

Article

Article Title: Hot Right Now: Diverse girls navigating technologies of racialized sexy femininity

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Abstract

In this paper, we draw upon group interviews in London and New York City to explore how differently classed and racialized groups of teen girls navigate media constructions of hot, sexy femininity. We explore how cultural ideals of sexiness are shifting to include more skin shades and larger body parts in specific proportions which align to new sexualised and racialized ideals of femininity. Some celebrities embody these new forms of what is termed racial mobility, but these ambiguous mixtures still relate to a standard that references normative White, middle class femininity. All girls found navigating the contradictory and impossible ideals of sexy femininity challenging, but White girls had internalised the norms and technologies of 'perfectibility' the most, and believed that achieving sexy femininity would bring them confidence. In contrast, racially marginalized girls were much more critical of normative ideals of sexiness. Black girls had a heightened awareness of how their bodies were consistently read as either not sexy enough or hypersexualized and they discussed the dangers this posed to them in both their school communities and in other public spaces. Overall our findings demonstrate how diverse girls must undertake very different forms of work to navigate and manage expectations around racialized and classed sexiness.

Key Words: racialisation, sexualisation, Blackness, Whiteness, femininity, racial mobility

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Introduction: Postfeminist sexualisation - where is racialization?

The sexualisation of girls has been an intense focus of popular concern and research in the past decade across the UK and the USA (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007; Papadopoulous, 2010; Tolman, Bowman, & Chmielewski, 2015; Renold, Ringrose, & Egan, 2015). The research shows a complex set of issues around sexualisation - girls are often the target of moral panics over sexualisation which deny their agency (Tolman, 2013; Egan, 2013), but at the same time, girls and women also do internalise shifting discursive norms of perfection and beauty and aspire to achieve these qualities as part of performing successful postfeminist femininity, which can have harmful impacts (Ringrose, 2013). In the postfeminist formula, girls' sense of confidence is about becoming empowered through consumption (Gill, 2012). How well girls and women can approximate, embody and perform 'sexy' feminine embodiment through a range of consumer practices will define their sense of self (Gill, 2012; Gill & Orgad, 2015). Evans and Riley (2014) have theorized these practices as 'technologies of sexiness', historically contingent formations and sets of practices that make up sexually attractive and desirable femininity. Within a heterosexual matrix such practices of femininity are constructed in opposition to hegemonic masculinity and desirability is defined by what hetero-men find 'fuckable' (Gill, 2012). Women and girls constantly negotiate these disciplinary postfeminist technologies of sexiness through a range of self-improvement regimes that must be repeatedly performed and evaluated (Evans & Riley, 2014; Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017). Gill and Orgad (2015) call this the 'confidence culture'. The ethos of the contemporary consumer body –beauty industries require “heightened modes of self-work and self-regulation” (p. 337) to achieve desirable, sexy femininity.

Jackson and Vares (2015) explored how DIY norms of self-improvement operate as a form of neoliberal meritocratic imperative for self-perfection in their qualitative research with tween/teen girls in New Zealand. They paid close attention to how girls constructed their body image in relation to dominant postfeminist advertising representations. They documented how girls' extensive 'body work' included: "buying products, styling and cosmetic procedures" and relentless "participation in self-surveillance and corrective technologies to achieve a post-feminist aesthetic". Jackson and Vares theorise that this is "part of a broader cult of perfectibility that governs not only expectations around ways their bodies should 'appear' but every sphere of their lives", an individualised logic of working hard to construct the best and most confident self-image (see also Gill & Orgad, 2015). For example, girls discussed how blemishes and pimples were to be banished through skin creams and scrubs to achieve 'flawless' skin. The 'skinny imperative' was constructed through "skeletal" and "anorexic" White celebrities and models. Beyoncé was heralded as the single celebrity who was 'drop dead gorgeous' but also 'healthy skinny'. What is striking throughout this research on beauty and confidence, however, is the absence of an intersectional analysis of race and class-based commodification in the construction of perfect skin and skinny embodiment. The way that New Zealander Maori skin may differ from the White ideal, nor how mixed race Beyoncé may offer a new racially hybrid skin tone and idealised curvier shape points to how racialisation and postfeminist ideals and sexualisation work together to create new technologies of perfectibility to be negotiated.

Recent critiques have suggested the majority of sexualisation and postfeminist literature has neglected intersectional dynamics of culture, global location and racialization (Driscoll, 2016). Jess Butler (2013), for instance, argues that postfeminist theorizing has largely been focused on analysing representations of Western, White, young, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin,

and conventionally attractive girls and women (Butler, 2013; see also Joseph, 2013). Similarly, Lamb, Roberts and Plocha (2016) argue persuasively that, “The current [sexualisation] debate focuses so exclusively on the imagined White Western 13 or 14 year-old girl, whether named as such or not, that the intersection of sexualization with these other problems [race and class] is rarely discussed” (p. 66; see also Egan, 2013).

In this paper, we seek to contribute to the research literature on how diverse girls navigate shifting postfeminist and neoliberalised ideals of sexiness, particularly racialized and classed ideals of beauty and perfection (Moreno Figuera, 2013). We use a Black feminist intersectional lens (Collins, 2005) to analyse focus group data generated with girls in New York City and London, paying close attention to how the classed context, background and racialized embodiment of our research participants shape their discussions of sexy femininities.

Racialised sexualisation and racially mobile sexiness

There has been a very limited empirical research literature prioritizing racially marginalized girls’ experiences of sexualisation. Debbie Weekes’ (2002) pioneering research in the UK explored how Black girls negotiate constructions of sexualised Black femininity, arguing girls used a series of defensive class and race positions to negate constructions of themselves as hypersexualized, locating themselves as more sexually responsible in relation to slutty White working class girls they called ‘blowers’ (because they would perform blow jobs at school). More recently Victoria Showunmi’s work in the UK has demonstrated that Black girlhood is an ambiguous category that is very short lived, because prevailing discourses of Black femininity aligned with early sexual development and ‘curves’ result in a very narrow margin of time where Black girls might fit into Whiteness childhood innocence (Showunmi, 2017). Showunmi’s research shows how Black girls struggled with issues of sexualized and racialized embodiment at

school and in public space, where they felt they did not fit into school uniforms coded White, or their bodies were read as inappropriately sexual and adultified in ways they found difficult to navigate (see also Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez, 2017, in USA).

In the USA, Dagbovie-Mullins found that Black girls were made particularly vulnerable by the ‘sexy schoolgirl’ trope said to “reflect a national troubling tendency to view Black adolescent females as sexually savvy and therefore responsible themselves for the sexualisation and exploitation of their bodies” (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013, p. 746). Sharon Lamb and colleagues (Lamb & Plocha, 2015, Lamb, et al., 2016) conducted research in the USA on how different “girls of colour” (which include Black, Latina and other identities) negotiate constructions of ‘sexy’ and ‘pride’ and found girls wanted to take pride in notions of Black beauty, for instance, but had trouble negotiating profoundly racist body image norms and White codes of beauty (see also Moreno Figuero, 2013). Girls of colour in this research also bought into slut shaming discourses of respectability and worried at length about being viewed as “too sexual” (Lamb & Plocha, 2015, p. 98). Some girls experienced verbal and physical harassment by peers given racialized policing of girls’ bodies at school was prominent: “if you’re thick...and wear skinny jeans...you get kicked out”; it’s easy, the girls noted, to get “busted” for having a shapely Black female body (Lamb et al., 2016, p. 26). Although the girls invoked a discourse of “thick” and curvy Black female bodies as beautiful to resist the higher valuation of light skin, the tension around having to cover their bodies to avoid punitive treatment by authority figures and harassment by boys and peers created the greatest difficulties around sexual expression given they explicitly recorded being treated unfairly and differently compared to White girls (Lamb & Ploccha, 2015, p. 70).

Research on popular culture has explored how the increasing visibility of mixed race celebrities in popular culture means that the boundary of ideal sexiness is shifting and slippery and demanding of reconceptualization away from a simplistic White/Black binary (Butler, 2013). Joseph (2013) notes Black women, celebrities (of colour) are at the epicenter of popular media cultural shifts, battling a culture of racist constructions of beauty ideals and bodily capitals in ways that are transforming cultural ideals of 'sexy'. Through this lens a simple dichotomy of White as sexy beautiful and non-White as other is no longer tenable (Deliovsk, 2008). New formations of sexy ideals in the shape of celebrities such as JLo and Kim Kardashian were discussed at length by the participants in our research. As argued by Sastre (2014), Kim Kardashian's:

curvaceous body is thus not just publically sexualised but publically raced...she strategically embodies both the trope of the heavily regulated 'White' body and the trope of the curvaceous, exoticised, non-White (implicitly Black) body. Similarly, to the racial ambiguity ascribed to Latina/Latinos in American media, Kardashian actively facilitates her presence in both racial realms while also moving between them, reifying an essentialist notion of Whiteness and Blackness while doing so (Beltrán, 2007, Molina-Guzmán, 2010). Priscilla Peña Ovalle (2011, p. 7) deploys the term 'racial mobility' to describe the ability of Latina entertainers to 'oscillate between the normalcy of Whiteness and the exoticism of Blackness, [functioning] as an in-between body to mediate and maintain the racial status quo'. Kardashian has a similar capacity to move between these poles (p. 129).

Thus, where earlier research foregrounded White femininity as the unequivocal standard of beauty and sexiness via the concept of White privilege (Deliovsk, 2008), this fixity is challenged

by ideas of ‘racial mobility’ and racial crossing, hybridity and ambiguity. Racial mobility, according to Sastre, can be defined as a way that racialised sexualised properties are strategically drawn upon to increase exotic appeal through such as attributes as larger buttocks, historically read as a property of the hypersexualised Black other (Gilman, 1995). Kim Kardashian has been argued to Whiten these attributes creating a new idealized what is called “Slim-thick” ideal of emphasized buttocks and breasts with extremely thin waist (Allen, 2017). To date however, there has been very limited empirical research on how teen girls manage these new, shifting idealisations of racialized sexualisation and racial hybridity in representational ideals of sexiness, which are also classed in complex ways, as our analysis will demonstrate.

Research design

In 2014, funded by the Society of Research on Adolescence, we conducted a small-scale research project in London and New York City in four research contexts to explore how girls from different socioeconomic and racialized environments navigate racialized “sexiness”. Drawing on previous connections to research schools and community groups, the research team established access to two different sites in each city. In New York City we gained access to a White, wealthy private school stressing academic success, and to a six-week-long feminist leadership summer program at a community centre. In London, we worked in a specialized fee paying media and performing arts school where the girls participate in the schools’ feminist society, as well as a low achieving comprehensive school, where participants were involved in a Black girls’ club. A more detailed description of each school site is in the 'findings' sections but what is significant to note is that due to the populations in each school or community site we ended up with largely White groups in both the US and UK fee paying schools and all girls of colour/Black participants in the community centre and comprehensive school. What emerged as

distinct and unique about our research sample, in comparison to the research on racialisation and sexiness reviewed above which focused on girls of colour (Lamb et al., 2016) is that our sample includes a diverse range of girls from very different contexts in each city, spanning elite primarily White girls as well as Black and mixed-race girls from economically marginalised communities in London and New York City.

Having gained ethical clearance from both our universities, with strict guidelines regarding consent at the school, community centre, parent, and participant levels, we began field work in each site. We made initial observation visits then returning for a focus group with girls selected by the teacher or youth worker due to availability and interest in the project in each site. Our main research question was: How do these four groups of girls in diverse settings, and with distinct positionalities in relation to racialized sexualization, talk about, understand and engage with media representations of racialized 'sexiness' targeting young women? We began each interview encounter in the same way, "inducing" discussion of intersection of racialization and sexualization through a *UK Elle Magazine* cover of Rita Ora with the caption 'Hot Right Now' referring to the title of Ora's 2012 hit song. We used this prompt due to Rita Ora embodying a figure of racial ambiguity and hybridity. Whilst Rita Ora is British-Albanian she is often perceived as mixed race Black. Like Kim Kardashian Ora is an ethnically "White" celebrity who has selectively utilized "racial mobility" to create racial ambiguity: "co-opt(ing) Black cultural markets and hair traditions to blur the lines of her sound and origins" (through practices like donning box braids (see Carlos, 2015). As noted, Kim Kardashian has mobilised a new difficult to approximate "slim-thick" body shape, Whitening Black attributes (Sastre, 2014). Rita Ora's racial ambiguity and mobility, in contrast is via golden, skin tone combined with extreme thinness and straightened, Whitened hair. Rita Ora's temporally specific 'hot right now' is

discursively signified in the *UK Elle Magazine* cover by an extremely thin and elongated body clothed in a plunged neckline sleeveless tunic (with no visible cleavage despite the plunge) accompanied by honey coloured skin, lightened and straightened platinum blonde hair, with thick Black eyebrows and full red lips. The image embodies another version of slippery, blurred racial ambiguity discussed by Sastre (2014); as an interview prompt it quickly incited discussion and led to explorations of celebrity culture, the beauty industry, and girls' own social media images. In each interview we concluded by asking what they might like to change about contemporary media cultures.

Our data analysis involved first identifying common discursive themes across the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using these themes to focus, we then identified strategies--discursive and through material practices--that the girls employed with the psychodynamic narrative approach of the Listening Guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1992) to "listen for" what girls say and how they say it. We were also interested in the subjective negotiation of discourses (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, & Walkerdine, 2002) and discursive contradictions and defensive practices in navigating 'raced' positionalities (Ringrose, 2007). Discourse of 'Whiteness' and 'Blackness' emerged across every group albeit in distinctly classed ways as our intersectional lens will unpick. Girls' navigated a range of cultural binaries around sexy/unsexy, im/proper comportment, and subdued/excessive sexuality, we also identified discourses of confidence, self-esteem, responsibility, age-appropriate sexual embodiment, and sexual and body shaming as these related to racialisation and economic/class locations.

UK White girls: There are not many Black sexy women

Kingley Theatre School is a small (up to 300 student) fee paying, co-educational performing arts secondary school in South West England. In this highly selective, elite environment, students are admitted after formal audition. As part of enrolment, students join the schools' professional agency and are on roll for possible paid theatre work, of which the agency take a cut. The pupils are primarily White British with no English as Second language students and very few students with special needs. The group interviewed were five White girls 14-15 years of age all from middle to upper class backgrounds and one of the participants is the daughter of a minor British pop star. These girls were already known to the researcher as part of their participation in a school based feminist group and their teacher facilitated the research visit and was present during the interview.

All the girls are avid readers of popular ladies' fashion magazines, and responded to the Rita Ora cover photo saying it was sexy because of her "really defined" cheekbones and "expertly arched" eyebrows:

Deidre: The photo [of Rita Ora] has been Photoshopped. Every single part of her is going to be changed a little bit.

Lani: Well they have kind of like paled her out, she looks really White.

Samantha: I think they should just have kept her how she really is because I don't think she is that White...

Deidre: No she's not. I know her...I have been to photo shoots with my mum where like they have been "Which part do you want?"

Samantha: It is basically like saying that White is more sexy than like Black and she should just have her natural colour and then people would be like yeah, I don't want to be White, I want to be my natural colour...

Lani: There are not really like very many Black sexy women.

Samantha: Naomi Campbell.

Helen: Beyoncé and stuff like that they are all more like mixed race, like Niki Minaj and stuff.

Helen: Here she hasn't got her natural, I'm sure she has curly hair because it's Black so they have obviously changed that so –

In a surreal moment of the interview for the researchers, the girls discuss that they 'know' Rita Ora through their professional networks, making clear the socioeconomic context of the fee-paying school and their elite insider social group. Even if the girls have come into the school via the scholarship route, as had one of the girls in our focus group, they are now a part of the elite performance art context, and they recount their own experience with photoshopping from professional photo shoots. They are familiar with the media technologies through which Rita Ora has been "paled out" to "look really White". And they claim she isn't really "that White". They observe "White is more sexy than like Black" and offer a tautological analysis of Rita Ora's imagined (and failed) resistance to being made Whiter; if she "had her natural colour" it could raise the possibility of other girls of colour, rejecting the equation of lighter with sexy—"I don't want to be White, I want to be my natural colour"—but they also disavow this possible resistance to a White mandate by categorically noting that "there are not really like very many Black sexy women" and those who are, are "all more like mixed race like Niki Minaj".

These girls are on the one hand critical of Photoshopping "they should have kept her how she really is," yet they are also embedded within these practices, acquiescing that the right sexy look is a complex achievement. For them, choice comes at the level of the individual buying into or resisting these requisite qualities—which they know are already coded White. They are

resigned about Rita Ora being “paled out” and altered through photoshopped chiselled “cheekbones” and “eyebrows arching” but conflate these as just one of many ‘prejudices’ going on to say that women like Rita Ora should not be criticized for being ‘too thin’:

Deirdre: there is skinny shaming... there is a shaming for everything and there really shouldn't be.

Helen: People should stop focusing on how people's bodies look and more on what their personality is because that is what means more than how someone looks or their body shape and everything....

Deirdre: There is a particular look for anything...in life and you are never going to wholly get around that. Like some people are prejudiced about these things but at the same time there is no reason to be...

Interviewer: So what if you don't fit these ideals at all?

Deirdre: Then you are going to have really low self esteem.

Lani: You are not going to feel comfortable with your body

Helen: But you shouldn't rely on the opinion of others to feel comfortable.

The girls relativize prejudices noting there is “shaming for everything” accompanying the process of ‘perfectability’ discussed by Jackson and Vares (2015). But this logic flattens the different forms of ‘looks’ and forms of shaming (see Ringrose & Coleman, 2013). When asked about what happens when a girl does not approximate these ideals in her embodiment, i.e., if she is naturally not curvy or too curvy, two girls argue then you will have “low self-esteem” although this is immediately countered with the claim that you shouldn't rely on the opinion of others to be “comfortable with your body”. A discourse of individualized responsibility about self-confidence part of the ‘confidence culture’ discussed by Gill and Orgad (2015), where you

should be able to shirk off judgement and evaluation is apparent.

This tension between the gaze and the demand to rise above external critique arose repeatedly in their discussion of wanting to create ‘hot selfies’ for their social media posts (see also Dobson, 2015) Deirdre mentions fear of critique: “Errrgh why did you put that up? Like your view is no longer valid because no-one else thinks it’s hot”. When asked about what they might like to change about this, the girls offer a tactic of complimenting each other, which was suggested as a route forward that could interfere with their highly competitive performative arts environment:

Deirdre: I don’t understand why girls are so offended by their own bodies. Like this chick put a picture up of her body you have the same body albeit it might look a little different, you have the same -

Lani: Features?...

Interviewer: what would you girls say if you put up a picture of yourself in your bikini?

Lani: We would probably write – oh your figure is amazing

Samantha: Because I think none of the other girls do it so if one did it, it would be like ‘whoa she is really crossing the line’ but then if all the girls did it would be fine!

Deirdre says she wishes girls were not so hostile to images of each other’s bodies and Lani says if someone did put up bikini picture they would respond with positive and affirming comments. But this is hypothetical, given nobody actually does this. It is interesting that the girls try to equalise the power relations by relativizing differences. They do this by arguing that every girl has the “same body” or “features”, much like they relativized and equated skinny and fat shaming above. The proposed scenario -if all girls posted a bikini image everything would be fine - demonstrates their desire for equity despite their earlier statements that only some (White)

girls and women can fit into the ‘sexy’ mould. We see a struggle between recognition of racialized hierarchy and a desire to flatten these differences between girls and women.

US ‘White’ girls: Somebody who is Black... would be looked at as more skanky

“NorthEastern” School was a small (less than 300 students) expensive, highly competitive K-12 upper girls’ private schools in the Northeast. The student body is primarily very wealthy and White, with a small proportion of girls of colour (primarily wealthy, some on scholarship). The school offers a traditional college preparatory education. In contrast to the UK White girls who are training to perform in the arts, in this school academic achievement is formally more highly valued than embodied appearance or physical “talents”. This focus group was smaller comprised of three socioeconomically privileged 15-16 year old girls from the upper school, two of them White, one mixed or ambiguously raced.

Discussing the Rita Ora cover, the girls suggested immediately that something wasn’t “right” about her image-- it didn’t look “natural”-- noting the image had been altered to make her thinner, so that her face is more “oval” “less chubby” and her neck is longer, claiming she is actually “much more normal looking”. They also discussed how her body is relatively ‘covered up’, which they immediately contrast to Kim Kardashian, discussing the ‘break the internet’ photo shoot, which had been released near to the time of the interview where Kardashian’s “butt is completely like bare... I think its really awful” (Denise). They also bring up Nicki Minaj’s *Anaconda* cover (of her squatting in a thong looking over her shoulder), which Denise says she also “hated so much”, noting however both celebrities have an “hourglass” figure and that “some types of bodies make you look more sexual”. Here contradictions are apparent with Denise suggesting that the media forces women to pose half naked, but the girls also express their explicit desire to be able to so:

Patty: I feel like women, though, aren't confident enough with their bodies. I think a lot of us are so insecure about who we are. Posing naked, don't you think that that would show that I am confident with my body? Like I don't think that that would be such a bad thing ... if you're doing it just to get male attention, that's different, but doing it to show that, "I am confident with who I am, I'm not insecure anymore about the way I look," that would be confidence, and that would be flawless.

Denise: Well there are those are those Dove commercials and people who aren't like a size two posing and I think that's cool. That's how women should be represented

Liza: Okay, say like—say you're overweight and you see someone in a magazine who's less overweight than you. Then you're still going to want to be like that, you know, because there's always going to be someone worse who's always going to want to be better.

Patty: I agree, but I think it's okay to aspire to something.

Denise: I think that's easy for someone to say if they've never been ... overweight. Like I am not the smallest person, and if I can see like somebody who has a good image, she doesn't have to be the smallest—she doesn't have to be a size zero, but seeing that... it could almost like give you hope or something... you should be doing it for health reasons—not all beauty reasons

Patty: Kim Kardashian and Nicki Minaj were not doing it for the confidence.

Liza: They weren't no - For the attention.

Denise: But the problem is that what they have to do to get famous!

In this exchange, Patty proclaims if women could somehow perform confidence they would be "flawless". This relates again to the confidence culture (Gill & Orgad, 2015), and Lamb et al's

(2015) findings from girls of colour in her study who felt confidence should be “coming from within” and girls should work to feel sexy “just for yourself” (p. 9). Indeed, Patty contrasts posing for male attention (self-sexualizing) as problematic, whereas posing to show that “I am confident with who I am” is commendable. Like the UK girls, Patty girls construct the possibility of miraculous empowerment through having “confidence”, which would mean a girl would be able to easily pose naked and not care what others think. Liza swiftly challenges this, noting if a girl is “overweight,” the images of thin women in magazines will always create a desire to be better (thinner), and Patty agrees, framing this aspiration (working on the self) as positive. Denise, who is ambiguously raced and further from the slim, White ideal challenges this claim, noting that having different images in magazines might give her “hope” (by presenting a different ideal), but that this work should be done for “health reasons”. Gaining sexy self-confidence for oneself is viewed as a positive technology of self-improvement, rather than doing it for others and (sexual) attention like Kim Kardashian and Nicki Minaj. Like the UK girls the confidence imperative is supposed to be achieved for individualized healthy self-esteem (Gill & Orgad, 2015) rather than for the attention of men/boys. They also explicitly argue that Black women cannot embody the type of racialized ‘sexy’ mobility of Kim Kardashian:

Patty: like the typical American beauty, or a typical sexual beauty would be a White person, so somebody who is Black might be looked at as like—what’s the word? Not like classic sexual beauty that you might see in like a lingerie magazine, but somebody who’s more skanky.

Interviewer: What’s skanky?

Patty. Kind of like wouldn’t be looked at as luxurious. Beautiful, like more like they’re selling themselves a little bit

Liza: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like trying to make themselves look sexual?

Patty: Like a prostitute.

Denise: Yeah, in a way that's looked down upon them. Like people don't—I think if a Black person were to do what Kim Kardashian did it'd be viewed differently than what she did, don't you think?

These girls position Blackness as “skanky”—a word that means low class (Oppliger, 2012), and they say Blackness is looked at as “not as luxurious” or “beautiful,” and “like a prostitute”. Race is indelibly tied to class, as proximity to Whiteness can enable ‘classical beauty,’ where Blackness signals inappropriately sexualized feminine embodiment. In the US tradition of good and proper (White) female sexuality resting upon an inherently abjected Black female bodies/sexuality (Collins, 2005) they disallow the possibility of Black girls/women into the construction of “typical American beauty”. Although Denise is very critical of Kim Kardashian ‘selling herself’ through the media, she suggests that Kim can get away with it, whereas if Black women try to look sexy like “Kim Kardashian,” it would be “viewed differently” because they are precluded from ‘classic sexual beauty’ and its alignment with Whiteness – looking sexual they say will “be viewed differently” when a woman is Black.

As before, however, the girls go on to discuss wanting some specific racialized ‘assets’. Denise argues repeatedly that an hourglass figure is more attractive than an androgynous one (like Rita Ora), affirming the status and appeal of Whitened Black exoticism (Sastre, 2104). For instance, they note that in their social media environments “bigger boobs and bigger butt... men want to see that, and that’s what girls like feel like, I think, they have to show off... its more looked as ‘hot’”. But they also contend again this is the wrong sort of “attention”. Although they

want these bodily features, they do not post images that are too “sexy or provocative,” because “I don’t want anyone to see me like that” (Liza); Denise says she never takes provocative images or images of her cleavage, although she “might add effects, like tone effect to make it look nice,” applying a filter to “improve” her skin; we explore skin lightening filters further as we proceed.

Patty said that she once posted herself in a bikini but tends not to post sexy selfies as much now, because she gets “really self-conscious if I don’t get enough likes”. As before Patty describes desiring a contradictory and impossible notion of confidence– “I don't think I know anyone that feels completely comfortable with themselves. But if you’re confident then you don’t have the same need ... to get people to like it... or see you as hot or sexy”. Patty feels so strongly that this innate confidence is the key for ‘success’ that she said it was more important than being smart and if she had the power to change things she would enable “every woman in the world [to] have confidence and be bold.” Like the British White girls, Patty demonstrates a type of ostensibly colour-blind, meritocratic logic of sameness - “every woman in the world” - which sits in an uneasy discursive contradiction with their explicit statements abjecting Black feminine sexuality and embodiment (Collins, 2005).

UK Black girls: “A Black girl wearing it ...catches more attention”

Community Secondary School is slightly larger than average comprehensive secondary school (over 1000 students), serving one of the most deprived wards in Greater London. A large proportion of students new to the UK join throughout each year. Most students are of Turkish, African, Caribbean or (non-British) White European heritage. Some 70% of students speak English as an additional language, and this proportion is increasing. The group interviewed included eight Black girls 14-16 years of age all living in this deprived catchment area. They

were part of an ongoing 'Black Girls Club' run by an academic colleague, who facilitated the visit and was also present at the interview.

The Black girls at Community High were much more critical of mainstream media representations of 'sexy' femininity than either of the White groups. We found that none of the eight girls at community high had ever bought *Elle Magazine*, which at 4 pounds/6 US Dollars was far too expensive. One girl noted that she sometimes borrows similar magazines from her older sister, but suggested the sister's desire to "lose weight," was what fuelled her consumption of the magazine. Aleshia says, "I personally wouldn't buy the magazine, because I feel like that throughout the whole magazine that is all you see, is skinny girls...so I personally - I'm not that interested. I am not one of those people...This is my body!" The girls were immediately critical of Rita Ora's 'skinny' body and skimpy outfit as an ideal that would be impossible for them to emulate:

Janelle: Say a pair of shorts, converses and a crop top...you wouldn't expect anyone to really accept a Black girl wearing it but then if a White girl were to wear it is considered like really nice, really pretty.

Monique: Yes and that is because Black people and White people they have two different shapes. So sometimes it may seem like it is easier for a White person to get away with it because their body is not as - what is the word for it, busty?

Vanessa: Curvy.

Janelle: Yeah. Because if a Black girl is wearing it on her body it looks like - it doesn't give a good impression, especially like to boys or whatever

Monique: Yeah whereas with White people... well most of them anyway, their body is not as curvy so it doesn't look as bad in things, whereas with a Black girl it looks like she

is looking for attention because she knows she has that kind of curvy body so it is not really appropriate for her to wear those types of clothes.

Janelle: - it catches more attention, like it is more eye catching for a boy to see, like if it was a White girl their body shapes are not as curvy - so it doesn't really catch the boys eye, so then there is more things to say about a Black girl then for a White one.

These findings are remarkably similar to Lamb, Farmer, Kosterina, Lambe, Plocha and Randazzo (2015), who found Black girls complained that White girls could “get away” with wearing “really really really short shorts” because they are “skinnier” (p. 10). A racist sexual double standard is imposed on Black girls bodies as always “bad” and “catching” attention. They are highly attuned to their inability to control how other people (boys especially) see them and then subsequently treat them—they narrate consciousness that Black women/'s bodies are looked at differently and are seen to make a different type of impression. While for White girls, making good choices protects them from being inappropriately sexualized—they have a way out through responsibly and successfully navigating the sexiness mandate correctly – the busty, curvy Black female body can never escape its shape and is always read as inappropriate. Rather than not being sexy as the White girls have positioned Black woman bodies, the Black girls reflect how representations of Black bodies are always already *overly sexualised* in ways that mean they can't be 'pretty' like White girls.

Like the girls in Lamb and colleagues' (2016) study, the girls blame “the media” and American Black celebrities like Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé for aggravating this conundrum. They feel neither is a good “role model”: Beyoncé's videos are not “child appropriate” because she is “showing too much skin,” and Nicki Minaj is criticized for having surgeries to make her body

“even more curvy”. Despite their explicit critique of Rita Ora’s thin Whiteness, the girls describe trying to achieve these properties in their social media posts:

Tania: This is a picture of me and I had to give it like a lot of tweaking, I took the photo a lot of times.

Interviewer: What were you trying to go for?

Tania: I would want to be skinnier and I would want to be...so that I have a nice smile...

Vanessa: the clothes that you are wearing if someone sees it they might think that you are trying to dress a certain way for attention

Tania: Like sometimes I look dark in those pictures and ...sometimes I change it round...

Vanessa: I concentrate on what I look like, face wise and clothing. ...like people will look at you like, urgh, like you have taken a picture of yourself and you look like a tramp. And clothes wise, even if it is not brand clothes, because most people are like she is wearing this, wearing that, and it is not branded they will be, ‘Oh so she can’t afford it’

Here we see the importance of moving beyond a critique of ‘the media’ given girls are actually ‘producers’ (Bruns, 2011) that is users and producers in social media ecologies, alert to the right ingredients for creating and posting a “nice” image (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). This involves tweaking the photo to look “skinnier”, producing a nice smile, wearing clothes that are not trying to get “attention,” as well as the need for branded clothes so as not to look like a “tramp”, in ways that are explicitly tied to both class and racialized representations. Tania mentions looking “dark” and goes on to discuss different lighting and filter techniques to change the skin tone. She went on to discuss ‘hot or not’ videos as a current trend, arguing “what they [boys] would classify as ‘hot’ is mixed race”. To achieve a lighter shade, the girls use filtering photography

technologies. As discussed in Sastre's (2014) theory of racial mobility, Whiteness is not a pure medium; it is a gradation, something they mix with their own subjectivities to look less "dark" in images.

Given the already heightened attention to their sexualised bodies, the girls were adamant that they would not produce or send nude images (sexts) of their body, with one girl noting that when she was asked for a 'sext,' she refused in a way that was both clever and clear by sending an "alien" instead (see also Ringrose & Harvey, 2014). The girls were highly critical of White girls' explicit "Sex in the City positions," and "selfies" arguing boys were simply looking for a "head chick girl... a girl that gives head [fellatio]". Like Debbie Weekes' (2002) participants who critiqued White girls as 'blowers', these girls resist the racial double standard of hypersexualisation, pointing out both an unequal sexual attention economy around their bodies and the unfairness of this sexual abjection and scrutiny, which they observe is not applied to the girls of White European heritage in their school or social media networks.

US girls 'of colour': "You have to work harder to be sexy as a coloured person"

The US Black girls were participating in a six week summer leadership program held at a community centre. The program aims to equip the girls with tools and opportunities to analyze their personal experiences, become civically and politically active, and transform their communities. The intake for the program is from low-income, primarily Black and Latina urban areas and all of the 15 focus group participants were either Black, mixed race or Latina and of a slightly older age range (aged 15-17) than the other groups. Like the UK Black girls, the US girls of colour responded in a resistant and critical way to the image of Rita Ora:

Interviewer: How does it make you feel looking at it?

Robin: Makes me want more pizza!

Keyshia: I feel like it's supposed to – make to make people feel bad about their self and the way they look and make them want to change how they look- to look like that.

They are aware of technological manipulating of the image via mainstream media production. They also allude to a coercive economic aspect of the beauty industry (Elias, Gill, & Scharff, 2017) speculating: “Rita Ora. She had to wear this outfit, she didn't have a choice.” As noted, these girls have participated in media training and had a lesson looking at Beyoncé's skin tone being made “way lighter” in magazines. They discuss wanting “different ways to keep showing coloured women [in the media] without Photoshopping or beauty products to make their skin complexion lighter.”

The girls went on to describe and analyze the difficulties that girls of colour have in achieving sexiness within a representational landscape that *both* privileges White bodies and at the same time makes yet another set of sexualized demands of Black and brown female bodies, evident in a rapidly shifting terrain of racialized ‘sexiness’ we have been exploring:

Ellynn: I think for White women, like they show like tall, just like skinny, like no type of like shape or something like that, no curves. But for like Black and Latino women, I think they say like sexy is like the curves, the boobs, the butt, the long hair wavy, curly.

Troya: The straight thing's not working a lot for coloured girls or Latino girls. That's a White girl thing, the straight, the slim, the everything. and they have like a little boy body. But like for Latino and Black women, you have to have curves, boobs, ass, curly hair, long hair. Why can't I be tall and skinny? Because I'm Black?

Leslie: I feel like it's almost to be the sexiest is being like White, skinny, like Caucasian, whatever. And like so if you're White or Caucasian, that's already sexy, that's already a plus for you, and then like the skinny and tall, it makes it better. But like if you're

coloured or Latina or whatever, like to be sexy you have to—like you can't be too skinny, you can't be too big. You have to have like boobs and you just gotta have it. Like you have to work harder to be sexy as a coloured person.

These girls' discussion pointedly illuminates the type 'racial mobility' discussed by Sastre (2014) as they argue Black and Latino women's bodies are on the one hand expected to embody a particularly raced construction and standard of sexy— "they say like sexy is like the curves, the boobs, the butt, the long hair wavy, curly" in relation to Whiteness, which is "already sexy". But they also noted a straight and skinny "boy body" like Rita Ora, doesn't work as easily for coloured girls, that if they are Black and skinny they are not sexy. A different discourse of trying hard emerges here than in Lamb et al's (2015) findings where trying too hard was viewed as something disparaging. Rather here the girls actually foreground the hard work and labour of performing sexy and its impossibility. They show defiance and frustration at the absurdity of the idealized hybridity of Black/White sexy and having to navigate never being sexy, always being sexualized, being the right/wrong shade of Black and shape: "you can't be too skinny, you can't be too big...have like boobs...you just gotta have it." (Quanesha)The girl who notes that being White or Caucasian "that's already sexy...already a plus for you" articulates the White standard of value upon which other qualities can be added to increase value, and went on to discuss how this translates into assumptions of sexual desirability:

Leslie: light skinned women of colour are better in any sexual way, rather than women of colour who are darker, just because they have lighter skin.

Amber: Yeah.

Interviewer: Better?

Quanesha: Yeah, they just think light skinned women of colour are like.. better in like—

how do I say this—in bed, I guess, compared to women of colour who have darker skin. But you never know, because you never met them, you never been in bed with them, so why you judging?

Amber: like Lupita... when they talk about her it's like, "Oh yeah, she looks so nice, she looks so cute," but they never mention like her sex appeal ... whenever JLo wears something they're like, "Oh my gosh, she's so sexy for her age" ... always have to bring it back to the sex appeal with JLo. It's like two different skin colours and like Lupita, like it's not like she's sexy or whatever, it's just she looks nice in that dress

The girls describe how a celebrity like Lupita is excluded from the form of 'racial mobility' exercised by Latina celebrities like JLo, who mix a degree of colour and curvy exoticness into a form of still 'White enough' sexual representation. As a darker-skinned, thin Black woman, the girls are aware that Lupita can be understood to look 'nice in that dress' but that will not be seen as sexy. They go on to note this form of "racism" is everywhere "within high schools ... and within the Black community so like people that are like dark skinned are looked down upon as like not as good as the light skinned women of colour" (Leslie). Because of these racist double standards they express great reticence in revealing their body on a permanent space like Instagram, because as one girl noted when she posted an image in her bathing suit, she felt everyone assumes like "Eww what is she doing? She's showing way too much skin". Discussing the policing of their bodies, like the UK Black girls, they express repeated concern about their own personal safety, noting that as girls of colour their bodies are judged to a different standard stating if they were attacked on public transport, arguing the response would be that their clothes would be judged as "too tight", and men and the authorities would conclude "you were asking for it." This is a concern intermeshed with racialisation and class based geographies of public

transit, given neither the UK or US White girls described such an acute sense of fear in public spaces. Black girls are responsabilized for racialized hypersexualisation—always, already sexually available (Collins, 2005) yet precluded from the now valuable asset of sexy--and see themselves as being held accountable for victimization, as well as excluded from normative ideals of nice and sexy femininity which is always coded Whiter than what they fit into.

Conclusion

We have explored how differently racialized groups of girls from the US and the UK describe managing complex and shifting racialized ideals of sexiness, beauty and ‘hotness’. Despite their convictions that mainstream media needed to more inclusive of Black women and that photoshopping to lighten celebrities was wrong, all the White girls constructed sexiness in a binary between Whiteness and Blackness. The UK White girls pointedly said Black women could not be sexy. The US White girls said Black women showing their flesh were more often read as skanky, selling themselves and low class; but they also narrated their own desire to have the new perfect hybrid mix of ambiguously racialized golden skin and ‘Black’ body parts like bigger ‘boobs and butt’ found in celebrities like JLo, Kim Kardashian. At the same time, they criticized attempts to enhance these qualities as problematically seeking male attention instead of wanting to achieve healthy self-esteem and confidence. Indeed, one of our key findings is that all the White girls to varying degrees were invested in a discourse of self-confidence (Gill & Orgad, 2015), where they imagined they could somehow (miraculously) achieve self-esteem if they worked towards the idealised forms of femininity - they responsabilize themselves as needing to find an individual solution to structural and discursive conditions of representational ideals, which they accept even as they critique them. We demonstrated that this discourse of confidence is highly racialized: internalising the norms and technologies of ‘perfectibility’ seems then be an

effect of proximity to Whiteness and ideals of White femininity. This places a high demand on the White girls to try to aspire to achieve sexy femininity – the key to healthy self-esteem and body confidence.

Another important finding was that proximity to Blackness meant girls' bodies were consistently read as either not sexy enough or hypersexualized, which posed immediate dangers to girls of colour in both their school communities and other public spaces. Many of the US and UK Black girls outright rejected Rita Ora as someone/thing they would identify with as sexy – they are resisters as noted by Lamb and colleagues (2016). And yet the UK Black girls described using photographic lightening techniques and clothing strategies to look “nice” and affluent to counteract their experiences of hypersexualisation and associations with not having money or class. The US girls of colour spoke extensively about American norms of White sexiness, and the new form of impossible racialized “mixed race” sexiness (the ‘racial mobility’ of Kim Kardashian or JLo). They felt the new demands to be curvy in all the right ways (rather than simply thin like White girls) meant they had to ‘work harder’ than White girls to be sexy or desirable. They argued that having both nice feminine comportment and sexiness simultaneously was not possible for Black girls and women.

Our final key finding is, therefore, that what is ‘sexy’ is a highly slippery, shifting sometimes contradictory but always *highly valued* property across these four groups of girls. Sexiness may expand (and contract) to include new gradations and shades of brownness and larger body parts in specific proportions which align to hypersexualized exotic appeal in ways that are highly classed (Sastre 2014). However, these mixtures still relate to a baseline standard defined through normative ideals of beauty and sexiness that reference and privilege White and middle class formations of femininity. Differently racialized girls are therefore forced to

undertake very different types of work to navigate and manage mandates and expectations for embodying sexy femininity in relation to the always racialized and classed condition of being ‘hot right now’.

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