Erotic capital, popular pedagogy and healthy adolescent female sexuality

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Abstract
The objectification of female sexuality in the media is intensifying, and so, too, is anxiety about the sexualization of girls and the implications for their health. Much of this anxiety focuses on the influence of visual media on body image and the flow-on effects for girls’ health. Rather less attention is paid to the pedagogical role of popular romance fiction in teaching girls about their sexuality. Given the pronounced increase in eroticized fiction for girls over the past decade, this is a significant oversight. This article applies Hakim’s (2010) concept of erotic capital to two chick lit novels for girls. The elements of erotic capital—assets additional to economic, cultural and social capital—are used to explore the lessons these novels teach about girl sexual subjectivities and sociality in a sexualized culture.

Keywords
desire, erotic capital, fiction, pleasure, popular pedagogy, sex education, sexualized society

Introduction
In the increasingly sexualized cultures of the West, the commodification of female sexuality is intensifying; so, too, are public and parental anxieties about the sexualization of girls. The depth of concern about this issue is demonstrated by the likes of the Australian Government Senate Committee Inquiry, Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media (Standing Committee on Environment, Communications and the Arts 2008), the Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (American Psychological Association Taskforce 2007) and the Sexualisation of Young People Review (Papadopoulos 2010) commissioned by the UK Government. These reports focus
on the links between sexual imagery in the media and marketplace, the premature sexualization of children—predominantly girls and often preadolescent—and the implications for their health and wellbeing.

According to the APA Taskforce, sexualization occurs when

- A person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics;
- A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy;
- A person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making; and/or
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person. (2007: 1)

Although the Report acknowledges the sexual trafficking, abuse and assault of girls, its main concern is with sexual objectification of the female body and the role of the media in this. The researchers found that “Virtually every media form studied provides ample evidence of the sexualization of women, including television, music videos, music lyrics, movies, magazines, sports media, video games, the Internet, and advertising” (2007: 1). The strong emphasis on the visual media here is logical since “A sex object is defined on the basis of its looks, in terms of its usability for sexual pleasure” (MacKinnon 1987: 173). Sexual objectification involves ways of looking and seeing. The health consequences of exposure to objectifying sexual imagery are often seen to stem from anxieties about the body.

Many feminist approaches to girls' sexual health also focus on the body, emphasizing embodied desire and pleasure. This stance springs from Fine’s essay, “The Missing Discourse of Desire” (1988), and in response to the discourses of violence, victimization and morality that continue to regulate female desire in formal sex education. Thus, Impett et al. assert that a “conceptualization of adolescent sexual health must include, among other things, the ability to acknowledge one’s own sexual feelings” (2006: 131). This is a valid goal. However, in a critique of feminist ideals for a healthy adolescent girl sexuality, Lamb cautions that “the kind of sexual person who feels
pleasure, desire, and subjectivity may be ironically similar to the commodified, sexualized, marketed teen girl” (2010: 302) depicted in the media, a figure problematic to feminists and governments alike. She also notes that “the embodied, agentive, subjective, authentic sexuality that is the ideal set out for teen girls… must be discovered in oneself and not in relation to another person” (302).

Sexuality is not simply an embodied experience. As an early World Health Organization [WHO] report states, “Sexuality is not synonymous with sexual intercourse … and it is not the sum total of our erotic lives” (Langfeldt and Porter 1986: 5). Rather, it includes

individual and social capabilities and conditions for eroticism, emotional attachment/love, sex, gender, and reproduction. It is anchored in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs and values and is expressed through identity, attitudes, values, roles, behaviors, and relationships. Sexuality is a result of the interplay of biological, psychological, socioeconomic, cultural, ethical and religious/spiritual factors. (Pan American Health Organization 2000: 8)

Healthy sexuality, then, “is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality” (WHO 2006: 5).

A concept of healthy adolescent female sexuality would acknowledge the importance of desire, embodied or imagined, but also the social dimensions of desire. Sexuality is primarily, although not exclusively, experienced in a social context, even if this pertains to two people. A conceptualization of social well-being in regard to female sexuality might encompass reciprocity, mutuality and respect. It would also take into account “the emergence of a genuine discourse of young women’s sexual desire that has already occurred and is not unproblematic” (Harris 2005: 39). It is not only sexualization and objectification of girls in the media that is at stake here, but public discourses of desire that invite girls to objectify others. The adolescent girl must now negotiate her developing sexuality in the context of a sexualized culture and the diffusion of a uniquely contemporary sensibility of sexual sociality across an array of pedagogical sites.

Attwood describes this as a specifically “postmodern” sexual sensibility. It includes “the injunction to be authentic, spontaneous, involved, hedonistic, a sensation-seeker, and yet to maintain control of our sexual selves; to self-fashion, remain detached
and forever open to offers” (2006: 89). Giddens refers to the new form of intimacy this produces as “confluent love.” Unlike romantic love, it “makes the achievement of reciprocal sexual pleasure a key element in whether the relationship is sustained or dissolved” and requires the “cultivation of sexual skills…via a multitude of sources of sexual information, advice and training” (1992: 62). The postfeminist sexual sensibility is likewise characterized by an “emphasis upon self surveillance, monitoring and discipline [and] a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment” (Gill and Arthurs 2006: 446). It is with the ways these sensibilities inflect the representation of an empowered adolescent female sexuality in popular fiction for girls that this article is concerned.

In this regard, this article departs from dominant approaches to the sexualization of girls in two ways. First, it contends that teen chick lit, a subgenre of romance, functions as a popular pedagogy of sexuality no less than the media texts that provoke moral panic and preoccupy much academic attention. Second, while attending to postfeminist and postmodern sexual sensibilities, it uses Catherine Hakim’s (2010) theory of erotic capital to inform its analysis of Yvonne Collins and Sandy Rideout’s *Love, Inc* (2011) and Allison van Diepen’s *The Oracle of Dating* (2010). Understanding fiction as a modality of popular pedagogy, this article interrogates the advice these texts give adolescent readers on how to fashion their sexual subjectivities and erotic relationships and questions whether they offer a model of healthy adolescent girl sexuality.

**Popular fiction as a popular pedagogy of girl sexuality**

In 1967, Raymond Williams recognized the educational influence of the culture within which the individual is immersed and since then a body of scholarship has developed around notions of public pedagogy, popular pedagogy and cultural pedagogy. All three concepts share the assumption that teaching and learning are not confined to formal educational sites and institutions of socialization—school, family, church and community—and may in fact contradict the lessons these teach. As the chief conduits of popular pedagogies, the media have come to be regarded as “the most important educational force in creating citizens and social agents” (Giroux 2005: 45) and to increasingly structure “the realm of subjectivity and freedom of the lifeworld” (Freisen and Hug 2009: 64).
Unsurprisingly, research conducted on sex education finds that popular culture texts comprise the most important, indeed, preferred source of information about sex for young people, particularly in regard to sexual relationships (Arthurs and Zacharias 2006; Bragg 2006). “Fact” and “faith” based approaches to sex education often eschew the uncertain and controversial roles of pleasure, desire and subjectivity in sexual literacy, creating a vacuum for popular culture texts to fill. Like television, the “transmodern teacher” to which Hartley (1999: 155) refers, popular culture texts also teach “different segments of the population how others look, live, speak, behave, relate, dispute, dance, sing, vote, decide, tolerate, complain”—and conduct their erotic lives.

Fiction for young people is likewise preoccupied with, if not intent on, teaching not only how others live and behave, but also how they should do so. Narrative strategies in the adolescent novel arguably mirror those of formal pedagogies, since characters are often engaged in the same processes of “modelling, successive approximations, performance, evaluation and reflection” (Hickey-Moody et al. 2010: 233) that pedagogy entails. Indeed, the novel has long played a key role in formal education. Research suggests that in the act of reading, the reader temporarily occupies the subject position of the focalizing character. In other words, the narrative positions readers to identify or empathize with the protagonist and, in the process, invites (though not compels) them to subscribe to the ideology of the text for the duration of the reading time (Stephens 1992).

Narrative structures reflect and give rise to structures of feeling, so that readers’ identification or disidentification with a character’s values and beliefs and the lessons they learn or fail to learn is more affective than critical. Despite the novel playing such an important role in schools, the informal pedagogy at work in the popular fiction young people read for pleasure is often acknowledged only in regard to print literacy. To focus on the (print) medium, not the message, is to disregard the other forms of literacy that popular fiction promotes, including sexual literacy. In respect to adolescent girl sexuality, it is also to overlook the ways that popular pedagogies confirm, contradict and contest formal and family sex education.

There is, of course, no shortage of cautionary tales that invoke discourses of violence, victimization and morality. Other fiction fills the gaps and absences in sex education as this online comment on Judy Blume’s novels suggests: “We had sex ed
classes to tell us what menstruation was; Judy Blume warned us how it would make us feel. We had science books to tell us about the biology of reproduction; Judy Blume clued us in on how the opposite gender felt and talked” (Redlass n.d.). More recently, teen chick lit has emerged to offer a contemporary set of popular pedagogies, ostensibly aimed at young adults, but read by girls as young as nine (Johnson 2010). The genre partakes of the “public discourses of desire” (Harris 2005) that circulate in the sexualized culture of late modernity, focusing on self-fashioning and the negotiation of erotic as much as romantic relationships (Bullen et al. 2011). To investigate the pedagogies in the chick lit novels I discuss later, I mobilize the concept of erotic capital.

**Erotic capital**

According to Catherine Hakim, erotic capital is “increasingly important in the sexualized culture of modern affluent societies [and] is not only a major asset in the mating and marriage market, but can be very important in labour markets, the media, politics, advertising, sports, the arts, and in everyday social interaction” (2010: 499). She posits the erotic as an asset comparable to economic, social and cultural capital. There is much in her explication and defense of erotic capital that is highly contentious, and given the anti-Anglo-feminist stance, its application in this discussion is somewhat at cross-purposes with Hakim’s. However, my aim here is not to critique her theorization, but to use it as a broad schema for analysis.

Hakim identifies six sub-categories of erotic capital, which in practice overlap. I summarize them here and elaborate on each in the next section of this article.

1. **Beauty:** principally facial, in part fixed by nature but also an achieved characteristic;
2. **Sexual attractiveness:** an embodied disposition also informed by personality and style, thus involving emotional labor;
3. **Social skills:** grace, charm and flirtatiousness, which attract others;
4. **Liveliness:** physical and social energy;
5. **Personal presentation:** includes techniques of grooming and adornment used to increase attractiveness, make style statements and announce social status;
6. **Sexual competence:** libido and erotic skills required to satisfy a partner.
According to Hakim, “all six elements contribute to defining someone’s erotic capital. The relative importance of the six elements usually differs for men and women, and varies between cultures and in different centuries” (2010: 501).

Age is another critical factor in how erotic capital varies and is perceived. Hakim focuses mainly on the impact of ageing, especially on women. She considers the erotic capital of young people to be necessarily high due to youthful physical attractiveness and high libido, but does not consider girls specifically. What she does insist upon, however, is that while erotic capital “requires some basic level of talent and ability, [it] can be trained, developed, and learnt, so the final quantum goes far beyond any initial talent” (Hakim 2010: 512). Some facets of erotic capital may be formally taught, for instance, at modeling school; however, its curriculum is predominantly delivered informally via popular pedagogies, including the chick lit novel. In what follows, I consider how erotic capital manifests in van Diepen’s The Oracle of Dating and Collins and Rideout’s Love, Inc.

**Lessons on erotic capital: a case study**

Both The Oracle of Dating and Love, Inc were written by Canadian authors, but are set in the United States and published for an international market by Harlequin Teen and Hyperion, an imprint of Disney, respectively. Given this, the nationality of the authors is somewhat incidental, even though the texts were originally selected with a view to exploring national variations on the teen chick lit phenomenon. However, the novels do not identify themselves with mass-market chick lit series like those produced by Alloy Entertainment, including Gossip Girl, the teen equivalent to Sex in the City. The old-fashioned covers eschew glamour. Images of “wholesome” girls reflect the fact that the middle class protagonists and implied readers are “ordinary” girls, making the representation of adolescent sexuality in them particularly significant. The covers also suggest that these novels may be aimed at younger readers—or circumspect parents. Certainly, the cover notes assume a sexually inexperienced reader:

For five bucks, the Oracle of Dating will tell you:

- How to flirt
- If that cute guy you’re crushing on likes you, too
- Whether your new romance will last through lunch period
And much more (van Diepen 2010, back cover, italics in original)

The Oracle, fifteen-year-old Kayla, runs an anonymous telephone service, online problem page and blog dispensing dating advice to teenagers, with predictable romantic complications ensuing. In Love, Inc, tenth grader, Zahra, meets Syd and Kali at group counseling. When they discover that all have been dating the same boy, they take revenge. According to the cover notes,

"Project Payback is such a success, the girls soon have clients lining up for their consulting services." The reader is then addressed: “Is your boyfriend acting shady? Dying to know if your crush is into you? Need matchmaking expertise? Look no further than Love Inc.

In situating their main protagonists as advisors to their peers through the “business” of relationship advice, these novels make their pedagogical intent overt and imply authorial reflexivity about what constitutes a healthy adolescent sexuality. Although this narrative strategy is not typical of adolescent chick lit, it makes explicit the pedagogy implicit in the genre. Indeed, as the narrators of The Oracle of Dating and Love, Inc instruct the reader on how to accumulate erotic capital and seek to perform an agential sexuality through their own romances, the texts betray aspects of the contemporary sexualized cultural sensibility that undermine their obvious intention to construct a model of healthy adolescent girl sexuality. I explain how in relation to the six elements of erotic capital.

Beauty

According to Hakim, “Great beauty is always in short supply, and is universally valorized” (2010: 500). It is also “a creation—a work of art, which can be achieved through training” and women generally “work harder” at it than men (2010: 504). In light of public anxiety about the health consequences of the West’s obsession with beauty and the overt pedagogical intent of The Oracle of Dating and Love, Inc, however, it is not surprising that both novels refuse a standardized, airbrushed image of female beauty. Instead, they promote the idea that every girl has a “best asset,” a strategy likely designed to encourage readers to focus on the beauty attributes they possess, not lack.

However, the notion of a “best asset” assumes that bodies are commodities to be evaluated for their erotic appeal. One way the media sexually objectifies women’s bodies
is by fetishizing individual body parts—breasts, legs, hair— which are made subject to the (male) gaze. This phenomenon is linked to self-objectification, which occurs when “an individual focuses attention on how her body appears to others rather than on how her body feels and on how she can, using that body, perform actions in the world” (Zurbriggen et al. 2011: 449). Research also suggests that women who self-objectify also objectify others (Strelan and Hargreaves 2005). When Kayla describes her friends, she identifies an aspect of their appearance as their best asset. Likewise, when Zahra attends her first counseling session, she notices Kali’s blonde curls and long legs, the very features that Kali later draws attention to when she tells her new friends: “My hair’s my best asset—after my legs” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 142).

Narrators Zahra and Kayla exhibit mild adolescent insecurity about their appearance. It transpires, however, that the very “flaw” about which Zahra is most self-conscious, her auburn hair, is her best asset. That it is part of her erotic capital becomes clear when Kali asks for a photograph for Zahra’s matchmaking profile:

“I hate to break it to you, Z, but no one you’d want to date would go out with a girl sight unseen,” Kali says. “Men are visual creatures. They need a photo. Why are you worried, anyway? You’re gorgeous. Better than that, you’re unique. No one else has your coloring.” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 294)

While affirming Zahra’s beauty, its uniqueness is objectified, evaluated and commodified. Moreover, Kali’s advice reflects the notion of “natural sexual difference” also manifest in the postfeminist sensibility (Gill and Arthurs 2006: 446).

**Sexual attractiveness**

In popular culture, a person with sex appeal is commonly referred to as “hot.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “hot” as meaning “Full of or characterized by sexual desire, lustful; sexually aroused.” The online *Urban Dictionary* suggests that it describes “someone you’d like to have sexual relations with,” suggesting that “hot” refers to how *another* looks rather than how *one* feels. This focus on the sexualized body is evident when Kayla describes her friend, Sharese, as “hot, in a voluptuous, full-figured way, and we’ve spotted Mike P. glancing at her chest—always a good sign” (van Diepen 2010: 26).
As Hakim notes, sex appeal is a masculine as well as feminine property. In fact, both novels place the greatest emphasis on what makes a boy “hot.” When Zahra observes Kali at her locker flirting with “hot guy,” Miller, she thinks he is “really off the charts. He’s at least six foot tall, with a great bone structure, just the right amount of stubble and killer arms” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 188). Likewise, when Zahra begins to date again, her younger sister encourages her to give Riaz a second chance simply because “he’s totally hot” (201). Having sworn off boys at the start of The Oracle of Dating, Kayla nevertheless declares: “I’m not immune to Jared…. And who can blame me, since it’s universally known that dark mysterious men are attractive. I have my fair share of hormonal urges. I just have the presence of mind not to take them seriously” (van Diepen 2010: 26). This implies that sex appeal reflects its construction in popular culture and romance narratives, not authentic desire. Kayla will later take her hormones—and Jared—far more seriously, observing: “[H]ot is not just about height and shoulders ... Hot is about a vibe, about sensuality, about electricity” (224). The main protagonists in both texts avoid sexual self-objectification, but instead objectify the object of their erotic interest.

**Social skills**

Erotic social skills like flirting may be learned early, but putting them into practice is often a trial and error process for many girls. The novels’ instructions are most explicit in respect to this aspect of erotic capital, often providing step-by-step instructions, as the Oracle does in regard to flirting:

The art of flirting is one perfected through practice. Scan area for hotties. Try to catch his eye. When you do, look for a full two seconds, smile and look away. There, you’ve been officially noticed. Talk to your friends, laugh and have a good time, and occasionally scan the vicinity. Find a way to move closer to him, don’t bring a friend. Once near him, look around and be approachable, smile and say hi. Chat. Use body language to show your interest—nod at appropriate times, react to what he’s saying, touch his arm if you can fit it in naturally. (van Diepen 2010: 39–40, adapted)
Erotic social skills, this implies, require know-how, agency and emotional labor: a girl should not be passive but should pursue the object of her desire. For, according to Kayla, women who do not “will get left behind. The proactive ones will find men” (226).

However, the novels suggest that the erotic field is not open. A savvy girl does not invest where there is no likelihood of interest. When Love Inc is engaged to help a client determine if she should let her skating partner know she is interested in him, Kali’s commentary explains how to tell: “Step one: make sure he’s on the right team. … No straight man can resist a free peak [of cleavage]. Now we can move onto step two: Observation” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 244). Signs include: “gratuitous contact”; “anxious to please”; “roughhousing … schoolyard flirtation, basic”; the “faux dis”; and “spontaneous chivalrous defense.” Kali concludes, “Simple. All signs point to interest” (245).

However, this is only the start of girls’ emotional labor. Love, Inc begins with Zahra preparing a romantic dinner for Rico, during which she holds an imaginary conversation with a Jamie Oliver figure who warns her: “If it looks like you’ve been fannying about for hours, he’ll run for the hills. It’s like asking for a commitment” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 6). Similarly, Love Inc advises a client that she, too, is “scaring boys off.” She needs to make them “feel like they’re competing for a prize” (157), and not reward any sort of male attention: “Rewards have more value when they’re earned by good behavior. And consistency is critical: if you give them an inch, they take a mile” (158). These recommendations sound remarkably like old-fashioned feminine wiles.

_Liveliness_

Hakim’s definition of liveliness suggests an animated quality of mind and body that is attractive to others, and it is evoked in Kayla’s advice on flirtation: “First, walk into the room projecting openness and confidence, your lips turned as if you’re pleased to be there. People notice others who are cheerful and gravitate towards them” (van Diepen 2010: 39). Conversely, in Love, Inc, Brody warns the girls that “Bitterness is a guy repellant” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 163) and tells Zahra that “harsh girls never get the ‘totally hot’ guy” (203). Of course, Zahra does get the totally hot guy, Brody, but the girl
who attracts the most boys in the novels is Kali, “a quirky free spirit”, who is “bubbly, adventurous and fun” (49). Confidence is integral to her high erotic capital.

The novels point to a further dimension of liveliness, though one not directly addressed by Hakim. The main characters are active and entrepreneurial, balancing part-time jobs, school, hobbies and businesses. Kayla is an expert at web design and does yoga. Kali is an environmental activist and songwriter, Zahra a cook, and Syd a street artist. After trying to figure out where she went wrong with Rico, Zahra concludes that she is boring: “The time I wasted scheming to keep my parents together should have been spent trying to become fascinating, like dark, arty-rebel Syd or carefree, sexy Kali. Sticking too close to home has made me as precise and predictable as my recipes” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 84). Of course, when Kali helps Zahra with her matchmaking profile, it emerges that she reads, websurfs and does graphic design. Zahra’s problem is her failure to recognize and value her own erotic capital.

The girl protagonists are “can-do” girls (Harris 2004:) and they require “can-do” boys. Brody is a photographer. Jared is an artist and musician. Erotic value is acknowledged when Kayla says: “It is universally known that a guy playing guitar is sexy” (van Diepen 2010: 119). Playing trombone in a marching band is not, leading Kali to drop Paolo: “Obviously I can’t go out with someone who wears a hat with a chin strap and a big feather!” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 160). Conversely, it is a common interest in music that attracts the attention of musician, Owen. It is not the fact that Kali’s clothes accentuate one of her best features—“In her black skinny jeans and lace-up boots, she’s all legs tonight” (219)—or the flirtatious way she “twist[s] a ringlet of hair around her finger” when she introduces herself. Rather, Owen notices her when she tells him she likes his new version of a song because of “The transition to F minor in the last refrain” (220). Love, Inc advises girls not to allow their boyfriend to dictate their tastes and interests, but to cultivate accomplishments as erotic capital. In this regard, the characters’ contemporary accomplishments resonate with those that traditionally made girls marriageable.

Personal presentation

The fifth element of erotic capital is accrued through the use of fashion, cosmetics, perfume, jewelry and other accoutrements and bodily disciplines that enhance physical
attractiveness. It does not reduce to sexy attire and the novels do not endorse this. Although Kayla approves of herself in the “sexy fairy” costume she wears to the school dance, she attracts the interest of a drunken Declan and implicitly the wrong kind of erotic interest. Instead, emphasis is placed on the development of a unique personal style as a form of self-expression, feminine pleasure and erotic capital. In *Love, Inc*, Syd favors a vintage/punk look: a 1920s bob, frayed velvet, leather, Clash T-shirts, motorcycle boots, kohl and red lipstick. Lauren, a secondary character, wears Gucci and Prada while a reserved Zahra considers herself a mainstream Gap girl. When she attends a photography exhibition in a hip and edgy dress, this is presented as a sign of growing confidence, which enhances her erotic capital.

Personal presentation is also linked to self-confidence in *The Oracle of Dating*. When Kayla meets friends to go to a nightclub,

They all comment on how good I look [and] it’s true, I put a lot of effort in tonight, not least of which is overcoming my fear of a red-hot flat iron in order to straighten my hair. I also put on makeup, my cutest jeans and a silver top. I know the silver is a bit of a fashion risk, but I also know that it brings out the sparkle in my eyes. It’s all about confidence, anyway. (van Diepen 2010: 126–127)

This confidence is necessary to get into the club because Kayla is underage, but she also hopes to attract Jared’s attention and get “cozy in the corner” with him by the end of the night.

As Kayla’s attraction to Jared develops, she takes more interest in her appearance. Before meeting him for coffee, she wonders: “What should I wear? The Oracle would caution that if I dress up too much, or put on more makeup than usual, Jared will sense that I’m really, eagerly into him” (193). He arrives in his school clothes, so it is only when Kayla smells cologne on him that this “sign of effort” reassures her of his interest in her. As these examples suggest, personal presentation functions as a complex code of erotic interest, availability and confidence that a girl must navigate as she fashions her own, and interprets others’, erotic capital.

*Sexual competence*

According to Hakim, and in contrast to other elements of erotic capital, sexual competence can really be known only to a partner, and is also dependent on the partner’s
skill since it is “interactive.” She speculates that while libido “does not guarantee sexual competence...people with a strong libido are more likely to acquire the experience that eventually leads to greater skill” (Hakim 2010: 501). In the absence of practical experience, skills can be learned from manuals, advice columns, porn, erotica, and popular culture. Unsurprisingly, popular pedagogies teach adolescent girls how to acquire the first five elements of erotic capital, but stop short of the sixth, even in teen chick lit, which is quite frank in its representation of adolescent sexuality. In The Oracle of Dating and Love, Inc, it is limited to descriptions of kissing.

Nevertheless, the novels reference the role of both skill and libido. The most flirtatious character in the novels, Kali, has a “use or lose it,” “practice makes perfect,” erotic philosophy. Despite her ongoing interest in Owen, she makes out with other boys because she does “not want to get rusty.” She asserts: “Relationships are like sports. If you want to compete, you have to keep in shape” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 235). Kayla takes a similarly pragmatic approach to a friend’s relationship with her “make-out buddy” when she remarks that, “Although the Oracle would say such relationships aren’t emotionally healthy, there’s a certain practicality in them. I mean she is as horny as hell, and so is he. And while he’s a little simple, he has cute dimples and a soccer bod” (van Diepen 2010: 21). How far Amy and Chad’s making-out goes is left to the imagination of the reader; what is clear is that the novel asserts girls’ right to feel desire, to be pleasured and not shamed for it.

When Kayla and her girlfriends meet some young men at the nightclub, dancing quickly turns to making-out. She realizes that, “It has been ages since I’ve kissed someone, and it feels damned good” (90). However, she is “under no illusion of dating this guy” (91) and Kali drops Miller because of his lack of skill as a kisser: “We’re talking snake tongue” (Collin and Rideout 2011: 208). Meanwhile, Zahra’s date, Riaz, is referred to as “the totally hot, mediocre kisser” (240). Brody tells her, “It’s not shallow to hold out for a great kisser. It’s common sense” (242). Both novels endorse this philosophy, but they are referring to sexual chemistry, not skill or sex appeal. As Kali puts it, “Nice packaging can’t create a spark where it doesn’t exist” (208). By focusing on this embodied chemistry, the novels retreat from the notion that the giving and receiving
of erotic pleasure is a learned or achievable property; they also privilege chemistry over other types of compatibility as the basis of relationships.

When Zahra feels nothing kissing her “match,” Andrew, after their date, she puts it down to her “hormones being off-line” (305). On paper, he appears to be the “perfect package,” but when subsequent events prove otherwise, her “hormones” are vindicated. Instead, and despite Zahra’s dislike of him, it is Brody who provokes “an odd stirring sensation. It’s as if someone replaced the batteries in my stalled hormones” (309). When they finally kiss, it “makes all the other kisses I’ve had before seem ordinary. … No one should settle for less” (386). Chemistry—what Kayla calls “the X factor” (van Diepen 2010: 110)—is “the most important factor when it comes to wanting to see someone again” (111); indeed, to entering a relationship.

Kali reiterates this sentiment when she has the final word in a conversation at a group counseling session:

“[T]here’s more to it than looks. You’ve got to factor everything into the package. An eight-point-five with issues is just a seven. A seven who’s fun and smart and knows it can clear a nine.”

What do you think about that, Zahra? Dieter says. …

“Simon is probably right about the confidence, I allow. But there’s a lot more to the equation than that.”

“Right, because you can date up and be let down. You guys have forgotten to factor in chemistry.” (Collins and Rideout 2011: 213–214)

*Love, Inc* here acknowledges erotic capital to be “a combination of aesthetic, visual, physical, social and sexual attractiveness” (Hakim 2010: 501) and both novels instruct girls in how to acquire it and to recognize it in others. However, they ultimately privilege embodied pleasure as the principal condition for attachment to another. It is the chemistry of the kiss that finally brings Zahra and Brody, and Kayla and Jared together, but not necessarily with the expectation that they will stay together. In the closing paragraph of *The Oracle*, Kayla says: “I smile. One kiss melts into another, and my soul is filled with bliss. Jared and I are together at last. And I have to wonder: is this my happily ever after? The Oracle side of me wouldn’t bet on it. But the romantic in me says, absolutely” (van Diepen 2010: 250).
Conclusion
The introduction to this article notes Lamb’s observation of the ironic similarity between the sexualized girl of the media and feminist ideals for a healthy adolescent female sexuality. This article identifies a comparable irony in the similarity between the pedagogies of erotic empowerment in Love, Inc and The Oracle of Dating and Hakim’s theory of erotic capital. The novels present erotic capital as a means for girls to secure sexual pleasure and power. They depict girls as erotically agential and desiring, eschewing the traditional romance discourse that made girls’ discovery of desire contingent on love. The characters’ consciousness of the contingency of erotic relationships promotes realistic expectations of adolescent romance. Do these textual pedagogies promote a healthy adolescent female sexual sociality? Or, do they also promote emotional detachment, self-objectification, self-commodification and the sexual objectification of others?

The emancipatory aspects of contemporary sexualized society are arguably its disciplinary ones, and the desiring girl must also be desirable if she is to attract the object of her erotic interest. The ostensibly empowering advice the novels offer on how to accrue the six elements of erotic capital arguably translates into higher and even more complex levels of emotional labor for the adolescent seeking to produce herself as a sexual subject. Although the Oracle of Dating and Love Inc advise young men, it is striking that the romantic heroes are largely exempt from having to perform such work. This makes the acquisition of erotic capital feminized labor. Girls need to demand more of boys, the novels assert, but boys need to regard girls as entitled to do so. The fact that boys are unlikely to read chick lit raises the question of what popular fiction for boys teaches them about the social dimension of sexuality, a question van Diepen raises, but does not answer. There are also significant tensions between the discourses of erotic capital, desire and the romance genre.

Romance conventions in these texts act as a foil to the instrumentalism implied by the calculated accrual of erotic capital. They also undercut the protagonists’ agency. The relationship with the hero follows the classic romance plot: only after a series of misunderstandings do the couples unite. Attraction grows in spite of the girls’ resistance, in Zahra’s case, dislike. The hero’s capacity to elicit deep desire proves first judgments
wrong. This is problematic, not least because it privileges embodied desire as the principal basis of erotic relationships. Desire is important, but it does not guarantee other types of compatibility and offers no insurance against gendered moral double standards, let alone violence or victimization. These are not absolute silences in the novels, being referenced in the erotic relationships of Kayla’s sister and the “mean girl” character in Love, Inc. However, the role of “chemistry” in sustaining their relationships is ignored. Embodied feelings are not a sound basis of judgment and no predictor of enriching, ethical or safe sexual experiences—not if a concept of a healthy sexuality entails mental, emotional and social wellbeing.

In the twenty-first century female desire has been dearticulated from feminist agendas, and articulated to the new sexual sensibilities of a contemporary sexualized and sexualizing culture. This article demonstrates the presence of these sensibilities in two novels, but clearly more research is required. Such research would broaden the focus on sexualizing imagery in the visual media to include the pedagogies of narrative, from a focus on the sexual body to include sexual sociality. Crucially, it would necessarily take into account the tensions between feminist concepts and popular culture constructions of girl desire and, likewise, the tensions between popular pedagogies and a feminist sex education, including its ideals for a healthy adolescent female sexuality.

Bio

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Acknowledgements

This article is based on a paper presented at the Institute of Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies, McGill University, Montreal, in February 2011, and completed at the Centre for Studies in Gender and Sexuality, New York University, New York. I am grateful to both institutions for hosting me as a visiting scholar and to Deakin University
for supporting my study leave. I also wish to thank Dr Elizabeth Parsons, Deakin University, who alerted me to Hakim’s theory of erotic capital.

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