Emma in these moments creates space for all of us to confront the larger systems within which these contradictions live. As Emma explains:

> I think what's the irritating part is that if I'm in a short skirt, not only am I gonna be judged for that, but the institution that I'm working for is gonna be judged for that and I think if you take away *that*, rather than my taking away my short skirt or you know trying to get me to wear a longer skirt, then that would be more helpful. (interview)

Feminist theories about sexualisation have little impact without a simultaneous call to action, and effective action requires that we grapple with the contradictions of girls' agency and resistance (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). This is the root of SPARK's intergenerational praxis: We live with the starts, stops and contradictions, listen deeply to girls' voices and experiences, learn from insights, successes and mistakes, and ultimately trust and work with girls' power.

SPARK is building a critical mass of young women who are learning to challenge that the airbrushed billboards, sexualised children's toys and sexed up television characters they see all around them are 'just the way it is'. They are building media literacy and criticism skills that allow them to read and deconstruct the contradictory messages they are being fed – and recognising which girls are listened to, and why. Girls themselves are demanding to be seen, heard and understood as the diverse, unique, bold, brilliant, creative and passionate people they are – and are defining 'sexy' for themselves based on their embodied awareness of their own experiences of pleasure and beauty. By refusing to absorb the limiting, sexualised messages about what a girl 'should' look like and how she 'should' behave, girls are engaging in critical conversations and creating counterpublic discourses (Fraser, 1990) online that represent the complexities of their experiences across race, class and sexual identity. We are using the creative power of women and girls working together to fuel this final frontier. We have lit the spark, and together we are feeding the flames.

Note

1. SPARK's leadership team includes Lyn Mikel Brown (Hardy Girls Healthy Women co-founder and Colby College Professor), Dana Edell (SPARK Executive Director), Melissa Campbell (SPARKteam Coordinator), Shelby Knox (Women's Rights Organizer at Change.org), Deborah L. Tolman (Hunter College Professor), and Jamia Wilson (Vice President of Programs at Women's Media Center).

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