

#HotGirlScience: A Liberatory Paradigm for Intersectional Sex-Positive Scholarship

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Abstract

What if being a hot girl was a way of life and a way of conducting science? In this paper, we propose a new sex-positive, liberatory, intersectional paradigm for sex science, #HotGirlScience. The #HotGirlScience paradigm invites sexologists to study the fun, sex-positive aspects of Black sexualities and move toward liberation-focused inquiry where pleasure is central. #HotGirlScience is founded upon hip hop feminism, hood feminism, and the work of Black feminist scholars past and present. The #HotGirlScience paradigm differs from the previously-mentioned feminisms in its empirical potential. Four criteria of real #HotGirlScience apply to the entire research process and not just interpretation of results or theoretical foundations of the research. By explaining the four criteria: 1) doing me unapologetically, 2) having fun, 3) sex positivity, and 4) hyping up my friends, we present the #HotGirlScience paradigm's ability to inform the empirical study of the pleasurable, sex-positive aspects of Black sexual lives as a necessary contribution to the current sexology canon that all too frequently presents a deficit view of Black sexualities. Descriptions of the four elements of the paradigm, as well as implications for the use of this paradigm with marginalized populations in sex science, are discussed.

Introduction

Although hip hop artist Megan Thee Stallion revitalized the phrase “hot girl” in the summer of 2019 (Megan Thee Stallion, 2019), the phrase's history as a hip hop lifestyle began twenty years earlier. When the Hot Boys, a rap group under the Cash Money label, introduced “I Need a Hot Girl” in 1999 (Hot Boys, 1999), their description of the hot girl prototype provided a framework for Megan's rap persona, in that she was a sexually liberal, Southern, hood girl (i.e., from the housing projects or adjacent economically marginalized areas, reflective of Black, socioeconomically marginalized cultural norms, strengths, and stereotypes). The hot girl identity has stood the test of time by existing in theory and action for at least two decades, anchoring the co-authors' formative years, as well as a new generation of hot girls. Jennings (2020) asserts that #HotGirlSummer is an epistemology, or how we know something (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In this paper, we extend Jennings' (2020) assertion by integrating Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), hood feminism (Kendall, 2020), and hip hop feminism's invitation to a politics of

¹ Acknowledgements: To the hot girls of our generation and generations past and present, thank you for making sex positivity our purpose.

pleasure (Morgan, 2015). We suggest #HotGirlScience is an emerging paradigm: a worldview that guides research action (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Ponterotto, 2005).

#HotGirlScience is a paradigm located within a liberatory philosophy of science, which is the next step following critical philosophies of science. Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) identify four preceding paradigms (e.g., positivist, interpretivist, critical, pragmatic), and Ponterotto (2005) also delineates four somewhat different paradigms (e.g., positivist, postpositivist, constructivist-interpretivist, critical-ideological). These scholars suggest the critical or critical-ideological paradigm intends to lead to emancipation/liberation of marginalized people; however, in practice the critical paradigms have often stopped at explicating oppressive power dynamics with suggestions for liberated action, rather than doing research on the positive, liberated aspects of marginalized people's lives. Thus, we distinguish liberation philosophies of science from critical, especially as it relates to sexology.

To this end, the #HotGirlScience paradigm invites sexologists to study the fun, “messy, sticky, and joyous” (Morgan, 2015, p. 39) sex-positive aspects of Black sexual lives as a necessary contribution to the current sexology canon that all too frequently presents a deficit view of Black sexualities. Sexologists studying Black people are encouraged to read critical sexuality studies to reduce their ignorance (Bowleg et al., 2017; Lassiter et al., 2021), but move beyond them toward sex-positive, liberation-focused inquiry (Hargons et al., 2020), where pleasure is central (Thorpe et al., 2021; 2022). In this paper, we outline the criteria by which one can determine if they are conducting real #HotGirlScience, and we establish this paradigm's four elements: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). First, we provide an overview of the Black feminist frameworks that undergird #HotGirlScience.

Black Women's Multifaceted Feminisms and Sex Research

Black feminisms are multifaceted, often in conversation with Black feminists of the preceding generation, global and other racially marginalized feminists, and White feminists. In the national context of the United States of America, early Black feminists undertook the work of respectability politics as a vehicle for safety from racist and sexist violence (Harris-Perry, 2011), as well as seeking suffrage and the ability to be treated like “ladies” (Thompson, 2009; Winfrey-Harris, 2015). The work of Black feminists and womanists like Collins (2000; 2004), hooks (2000), Crenshaw (1991), Lorde (1984), and Butts (1977) provided an analysis and taxonomy for understanding the intersecting marginalization Black people faced (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism) and the myriad resources and strengths Black people possessed and used to confront them. For example, Collins (2000, 2004) gave us the language of controlling images, Black sexual politics, and defining ourselves, alongside Crenshaw's (1991) contribution of the intersectionality framework and hooks' (2000) love ethic. Lorde (1984) and Butts (1977) presented us with the importance of erotic power and how power informs sexual wellness and pleasure. Their works were transgressive, and they paved the way for actions born out of the awareness of our power to transgress oppressive social norms.

In a 2012 review, Nash argued that the third wave of Black feminism was filled with liberation, fun, and pleasure by articulating complex sexualities of Black women (Thompson, 2009) and moving beyond what Lee (2010) refers to as an epistemology of respectability.

Within this wave, Morgan (2015; 2017) and other hip hop feminists (Durham et al., 2013) integrated a love of hip hop, rather than just a critique of its ills, into the way we understand Black feminism. Her nuance was valuable for Black women who loved and were sexually empowered by hip hop culture and music, even as it upheld some harmful misogynoir. Morgan (2015) asserts that female hip hop artists use sex and sexuality as erotic power within a culture that is often rooted in misogyny as an opportunity to reclaim their sexuality and empower other women to be sexually liberated. Instead of what some may refer to as self-objectification, erotic power as currency allows Black female hip hop artists to use their power to express what Morgan refers to as “honest bodies that like to also fuck” (Morgan, 2015, p. 40). Morgan more pointedly called us to action around pleasure as an essential part of our liberation, extending Lorde’s articulation of the erotic into a praxis of it.

The Crunk Feminist Collective was founded by a group of hip hop feminists to create a space to support and fellowship with other feminists of marginalized identities, within and outside of the academy, that were from the hip hop generation and appreciated the Southern Black culture of ‘crunk’ (i.e., enthusiastic, energetic, and ratchet cultural norms that subvert respectability; see Cooper et al., 2017a). These hip hop feminists, similar to Morgan, acknowledge the positive cultural impact of hip hop and crunk music on their lives and are committed to dismantling the patriarchy. To advance the work of hip hop feminism, the collective created the Ten Crunk Commandments for Reinvigorating Hip Hop Feminist Studies (see Cooper et al., 2017b). Commandments #5 is especially relevant for #HotGirlScience. Commandment #5, avoid the *pitfalls of presentism*, means our discussion of #HotGirlScience must be bigger than Megan Thee Stallion’s current popularity and the resurfacing of the term “hot girl”, rather we have to ensure that the #HotGirlScience paradigm will be relevant and useful to scholars for years to come.

More recently, Kendall (2020) reminded us about not only who White feminists forgot, but also who the largely middle-class Black feminist canon only cursorily addressed. Different from hip hop feminism, hood feminism addressed the way the stories of Black life in hood communities is only investigated to uphold a grim picture of Blackness, including Black sexualities. Contributing to sexology, she also used her Twitter platform to interrogate the sexualization and slut-shaming of Black girls and women with the #FastTailedGirls conversation (see Kendall, 2013).

Finally, artists from Lil’ Kim, Foxy Brown, and Trina, to Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and Megan Thee Stallion embody these multifaceted Black feminisms in practice. Their legible branding of Black feminisms translated these frameworks for the masses. For example, these artists reclaimed the terms (e.g., hot girls) Black male hip hop artists applied to Black women as potential controlling images and endorsed self-definition that denounced respectability politics. They amplified the value of sexual pleasure and erotic empowerment for Black women as erotic revolutionaries (see Lee, 2010), with a hood ethic. Real #HotGirlScience.

This “politics of pleasure” (Morgan, 2015) highlights the need for focus on Black women’s sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame and pushes against the “politics of silence” that frames Black women’s sexuality as something that should be kept in silence and regulated for the sake of respectability politics (Hammonds, 2017). Hip hop feminism, crunk feminism,

and hood feminism are rooted in a politics of pleasure which centers Black women's pleasure experiences, pleasure worthiness, and sexual agency. Ohman (2020) refers to hip hop artists such as those mentioned above as Black pussy theorists. Black pussy theory is "the critical and creative tradition of considering how Black women and their genitalia figure into interlocking discourses of race, gender, and sexuality" (Ohman, 2020, p. 5). Black pussy theory builds upon hip hop feminism by focusing on the way ratchet hip hop (see Ohman, 2020 for definition) allows Black feminist reclamations of pussy through creative sense-making that condemns respectability politics and highlights the endless possibilities of pleasure (Ohman, 2020).

#HotGirlScience encourages researchers to embody their erotic power, through the four criteria below, throughout the scientific process and invite their participants to do the same. It also necessitates dissemination of findings in a way that promotes a politics of pleasure and rejects the politics of silence and respectability by articulating what is most pleasurable (Lomax, 2018). Specifically, #HotGirlScience is the empirical younger sister to hip hop feminism, asking and answering human subjects research questions that hip hop feminism has proposed theoretically. It understands itself as raised by the same ratchet and crunk feminist village and Black feminist foremothers, and it advances the good work of its big sisters beyond scholarship into science.

Real #HotGirlScience: Four Criteria

Four criteria establish whether someone is doing #HotGirlScience. These criteria were translated from Megan Thee Stallion's description of the #HotGirlSummer and applied to the study of sex research with Black samples. The self-proclaimed head Hottie, Hot Girl Meg, says a #HotGirlSummer, "It's just basically about women (and men) being unapologetically them, just having a good-ass time, hyping up your friends, doing you, not giving a damn about what nobody gotta say about it" (Townsend, 2019). She also explicitly stated that a #HotGirlSummer is gender neutral (Townsend, 2019). Below we outline how these sentiments apply to #HotGirlScience as a research paradigm. Then, we transition into how these criteria work alongside the four elements of paradigm.

Doing Me, Unapologetically

This first criterion is aligned with the concept of empowered authenticity. Rather than asking/waiting for permission or bestowed credibility, people using a #HotGirlScience paradigm "do them." Doing me is a disposition, an attitudinal posture of confidence, courage, power, and authenticity. It is an important criterion because permission or credibility may never be bestowed upon people with multiple marginalized identities. For Black women who work in academic settings where Black women's ways of being are extinguished, employing this paradigm is an act of resistance and liberation. Regardless of whether the topics you study are extramurally fundable, outside of the typical scope of your discipline, or cutting edge, this paradigm requires sexologists to ask: "Am I authentic to my values and love ethic, even when the academy scrutinizes Black women's ways of being?"

Having Fun (A Good Ass Time)

For other paradigms (e.g., positivist, critical), science is a serious endeavor. The toxic seriousness (Leaf, 2013) of the academy often perpetuates an absence of fun, but one can conduct rigorous research and still have fun. The #HotGirlScience paradigm requires sexologists to ask: “Does the research process facilitate joy? Are the questions I ask and the products I create fun?” This has implications for the entire research process, from study conceptualization to research design, to dissemination. Even with mundane and potentially grueling tasks such as data entry, data cleaning, and conversations with institutional review boards, listening to good music, engaging the process as a temporarily tedious part of an overall fun project, and doing the work in community can facilitate joy. Along each step, if the researchers conflate rigor with toxic seriousness, rather than intentional attention to important details, it isn’t real #HotGirlScience.

Sex Positivity

As a necessary intervention on sex research using marginalized samples, sex-positive frameworks (Williams et al., 2015) balance the deficit-focused narratives often presented (Hargons et al., 2020). This can include deficits that are victim-blaming pointed at the people being studied, as well as deficits that are system-focused that highlight the oppressive forces at the omission of the resilience, strengths, and “good stuff” related to sex. Sex-positive frameworks focus on strengths of marginalized populations to inform their overall well-being, happiness, and their ability to have open and honest communication about sex, including pleasure, across varying social structures (Williams et al., 2015). Jones (2019) argued erasure of good stuff, such as sexual pleasure, was a problem in the field of sexology. She states, “an appropriate and sexually affirming approach [to research] would require that sexual scientists are attentive to pleasure, alongside pain, and do so using an intersectional framework that is also attentive to how race, class and gender shape people’s sexual lives and choices” (Jones, 2019, p. 246-24). Under a #HotGirlScience paradigm, sex science would include understudied sex-positive aspects such as passion, desire, good sex, pleasure, orgasms, intimacy, and sexual function among marginalized populations. A question to ask related to this criterion is: “Am I studying and amplifying pleasure and sexual wellness holistically, especially for people who are marginalized?”

Hyping Up My Friends

Black women have created amazing sex scholarship and were among the pioneers in sexology. For example, June Dobbs Butts worked alongside Masters and Johnson (Butts, 2016); however, her work is rarely cited in sexology journals (see Google Scholar for her citation counts). The #CiteBlackWomen (Smith et al., 2021) movement has already begun to address this neglect of Black women’s contributions in scholastic circles, and the #HotGirlScience paradigm amplifies their call to action in sexology. We argue that the sexology canon is lacking if it only minimally engages the work of people who are multiply marginalized, specifically Black women. Thus, for this criterion, a question to ask is: “Am I citing Black women, as well as anyone who is a friend to Black people in word and deed?” Both word and deed are imperative here, as the alignment of these two ways of extending friendship to Black people circles back to authenticity as a criterion. If the deeds don’t match the words, then it isn’t real #HotGirlScience.

Four Elements of a #HotGirlScience Paradigm

The four elements of a research paradigm provide additional questions and recommendations to guide sex research. They make plain the assumptions under which a research project is being conducted. Below we present an overview of what these can include for #HotGirlScience, although it is outside of the scope of this paper to discuss fully these elements of the paradigm philosophically. For in-depth overviews, see Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) or Ponterotto (2005).

Epistemology

Epistemology is how we know something and what counts as knowledge. #HotGirlScience upholds both intuitive and authoritative knowledge as its epistemology. This means if your knowledge of a subject is not based on insights or intuition developed as a result of living that experience, you “better ask somebody” who knows. You can have people with that lived experience as participants in your research, but that does not go far enough. You need them as members of the research team to do it justice, otherwise your ability to interpret the value and relevance of the knowledge they’ve provided will be inadequate at best, and problematic or violent at worst. This epistemology also promotes that all research is intervention, with the goal of active liberation as an outcome of participating in the research process: for sexologists and participants. For members of the RISE² research team (led by Hargons), research team meetings and projects have reportedly been a source of liberation and provided opportunities for team members to be their authentic selves during the research process while centering marginalized voices. The epistemology of #HotGirlScience aligns with Crunk Feminist Commandment #9, *lived realities still matter*.

Ontology

The ontology, or nature of reality, of the #HotGirlScience paradigm is that reality is shaped by context and the level of power one has – and believes they have – within their contexts. Both power and context are simultaneously shaping reality, and a person’s level of critical and liberation consciousness allows them to deploy their internal and external resources to transform reality. For example, as Black women we can identify the context of intersecting oppression that organizes the academy, and we can simultaneously transform these systems in the work we do day to day. In sexology, this means the sex-positive topics we choose to write about and persist in publishing, despite potential biases against the topics that constitute our realities, gradually shape reality in the way we imagine it can be. Both our privileged identities and our internal resources born of marginalization (i.e., cultural values, love, radical hope) allow us to imagine realities that we believe we have the power to manifest.

Methodology

Methodology is the research process, beginning to end, including the steps – methods – one takes for each part of the process. Mixed methods, qualitative, and participatory action research methodologies are aligned with the #HotGirlScience paradigm. These methodologies give the researchers access to the sexual lives of participants in a way that can uncover intuitive

and authoritative knowledge. Only #HotGirlScience scholars born and immersed in the sexualities they study can use quantitative methodologies and do them justice, because their interpretation is the only justifiable frame for authenticity, fun, and sex positivity.

Axiology

The axiology in #HotGirlScience is a love ethic (hooks, 2000) and other values that are born of the integration of Black feminisms. For example, emotions, enthusiasm, care, fun, joy, and pleasure have a central place in #HotGirlScience. “Nothing about us without us” is a part of the code of ethics undergirding this axiology. It puts a stop to the current sexology mainstay of people studying sexualities of marginalized people from a deficit lens to acquire extramural funding when they have no ties to these communities outside of the research project, even if their desire is to do good. It requires the inclusion and citation of Black women and Black queer people, whether they are established academic scholars or not. Further, if the results are not disseminated in accessible, legible ways – if the people studied don’t have the results made available to them in ways they understand – it’s unethical. Sharing the data and asking the people what questions they want us to ask of it are necessary. Also, it requires the most loving, sex-positive, nuanced interpretation of the research results. This means that even when the results are negative and not sex-positive or liberatory, researchers acknowledge and state the results but interpret them in meaningful and robust ways that reflect the full context of history and politics that inform the outcomes. Researchers, especially those publishing in academic journals, should ask of themselves: “How would participants feel if they read what I wrote about them, their sexualities, and their lived experiences?”

Conclusion

Being a hot girl is more than a way of life. It is a transformational way of creating new knowledge and conducting research. The evolution of the term hot girl over the last 20 years, along with the rise of third wave Black feminism, including hip hop, crunk, and hood feminisms, have the power to transform the narrative of Black sexology to one that is sex-positive, liberating, and pleasure-filled. #HotGirlScience aims to focus on sexual liberation of participants, while also liberating Black women and femme scholars from the toxic seriousness of academia, to foster research that is rooted in love and filled with joy, not obligation and sacrifices to appease funders. We conclude that - with care – this paradigm may be applied to and used by non-Black, but still racially/ethnically marginalized, people too.

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