“Hey Media, Back Off and Get Off My Body”: SPARK is Taking Sexy Back

Deborah L. Tolman, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Christin P. Bowman

The usual images: A video of little girls dressed in fishnets, revealing outfits, and high heels—performing “All the Single Ladies” with all of Beyoncé’s moves. An ad for jeans depicting a young woman flashing her breasts at a surveillance camera with the caption: “Smart may have the brains, but stupid has the balls. Be stupid.” A t-shirt that reads “Who needs brains when you have these?” Heavily made-up, carefully coifed five-year-olds prancing down a runway in pitch perfect impersonation of adult models on any episode of the runaway hit television show Toddlers and Tiaras. Costume stores jammed with Halloween attire for school-aged girls: French maids, sexy witches, and barely-there cheerleader outfits.

Alternative images: A video of girls saying what sexy means to them: “Women’s bodies are not marketing tools!” An ad from a popular tween brand that girls have recaptioned: “I am more than eye candy...Why can’t Candies treat me that way?” A group of girls wearing white t-shirts with “Being sexy is not a look, it’s a feeling!” and “Use your imagination INSTEAD OF ME to sell cars, clothes, airfare, cologne, burgers, or booze!” projected onto them. An Intervene in Halloween costume fashion show won by a girl dressed cleverly as hipster candy—Eminem the M&M. An auditorium jammed with girls and young women proclaiming with feeling: “We’re taking sexy back!”

SPARKing History

In May 2010, a convening of thirty people, representing large and community-based organizations that work with girls, scholars, young feminist activists,
policy think tanks, media organizations and funders, made a commitment to raise awareness about the sexualization of girls in the media. Two profound problems quickly became clear. The first, that sexualization is a secret in plain sight, was hardly a secret really, but so pervasive as to appear impossibly entrenched, as well as “the way things are,” a “natural” evolution and the persuasive narrative in the wake of growing sexual freedoms for women, trickling down to girls. The second, that parents, educators, health professionals, community, religious leaders, and media talking heads are comfortable doing a lot of judging and pessimistic hand wringing, but offer little concerted effort to push back against the gargantuan tide of increasing objectification, commodification, and sexualization of girls. What began as an idea to host a one-day summit on the sexualization of girls transmogrified into a plan to launch a movement to name this emerging reality as unacceptable, and to challenge it, while strengthening our commitments to supporting girls’ and young women’s right to the development of their sexuality and overall wellbeing. This positioning and set of goals recognizes and redresses the profound lack of and need for “enabling conditions”\(^1\) that require the end of or at least a substantive challenge to sexualization, the constant and monolithic press in the media to be a “good sexual object” rather than an embodied (sexual) subject.\(^2\)

The spark that ignited this convening, summit, and movement began with a conversation between two feminist psychologists who have been friends and colleagues since graduate school, where they had been part of the Harvard Project on the Psychology of Women and the Development of Girls. Deborah Tolman had gone on to study adolescent girls’ sexuality and sexual agency development as a relational process (i.e., Tolman, 2002), while Lyn Mikel Brown studied girls’ resistance to idealized femininity (Brown, 1998, 2003) and developed feminist strength-based approaches to working with girls (Brown, 2008). Tolman, a member of the 2007 American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, had been in discussion with the Women’s Foundation of California and the Ms. Foundation about holding a national summit in response to the Task Force Report’s call for raising awareness and grassroots mobilizing around the clear and present danger that sexualization poses to girls and young women. Lyn Mikel Brown had been working with the girl-serving nonprofit she co-founded a decade ago, Hardy Girls Healthy Women (HGHW), to pull together an alliance of feminist grassroots girl-serving organizations under the umbrella “Powered By Girl” to address media sexism and sexualization. Reframing the summit as the launch of a movement generated the need and possibility of joining these efforts into a previously unimagined whole that would be greater than its parts. The symbiosis and energy of bringing together these initiatives—research and activism, summit and public aware-
ness—resulted in a movement, ultimately an ongoing collective effort to “connect the dots” of research, policy, funding, and the collective power of small, nimble local groups to form a heftier force and to build a wider platform than any singular effort could offer.

We named the summit “SPARK,” an acronym for Sexualization Protest: Action, Resistance, Knowledge, and it continues to be an engagingly apropos moniker for the movement. Our original plan was to coordinate a collaboration of organizations rather than to form a new one, with an expanded leadership team that could support the growing demands of the Summit and subsequent movement, consisting of Hardy Girls Healthy Women and Tolman’s start up initiative at Hunter College at the City University of New York to bridge academia and activism; Women’s Media Center, an organization started by Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, and Robin Morgan and founding director Carol Jenkins to raise progressive women’s voices in the media; the Ms. Foundation, serving as funding partner; ISIS (Internet Sexuality Information Services), an organization leading efforts to integrate media into sexual health initiatives; TrueChild, a nonprofit repackaging of GenderPac started by Riki Wilchins and Gina Reiss-Wilchins dedicated to eradicating gender stereotypes in society; and Hunter College, which generously provided location and logistical support for the summit, as well as endorsement from the school’s President and Provost and leadership from students in the Women and Gender Studies program.

**Sowing the Seeds of a Movement: SPARK Summit**

A movement needs more conceptual infrastructure than a daylong event, and so we articulated principles and commitments that we believed would enable impact. First and foremost, rather than simply talking to girls about sexualization, we were determined that SPARK should be girl/youth-focused and driven, to engage girls to become social change agents of and by media—a part of the solution rather than victims of the problem who are in need of protection. Therefore, we committed to being an intergenerational movement, to develop a platform where some of the nagging fissures between older and younger feminists might be mended, as well as where adults who care about young people can support youth efforts and learn from them as well. We also made a commitment to promoting healthy sexuality—not an easy task when challenging sexualization, which at first glance could be interpreted as “frumpy feminists” being anti-sex. This commitment is further complicated, because media and marketing have effectively sold sexualization and self-objectification to girls and young women as empowerment, control, choice, and fun. Ensuring diversity of all kinds went without saying—sexualization may impact all women and
girls but not in the same ways, and recognizing and understanding those differences was essential to our success.

Every dimension of the summit was part of our strategy for seeding the movement. What seemed like an action-packed, high-energy day (and it was indeed that and more!) was also groundwork for our larger goal. Inviting male allies to be part of SPARK from the beginning reflected our understanding that boys and men are producers and consumers of all media, that sexualization of girls is bad for boys and men as well, and also that a real and effective challenge to the sexualization of girls would only be possible with boys’ and men’s commitments. At the same time, the need and desire for SPARK to be a girl-dominated space was primary, so our male allies were present but not in front-row seats.

We know that media literacy is necessary for change and that it more often than not ends with the ability to “see” what is problematic—which is a critical first step and not always easy or obvious until the proverbial “aha!” moment. This strategy was inspired by PBG and the effectiveness of other alliances of small, grassroots girls’ organizations’ engaging and innovative ways of giving girls strategies to vent and talk back to media’s sexualization of them and also to creatively produce both fun and scathing alternatives. We wanted the summit to be a dynamic context for girls to experience the symbiosis and energy of working together in the same space.

In this way, the movement provided the means for small grassroots organizations doing transformative youth-driven media activism an alternative to scaling up, what we are calling “scaling out,” that is, utilizing the platform that SPARK creates to showcase and disseminate their work with the support of over sixty partner organizations at the summit and growing as part of the movement. As organizations are under increased pressure to scale up, we recognized that it is not feasible for all small organizations to expand, and also that it is not productive for those doing effective and outstanding local work to do so. “Scaling out” enables more impact without having to grow larger or be subject to more funding pressures and thus ensures viability in the current strained economic situation. As we will describe below, through being part of the SPARK movement, such organizations can report to their funders that their impact is even greater and moves beyond the outskirts of their communities while enabling them to stay focused and on the ground.

Our choice of date was yet another strategic decision. We were tired of receiving what had become predictable media calls just prior to Halloween as “expert commentators” on the growing concern about sexualized costumes for young girls and few alternatives for teens and young women. These calls had persisted for several years, underscoring for us that nothing was changing.
Knowing that we had the mainstream media’s attention, both on the issue and for our own voices in a particularly visible way for Halloween, we decided that the summit had to be held just prior to Halloween. This timing provided us with the chance to reframe public discourse about sexualization from the “woe is me” party line to what girls and adults could do to begin to push back and demand change. We selected October 22, 2010, right before the news cycle on this topic would begin. As a movement, SPARK will continue to claim Halloween as a moment when we can garner attention and provide strategies for taking action to challenge sexualization.

We recognized that taking on sexualization was in some sense a risky proposition. One ostensible response to focusing on the issue is the impulse to protect and/or contain girls, putting their sexuality further under wraps. Since we had claimed to be a movement to support girls’ healthy sexuality and its development, we were confronted with the quandary of how to be against sexualization and for sexuality. We resolved this dilemma by claiming the motto, “We’re taking sexy back!” This rallying cry has been very useful in formulating the problem—that marketers and media have defined a narrow vision of “sexy” and have rewritten sexy as a look—while we simultaneously seek solutions such as reclaiming “sexy” as an embodied feeling that girls and women can and should define for themselves. Rather than jettison the concept of sexy, SPARK chose to embrace it and “wrest” it back from its limiting function in current public discourse to redeploy it as a discursive site for redefinition and reclamation.

To be true to our commitment to a girl-focused and driven summit and movement, we were mindful about meeting girls where they are to engage them as actors, inviting in and utilizing as tools the things they are usually asked to set aside when gathered in an auditorium. Girls were encouraged to use their cell phones to text their friends and access their social media venues to report on what was happening at SPARK. We distributed “mingle stix,” a kind of flash drive device that, when pointed at another such device, automatically exchanged contact information, driving network building. These mini hard drives also contained materials from participating organizations that could be accessed by summit participants at a later time. The summit was chaotic, raucous, a constant din of chatter and discussion, of movement, of doing, of connecting and communicating. Sometimes soberly silent listening to the “The Numbers Don’t Lie” panel (organized by another APA Task Force member, well-known media researcher Dr. L. Monique Ward) of research findings, reports from researchers on negative impacts of sexualization on girls’ cognitive performance and school achievement, career aspirations and self-esteem, sometimes dashing down the hall to try out street performing or podcasting or hip hop that refuses rather
than replicates sexualization or trying Pilates, eating, munching, yelling, hugging—all of these embodied ways of being were an active part of SPARK.

To be girl-centered and girl-focused, the summit was organized quite differently from the usual fare. Headed by Hardy Girls Healthy Women, a collection of grassroots girl-serving organizations served as a planning committee for the action focus of the day, each with access to groups of girls to give us input on all elements of the summit to ensure our plan passed muster with them. Organizations were chosen deliberately, based on diversity with respect to geography, girls served in their local programming, and approaches to media activism: Hardy Girls Healthy Women (Waterville, Maryland); About-Face (San Francisco, California); Girls for Gender Equity and viBe Theater Experience (Brooklyn, New York); The Blacklight Project (New Brunswick, New Jersey); Girls for a Change (Phoenix, Arizona); Project Girl (Madison, Wisconsin); and Women, Action and the Media/WAM! (Boston, Massachusetts).

Another key decision was to reach out to girls who were already “media literate”—that is, girls and young women who did not have to be “convinced” that sexualization is persistent or problematic but arrived with this level of understanding in hand in order to take that awareness into activism. We initiated a SPARKTeam of twenty (now thirty) young women, nominated by community-based organizations, to be trained to blog about sexualization and to be a nascent savvy girl media force. The SPARKTeam continues to blog (300+ blogs to date and counting!), to grow (thirty-six girls strong, with over 100 applying to join in 2012), to engage in online and on the ground activism, and to be an absolutely essential part of SPARK’s ongoing and growing public voice, as well as enabling girl-driven debates about these complicated issues.

The summit was suffused with media. It was live streamed and accessed by over 3,000 individuals on our SPARK YouTube channel, which now hosts multiple videos from the summit that are being used to drive movement building. Slideshows providing examples of sexualized media as well as research findings about the impact of sexualization ran throughout, and the summit ended with a slideshow of the resistance and media creations that the participants had produced throughout the day. Keynotes featured both young women, such as Yasmine Richards, an active blogger who had just started college, and established and well-known figures, like Geena Davis, who started the Geena Davis Institute on Gender and the Media. Most of the girls had never heard of Thelma and Louise but its iconic portrayal shown in clips at the summit once again proved inspirational. Plenary panels included teen activists and adult women activists who had successfully pushed back against sexualization through online campaigns, script writing, on-campus activism, and established grassroots organiz-
tions such as Hollaback!, which provides women, young and old, with the chance to resist street harassment in real time through a cell phone app.

The heart of the summit was a series of hands-on workshops on everything from creating zines, to writing and performing theater, hip hop, and spoken word, to culture jamming media and organizing change campaigns. In addition, a large room accommodated 13 different hands-on “Action Spots,” introducing girls to a range of media activism and offering the chance to make their own media. Examples included Project Girl’s Commercial Land collages, in which girls developed pieces of original art and then made uploadable videos explaining their “take back” of media images into positive conceptions of themselves; a male allies station co-sponsored by Men Can Stop Rape and “manned” by male peer educators from Planned Parenthood of New York City; the CUNY chapter of the Campus Coalition for Sexual Literacy and high school students, at which girls were invited to ask boys any question and receive a sincere, honest answer; and a Woman, Action and the Media (WAM!) petition booth, where summit-goers were invited to talk back to Glee stars about their exquisitely timed sexualized GQ spread. The summit also provided introductions to mind-body movement practices, including yoga, Pilates, and flamenco dancing. The day ended with an Intervene in Halloween costume show, where girls attending the conference joined those who had submitted photos online to showcase fun, creative costumes they want to see in stores.

We cannot underestimate the impact and importance of social media in giving the summit lift, visibility, broader engagement and impact, an instant track record, and evidence of how the desire to do something about the sexualization of girls is profoundly ready to ignite. Encouraging participants to text, post and tweet yielded tremendous internet presence. Well-known young feminist bloggers, including Shelby Knox and Deborah Siegel, blogged in real time. On the day of the summit, we had over 3 million impressions on Twitter that catapulted us to a top-ten trending topic in New York, almost 2,500 visits to our website, and just as many Facebook visitors. Social media on all fronts remains one of the most potent tools in SPARK’s arsenal, with a constantly updated Twitter feed on our website, multiple postings on our Facebook page daily, and plans afoot to enhance traffic and “likes” to our page. Our SPARK YouTube channel continues to be accessed, with over 65,000 views to date. These strategies are efforts to enlarge the SPARK community so that it can be mobilized for campaigns and easily alerted to new resources that SPARK and our partners are generating.

We also utilized the summit itself as a chance to muscle in to mainstream media, and very quickly SPARK became the go-to for public comment on sexualization. For instance, Tolman and Brown published an op-ed in The Huffing-
Deborah L. Tolman, Lyn Mikel Brown, and Christin P. Bowman

*ton Post* and were interviewed for radio programs at the time of the summit. In line with the launch of a movement, as of August, 2011, SPARK has been persistently tapped for input, commentary, and quotes in media ranging from documentaries to talk shows to articles for mainstream venues such as *Good Housekeeping, The Daily Beast, USA Today, Toronto Star,* and *The New York Times.*

Finally, SPARK won a policy victory in announcing a new relationship with Common Sense Media to integrate attention to sexualization into their materials. Success continues apace and quickly (check our website, www.sparksummit.com, for the latest campaigns and actions).

**Deep Background: Motivation for SPARKing a (Media) Movement**

Why focus on the media? Sexualization is certainly an element of sexism in a plethora of contexts such as harassment in schools, evaluation of girls and women in malls and on walkways through college campuses, as well as a component of dating violence, sexual abuse, and commercial sexual exploitation. However, the critical mass and unequivocal social acceptance of the sexualization of girls in the media provides a constant and consuming context of sexualization within which girls’ relational and psychosocial development now takes place. Moreover, reflecting the pervasiveness of media in our lives, there is now a convincing body of research on the impact of media sexualization on girls and young women.

Media formats such as television, magazines, and the internet continue to impose age-inappropriate sexual characteristics upon girls and young women. Nearly thirty percent of web-based advertisements for girls’ clothing are explicitly sexual, and almost ninety percent of music videos, crossing all genres, incorporate objectifying images of women, often portraying women as prostitutes and servants. Magazines aimed at girls, adolescents, and young women encourage women to think of themselves as sexual objects who should strive constantly for male attention and connection. Even cartoons feature sexualized images of girls and women, with female characters wearing sexy costumes that do not match their roles in films like *Ella Enchanted.*

More and more evidence points to the damaging effects of the sexualization of girls on those girls themselves, on adult women, on boys and men, and ultimately on society as a whole. Girls who are exposed to sexualizing or objectifying media are more likely to experience body dissatisfaction, eating disorders, low self-esteem, and depression. Because girls are constantly exposed to images of sexual objectification in the media and in their lives, they internalize this objectifying perspective and learn to look at themselves as sexual objects, harboring a “male gaze” in their own psyches. This self-objectification involves constantly assessing one’s own body in order to evaluate how successfully one
is conforming to cultural standards of attractiveness. Among the most devastating consequences of self-objectification is the impairment of cognitive and physical functioning. Self-objectification has been shown to affect girls’ math performance and logical reasoning and spatial skills, diminish girls’ career aspirations, and their ability to throw a ball.

By setting an unachievable standard for what it means to be female in terms of narrow beauty ideals and appearance-focused sexuality, and saturating the visual, aural, and interactive landscapes with sexualized imagery, the media has severely constrained the psychological imagination of girls and women and narrowed their perceptions of healthy relationships. Future possibilities appear limited for girls as they learn to value themselves based on painfully narrow standards of beauty and sexuality and to discount their competence and achievements outside of the “beauty myth.” Professional ambitions emphasizing appearance and sexuality, such as ‘glamour model,’ are slowly replacing career ambitions that focus on intelligence and ability, such as ‘doctor’ or ‘teacher.’

**Leveraging Research: Building a Bridge From Academia to Activism**

Academic research regarding girls and women has the tendency to circulate within the academy, rarely reaching those girls and women to whom it is most pertinent. SPARK embodies a departure from the entrenched ivory tower goals and focus of academia, utilizing this research as a springboard for preparing girls to be agents of change, incorporating systematic empirical evidence as necessary to public persuasion as well as intellectual debate. From the beginning, a key SPARK principle has been to scaffold girls’ engagement with peer-reviewed research. The SPARK Summit included a plenary session entitled “Numbers Don’t Lie,” which reviewed current research on the impact of media sexualization on girls and women.

As the summit came to a close, the SPARK leadership team sought a way to keep the girls and young women engaged with current relevant research. We wholeheartedly believed that girls could consume complex academic research if it was presented to them in a format that was accessible, convenient, and engaging to them. Having had considerable success with our SPARK team bloggers and in order to keep the flow of the latest and most exciting research on sexualization integral to the movement, we launched a research blog as a regular feature on the website. Written by Bowman, a graduate student in psychology, who is training others in this strategy for knowledge dissemination, the blog has a playful and witty voice to make current research accessible and to bring it to life for SPARK readers. Rather than the jargon-filled, statistic-laden academic writing that is the usual delivery mechanism for research, the SPARK research blog
cuts through the insider-speak, “translating” into plain language explanations of difficult concepts like “self-objectification” and “sexualization.” The blog often includes interviews with the researchers about their findings or how they conceived their questions. By rendering dense material more widely comprehensively, the blog explains how research is relevant to girls’ lived experiences while also providing a model for how to communicate this information in mainstream venues.

Each blog tackles a new piece of research, explaining in simple terms the research question, methods, and results. The blogs conclude with a discussion of the implications of the research for girls and young women who want to be critical of their environments. Presented from a first-person perspective by “twenty-something” women who, like us all, are constantly bombarded by sexualization and look to research to make sense of and develop strategies to resist it, the blogs invite the reader in as both subjected and resistant to sexualization. Throughout the discussion of the research, the blogger maintains her playful, critical voice, usually concluding with a call to action. For example, in a blog discussing the true meaning of “sexual empowerment” in advertising (reporting on Halliwell et al., 2011), Bowman writes:

These so-called “empowering” images of women turn out to be just the opposite. They’re a lie, a Venus flytrap. They lure us in with sweet promises of empowerment, and then SNAP! They gobble us up in the same old sexualized rhetoric. Well I’m not falling for it. Real sexual empowerment isn’t about what you look like. It doesn’t require stick-thinness or exhibitionism. Real sexual empowerment is about how women feel in their bodies. It’s about knowing what you want (and don’t want) and not being afraid to let your partner know. It’s about sexual pleasure. It’s about having fun in your body and loving your body and really feeling your body. When the media can figure out how to show us this kind of healthy female sexuality, I’ll be glad to call it sexual empowerment too.

Communicating her own subjectivity through phrases like, “Well I’m not falling for it,” Bowman models for girls how to be critical of the media. Far from simple critique, however, the blog ends with suggestions for how to resist media oppression and “take sexy back” by envisioning and emphasizing one of SPARK’s key messages, that sexy is not simply a look, but most essentially, a sexy feeling in our bodies to which we are all entitled.

**SPARK: The Movement**

Girls’ experiences of and responses to sexualization and objectification sit within existing contexts of power that constrain and restrict the kinds of choices and range of options available to them. Sexualization is ironically frequently framed and misnamed in media as female empowerment—a fun choice in a
“Hey Media, Back Off and Get Off My Body”

“postfeminist” world. This discourse often provides a compelling cover for sexual double standards and unequal power relations and does so in a glitzy, inviting way, such that girls and young women choose to embody the very conditions that serve to constrain, restrict, and subordinate them. A truly freely chosen, embodied, healthy sexuality, Correa and Petchesky suggest, requires the presence of “enabling conditions” that are both “material and infrastructural” and “cultural and political.”

We approached SPARK as a way to lay bare this contradiction and to reveal how this experience of “choice” is in fact much more fraught than it appears to be—in part, how media serves commodification and thus itself while cloaking its disservice to girls in well-disguised contradictions.

Two specific SPARK activities provide space for girls, along with women and their male allies, to think about and express how sexualization makes them feel, and how it limits and undermines their felt sense of freedom to move through the world. The SPARKTeam, a collection of girl blogger/activists from across the country, and the SPARKits, a series of online free downloadable media literacy and activism projects inspired by the summit action spots, create public spaces for critical perspectives on sexualized media and enable a push back to a media-saturated environment that “crowds out” or “overwrites” possibilities for young women’s sexuality, sense of self and being in relationship.

The SPARKTeam

From the beginning, the SPARK leadership group was determined to bring girls and young women into the summit planning process and to join with them to develop the shape and trajectory of the movement. As the primary targets of media and marketers, girls have grown up in a culture saturated with messages about what it means to be a “successful girl” and how “being sexy” is central in that accomplishment, and have spent their lives negotiating a relationship with media. We knew any progress around this set of issues required the experiences, insight, wit, and activist spirit of girls and young women. With this in mind, SPARK circulated an August 2010 call for nominations in search of a diverse group of girls between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two from across the country to make up a SPARKTeam of bloggers. The call invited girls to help SPARK launch an intergenerational movement to support and stand with girls against sexualized media, engage girls to be part of the solution rather than to protect them from the problem, challenge the belief that the current media landscape is “just the way things are,” and then articulate and demonstrate what the alternatives can be. We sought a SPARKTeam of girls and young women who were interested in “challenging the sexualization and objectification of women and girls and/or promoting girls’ sexual rights and healthy sexuality” to be bloggers for the SPARK Summit and movement. The initial twenty girl
bloggers chosen ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-one; half of the young women self-identified as white; half self-identified as of color.

The SPARK bloggers came to us with varied experience interacting with mainstream media and with movement building. The younger bloggers had taken a high school class in feminism or had been actively involved with what Jessica Taft terms “transformative” girl serving organizations—those organizations, such as Hardy Girls Healthy Women and Girls for Gender Equity, that encourage “girls to think systematically about the conditions of their lives and their communities and the intersecting forces of racism, sexism, classism and ageism (among others)”—but had little experience as bloggers or activists, whereas some of the college-aged bloggers came to us with majors in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and experience leading actions or blogging for other established activist organizations. Carmen Rios, nineteen, for example, was editor and blogger for THE LINE Campaign and founded an educational campaign, (con)sensual, on her college campus. Melissa Campbell, twenty-one, an established Tumblr blogger, had developed and led public actions for the community-based organization About-Face in San Francisco.

The girls participated in an online training with activist and blogger Shelby Knox and the day before the summit participated in a two-hour Progressive Girls’ Voices training with Jamia Wilson of the Women’s Media Center. The bloggers now iChat twice monthly on the Powered By Girl Ning site (an invitation-only safe online space that allows multiple users to participate in real-time conversations), generating blog and activism ideas, commenting on one another’s drafts, and planning online and on the ground actions; in addition, they communicate daily on their Facebook group page. Blogging advice and feedback is offered by former SPARK blogger, Melissa Campbell, who is now on staff. Financial support comes from SPARK, ensuring that each girl gets paid for her blogs and other SPARK actions on a monthly basis.

The SPARKTeam bloggers write about the realities and impact of sexualization, as well as promote and define possible alternatives, including an agentic healthy embodied sexuality. The SPARK Summit rallying cry, “We’re taking sexy back!” resonated with the bloggers, and they have grappled with what sexy should and could be, demanding more positive and realistic images of girls, and considering what conditions are necessary for healthy sexuality.

“We want control over our sexuality,” Juliana writes, expressing a dominant thread running through the SPARKTeam blogs. Through their blogs the girls have developed language and created space for this control. Blogging gives each individual girl some measure of agency, power to determine the significance of media messages, and a means to talk back, but their collective public effort, scaffolded by the SPARK network of sixty partner organizations, website
and social media, creates a broader platform to advocate both for resistance to sexualization and for support of healthy sexuality. Together the girl bloggers offer their readers a critical vocabulary, public dialogue, and a set of resistance strategies. Brown describes how the bloggers contribute to the creation of enabling conditions for healthy sexuality by opening up more space for a diversity of options and complexity of what it means to be sexual; publicly interrupting and disrupting an increasingly normalized set of discourses and imagery; and widening options for participation in social and political action in response to increased sexualization, objectification, and what has been called “pornification” of girls’ media.

The girls promote one another’s blogs on Facebook and Tumblr and, in this way, create a steady stream of thoughtful critique about their experiences as both consumers and producers of media. When they invite media activism, it is usually a mix of playful, satiric, and pointed criticism that catches the attention of their peers and adults alike. For example, when Maya, sixteen, heard that Candies (a brand of tween clothing and shoes) had announced a contest to design a new clothing ad, she called them out on their disingenuous invitation:

> When I went on the Candies website, there wasn’t a place to make any sort of ad I wanted to see. There wasn’t a place I could upload my own pictures or even a variety of pictures to choose from. Instead what I saw was a cookie cutter mold for sexist ads. There were about 10 pictures of Vanessa Hudgens, the current “Candies Girl,” in various sexualized positions and states of undress…The site gives the appearance of freedom and creativity…but in reality any advertisement I made would be pretty much the same. Not to mention that in order to submit the ad I’d have to upload a Candies logo…

On behalf of the SPARKTeam, Maya invited readers to “take their sexist ad contest and throw it right back at them. So go ahead, log on and make an ad for them, but make it satiric. Use the functions they supply, like text boxes and a drawing pen and question the sexist ads they’re selling…Be sure to take a screen shot and post on our SPARK Facebook page.”

When thirteen-year-old Julia Bluhm successfully petitioned Seventeen Magazine to include digitally unaltered images of girls in their pages, she and her SPARKTeammates staged a mock photoshoot in front of the magazine’s Manhattan headquarters, playfully grabbing media attention with satiric slogans and hand-made signs. The Team’s strength is the creative mix of critique and humor they bring to every action.

The SPARKTeam works together to create sites of resistance, making visible creative forms of agency in response to sexualized media that promise freedom but deliver a set of narrow choices and constraining options. But SPARK is also about engaging adults and offering girl-serving community-based organi-
zations much needed media literacy and activism tools and resources they can use to participate actively in the growing movement.

The SPARKits

Designed in collaboration with Hardy Girls Healthy Women and Powered By Girl, the SPARK Summit “Action Spots” were chosen on the basis of their potential to seed the movement. Developed in collaboration with SPARK partner organizations, they became the inspiration for a series of free downloadable interactive SPARKits. An important feature of this initiative is to enable those organizations offering SPARKits to share their work with other girls across the country and internationally via SPARK’s social media and website. SPARKits are strategically named to convey simultaneously that they are a kit by which girls and others can “do” SPARK work and, in so doing, they will “spark it”—ignite the SPARK movement—in their group and community.

Each co-branded interactive SPARKit enables girls, community-based organizations, parents, families, schools, and communities to engage with the SPARK movement; in turn, the growing coalition of partners supports the use of the Kits, and extends the movement worldwide via social media. As we mentioned earlier, this allows the smallest grassroots SPARK partners, many of which have some of the most creative media literacy projects and actions, to extend their reach. This also allows marginalized or economically stressed schools, organizations, and communities free access to some of the most creative and fun media literacy and activism materials available.

The first SPARKit was developed in collaboration with Project Girl, a grassroots media activism-through-the-arts organization in Madison, Wisconsin. Run by visual artist Kelly Parks Snider and videographer Jane Bartell, Project Girl had a small but ardent following as a result of their traveling art exhibit, art activism workshops, creative online gallery of girl art, and progressive curricular materials. Project Girl developed a Summit Action Spot based on their Commercial Land Collage. They invited girls and young women to use art to develop critical commentary on the media targeting them and videotaped their art talks. Their SPARKit offers free downloadable collage-making instructions and invites girls to upload their art and commentary into Project Girl’s online SPARKit gallery for others to see and appreciate (see the SPARK Commercial Land Collages and listen to the girls art talks).

After their SPARKit was announced, Project Girl’s Facebook page numbers doubled, and they received offers from coast to coast to do workshops with girls. In fall 2012, they spoke at the National Women’s Studies Association annual conference about their Kit and their work with girls.

Twelve SPARKits developed from the original action spots at the summit have been assembled into an integrated curriculum for teen girls called *SPARK-
“Hey Media, Back Off and Get Off My Body”

The curriculum includes extensive guidelines and instructions for using the kits to teach and enable media literacy and activism, as well as a list of SPARKTeam blogs to engage girls in discussion.

SPARKing the Future

SPARK has the distinction of being both a highly planned summit and movement and a context that feeds and fuels innovation with the best of unintended consequences. As a movement dedicated to resisting the onslaught of sexualization of girls while promoting girls’ right to develop healthy sexuality, it is tantamount that we grow. As more partners join SPARK, they continue to transform and improve the movement, enabling us to draw attention to and protest sexualization, as well as offer alternatives to it.

SPARK is also in the process of becoming a formalized entity. We have hired a director, Dr. Dana Edell, founder and former executive director of viBe Theater Experience. Dana was instrumental in organizing the action spots at the summit and now brings her considerable skills to realizing SPARK’s strategic plan. We have launched successful actions and campaigns to secure LEGO’s engagement on reworking their line for girls, and convinced Seventeen magazine’s editor to take a public pledge in her August 2012 letter to readers that the magazine will never alter images of girls’ faces or bodies. We have collaborated with partners on national awareness and protest campaigns, including the #KeepItReal campaign with Miss Representation and #Proud2BMe campaign with the National Eating Disorders Association. We will be developing a college campus initiative through collaboration with women’s studies programs and women’s centers. We have already expanded the SPARKteam and are hard at work instituting reposts of their blogs on websites beyond our immediate focus. We have plans to expand internationally, beginning with a Canadian Women’s Foundation-initiated SPARKit contest for girl-serving organizations across Canada, designed as a template for future work with other countries. We have no shortage of ideas for how to grow the SPARK movement to create what SPARK leadership team member Jamia Wilson of the Women’s Media Center, utilizing Malcom Gladwell’s concept (2002), has termed “a cultural tipping point where sexualization of girls is no longer acceptable, tolerable or profitable.” Some might say we are overreaching, but we know, based on historical shifts to intolerance around racism and sexism, meeting such a goal requires only our imagination, our commitment, and our passion for raising awareness of the injustice that sexualization brings and the possibilities that media activism holds.
Notes

“Hey Media, Back Off and Get Off My Body” 243


Works Cited


