

# The Young Are Making Their World

*Essays on the Power  
of Youth Culture*



*Edited by Yuya Kiuchi  
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## #GirlsFightBack

### *How Girls Are Using Social Network Sites and Online Communities to Combat Sexism*

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Online social network sites are an integral part of adolescents' lives today (e.g., Lenhart & Madden, 2007; Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). As of 2012, 95 percent of all U.S. youth aged 12–17 reported going online (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013) and 81 percent of these reported using social network sites, up about 25 percent from 2006 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). Teen social media users typically visit social network sites daily (Madden, Lenhart, Duggan et al., 2013), and most access the Internet on mobile devices—meaning that youth are connected to online social networks every day and everywhere.

Over the last 10 years, from 2005–2015, social network sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, and Vine have become the most dominant forms of social media communication (Boorstin, 2014; Boyd, 2008; Marquart, 2010; Sloan, 2011). Youth today rely heavily on Facebook for social networking, with 94 percent of teen social media users having a Facebook profile (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi et al., 2013). Twitter is less popular, with 24 percent of online teens using Twitter in 2012, but its usage is growing rapidly, having doubled since 2011 (Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi et al., 2013). High school age girls and African American teens are particularly likely to use Twitter compared to other groups (Lenhart et al., 2010; Madden, Lenhart, Cortesi et al., 2013).

The rapidly increasing accessibility and popularity of social network sites, which are cited as one type of social media classification (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), has had myriad effects on youth development outcomes.

Many scholars have pointed to the seemingly negative effects of social media on youth behavior and culture. For example, it has been argued that social media enable youth violence, including bullying, stalking, and gang violence (for a review, see Patton, Hong, Ranney, Patel, Kelley et al., 2014). Others have demonstrated a negative relationship between social well-being and social media use among girls (Pea, Nass, Meheula, Rance, Kumar et al., 2012), especially compared to face-to-face communication. Some argue that social media use can exacerbate youth consumption of alcohol and tobacco (Cavazos-Rehg, Krauss, Spitzmagel, Grucza, & Bierut, 2014; McCreanor, Lyons, Griffin, Goodwin, Barnes et al., 2013). The American Academy of Pediatrics has even released a clinical report on potential problems youth may face due to social media activity, urging parents to watch for signs of depression and exposure to inappropriate content (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

However, the overall relationship between social media use and youth well-being is inconsistent (Best, Manktelow, & Taylor, 2014), because some forms of social media engagement can promote positive youth development. In this essay, we will examine one way social media are being used by girls as a means for self-expression, empowerment, and to level engagement in political and social movements. In this essay, the term “girls” is specifically referring to youth between the ages of 12–17. Furthermore, the current essay will examine how girls are using social media to undertake meaningful and impactful social change efforts to combat sexism. First, we review how girls use social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter, and online communities such as SPARK and Powered By Girl (PBG), as activist tools in the fight against sexism. We also examine some of the positive outcomes of these efforts for girls and communities. Finally, we discuss areas for future research on online activism and ways to continue to support girls' activism moving forward.

### *Definition of Online Activism*

Activism, or efforts to enact or direct social, political, economic, or environmental change, can occur on a local or individual level as well as in larger social movements (Martin, Hanson, & Fontaine, 2007). An example of individual feminist activism might be a person's decision to challenge a friend who makes a sexist comment. Other examples of individual activism may involve addressing injustices occurring within a local school, neighborhood, or government agency. While these efforts are crucial to enacting change, they co-exist with larger activist efforts that draw from and unite a diverse group of people dedicated to a common cause. The primary emphasis in this type of activism is to create social change via a collective vision and the shared

belief that a particular facet of society needs to be addressed and improved (Taft, 2011). The current essay will focus on such larger social movements.

For hundreds of years, social activism included media communication such as leaflets and newsletters (van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004a). Young people also have a long record of being “key actors in nearly every major social movement in modern history” (Chock, 2012, p. 2). However, youth activism that originates and is hosted primarily through media communication is an entirely new phenomenon. Online social activism, also known as Internet activism, digital activism, digital campaigning, cyberactivism, e-activism, online participation, online organizing, e-movements, eParticipation, etc. (e.g., McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Earl & Kimport, 2011a; Earl, Kimport, Prieto, Rush, & Reynoso, 2010; Seabo, 2008; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004b) can be defined as politically-motivated social movements that rely on the Internet (Vegh, 2003). Often cited as beginning in 1990 (Gurak & Logie, 2003), online activism ranges the gamut from passive information sharing to mobilizing online and offline action, including participation in petitions, protests, boycotts, fundraising, politically-motivated hacking (e.g., hacktivism), demonstrations, voting, and email and letter-writing campaigns (Earl & Kimport, 2011b; Vegh, 2003).

Despite its recency, online activism has spread rapidly and widely, helping mobilize youth in political and social actions. The low-cost, high-speed, and wide accessibility of the Internet and social media have enabled youth across the globe, from diverse socioeconomic, political, and racial/ethnic backgrounds, to become involved in activism (Earl & Schussman, 2008; Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008). The Internet is a vehicle youth can use to sidestep some of the limitations they face in dominant structures, both to voice their personal opinions and experiences and to participate in and organize cooperative efforts. Though youth typically lack conventional power and status (such as the right to vote, economic independence, or mobility), online activism provides them a platform for challenging the “true powers” of this world (Stasko, 2008). In fact, social network sites and online communities can empower youth as “information leaders” when they connect their families and peers with mobilizing information and opportunity (McDevitt & Butler, 2011). Furthermore, these virtual spaces allow youth to utilize activism for important social issues. For example, researchers have cited the Internet and social network sites as important places for youth to understand, respond, and challenge gender-based violence (Motter, 2011; Salter, 2013).

Research supports a strong, positive relationship between social media use and youth political engagement. In fact, social media use has been found to be a stronger predictor of activism in youth than various demographic variables, such as socioeconomic status. Social media appears to be an accessible space for diverse youth to engage in political and social activism as it

is familiar, youth are already spending their time on the sites, and they can participate without having to step outside their comfort zones (Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008). This has been documented in advanced democracies, such as the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), as well as in Africa (Iwilade, 2013), Chile (Valenzuela, Arrigada, Scherman, 2012), Iran (Wojcieszak, & Smith, 2014), Lebanon (Maamari & Zein, 2014), and Singapore (Skoric & Poor, 2013), for example. Internet activism has even penetrated the U.S. White House, where the first lady, Michelle Obama, publicly participated in the #BringBackOurGirls hashtag tweeting campaign (aka “hashtag activism”) to end the 2014 Chibok kidnappings (McVeigh, 2014). Furthermore, the White House has created the “It’s On Us” campaign, which is aimed at addressing and reducing the sexual victimization and rape that is prevalent on college campuses (RAINN, 2014). The White House and other organizations supporting this campaign have utilized social media and hashtag activism by promoting the #ItsOnUs hashtag, which urges everyone to take a pledge to fight campus sexual assault.

### *The Use of Social Networks and Communities*

The most popular forms of online activism have changed over the years. The “zines” of the 1980s and early 1990s transformed into personal websites and blogs for many, or morphed into online newspapers and magazines. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw the birth and popularity of “blogging” and “ezines” which have also become an important online contribution (McCaughy, 2013; Piepmeier, 2009). Much research and writing has already covered the content and outcomes of girl’s online blogging and ezines (e.g., Keller, 2014), with some even identifying “zines” and blogs as the new feminist frontier (e.g., Hammer, 2005; Keller, 2012).

Online communities have been defined as sites that have one or more “maintainers” who serve in a supervising or administrative role to manage the site’s activities, content, and users (Bers, 2012). “Online community” appears to be a general umbrella term that can describe different types of activity, with social network sites being one type of online community (boyd & Ellison, 2008). According to boyd and Ellison (2008), social network sites can be defined as a web-based service that permits users to “construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view their connections and those made by others in the system” (p. 211). In addition to connecting with other users, these sites are popular places to share text-based information and other forms of media such as pictures and videos (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Although the terms “social network site” and “online community” are often

used interchangeably in the literature, boyd and Ellison (2008) specify that recent social network sites are often revolved around people and not “topics” or “interests,” with the “individual at the center of their own community” (p. 219), while previous online communities may have been revolved around a specific topic or interest. In this sense, it appears that “online communities” can describe social network sites such as Facebook, which can be deemed a community organized around “people,” or they can describe online sites that are a community organized around a certain “interest” (e.g., combating sexism). Online “movements” have been described as both identifiable, episodic movements that have occurred online (e.g., #BringBackOurGirls) as well as ongoing online movements that have active members coming together to change an aspect of society based on a specific topic or interest (e.g., the SPARK Movement). For the purposes of this essay, the latter conceptualization of an online “movement” can be used interchangeably with the term online “community” when the movement is geared towards an ongoing topic or social change and the movement is made up of members who can contribute and also manage the website for that movement. Both social network sites and online communities can be a place where online social action groups are formed and enforced, online petitions and their topics are conceived and circulated, and other grassroots social movements can be found.

Although blogging and ezines are still popular, they can be written in relative isolation and do not necessarily involve communities of girls or social activist outreach. Here, we are particularly interested in online activism that is created by girls to reach and inspire other girls. We will briefly mention a few adult-led or adult-majority communities that provide resources or space to girls, but these are not the focus of this essay. Instead, we will focus on the use of public social networks (e.g., Facebook) and online communities that are girl-powered (e.g., the SPARK Movement) that connect girls and help them become agents of their own lives. This focus was chosen because one of the most exciting, novel, and empowering features of activism for girls is that it holds the potential for them to create representative communities in which they control information and lead initiatives. The ability to autonomously create content and direct action is what sets girls’ online activism apart from all previous forms of social and political action they might have participated in.

### *Girls as Creators and Change Agents in Online Activism*

Online social network sites allow a level of active participation that did not exist before the Internet. For example, social network users can view and

comment on information posted by those in their network, including on comments posted by an out-of-network person on an in-network person’s feed. Users can also share other’s posts in their own profile feed, for all of their in-network members to see, comment on, and share. Finally, users can create and post their own content in their profiles, including everything from text to links to photos and videos. In all these ways, girls can become contributors to culture instead of simply passive consumers through social network sites (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Stasko, 2008; Harris, 2008).

Sites such as Facebook and MySpace also have groups and activist opportunities that enable people to band together on topics that are important to them (Kann et al., 2007). For example, Facebook has a “Causes” application where people are able to “share ideas, find supporters, and make an impact.” Users are able to create and/or support a social cause campaign. Furthermore, Facebook has open and closed groups such as “Feminism on Facebook” with 8,706 members, which highlights current events and issues relevant to grassroots feminist movements. Users are also able to “like” topics that are categorized as “interests,” to learn more about the topics and connect with other users who are interested in similar topics. For example, the topic of “gender equality” has 12,071 “likes,” or 12,071 people who have publicly endorsed an interest in this topic.

Online petitions have also become a popular vehicle for girls’ participation in online activism (Earl & Schussman, 2008). Earl and Schussman (2008) claim online petitions demonstrate that girls are making a shift from passive to active, and are demanding change from people in power. Change.org is one online petition website where girls can identify an issue related to sexism that needs awareness, attention, and change, and where they can find like-minded others to stand with them in solidarity. Social network sites such as Twitter and Facebook are places where these online petitions are often circulated for public awareness and response, and where young girls can “talk back” to various forms of pop culture. In this way, social network sites and online petitions sites such as Change.org have amplified girls’ voices to the point where they can catch the attention of traditional producers of media and advertising (Earl & Schussman, 2008; Stasko, 2008).

For example, in 2014 a female high school student from Virginia started a Change.org petition urging Disney to include plus-sized princesses in their movies which reached 37,181 signatures. In 2012, an 8th grade girl from New Jersey started a Change.org petition on behalf of her four-year-old brother who wanted an Easy Bake Oven for Christmas but found no gender neutral oven sets for purchase. The 8th grader petitioned the company requesting that they make a less gender stereotypical version of the product along with non-gendered promotional materials. Her petition garnered 45,502 signatures and got the attention of the company, Hasbro. Hasbro invited her to their

headquarters and ultimately agreed to make Easy Bake Ovens geared towards both boys and girls. Although Hasbro did not agree to the full extent of her requests, including making a non-gendered product, her advocacy resulted in real change from a multi-billion dollar company. These examples are evidence that girls are finding a voice in online social activist sites such as Change.org.

### Culture Jamming and Media Activism

Certain types of websites and online communities provide girls with opportunities to create and deconstruct the popular culture that surrounds them. This is particularly important when it comes to the media's depiction of girls and women in music, movies, and television, where multidimensional female representation is lacking on and off the screen (Smith & Cook, 2008; Smith & Choueiti, 2010). Furthermore, producing their own content and media online helps girls to resist and challenge mass culture and to create and express their own realities (Harris, 2008; Hasinoff, 2012). For example, researchers have found that being able to actively produce and create media online assists girls with responding to and protesting the objectification of women and girls they see in mainstream media (Durham, 2008; Kearney, 2006). For example, the site "My Pop Studio" was developed by researchers and media scholars from the Media Education Lab. My Pop Studio provides girls experiences with different virtual options to increase media literacy skills by actively creating and recreating media. According to its site, My Pop Studio has a "Magazine Studio" where girls can create magazine layouts and have the opportunity to experience the impact of Photoshopping. The "TV Studio" allows girls to edit portions of television shows while the "Music Studio" affords girls an opportunity to create their own music stars and even compose a song. They are also able to experience the influential role of music when it comes to selling various consumer products.

This phenomenon of young girls creating and deconstructing pop culture reflects a concept that has developed in the culture in response to the overwhelming presence of media messages. "Culture jamming" is a form of media activism that has become popular over the Internet as more people, especially young people, disapprove of many of the underlying messages that are portrayed in mainstream popular media culture (Stasko, 2008). Although culture jamming has different forms and began offline by utilizing in-person protests, artwork, billboards, disseminating leaflets, and graffiti in public areas, the Internet has made the prospect of culture jamming quite accessible (Cammaerts, 2007). According to Mackey-Kallis (2012), "Culture jammers hoax corporate practices and products or spoof mass media messages in a way that unveils hidden agendas or counteracts meaning in order to negate

their impact or success" (p. 51). Users culture jam, for example, by making parodies of existing media (e.g., advertisements) in order to "talk back" or "fight back" to marketers and expose the underlying harmful messages the media contains and is communicating to consumers (Harold, 2004). Even though anyone can be a cultural "jammer," Merskin (2006) specifically explores the evolution of what she calls a "Jammer Girl." Jammer Girls are groups of young girls that want to fight back against and change sexist depictions of girls, especially in the media. Merskin describes these girls as rejecting the "tenets of thinness, fashion, and passivity" (p. 51) and those wanting to actively redefine "beauty" in mainstream media and replace it with a more balanced and healthy representation of women and girls. The increase of culture jamming sites on the Internet has been noted as a significant advantage for girl-fueled online activism, particularly when it comes to unidimensional depictions of girls and women in the media and in the culture (Merskin, 2006).

There are many culture jamming sites, movements, and technologies that have been created specifically to "fight back" against modern media such as AdBusters, LAMPlatoon, and the LAMP's Media Breaker, to name a few. Many of these culture-jamming sites and technologies are not restricted to issues of sexism only, but most do address issues related to sexism to some degree. For example, AdBusters, which has been cited to be one of the most well-known culture jamming organizations (Mackey-Kallis, 2012) "spoofed" a Calvin Klein ad from the 1990s that featured one of their most popular models who was also extremely thin. AdBusters inserted the words "Feed me" into the ad, in an effort to highlight the true problematic nature of the marketing campaign for this popular consumer brand.

Some culture jamming movements and technologies are geared towards girls and sexism specifically. For example, the Representation Project is a movement that utilizes activism to critique film and media content that reinforces harmful gender stereotypes as well as objectification and violence against women and girls. The Representation Project utilizes social network sites and "hashtag activism," which is a way for people to support issues or causes such as sexism through social network sites and social media (Hill, 2014). The Representation Project started a hashtag called #NotBuyingIt, which allows the public to identify specific ads, episodes, and messages that are harmful, cite their reasoning for why they believe the message is harmful, and end it with #NotBuyingIt. The rationale is that companies will decrease sexist advertising if they believe it will cost them sales or public support. #NotBuyingIt has been successful in multiple campaigns, and they specifically target ads that are sexist to girls. From getting authors of children's books to remove sexist content, to pressuring Halloween costume businesses from marketing to girls in a sexualized way, this form of online activism is making



changes (Indiegogo, n.d.). The Representation Project is, however, an adult-led organization that is speaking out on behalf of girls. Although many girls contribute to the creation of the different #NotBuyingIt hashtags, they still do not have ownership over this online movement. Although this type of online activism is geared towards girls and for girls, it is not necessarily a girl-initiated or managed online community.

About-Face.org “equips girls and women with tools to understand and resist harmful media messages that effect their self-esteem and body image.” The site has a “Gallery of Offenders” and a “Gallery of Winners” that depicts media content that is both harmful and empowering towards girls and women, respectively. Girls and women can send in their own recommendation for both galleries. The site also has three online activist opportunities for young girls and women; petitions, “tweaking” a media ad, and an action section. The petition portion allows girls and women access to petitions for each ad/company in their Gallery of Offenders. They also provide a guide for how girls can create their own original petitions. In their tweak an ad section, they show examples of “tweaked” ads and an opportunity to send About Face their ads so they can be placed on the website. Lastly, their action section provides examples of social action projects and an opportunity to submit this so their own unique action projects can be highlighted on the site. Although girls and women can contribute in many different ways to About Face, the community appears to be led primarily by adult women who wish to assist girls and women in culture jamming and social activist processes.

Whether online movements and communities are geared towards culture jamming or are simply seeking a decrease in sexism geared towards girls, entirely girl-fueled online social movements against sexism are rare. While many anti-sexist online movements work towards improving girls’ lives, many of these are run by adult women. There are some movements that invite girls to be the originators or the creators of activism (such as contributing to the Gallery of Offenders at About Face), rather than simply recipients of information. However, these movements showcase girls’ work within a larger, adult-led change effort. In other words, girls’ activism is a part of many online feminist communities, but girls rarely lead these communities. However, we found at least two established online activist communities and movements based in the United States in which girls are the major change agents. It is important to learn more how these unique communities operate, as they offer the most direct route towards understanding what girls want and need in today’s feminist movement.

One online community called Powered By Girl (PBG) is “an online media activism movement and campaign for girls by girls.” PBG is girl-fueled and was created by the Hardy Girls Healthy Women (HGHW) organization.

PBG’s purported mission is to challenge, interrupt, and eventually decrease sexism in the media. PBG is known to focus on sexism and ways it uniquely interacts with racism, classism, and heterosexism. PBG is an international online movement and community, where its contents are created and uploaded by female guest contributors as well as social media interns. PBG welcomes the culture jamming of drawings, cartoons, poems, and remakes of ads and they encourage the use of humor and satire when “fighting back” against sexist media images. PBG provides a culture jamming app (the idea of this app came from young girls themselves) that allows girls to create their jam and can then post their work on the site. PBG bloggers are also all young girls who write commentary on sexist media aimed at girls. PBG reports having a presence across the Internet, but is specifically visible on Twitter, Facebook, and other social network sites.

### *A Case Study of the SPARK Movement*

The SPARK Movement is a prime example of a successful online community where girls (ages 13–22) fight everyday sexism. SPARK is an inter-generational grassroots community and movement that is girl-fueled and girl-driven with the aim of ending all forms of sexualization. SPARK has had a number of influential campaigns that have led to tangible changes in society. For example, SPARK has focused on gender stereotypes and equality in the toys marketed to girls and boys, body image issues in advertisements in the media (e.g., magazines), and issues related to sexual assault and violence. SPARK utilizes various forms of online activism in their campaigns (e.g., online petitions, blogs), and they define themselves as a movement by girls, for girls. As online communities continue to be a place for girls to galvanize for social change against sexism, it is crucial to take an in-depth look at a successful online community that operates by having girls as an integral part of the problem-solving team and leadership. The following information was gathered through the SPARK website and also through an in-person interview with the first author and the SPARK executive director, Dr. Dana Edell. This interview was audio recorded and transcribed, and took place at the National Women’s Studies Association National Conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on November 14, 2014.

SPARK is open to all girls ages 13–22 to participate and become a part of the SPARKteam, including girls from across the globe. The SPARKteam has been responsible for creating blogs, creating online petitions, fundraising, and heading national movements with large corporations who they have identified as being a part of the sexualization that hurts girls. SPARK is designed to be a movement fueled by girls for girls, yet has an intergenera-

tional structure that allows adult women as part of the leadership team to help guide, support, and make girl activism possible.

Dr. Dana Edell, SPARK executive director, estimates that as of 2014 about 65 percent of SPARK girls are girls of color living in 14 U.S. states and eight different countries. Girls come from various socioeconomic classes and also range in terms of urban, suburban, and rural dwelling areas. Edell reports that one-third to one-half of the girls would also identify as lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender in terms of their sexual orientation and gender identity. One of SPARK's strength areas is its diversity of participants, and given that it is a mainly online community, the Internet affords an international reach that enriches the experiences of the SPARK girls themselves as well as the impact they can have on other girls. In fact, Edell believes part of why SPARK is so important is that it allows girls who are in geographically-limited areas to share their voices and a place to find like-minded individuals. SPARK as an online community addresses the lack of access problem that leaves many young girls who want to fight back against sexism feeling alone. Edell says girls often come to her and say, "I'm the only feminist in my high school" or "I'm the only feminist in my community." Edell says SPARK's online presence is important because

suddenly girls can foster all these relationships with girls who are incredibly different from them and incredibly connected to them. It's a space where girls are sharing feminist ideologies and activist passions. A girl living in a small town in Maine can connect with a girl living in New York City and a Trans girl in Connecticut can connect with a Trans girl in North Carolina. They might not have another space where they can actually communicate with each other.

In addition to connecting girls with other girls who think and feel like they do, SPARK allows flexibility as an online community that meets the demands and obstacles some young girls face. Given that they often lack independence in their schedules and mobility, it may not be realistic to expect girls who want to be involved in social change to attend weekly or biweekly in-person meetings. According to Edell, SPARK has online chats every two weeks with its members. These chats are automatically recorded and therefore girls who cannot attend the chat can catch up on the meeting when their schedules permit. The flexibility of having a social movement that is accessible 24 hours a day and seven days a week makes it manageable and possible for many young girls who would otherwise be unable to consistently participate.

One attribute of SPARK that distinguishes it from other online activist movements for girls is the way in which they structure the role and power of girls who join their movement. SPARKteam members attend one face-to-face annual retreat where they discuss the issues that are important to them and they begin to make plans for the SPARK Actions they will work on for the year. While the retreat is not mandatory, attendance is crucial. Edell

reports that about 70–75 percent of girls attend in person, and Skype participation is setup for the girls who are unable to attend. Additionally, SPARK is able to provide full and/or partial financial support for girls in need so they are able to attend the retreat.

During the actual retreat, the girls brainstorm different issues that they believe are important to them and all members vote on which initiatives should be pursued for that year. Edell reports that at the most recent SPARKteam retreat, SPARKteam members came up with 27 possible actions/initiatives. Some example actions/initiatives that they suggested were related to women and immigration issues, girls in STEM fields, and issues related to feminist television analysis. Edell explains,

Girls had to pitch why each of the proposed actions should be a Spark Action for the year. Then we narrowed that down into 6 or 7 of those 27 actions and we split the girls into groups. Girls within each of those groups had to strategize long term plans for that action. We have a whole action pitch form that is about 15 questions that the girls have to answer when they have an idea for an action and pitch it.

SPARK maintains flexibility by merging current events and issues with pre-determined SPARKteam actions/initiatives. Edell reports that members of SPARK leadership and the SPARKteam will often expedite a SPARKteam action if something has occurred in society that is relevant to that action. Edell mentions that this flexibility is important because it can be "a moment where it [the action/initiative] could take off."

Even though there are a limited number of slots for girl leaders on the SPARKteam, Edell reports that SPARK has created additional online-only SPARK spaces for young people to participate in the movement.

We currently have about 150 people in the SPARK Action Squad. It is a private Facebook group that is an online-only space where applicants fill out an application but most young people who express sincere interest in their application is accepted. The SPARK Action Squad is more diverse than the Spark Team. There are boys and a larger age range; we have people younger than 13 and young women or young adults in their 20s that are older than 22 but want to be engaged in this community. The SPARK Action Squad is moderated by three girls on the actual SPARKteam and SPARK recently hired a part time adult staff member to partner with the SPARKteam girls and co-facilitate. And every day there's a different focus. For example, there's Take Action Tuesday and every Tuesday there is a post about taking action this week. If they watch documentary films online together they are then able to talk about them together, and there is also a weekly book club. It is truly a hundred percent online space.

## SPARK's Impact

SPARK has had a number of successful campaigns that take on sexism from a diverse lens. One of SPARK's campaigns that received high amounts of attention was geared towards *Seventeen* magazine and their use of Photo-



shop to alter the images of girls and women in their magazines. When Edell was asked which SPARK initiative she felt had the biggest impact on SPARK girls and other girls around the country thus far, the *Seventeen* magazine initiative was at the top of her list.

Members of the SPARKteam, who were supported and guided by a number of adult women from the SPARK leadership team, demanded that *Seventeen* magazine change how they represent girls in their magazines. One girl from the SPARKteam created a Change.org petition asking *Seventeen* to print at least one unaltered, un-Photoshopped image per month and to start committing to showing diverse images of girls in their magazines. Along with full participation from all the girls on the SPARKteam, SPARK counted on their dozens of partner organizations and friends in the media across the country to continue to put pressure on *Seventeen* and to collect petition signatures. With 86,436 signatures on their petition, *Seventeen* agreed to meet with Julia Bluhm, the SPARKteam member who wrote the petition along with Edell, and following the meeting made a pledge to promise to never alter the body size and face shape of the girls featured in their magazines and to feature more diverse girls in the magazine. They published this pledge in the Body Peace Treaty in their August 2012 issue. Edell reported that there was even a bigger success to the campaign than *Seventeen's* Body Peace treaty—the overall level of public attention given to the issue of media representations of girls.

If we had just had a private meeting with the editor of *Seventeen* and nobody ever knew about it, I would not have felt like it had a huge impact as it was never called out. But the fact that we got people talking about the impact of Photoshopped images, about the ways girls are represented, about who is missing from these teen magazines, which body sizes, which ethnicities— that felt great.

In addition, Edell believes the *Seventeen* magazine initiative fostered positive identity development in the teenage girls who were a part of SPARK, as well as impacting the teenage girls who were witnessing it. “We had a media firestorm around their office for weeks leading up to demanding a meeting questioning, ‘Why won’t you meet with a girl?’ ‘Why won’t you sit down with a teenage girl?’ It [the *Seventeen* magazine success] ended up building the confidence that their [teenage girls] voice matters. That they have something to say and that it’s worthwhile. Look at what girls can do, they have the power to make change.” Edell also mentioned that the *Seventeen* magazine initiative was successful because of the intentional targeting of a company that had something to lose. *Seventeen* magazine purports to be a magazine that wants girls to love themselves and love their bodies, and it relies on girls’ interest and support to be profitable. The accusation that the magazine was harmful for girls and not in girls’ best interest had dire implications for their bottom line.

Alternatively, Edell cited one additional SPARK victory that she believes was impactful for the SPARK girls and for the movement against sexism. In this case, the action involved the Google search engine homepage. The Google homepage honors successful and influential people with doodles of themselves that are showcased on the Google homepage. After extensive research by girls on the SPARKteam counting every published Google Doodle over four years, SPARK purported that the Doodle representation was sexist, in that 82.7 percent of the doodles were images of men. SPARK also pointed out that the doodles were not representative of racial/ethnic minorities. Edell reported that unlike other organizations, Google reached out to SPARK once they brought the issue into the public conversation and made it known to SPARK that they were committed to a more balanced representation of gender and race.

Part of our contribution to the movement is igniting certain conversations and dialogue like this. But I also believe strongly that the girls who are on the SPARKteam have had transformative experiences working with us and that is also a huge success. I’m very proud of that, I think we work with girls in a unique way that the girls feel and they become aware that this space is pretty sacred for them, that they don’t have other spaces like this. And that we’ve been working really hard to ensure that this exists, these intergenerational spaces of activism where girls can talk authentically and honestly about, feminism. [The message is] girls, we should give them a chance. We should listen to them.

According to Edell, an important theme when it comes to fighting media sexualization online is fighting “fire with fire.” In other words, in order to effectively fight back against sexism that is often in public spaces like the media, one must also use media itself. It is important for online social change communities to utilize the tools that oppress them as a means to fight them.

We have to use those tools and that language and that vocabulary in order to impact that space. And part of what we’re doing is trying to create an alternative to sexualization and so we have to be using those same methods and tools in those online spaces. [We must use] strategies with positive messages so that we can interrupt and eventually draw out the negative.

### *Girl's Use of Social Network Sites and Online Communities and Their Relationship to Identity*

After examining the purpose and impact of successful girl-fueled online activism, the theme of identity development emerges as a critical by-product for girls. Social network sites and online communities provide girls an unparalleled opportunity to shed, adopt, and explore identities both online and offline. Specifically, social network sites have been cited as important for the identity development of girls, as it gives them a place to create and explore “possible selves” (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008) that can

defy norms and stereotypes. Additionally, the negotiation of online identity and activity has been found to increase self-esteem and positively impact the way young people see themselves (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). Some scholars believe the very act of having a social media online presence forces the adolescent to critically think about the way in which they want to be perceived by others (Fleur, 2014). In essence, making decisions about the different ways in which a teen will portray themselves and their activist efforts online triggers a negotiation of the identity development process which impacts them both on and offline. Guzzetti (2006) found that young teenage girls utilize online communities to “discuss, promote, and explore” aspects of their identities and that as a result, their online and offline identities often end up blending together. Sherman and colleagues (2000) assert that online actions and behaviors are actually extensions of what would be seen offline. Furthermore, Valentine and Holloway (2002) suggest a reciprocity effect in which young people’s virtual world or persona actually become a part of their offline world or persona, and vice versa. For example, the exploration of an online self can become a type of identity “dress rehearsal” before the young girl decides to show newly found parts of herself to the offline world (Milford, 2013). Participating in online activism and online communities positively impacts girls’ identity development on and offline, and it is important to consider this in future activism and research on girls.

Social network sites and online communities are critical venues for girls to explore their identities specifically as gendered and sexualized beings. Sexual objectification, which occurs externally and internally, serves to silence girls’ internal experiences, such as their attitudes, needs, and feelings (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). An online community, as compared to a face-to-face community, may lessen the influence of the activists’ gender or appearance (Valentine & Holloway, 2002), eliminating stereotyping and objectification on the basis of these social category memberships. For example, online communities appear to overrule strict gender norms and stereotypes that girls face in their everyday lives. The presence and relevance of their “femaleness” and their “femininity” can often result in the adherence of rigid gender roles that they place on themselves and that others place on them. However, online communities allow girls to take on less traditional and stereotypical norms, and allow exploration of more “masculine” attributes that they identify with but for one reason or another do not feel comfortable to express in their daily lives (Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2009). This flexibility in the expression of different parts of their gender and sexual identity is crucial for young girls going through the pivotal stages of identity development.

The anonymity the Internet can provide is also relevant for girls of varying races, ethnicities, classes, sexual orientations, religions, and abilities. In fact, research has noted that women who are a part of marginalized and dis-

advantaged groups seem to be the ones getting the most involved in online social action (Rapp, Button, Fleury-Steiner, & Fleury-Steiner, 2010; Roker, 2008). While the Internet does not eliminate the presence of gender, race, or other forms of discrimination, it does appear to afford girls a way to present themselves and be heard in unique ways. For example, some face-to-face social activism, such as sit-ins or protest marches, brings a risk to one’s physical safety. Online networks and communities allow girls, particularly minority girls, to challenge injustices in society and to begin conversations surrounding change while remaining somewhat or completely anonymous (Motter, 2011). This affords freedom from physical harm and from the experience of “surveillance” that many minority women experience from dominant groups and even from themselves while in the presence of dominant groups (Harris, 2004). Additionally, girls can be influential on issues that do not just impact them locally, but nationally. Allowing girls an opportunity to positively impact a situation that is occurring on the other side of the country gives them visibility, power, and a reach that previous generations of girls and women simply did not have.

As stated by Turkle (1999), the positive effects of exploring online can be likened to the exploration Erik Erikson outlined as a “psychosocial moratorium” where young people can interact with many different concepts and groups of people, which assists with the identity development stage. Online activism can be considered a prime example of this “psychosocial moratorium” as young girls are able to learn about social problems, find other girls who care about these same problems, and troubleshoot and brainstorm ways to ameliorate these issues. As was noted as a result of the SPARK Movement victories, engaging in online activism, particularly activism that leads to observable change, leads girls to feel differently about themselves. It appears that participating in an online activist community (such as SPARK) increases not only a sense of efficacy for girls, but a deeper sense of who they are as girls, future women, and valuable, capable citizens.

### *Future Directions and Suggestions for Girl-Led Online Activism*

Although there has been some research and evaluation done on advocacy and activism efforts related to girls and girls’ issues (Brinkman, Brinkman, & Toomey, 2011; Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010), studies are most often limited to face-to-face interventions with girls who are part of an after-school organization or as part of an outside study. Given the crucial role social media and online activism plays in the lives of young girls, it is noteworthy that there is little empirical research on these efforts. According

to Kimball (2014), academic scholars largely ignore in-depth analyses of youth activism and youth social movements. Kimball studied the frequency of article titles that reflect youth activism in popular empirical youth journals. In her analysis of article titles in the 2011–2014 volumes of the *Journal of Youth Studies*, only 11.6 percent of titles reflected youth activism or political attitudes. Yet, according to the 2013 Youth Organizing Field Scan, there was a 15 percent increase in the amount of youth online and offline activism efforts surrounding gender and young women's issues from 2010 to 2013 (Braxton, Buford, & Marasigan, 2013). Braxton et al. (2013) surmise the increase can be a combination of young people responding to issues that are particularly relevant to their community, as well as experiencing an increase in solidarity around certain issues. Yet, research documenting girls' online activism in regards to these very issues is sparse.

A number of scholars who focus on ways to improve online activism cite the lack of structured methodology, empirical evidence, and evaluation as a pivotal area of weakness (Earl 2000, 2006; Grant, Finkelstein, & Lyons, 2003). Saebo (2008), who categorizes online activism as a type of "eParticipation," cites that since research on online activism spans across many different academic disciplines and is relatively new, there is not always a general consensus on the best research methods to utilize. Additionally, without structured research methods, researchers may have difficulty comparing studies and learning from each other's work (Saebo, 2008). Therefore, establishing appropriate research methods for the various forms and types of online activism may provide a useful blueprint for evaluating and comparing activist methodologies, designs, and outcomes (Earl, 2006; 2013; Saebo, 2008). While empirical research has been conducted on general youth online activism (Raynes-Goldie & Walker, 2008), online and offline activism against sexism by women (Ayers, 2003), offline activism against sexism by girls (Taft, 2011), girls who blog about sexism (Keller, 2012), and girls who write e-zines about sexism (Kearney, 2006), few studies have empirically investigated girl-fueled activist online communities that combat sexism. It is critical to explore this phenomenon not only because of the dearth of empirical research on girl-fueled activism but to evaluate the efficacy of these efforts and incorporate new strategies to increase their efficacy and expand their scope.

One reason for the lack of research on online community actions may be that it is difficult to define online activism. In the last few decades, news increasingly takes the form of a "media spectacle," which is when a story becomes "viral" through mass circulation on many different forms of social media (Kellner, 2011). Individuals have many opportunities to promote these stories in their networks, and they can use social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter to become a micro-contributor to the spectacle. It has therefore become challenging to differentiate between online activism and simply

reposting, commenting on, or forwarding a news article or other form of media. In fact, this kind of viral effect can even lead to observable and significant social changes (Kellner, 2011), further blurring the line between activism and spectacle.

Additionally, scholars note that online activism is a "broad term" and can be seen many in different forms (e.g., culture jamming, online petitions). Careful attention is needed when defining and operationalizing online activism in order to avoid the obstacles academics face when attempting to study it (Vraga, Bode, Wells, Driscoll, & Thorson, 2014). Harris (2008) investigated online communities/cultures that are created by young women and girls to address "girl-centered feminism and racism." Harris contends that although these girl-fueled websites are often themselves a form of activism, analysts and researchers may not attend to these sites as they are not typically "outcome oriented." In this sense, part of the reason for the lack of research is not only the murky definition of what constitutes online activism but also whether online activism must or even can reliably result in observable, successful outcomes. For example, there are opposing views on the efficacy and impact of online petitions, which have been cited as both a popular online activist tactic and also a tactic that has earned the term "slacktivism." According to the *Stanford Daily*, online petitions are simply not effective and can in fact hurt social movements, "Many believe that online petitions have greatly risen in popularity because the strategy allows the signatories to feel good because they have done something, without necessarily having accomplished anything substantive" (Editorial Board, 2012, par. 4). However, Randy Paynter, founder of thepetitionsite.com, insists that online petitions provide an opportunity to "do something" for an otherwise overwhelming social problem. He sites that online petitions are a first step for many activists and likens online petitioning as a "gateway" to the online activist world. In fact, research has found that individuals who sign a petition are significantly more likely to donate money to a related charity (Lee & Hsieh, 2013). In this way, tracking the impact not only of the online petition but also the long-term activity and efforts of the people who sign a petition proved to be an important way to determine multidimensional longitudinal outcomes.

Therefore, implementing a system to track multidimensional outcomes can likely increase the occurrence of empirical research on girl-fueled online activism. One way to track outcomes may be to incorporate thorough evaluations of the experiences of girl online activists. For example, SPARK asks its members to fill out annual evaluations of their experiences in order to get a sense of the impact and ways they have grown and changed over the year. Additionally, online communities with heavy blog sections can document the perceived impact of various blog posts by noting the number and type of responses from the public (Keller, 2012). For example, researchers have

utilized various techniques related to content analysis, a quantitative research method, and applied this to the study of online blogs (Herring, 2010). Furthermore, given the demonstrated relationship between online activism and identity for girls, it will be important to include empirical investigations that specifically target and measure identity development in online activists. In order to track and evaluate outcomes and to assist with the research and evaluation component, online communities may wish to partner with local universities, colleges, or professors. For example, multiple members of the SPARK leadership team are psychologists, professors, and/or researchers who are able to utilize their expertise in research methods and girls' activism to publish empirical journal articles that provide in-depth exposure to girls' experience with online activism. Additionally, research universities in particular have doctoral students that must complete theses or dissertations and may have a keen interest in exploring and evaluating girl-fueled online activist communities. Online communities that make efforts to evaluate outcomes will not only be more attractive for funding agencies, but will make future replication and improvements to activism more likely.

Another way to increase research and evaluation on online communities and online action is to expand our definition of what we consider to be "observable outcomes" in this area. While not every activist effort results in large and permanent social changes, changes on a smaller scale are telling and crucial. For example, changes in the composition or number of individuals in certain activist communities can signal important shifts in political and social climate. Also, public discussions within these groups can provide information to researchers and practitioners on girls' interests and concerns, enabling them to better support girls in starting their own online activism. Thus, researchers in areas related to social work, clinical and counseling psychology, sociology, public health, and other disciplines are encouraged to increase their attention towards girl-fueled activism and discussions that are already occurring online but are largely being ignored. Future directions should focus not only on tracking outcomes for research purposes, but also publicizing the outcomes of girl-fueled online activist efforts. It is critical to provide young girls with examples of other young people who have had positive outcomes who can serve as a model that the efforts of young people are valued and effective. In fact, there is a webpage dedicated solely to highlighting "23 Inspiring Feminist Digital Campaigns That Changed the World," however all of these feature adult women leading change and not a single one mentions girls. For example, a feminist group called UltraViolet waged a successful social media and online protest to pressure Reebok to drop a musical artist from brand ambassador status after he allegedly rapped about drugging and raping women. *Everyday Sexism*, another feminist online community, pressured iTunes to remove an app that allowed young girls to perform plastic surgery on virtual female char-

acters. The Representation Project had a hand in pressuring GoDaddy to alter their advertising strategy and therefore decrease the sexist ads they produced. Once again, some of the examples given had a profound and positive impact on the lives of girls, but all appeared to be primarily adults advocating on behalf of those girls. While these are crucial examples that underscore the power online social activism has for combating sexism, it is imperative that journalists, scholars, and academicians make efforts to highlight online social change that is a direct result of girls. This is not to say that adult women should not be a part of these efforts. In fact, movements such as SPARK are as successful as they are due to the combined efforts of the adult leadership team in conjunction with the SPARKteam. However, the girls on the SPARKteam are afforded decision making power, and are asked to be a part of not only identifying the problems, but coming up with solutions to those problems.

Organizations and communities that are girl-centered but run by adults may increase the impact they have on girls by creating a youth advisory board or recruiting youth representatives who have power in organizational decision making. In addition, it is hoped that secondary and post-secondary institutions, in-person organizations, and after-school programs that serve girls may consider adding an online activist component to their programming. Students are often able to choose elective courses in school, yet options to take elective courses that utilize the Internet to promote activism or social justice on feminist topics are less commonplace. Implementing these types of opportunities can trigger a developmental process of empowerment that research has shown positively impacts youth development.

For example, Earl and Schussman (2008) argue that youth-driven online petitions with even a few hundred signatures have been able to create visible change. They also argue that this visible change leads young people to feel their voices count for something, which can lead to a sense of efficacy in relation to personal, social, and political power that may not have been possible before online petitions. Earl and Schussman (2008) write, "A personal sense of efficacy may be an important factor that prompts people to engage in collective action. That sense of efficacy may be something young people are gaining from their cultural contestation that they do not get from interactions with government" (p. 89). The creation of webpages, blogs, and articles that underscore the importance of digital petitioning by and for girls is a great example of how we can highlight the things girls are already doing while ensuring younger girls feel empowered to follow in their footsteps. The more young people look to the Internet as a place where they see their activist efforts work, the more online-only activist communities (Earl & Schussman, 2008) and girl-led online movements we will see.

Social network sites and online communities have afforded girls a new and critical opportunity to increase their voice and power in their everyday

lives and in the larger society in which they live. These virtual spaces allow girls to communicate with other like-minded individuals from around the globe. In this way, virtual spaces provide the opportunity for girls from diverse backgrounds to develop solidarity and purpose in a way that has never before existed in our history. Through these connections, girls have found a way to capture the attention of major organizations and power holders and, in certain instances, convince them to change their approaches and practices. In addition to influencing organizations, girls, women, and even boys and men are being awakened to girls' needs and efforts through the use of online communities. Due to the accessibility of online activism, girls are able to nourish their leadership skills, critical thinking skills, and innovative thinking at even younger ages than before. These experiences increase girls' self-efficacy and support healthy identity development. Providing young girls spaces where their opinions and experiences have value and influence has the potential to create a new generation of women who will shatter old gender gaps. In fact, it is the belief of the authors that online communities are one key to decreasing and eliminating harmful gender stereotypes and inequities in income, violence, and power that girls and women experience. We hope that this essay has highlighted how important online activism is for girls when it comes to issues surrounding sexism, and that we can all assist girls in fighting back and (re)claiming their innate agency.

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