# The Aesthetics of Sexualisation

## A Study of Gendered and Classed Discourses through the Co-creation of Representations of Sexy Selfie Takers

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UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

# The Aesthetics of Sexualisation: A Study of Gendered and Classed Discourses through the Co-creation of Representations of Sexy Selfie Takers

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the supervision of Professor Alan McKee and Associate Professor Ilaria Vanni.

**University of Technology Sydney,**
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# Dedication

For my parents, Veronica and Mick.

Mum has a brilliant mind and a fierce belief in education. In 1965, she was accepted into a teaching course at Monash University in Melbourne, but couldn't take up the offer as her parents couldn't afford the fees. An admin job at a technical college beckoned and with the expectations of working life and family settling in, her shot at formal study beyond high school was dashed. She would go on to become a respected school business manager with a renown for stretching meagre public funding to its fullest potential and prioritising families in the school community who needed some extra assistance. Mum taught herself history and the classics and joined feminist activist groups in the 70s, but her longing for the experience of tertiary study remains.

Dad too, has a brilliant mind and also a poet's soul. As kids, my sister and I heard him again and again tell us 'knowledge is power!' He is the fifth of eight kids in a working-class Catholic family from inner Melbourne and was the first of his lot to get a degree. Not, however, before failing year 11, taking up an apprenticeship and working as a printer at The Age newspaper for a decade. The Whitlam government introduced free education and with a nudge from a professor friend, Dad enrolled in teaching at Melbourne University. He worked night shift to help support the family while he studied and when he got his degree, his own Dad was unable to acknowledge his achievement.

Dad became a teacher, Mum continued her work as a business manager and both instilled in my sister and I a passionate belief in democratic, secular education. They shaped our capacity to think critically and encouraged us to see ourselves as powerful, capable and compassionate women.

They are chiefly the reason I've been able to produce this thesis and I am profoundly grateful to them.

# Certificate of original authorship

I, Emma Phillips, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

Signature:

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Date: 28th February 2022

# Acknowledgements

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the wonderful support and contribution of a number of important people.

Thank you, firstly, to my supervisors, Professor Alan McKee and Associate Professor Ilaria Vanni, for your exceptional guidance, wisdom, humour and availability to me. You both have taught me so much and I am tremendously grateful. To my principal supervisor Alan, particularly, I am unable to express enough the gratitude I have for the way you have guided me through this project. It has genuinely been a joy working with you and I feel immensely richer for the experience. Should I come to supervise doctoral students in future, I would model my approach on yours.

I would also like to thank the participants who collaborated with me – Melissa Dansie, Simone Ryan, Bec Logan, Kristina Wilson, Michelle ten Bohmer and Blair Scharrmacher. You gave your time and knowledge very generously. I learned so much from you and I am proud of what we made together.

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# Statement of thesis format

This thesis is submitted as a *thesis by compilation* and is also a *thesis including artefacts*. This means that it accords with the requirements of the compilation format but also contains a significant creative artefact. It includes four chapters which have been submitted to peer-reviewed journals which are relevant to my field of study. One has been published and the three others are currently under consideration at various journals. The introduction chapter contains a synopsis of each of these articles/chapters and page v describes the status of each paper and the journal to which it has been submitted.

The *artefact* component of this thesis is a photobook which constitutes almost half of the materials submitted for examination. It is based on the creative practice (photography) that has been foundational to the project and which fundamentally informs the exegetical writing here.

This style of thesis was developed in consultation with my supervisors who advised, firstly, the importance of a practice-led project on the grounds of my work as a professional photographer and the opportunity this brought for a unique methodological approach. Secondly, the *thesis by compilation* was chosen as a way to provide me with the skills for manuscript preparation and also to potentially have published materials by the conclusion of my doctorate. It is a thesis format that more and more universities are suggesting their doctoral students undertake.

Please note that the List of Figures on page ix is arranged per chapter, rather than as a comprehensive start-to-finish-of-thesis list of figures, on account of the *thesis by compilation* format requiring papers sent to journals to have figures listed as '1' from the start of the paper.

# List of papers/publications included

1. Chapter 4
   Title: *'It's classy because you can't see things': data from a project co-creating sexy images of young women*
   Author: Emma Phillips
   Publication Outlet: Feminist Media Studies
   Status: Published 17th November, 2020

2. Chapter 5
   Title: *Instagram as site of sexy solidarities: A classed analysis of beauty as social utility*
   Author: Emma Phillips
   Publication Outlet: Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture
   Status: Submitted 22nd January, 2021

3. Chapter 6
   Title: *"So when we do have a say?" On sexy selfie making as a standpoint for seen-ness*
   Author: Emma Phillips
   Publication Outlet: Sexuality & Culture
   Status: Submitted 17th September, 2021

4. Chapter 7
   Title: *"Why does she have to wear make-up? She looks better natural!" Staged photos and sexual subjectivities*
   Author: Emma Phillips
   Publication Outlet: Journal of Visual Culture
   Status: Submitted 9th June, 2021

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# Abstract

This thesis takes a practice-led approach to co-creating sexy selfies of young women, using these as data for a compare-and-contrast approach that makes clear the discourses that are employed to judge women's sexual self-representation.

As women's sexy selfie making practices have burgeoned, so too have popular and feminist discourses of concern about them. A growing body of important work in the field of selfies is beginning to highlight the gendered and sexist nature of these discourses and to demonstrate that much selfie critique belongs to a history of paternalistic discourse which polices and shames the female body. I build on this tradition by focusing on the aesthetic elements of these critiques, and their relationship with discourses of class, to demonstrate that many of these discourses of concern reinforce long-standing, classed ideals of feminine sexual presentation which marginalise some self-representations and legitimise others.

The project brings together women who are amateur, sexy selfie takers with a professional photographer (myself) in a unique methodological frame where participants are especially prominent in the creation of data. It privileges the co-creation of new photographs of the participants, who are each asked to engage with me as if they have commissioned a professional photoshoot. This forms the basis for a method of analysis where the texts and practices of professional photographs of young women are compared with the texts and practices of participants' own amateur photographic self-representations. The intention is to reveal new information about how dominant popular and feminist discourses are typically applied to each set of images.

I argue that the aesthetic languages of each provides unique insight into jurisdictions of power which privilege professional, refined imagery over everyday, amateur imagery. Mainstream feminist readings of amateur sexy aesthetics contribute to the cultivation and maintenance of hierarchies within visual culture which, critically, create class distinctions and marginalise the self-representational experiences of women who do not portray the codes of middle-class respectability, nor the aesthetics of formal art. The project's findings offer new knowledge into the ways in which young women's sexuality and presentations of femininity are culturally affirmed or resisted through class distinctions founded on 'taste' and which conflate certain forms of women's sexual expression with moral paucity. I argue further that women who make sexy selfies often find their aesthetic choices to be a positive resistance to normative femininities; an opportunity to be in community with like-minded people; a place through which to develop confidence; and a means through which to be *seen*.