The Aesthetics of Sexualisation

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

Emma Phillips

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

By Emma Tremora Phillips

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.

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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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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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Chapter Eight

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*.

Chapter One

Introduction

'I think classy is just being sexy, but in secret'
– Simone Ryan, participant

Introduction

The April 2014 issue of *Vogue* magazine sent many popular media commentators, celebrities and regular consumers into a spin for its depiction of famous selfie-taker Kim Kardashian and her husband Kanye West on its cover. Despite above-average sales (Hyland, 2014), a backlash ensued which decried the decision to promote the couple in this way. Amidst suggestions Kardashian and West might not be '*Vogue* worthy' (Cooper, 2014) and comments such as 'disgusting! these two are the epitome of VULGARITY. You [*Vogue*] will never recover from this low' (Henry, 2019), celebrities like Sarah Michelle-Gellar also declared that she would never buy the magazine again.

Much of the animosity at the inclusion of 'Kimye' on the cover stemmed from a desire by critics to protect a magazine seen as 'much too rarefied and civilized a precinct to welcome a multiplatinum musician and his reality-star fiancée' (Larocca, 2014). This 'rarefied' space had, according to dissenters, been compromised by 'trashy' (Kohn, 2014; Leinkram, 2020) interlopers masquerading, as Beverley Skeggs (2004a) would suggest, as respectably middle-class and therefore not deserving of their space on *Vogue*'s cover. The issue is one of transgression and unspoken rules about who gets to access these kinds of culturally valuable domains. In reference to her decision to place Kardashian and West on the cover of *Vogue*, editor-in-chief Anna Wintour acknowledged this breach of a culturally-sanctioned boundary when she noted that 'there is always a time when you know you have to break the rules' (Henry, 2019). When pressed further to justify her decision, Wintour said, 'I think if we just remain deeply tasteful and just put deeply tasteful people on the cover, it would be a rather boring magazine' (Donlon, 2019). Kardashian and West, according to Wintour, are clearly not 'deeply tasteful' and in identifying this, Wintour brings rich insight into what troubled so many about their presence on *Vogue*'s cover. Why is Kimye's so-called tastelessness so problematic? And why did Kardashian receive more criticism than her husband?

One particularly important element of her personae is the extensive work that Kardashian has done visualising herself and managing her brand through her selfies. She is the 'selfie queen' (Bruś, 2019; Elinzano, 2018) and she has even published a photography book of her selfies called 'Selfish' (Kardashian, 2016). When this expert in self-representation was photographed by a professional photographer in a space that is very much marked as 'high culture', it led to visceral reactions, raising important issues about class, aesthetics, femininity – and the place of self-photography – selfies – in relation to these discourses. Kim Kardashian has been called vulgar and tasteless in a variety of contexts. *Vogue* could not simply place one of Kim's photographs on the front cover. Instead, she had to be made over, dressed and photographed in a way that better suits the aesthetic codes of a high-culture magazine. This thesis explores these interactions in an innovative and creative way.

The concept of taste functions in these culturally significant spaces as a way to mark class boundaries (Bourdieu, 1984), even if this is not acknowledged in the kinds of discourses described above. Responses of disgust, such as those directed at Kardashian, support this function and are performed in the interests of gate-keeping such spaces from those whose tastes do not align with the dominant group. This is to maintain, as it were, a set of values and aesthetics that would otherwise

be compromised by the so-called interloper. Just as the arbitrary Victorian-era designation of 'proper' table manners functioned to protect middle- and upper-class arenas from working-class impropriety (Langland, 1995), arbitrary designations of tastefulness in feminine presentations now serve the same purpose.

Kardashian, in particular, has been consistently marked with classed language like 'vulgar' (Monteverde, 2016), 'trashy' (see #KardashTrash on Twitter and Instagram) and 'tasteless' (Drohan, 2014) and much of this relates to her refusal to conform to middle-class standards of 'proper', demure femininity and polite sexual decorum – standards which have, incidentally, lingered since Victorian times. Instead, she has chosen to display her body publicly in ways that are sexually overt (often through sexy selfies) and challenge the norms of middle-class properness and respectability. As Skeggs (2004b: 24) argues, the concept of femininity is classed and has been constructed as 'docile' and 'fragile', in opposition to working-class (and black) bodies which are 'defined as robust, masculine and contagious'. Such bodies in a sexual context come to be regarded as 'excessive' and in need of correcting – a phenomenon which can be seen, for example, on multiple reality make-over television programs that seek to 'improve' working-class women (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006; McRobbie, 2009; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Skeggs, 2009) and also in the responses to Kardashian's *Vogue* cover.

This is not to suggest that Kim Kardashian is working-class (and the term is problematic in all manner of contemporary contexts), but that her cultural positioning provides a kind of bellwether for understanding aesthetic hierarchies and insight into how middle-class cultural fields are demarcated, especially those concerned with representations of the female body. This intersects with mainstream, middle-class feminism (Phipps, 2020) as it positions Kardashian's self-presentation choices as antithetical to certain feminist ideals. Where feminism seeks freedom for women from socially constructed and damaging beauty norms, it views Kardashian as a promoter of them; and where feminism seeks to dismantle the objectifying presence of the vernacular 'male gaze', it sees Kardashian as self-objectifying *for* that gaze. What is missing from the mainstream feminist assessment of her, however, is any serious critical attention to feminism's own class structures and the blindspots this creates for its broader project of achieving gender justice. The concentration on Kardashian's self-presentations (and, by extension, 'everyday' sexy selfie-takers) as 'problematic' has obviated, in its view, any need to assess its own (classed) symbolic violences. Such violences make Kardashian 'disgusting' and mask an alternative project of protecting middle-class cultural – and feminist – fields. The regulation of 'inappropriate' female bodies through mainstream discourse is indicative of this impulse.

To return to Wintour: 'Kim, of all of them, I feel has possibly changed the most. I personally admire the way she's become a little bit more minimal in the way that she's dressing and a little bit more covered' (Donlon, 2019: para 33). Kardashian's growing aesthetic modesty has met with gatekeeper approval, and she has been duly granted access to the culturally valuable *Vogue* cover. Wintour's approval of Kardashian's choice to change is symptomatic of what Skeggs (1997: 84) would refer to as the great project (and pressure) of 'becoming middle-class'. Can mainstream

feminism critically take account of this? Can it address how it *wants* women to present – not just how it *doesn't want* them to present? Should there be limits placed on women's sexy self-representations? If so, what might they be?

Kardashian is not alone in experiencing this kind of phenomenon. However, her highly visible public life provides an immediate touchstone for the ways in which women who take sexy selfies are subject to similar limiting discourses within the so-called sexualisation debates. The rapid rise of publicly shared sexy selfies by women has accorded with a rise in feminist and popular worries about them. Much of the academic analysis of Kim Kardashian – and similar, everyday sexy selfies by other women – has focused on post-, popular-, and neoliberal-feminist concerns (Monteverde, 2016; Ringrose et al., 2019) within the sexualisation debates. This thesis is interested in the aesthetic components of these concerns and brings attention to the under-researched intersection of feminism and class within these debates.

I argue that through an examination of the aesthetic components of the sexualisation debates, it is possible to better understand the ways visual culture is structured by the concept of taste and that the language of taste is often used to marginalise the sexual self-representational experiences of women who do not conform to dominant, classed and gendered constructions of 'tasteful' sexy aesthetics. Who is allowed to be sexy in the public sphere? In what ways?

Situating the Research

A full review of academic literature is presented in Chapter 2, so in this section of the Introduction, I will only outline the context in which this research exists.

This research project enters into the sexualisation debates at a time when the smart phone-social media complex has created a seismic techno-cultural shift for photography (Frosh, 2015; Gómez Cruz and Meyer, 2012) which has been largely advanced by the obvious technology, but also the ubiquitous selfie and, in turn, the sexy selfie. Prior to this shift, debates on the so-called sexualisation of culture were concerned largely with media presentations of 'hyper-sexualised' young women (Simic, 2011), the marketing of 'sexy' products to girls (Tankard Reist, 2008), objectification (Paasonen et al., 2020), burgeoning internet porn and the growth of what Ariel Levy (2005) termed 'raunch culture'. Some aspects of feminism and popular commentaries have typically positioned the phenomenon of sexualisation as alarming and problematic for young people and especially for young women. Concerns ranged from fears for young women's safety, to loss of innocence, to psychological and confidence damage, and also that they might be subject to new forms of patriarchal and commercial subjugation. Whilst there is merit in some of these concerns, they often mask a moral panic about some form of social destabilisation (Tiidenberg, 2018; Sullivan and McKee, 2015). They also, as Albury and Lumby (2008) point out, imply that young women need protecting from sexually suggestive media and focus unfairly on what such media *does* to young women, rather than on how young women might use it for themselves.

Though these concerns are still present in what Alison Phipps (2020) has referred to as mainstream feminist commentaries, the popularity of women's sexy selfies has drawn the sexualisation debate focus to issues of agency (Attwood, 2007; McGladrey, 2015), so-called self-objectification (Paasonen et al., 2020; Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020) and the critical role of feminism in young women's sexual lives (Lamb, 2010). Since women now produce and disseminate their own content through social media channels, feminist argument is re-evaluating its positioning on a number of corporeal-representational concerns. These include new considerations of Laura Mulvey's (1975) now-vernacular 'male gaze'; Naomi Wolf's (1990) equally-vernacular 'beauty myth' and questions of choice, agency and 'false consciousness' in ongoing misogynistic cultures (Hermes, 1995). Parallel to these feminist enquiries is a set of mainstream discourses which often characterise female sexy selfie takers as, variously, vain and narcissistic (Abidin, 2016; Senft and Baym, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2014), inauthentic (Warfield, 2017) or as pornified agents of patriarchy (Dines, 2010; Paul, 2005). Not unlike earlier fears of the sexualisation of culture, it is argued that these concerns, too, are underpinned by a form of sexual moral panic, though as Hasinoff (2013) and others (see below) suggest, this might be best described as a moral *media* panic where ongoing anxieties about the meeting of women's sexualities with technology converge to create misplaced mainstream fear of sexual content such as sexy selfies (Hasinoff, 2013; Senft and Baym, 2015; Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020).

Technological shifts in visual culture have helped to produce certain new stylistics in mainstream sexy aesthetics, such as those often associated with Kim Kardashian. Accompanying this visual trend is the rise of new forms of sexual prejudice and class distance-making. Such judgements and class distinctions rely, in part, on ignoring the polysemic nature of photographs (that is, that they have more than one meaning) in favour of declarations of objective truth in images. The 'truth' of imagery is discursively propagated, of course, by those with the kind of cultural power to determine what is 'truthfully' tasteful (and therefore valuable) and 'tasteless' (and therefore without value). 'Tastemakers' such as Anna Wintour – who might otherwise be known as a cultural intermediary (Maguire and Matthews, 2014) – often neglect to acknowledge that value is placed on aesthetics from cultural standpoints that are discursively produced (Bourdieu, 1984) and aesthetic preference often accords with a taste for what is deemed inherently 'right' or morally 'good' (Skeggs, 1997). Tastemakers, as Bourdieu (1984: 365) suggests, regard themselves as 'sellers of symbolic goods and services who always sell themselves as models and as guarantors of the value of their products'. So, Kardashian comes to be regarded as 'vulgar' and 'disgusting' because dominant, mainstream feminist discourses tell us her aesthetic *is* this, rather than acknowledging the systems of value which cast her out as arbitrarily ill-fitting of middle-class propriety.

This gives rise to popular commentary such as that by Nikki Gemmell (2015) who wrote an article for a weekend news magazine called 'Boner Garage' girls, my heart breaks for you' (which references girls who draw the words 'boner garage' on their abdomens with downward-pointing arrows). In it she says:

> Your glossy blonde hair is across your face so no one can see your features. The room behind you looks utterly normal, middle class; just like any teen's cherished and girlie private space. I don't know you, but you have hundreds of followers, boys and girls, and you've not locked your account to strangers. Happy 13th birthday. My heart breaks for you. (Gemmell, 2015: para 7)

In positioning herself as a concerned feminist, Gemmell can leverage from feminist claims that young women's sexual expressions often serve male pleasure and dominance at their own expense – and this is not to doubt that she does, in fact, believe this be a serious problem for women and girls. However, Gemmell is unwilling or unable to acknowledge the classed undertones of her critique, despite idealising middle-classedness as both 'normal' and without the displays of sexuality favoured by the girls in her story, nor her position as 'guarantor' of that which she values. Contained in Gemmell's lament is the suggestion that the 'Boner Garage' girls have transgressed a series of normative boundaries: there is sexual and class transgression, and the likelihood they have also transgressed the normative limits of 'appropriate' feminine behaviour and display. As Mort (2002: 28) notes, 'transgression functions to define the norm, shaping and crystallising ideas about the rules of correct moral conduct', and commentaries such as Gemmell's operate in popular discourse to gate-keep the boundaries and values of her middle-class field, just as the disgusted response to Kim Kardashian performs the same function.

I wish to note, as this point, that the meaning of social class is ever-contested and changing. This project is not fundamentally concerned with defining class, however it is necessary to begin by understanding what it means in this context. Drawing from the work of Sheppard and Biddle (2017), class in Australia can be determined by a social pecking order that is established based on three forms of capital: economic, cultural and social. Sheppard and Biddle draw from Bourdieu (1984) in this respect who demonstrates in his seminal work 'Distinction' that those with cultural capital often seek to maintain their position in the social hierarchy by distinguishing themselves from others through the use of cultural symbolic violence. Such activity might take the form of shaming or demeaning the cultural or aesthetic choices of other groups in society and often has the outcome of maintaining class 'distinctions'. I am not interested here in the class identity of the project's participants, but of the prevalence of middle-class boundary-marking that often occurs in the encounter with young women's sexy selfies and the harms that are therefore inflicted on this social group.

To be clear, this thesis does not employ a Marxist understanding of class – in terms of ownership of means of production – but a more cultural understanding of class. It attends to the way that 'middle-class' is understood through a specific body of media studies literature which holds that certain values and cultural practices are mobilised by people across different socio-economic classes. It is not a comparative study of the values and tastes held by different classes in the manner of *Distinction*, but draws from this theory to examine how the concepts of 'taste' and 'sexiness' come to be classed. Some important scholarly work in this regard has highlighted the ways that

working-class women's sexuality is suggestively positioned in mainstream discourses as 'raunchy and tarty', 'vulgar' and/or 'rude' (see Kipnis, 1999; McKee, 2012; Skeggs, 2004a). This is not to say that so-called vulgar or raunchy aesthetics are always working class, but that a dominance of middle-class positioning of them as such creates a distinction of 'acceptability' in feminine representations of sexiness.

One further point to make on the classed nature of sexy feminine representations, as it relates to this project, is that it is not a study of body normativities, even if this is touched-upon at various points in the thesis. While certain 'non-normative' bodies may be subject to classism, the project is more concerned with the reading of sexy aesthetics broadly, not just with respect to body-norms. That is to say that there are sets of so-called 'vulgar' and 'rude' aesthetic markers in sexy selfies which include both normative and non-normative bodies and it is these markers which generate dominant, class-based distinctions of 'tastelessness'. Indeed, a number of participants displayed what would be regarded as a 'normative', 'western heterosexy' (Shields-Dobson 2011) feminine body and yet they were subject to the kinds of classed discourses which marginalise them as 'rude' and 'trashy'. Lastly, as Skeggs (2004a) notes, 'rude' and 'trashy' emerge in morality discourses surrounding women's bodies, where a 'moral good' is attached to 'respectable' feminine sexuality and moral panics about 'non-respectable' sexiness are used to justify interventions into women's representational choices.

Though the media landscape has changed, moral panics regarding sexualisation remain. They operate in discourses of protectionism and in the active policing of women's bodies through cultural intermediaries such as *Vogue* and Anna Wintour, and in feminist argument that suggests female sexual self-representation is a 'fallacy of choice' (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015). Many have noted that the justification for such interventions is through the feminist aim of female bodily safety (Albury and Lumby, 2008; Hasinoff, 2014; Ringrose and Renold, 2012). I argue that the interventionist mindset, whilst undeniably motivated by women's safety, is also driven by a desire to protect middle-class fields, in the Bourdieusian (1984) sense, from women who do not perform their sexuality in a manner befitting its standards. Kardashian is lacking, in this framework, in the demure and stylish femininity that would have prevented criticisms of 'tastelessness' from being directed at her. Kardashian's *Vogue*-cover contemporary Jennifer Lawrence, by contrast, escaped this charge, despite appearing on the September 2017 issue in a revealing red satin dress with the accompanying text 'American Beauty' and the description that her photoshoot was 'transcendent' (Vogue, 2017: para 1).

While this research project is located firmly within current debates about the sexualisation of culture, it is by extension connected with broader discourses on sexuality and sexual politics at a time when aspects of sexual life are increasingly made public. As Feona Attwood (2018) notes, changes in media and communication technologies has supported a growing '"striptease culture" that make possible new forms of "public intimacy"' (McNair, 2002 in Attwood, 2018: 123) and which inspires the regulation of '"pornified" or "sexualised" media materials' (Attwood, 2018: 102). Feminist debate in this terrain echoes the infamous 'sex wars' (Basiliere, 2008) of the early

1980s where feminist scholars were bitterly divided into roughly two camps: anti-porn feminists who believed pornography to be inherently damaging for women in misogynistic cultures, and sex-positive feminists who thought their counterparts too puritanical and reductive, and saw the championing of women's sexual pleasure as vital. This project resides in the latter ideal. The research is intended to create a segment of new knowledge in the increasing area of scholarship which draws attention to the positive, affirmative and affective dimensions of female sexual self-representation whilst also asking for class concerns to be better included in sexualisation discourses – both academic and mainstream.

The Project

Overview

This thesis explores the question: 'what does comparing the texts and practices of professional photographs of young women with the texts and practices of their own amateur photographic self-representation reveal about the dominant academic and public discourses typically applied to each set of images?'

The project has been designed to understand the ways in which formations of taste in women's sexy aesthetics are constructed and operationalised, and how taste impacts women's self-representational experiences, with particular respect to issues of gender and class. The project is practice-led and involves photographic collaborations between me as a professional photographer and a number of women who take amateur sexy selfies for display on Instagram. The design is unique and enables qualitative insight into the regimes of professional and amateur image-making in the context of the sexualisation debates and visual-cultural production. The participants and I co-created images of them and then worked with these images to 'compare and contrast' with their own selfies. Each photoshoot had two accompanying semi-structured interviews and I journaled in a reflective way throughout the process.

A substantial number of sub-questions became quickly obvious in the early stages of the project. I foreground them below and then explore each one in chapters 4 – 7.

- How might women engage with visual culture as a means of sexual expression and agency in a broader culture that largely fetishises them as sexually innocent or victim (Egan and Hawkes, 2008)?
- How might they contend with the privileging of fear-based discourses that position them as passive (Albury, 2017)?
- Might a hegemony of middle-class sexual respectability that demands women display sexual decorum, be challenged by young women's assertions of what could be termed, given current techno-affordances, 'aesthetic agency'?
- Might sexy selfies advance an often-missing discourse of female desire (Fine, 1988)?

- If fine art or professional photography is delineated by tastemakers, such as professional photographers and gallerists, as having a certain refined quality which 'perpetuates certain kinds of elitism' (Carrabine, 2012: 484) and is also the validated standard in image-making (Perry, 2013), then what is to be said for the democratisation of photography and concomitant shift in aesthetics?
- How do visual cultural codes and hierarchies adjust to new vernacular photographic modes of communication that are of the everyday? How too, does this meet with discourses surrounding women's sexual self-representation, their new status as both subject and object and the inherent agency which that enables?
- This project aims to investigate whether sexualisation can be a means to explore assumptions about sexuality, high and low culture, and class. What, for example, is the difference between a selfie and a self-portrait?
- The images from the collaborations with participants were used in a 'compare and contrast' method of analysis, where the texts and practices of the participants' amateur photographic selfies were compared with the professional photographs of them. The contrast in aesthetics belonging to each set of images becomes the framework for a dialogic analysis with participants about respective practices and visual choices, each informing the other. Several questions underpinned this process, such as:
  - Might it be possible to gain knowledge into both academic and popular discourses typically applied to each of these sets of images?
  - What could this reveal about limiting beliefs, cultural norms and difference in the way that female sexuality and related aesthetics are perceived and affirmed or resisted?
  - And, crucially, what could this comparative method reveal about whether aesthetic judgements of taste produced classed hierarchies in visual culture?
- • What power structures are produced and reproduced by women making and distributing sexy selfies?
- • What regimes of power are at work to produce and control women's sexuality and how might these regimes of power manifest in photographic aesthetics?
- • How do sexy selfie takers discipline and regulate their own bodies in respect of normative discourses surrounding female sexuality in this cultural context?
- • What are the markers of class in the aesthetics of sexualisation?
- • How does contemporary feminism contend with the differences between sexy representations and sexual objectification?

Research Design

I arrive at this research project as a commercial portrait photographer with around twelve years' experience across Australian media. I have worked with editorial clients such as Marie Claire, Rolling Stone and Good Weekend and advertising clients like Leo Burnett and DDB. My work

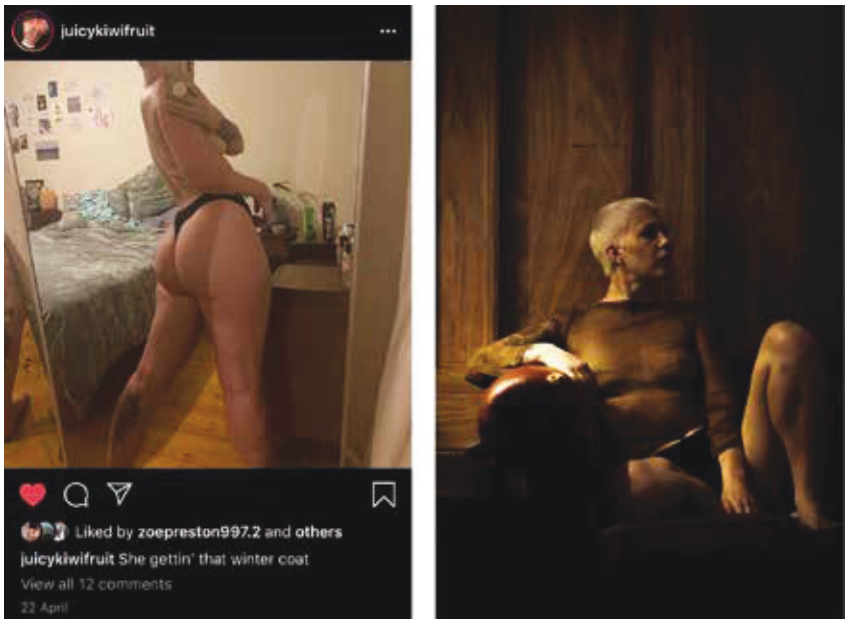

Figure 1. Kristina Wilson in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

has appeared in the National Photographic Portrait Prize and illustrates book covers, billboards and music paraphernalia. I belong to a feminist photographic collective called See Jane Run which produces political works for exhibition, and I have also taught at length at RMIT Melbourne's BA Photography program. This project incorporates many aspects of my commercial photographic practice through the professional nature of the photoshoots and their pre- and post-production components. Though I am obviously situated in the project as a practitioner, I also take a semi-autoethnographic approach to the research both through reflections on the photographic industry and pedagogical practices in visual art and photography.

The research design for this project is highly unusual. It engaged eight Australian women (though only six progressed beyond an initial interview due to COVID-19 restrictions) who make sexy selfies (and disseminate them though Instagram) in a collaborative professional photoshoot with me, with a view to comparing the regimes of professional image-making with amateur image-making in this arena of 'sexy' female imagery. The 'compare and contrast' method of analysis allowed for an exploration of the aesthetic dimensions of the sexualisation debates, particularly where judgements of certain kinds of sexy aesthetics marginalise some women's sexualities. It tests the idea that dominant discourses about sexualised self-representations of women that focus on risks to the selfie-taker mask prejudices regarding class and gender. On this point, I make no claims to know the class positioning of the participants, nor is it important in this context, as the study is concerned with how dominant classed and gendered *discourses* function to stigmatise and marginalise the sexual-representational experiences of young women.

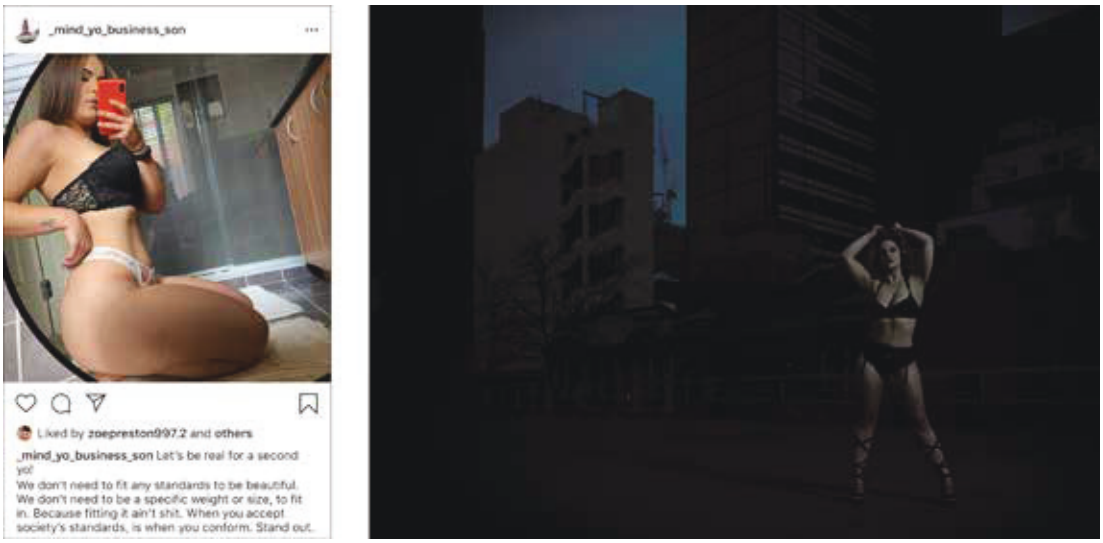

Figure 2. Simone Ryan in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

I argue that the privileging of professional or 'high art' aesthetics over amateur, 'everyday aesthetics' perpetuates a policing and marginalising of women's bodies and sexualities and maintains long-standing, narrow ideals of feminine respectability and sexual decorum. The research is conceptually underpinned by Michel Foucault's (1978) theories on the discursive production of sexuality and power; and by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) for his demonstration of the relationship between the concept of 'taste' and class demarcation. It also relies on a post-structural feminist framework which is best expressed through Beverley Skeggs' (1997; 2004a) important work on class and gender. I elaborate on this conceptual framework in Chapters 2 and 3.

Significance of the Research

The significance of this research is that, in working directly with participants, I was able to gain access to their representational processes as much as their finished selfies on Instagram. They too experienced a professional shoot and each of us was the beneficiary of knowledge sharing (though this is not necessarily equal, nor unproblematic given what I stand to gain from what I have learned; I discuss the power relations involved in our collaboration throughout the thesis). The shoots were supported by two semi-structured interviews and a lengthy pre-production stage where each participant and I collaborated on the design of the shoot. We also had a post-production stage where we discussed the retouching or 'finishing' of certain images. All participants except one shared a

number of our co-creations to their Instagram account and I posted some to mine. These can be seen throughout Chapters 4 to 7 and at the following Instagram accounts (correct at time of printing): itsmeldaisy (Melissa Dansie), juicykiwifruits (Kristina Wilson), _mind_yo_business_son (Simone Ryan), aliceinlingerie (Michelle ten Bohmer), honeywestxx (Blair Scharrmacher), becc_logan (Bec Logan) and emmatremora (mine). Each participant is happy to be identified here, just as they are happy to be identified in the public sphere through their Instagram presence, and Ethics Committee approval from UTS consolidates that arrangement. Figures 1 and 2 are examples of some of the imagery that was compared and contrasted. Figure 1 is Kristina Wilson and Figure 2 is Simone Ryan. Each has their own selfie at the left and one of our co-creations to the right.

This particular methodology (which I elaborate on in Chapter 3) has made for the sometimes-difficult forging of worlds on my part: those between researcher and participant; fine art and commercial photography; industry and the academy; and the respective disciplines of creative art and humanities. All of these fields have their own cultural idiosyncrasies and languages. It is a unique research design and became a powerful means through which to understand some of the substantial concerns about women's sexual self-representation and, in particular, the nature of classed discourses. It allowed me the opportunity to work closely with sexy selfie takers and it produced rich insight into phenomena such as: relations of power in visual culture and mainstream feminism; how aesthetic difference is marked and coded along class and gender lines (and what those aesthetics actually look like); the ways normative standards of femininity discipline women in this field; and how agentic sexual expression is both encouraged by mainstream messaging and degraded as shameful. Findings were substantial enough to warrant several chapters more than this thesis can hold and so they were contained to four significant areas of discussion, each of which is discussed in detail in Chapters 4 to 7, with accompanying relevant images. This is a brief summary of the four key findings that appear in these chapters:

1. Language (both verbal and visual) is classed and hierarchies of value in visual culture operate, at times, in symbolically violent ways to prevent some women from accessing so-called higher realms of visual culture (and the trappings that come with that). Findings revealed that the verbal and visual languages used by participants, and myself, make visible differing classed standards, through the concepts of what is 'tasteful' and what is 'vulgar'. What do these languages literally look like? And who decides what is tasteful?
2. Beauty practices can be useful and productive for women who take and share sexy selfies. The structural and classed ways in which the concept of beauty is managed by young women and by feminist commentators is considered through thinking about ways that beauty is productive rather than destructive to women, particularly in digital networks, and that feminism must consider its own forms of symbolic violence as it pertains to the classed notion of 'taste'. Beauty and presentations of sexiness can function to build community, despite mainstream feminist fears that engagement in both often causes women harm. What kinds of engagements with beauty and sexiness are permissible in dominant culture?

3. The concept of participant seen-ness emerged as a way for the stand point of sexy selfie takers to be newly conceptualised. It offers a counter to male-centered and audience-centered gaze discourses as well as ideals of 'proper' feminine/sexual presentation. Like theories on 'listening' to create a to-be-heard-ness, there is an ethical imperative for the viewing/gazing of sexy images to allow a to-be-seen-ness, as a way to reframe the stultifying male gaze (in the vernacular sense) and consider anew what might be present in a sexy image a woman takes of herself. It further emerges that sexy selfies have brought objectification discourses to a critical juncture where relations of power between the looker and the looked-at are much less clear and in need of new frameworks for analysis.
4. Naturalness and authenticity discourses are sometimes utilised by mainstream feminism as proxies for class demarcation. So-called naturalness is valued in dominant discourses and seen as a virtuous feminine trait. Certain performances of femininity are read as unnatural and so the concept of naturalness functions to regulate women's self-representations. Sexy selfies are often read in this way as 'inauthentic' and 'contrived', but professional or artistic contrivances are accorded value in visual culture.

Thesis Structure

Creative and Practice-Led

The format of this thesis is not traditional. The project is practice-led and the thesis comprises two key components: a significant piece of creative work; and the writing of approximately 65,000 words. The creative work in this project has largely occurred through the aforementioned photoshoots and also through the work that the images from these shoots do, both on Instagram and in dialogue between me and the participants. The creative work has also been made into a photobook as a separate object to the written aspect of the thesis. The photobook is a significant text for this thesis – it represents one half of the materials submitted for examination. Please view it at any time. There is no set order to which the book should be viewed and the thesis read. It may interest you to look at the photobook before reading the written component of the thesis to better contextualise the discussions of the images; or you may prefer to view the photobook after reading the substantive text so that your engagement with the images is informed by a deeper understanding of each participant. The photobook is structured by 'chapters' of each of the participants in the project, so you may like to pick it up as you encounter each one in the main text. The substantive thesis text and the photobook interweave and fundamentally support each other, but the order in which you read them is unimportant.

Throughout the discussion chapters, the reader will notice several images from the project – some are the participants selfies and others are our co-creations – which are to be read alongside the text. Please also note that during the project, I opened a new (second) Instagram account (as I thought

this would better situate the co-created images away from my long-standing Instagram account which has an odd name and different aesthetic to that which has largely been produced in the co-creations. The reader may notice in some of the Instagram screens shots that participants refer to my original Instagram account 'artistsandcannibals' and also to the account that was newly established 'emmatremora' as some of the conversations had with early-joining participants was through the former account. Please feel free to engage with emmatremora on Instagram to view how I posted some of the images from the project. It is not critical that you do this, but will provide some context for how these images are operating in a public space. On pages 8 and 9, I refer to the Instagram accounts on the project's participants, where many of the co-created images have also been posted.

The photobook has very little text, but many more images from the six photoshoots. The photobook presents the knowledge gained from this project in a way that cannot be replicated through text. It is designed, firstly, to simply show a greater breadth of images that participants and I captured. It is also an invitation for the viewer to contemplate the *seen-ness* of the women in the photos, notwithstanding the obvious presence of my own gaze. Is it possible to look at sexy images of women in a way that escapes, even momentarily, the colonising impact of the male gaze? What does our own class positioning mean for the way we encounter these images and to what degree does the professional photographic lens 'legitimise' the women photographed as 'respectable' subjects? What is the role of the expert here? Are these images 'classy'? Why/why not? What constitutes 'classiness' and how does value come to be attached to this concept in sexy imagery?

The book presents these questions differently from the thesis in that it asks the reader to encounter these sexy aesthetics directly. The written component of this thesis conveys the findings and questions to arise from this project in the linguistic academic tradition and is a translation of my findings. The photobook presents similar ideas but does so through the vision and words of the participants themselves. The images are collaborations which draw on my visual aesthetic in ways the participants wanted to be represented. Their voices, though mediated somewhat by my influence, are certainly present in a way that more directly connects them with you, the viewer. And you will have your own lens. I ask you to encounter this book, if you will, with this question in mind: how do some sexy aesthetics come to be valued over others?

Thesis by Compilation

This thesis is also untraditional along a second axis, as it is a 'thesis by compilation', which means the discussion chapters (Chapters 4 to 7) have all been submitted to journals and have either been published or are awaiting a response. At the time of writing, Chapter 4 had been published (by Feminist Media Studies in November 2020) and Chapters 5 to 7 are currently lodged with other journals. This means that the reader of the thesis will encounter some repetition as they read (e.g. each journal requires a description of the project, so this appears four times in the discussion chapters, even if in different words). The reason universities now encourage students to submit theses-by-compilation is because, despite the risk of some repetition in the structure, engaging with

the academic publication process during postgraduate studies is recognised as strongly beneficial. The genre of the journal article also includes less discussion of literature reviews and methodology than the typical thesis. Therefore, this thesis includes significant literature review and methods chapters, which offer greater depth about these topics than any of the articles.

It is important to note that, in the writing of these articles/chapters (and beyond), my knowledge and thinking has evolved in various ways. Throughout much of my candidature, I have sought to easily define the kinds of popular and academic feminist discourses to which I regularly refer, and it has only been recently that I have come to adopt what feminist scholar Alison Phipps (2020) terms 'mainstream feminism'. Phipps defines this as 'mostly Anglo-American public feminism' which is 'white and privileged' (Phipps, 2020: 5) and suggests that it includes:

> Media feminism (and social media feminism) or what media scholar Banet-Weiser has called 'popular feminism': the feminist ideas and politics that circulate on mainstream platforms. It also includes institutional feminism, corporate feminism and policy feminism: the feminism that tends to dominate in universities, government bodies, private companies and international NGOs. (Phipps, 2020: 5)

Since the format of this thesis is 'by compilation' and Chapters 4 to 7 have either been published by an academic journal or are awaiting a response from journals they have been submitted to, it is not possible to revise them to include this definition. A consequence of the 'by compilation' format is that there is no opportunity for the substantive discussion chapters to benefit from any knowledge acquired after writing them. So, as you read these chapters, I invite you to carry through this definition as you encounter references to feminism. I take Phipps' use of the term 'privileged' to mean, at least in part, 'middle-class'.

Lastly…

This research project is centred on female sexy selfie takers who are active participants in sex-positive communities afforded by the public forum that is Instagram. This is not to politicise their activities, but to recognise that their sexy selfies allow them a way to express their sexual selves which, in part, rejects the anti-porn position that says their own bodies are sites of sexual danger. And this, in turn, is not to suggest that sexy selfies somehow herald an era of post-feminist freedom from damaging misogynistic structures or casually redress the sexual harms that patriarchal dominance has subjected women to, but to invite the possibility of moving beyond what Gayle Rubin (1984: 275) calls a 'sexual essentialism' – that is the Western idea of sex as 'eternally unchanging, asocial and transhistorical' – to challenge the entrenched systems of value which limit women's sexual (representational) freedoms.

While the women involved in this project perform their own challenges to systemic sexual injustice, my own challenge is to forge a research project that involves them as collaborators in a field which has

a history of talking *about* them rather than *with* them – though I recognise my own class privilege and power remains intact in so doing. I am also interested in positioning this project as a challenge to photographic industries that bear much responsibility for the inscription and perpetuation of sexual, gendered and classed systems of value in visual culture and to which I have, to some degree, contributed. Commercial photography has little interrogated its own field in this way, just as academic feminism has little interrogated the intersection of class with women's sexuality in this new media moment.

The furore over Kim Kardashian's appearance on the cover of *Vogue* provides important insight into the ways public discourses limit women's representations and self-representations. Despite feminism's intersectional embrace, mainstream, middle-class feminism maintains a cultural power which is exercised in the condemnations of Kardashian as 'vulgar' and 'trashy'. It is my desire that this project allows women who make sexy selfies to be 'seen' and that our collaborations contribute to academic discussions that move beyond the false binary of agency versus structure and consider in depth the role of class delineation within judgements of sexy images. Women are appearing in images in ways that are less mediated by men or traditional structures than ever before. Let us imagine a wider variety of ways in which they can represent themselves as embodied, beautiful and, yes, sexy.

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Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established that this project is located within the ongoing debates about the so-called sexualisation of culture and, more broadly, in the long-standing 'feminist sex wars' which wrestle with how best to support women's sexual lives and sexual representations within misogynistic culture. In this chapter, I examine these debates through an analysis of the relevant literature. I turn my attention to the project's key area of concern, which is the aesthetic components of the sexualisation debates and in particular, whether dominant discourses on them might contain gendered and classed approaches to women's sexual self-representations. Since the project is also fundamentally informed by photography, I examine the technological changes that the medium has undergone and how a greater uptake in the use of the medium by young, female sexy selfie takers has spurred a moral panic and subsequent rise in protectionist discourse that is found in some strains of feminist writing and commentary.

Underscoring this analysis are four areas of critical interest which have emerged as consistent themes through the literature on selfies: female agency and the socio-political impact of sexy selfies; photographic aesthetics theories and shifts; a feminist attention to gendered standards in popular appraisals of selfies; and the notion of representational authenticity.

I examine these areas of critical interest through a review of the literature on the sexualisation debates; feminist writing on class and sexuality; the so-called feminist sex wars; and through the concept of aesthetic taste, particularly as it operates in photographic cultures. I primarily argue that whilst there is a growing volume of rich academic work on sexy selfies, little attention has been paid to the ways in which class underpins discourses of feminist concern in this regard.

Sexualisation

Contemporary concerns about 'sexualisation' arise largely from popular discourses that hold it to be problematic, particularly for young people and especially for young women (Albury, 2015; Renold and Ringrose, 2013; 2017). Those who fear its influence argue that culture in general is becoming increasingly sexualised and worry about young women 'self-objectifying' through 'pornified' behaviour (Dines, 2010; Kiraly and Tyler, 2015; Murphy, 2017), including posting sexy selfies on social media. It is a risk-focused concern that is found in both public and academic discourses (Attwood, 2018; Paasonen et al., 2020) and which entered mainstream consciousness with the publication of Ariel Levy's book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* in 2005 (Serisier and Pendleton, 2008). Levy stirred public fears that 'raunch culture' was variously corrupting the innocence of young women, objectifying them, adversely affecting their own body image, and placing them in danger of predatory men. Her worries that women were becoming increasingly subject to the colonising influence of male sexual fantasy helped to anchor a growing strain of feminist concern about young women's sexual behaviours, including their production of sexy selfies.

Such concerns have been broadly aired by influential Australian media commentator and writer Melinda Tankard-Reist (2008; 2018) who takes the view that sexualisation and the 'pornification' of culture is damaging to the mental health of girls and laments the lack of 'traditional supervision or guidance of adolescent girls' (2008: 10). Drawing primarily on the American Psychological Association's report on the sexualisation of girls (2007) and the 2006 Australia Institute report *Corporate Paedophilia* (Rush et al., 2006), which calls for protection of children against sexualising media, Tankard-Reist (2008) raises concerns on issues of sexuality, sexualisation and identity formation of girls. She also signals the need for regulation and intervention into 'pornography's insidious take-over of the public space' (Tankard-Reist, 2008: 12).

Public fears of this nature are pronounced and 'public concern about popular culture's sexualisation of women and girls is regularly voiced in Australian media' (Charles, 2010: 61). In a similar vein to Tankard-Reist, Nikki Gemmell's (2015) previously-mentioned critique of sexualisation is emblematic of these public concerns as they appear in mainstream media. These popular, protectionist discourses lack critical, evidence-based analysis, as Albury and Lumby (2008) notably raised in their submission to 'The Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Communication and the Arts Inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment'. They also, as Bragg et al. (2011: 280) point out, lack a clear definition of sexualisation and suggest that research in this field 'often fails to distinguish between material that is "sexualised" as opposed to "sexual"'. This idea is advanced by Paasonen et al. (2020) whose important book on this subject has brought new insight to objectification discourses and unpicks the threads of media debates on sexualisation to demonstrate that sex and sexism are not the same thing. Indeed, as McKee (2010: 131) notes, these threads contain many 'distinct issues, with distinct aetiologies (that are often) collapsed together' into the all-encompassing term 'sexualisation'. It is a term used to propagate fear-based discourses, but does little to address the fact that the greatest risk of sexual harm to young women is in the family (McKee, 2010; see also Attwood and Smith, 2011).

The collapsing-together of the many distinct issues of sexual representation into an amorphous, convenient cover-all has the effect of shutting down discussion across a range of important issues (Attwood and Smith, 2011; Faulkner, 2010). The term 'sexualisation' then, is often employed to intentionally obfuscate agendas of sexual protectionism (Egan and Hawkes, 2009) in the maintenance of classist ideals of 'respectability' (Skeggs, 1997, 2004a), which I canvass in more detail in the following section. It is difficult discursive terrain where simplistic debates position the notion of sexualisation as self-evidentially harmful, leaving the term under-developed, largely rhetorical and as a negative phenomenon in the popular consciousness. It is also one that academics have decried as distinctly lacking in good knowledge.

Faulkner (2010) also points out that these concerns are ahistorical, always suggesting that things are getting worse and young people are subject to an increasingly sexualised culture (Attwood et al., 2013). Additionally, Barker (2012: 303) succinctly notes that, 'through this construction of 'sexualisation', gendered relations of power are not only hidden from view but also buttress a

narrative in which young women are situated as children, and their sexuality and desire rendered pathological and morally unacceptable as judged by a conservative standard of decency'.

In the criticism directed towards women who take sexy selfies, Katrin Tiidenberg (2018) argues that there exists a moral panic that is born, like other moral panics, of a threat to the stability of the social order. She further suggests that critiques of sexy selfie takers focuses on visibility and the right to be seen, and that 'selfie shaming is a cultural discourse that aims to control people, in particular women and minorities, to conform to the existing norms of their (in)visibility' (Tiidenberg, 2018: 89). To this point, Sullivan and McKee (2015: 109) argue that sexualisation is 'an easy shorthand for moral panics that simultaneously sidestep any critical interrogation of sexism, misogyny, and queerphobia in all our social systems, not just the media, while indulging in melodramatic hand-wringing over silly, stupid, slutty girls'. Other scholars bring attention to anxieties about the intersection of women's sexualities with technology (Hasinoff, 2013; Senft and Baym, 2015), while Tiidenberg and van der Nagel (2020) illustrate the ways in which the intersection of sex and social media has given rise to these techno/moral panics.

In the face of media moral panics and the lack of a definition for sexualisation (despite its presence in popular consciousness as self-evident), how might reasoned, evidence-based argument on this issue advance? A persistent refrain throughout the literature, in response to this, is the call for a significant broadening of the conversation around sex and sexuality (Attwood et al., 2013; Albury and Lumby, 2008; Gill, 2009). To this point, one of the core objectives of this project is to understand how classed discourses figure in the sexualisation debates and, in particular, how they imprint on the ways young women construct their sexy self-representations when they are culturally situated within a dominant 'conservative standard of decency'.

Class and feminism

The concept of class is an important element of the sexualisation debates, even if this is not always acknowledged. As Yvette Taylor (2011: 3) points out, 'sexuality frequently neglects class studies, just as class analysis ignores sexualities'. While there exists some feminist intersectional writing on class, it has not typically been applied to debates about sexualisation, nor to sexy selfies. In this section, I examine some of the important literature on class and women's sexuality and, through the concepts of 'respectability' and 'vulgarity', the ways women's sexy selfies are subject to discourses of shame.

In contemporary Western cultures, the concept of respectability as a signifier of class manifests in a variety of forms, but perhaps none more so than in matters of women's sexuality. Foucault contends that the process of constructing sexuality is discursive and social (Weedon, 1987: 105) and one that has been 'foremost…a class-bound project' (Skeggs, 1997: 121). In the critically important work that Beverley Skeggs has undertaken in this area, she argues that historically, women's bodies, behaviours and social roles have been 'mapped out and circumscribed' (Skeggs,

1997: 121) and that working-class women have been particularly subject to regulatory discourses and policies, having been constructed as 'dirty, dangerous and without value' (Skeggs, 1997: 74). She also argues that they are presented as 'excessive' in their sexual display. It is against this long-standing construction of working-class women's sexuality as excessive that middle-class ideals of respectability and sexual propriety are forged. As Skeggs (2004a: 100) notes:

> To read something (a body or object) as excess is to render it beyond the bounds of propriety, to locate it within the inappropriate, the matter out of place, the tasteless.

Through the work of Mercer and Julien (1988), Skeggs (2004a: 100) also identifies that 'excessive sexuality is the thing which, par excellence, is a threat to the moral order of Western civilization'. There is little that provokes the regulatory impulse more than young women's 'inappropriate' displays of sexuality or femininity (Attwood, 2018; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). As Gill (2007b: 70) notes, the kinds of moral anxieties that are 'projected onto girls' bodies, by contrast [with boys], are overwhelmingly sexual'. The sexualised subject is constructed in these conditions and meaning is ascribed both to women's bodies and to cultural objects such as sexy selfies – where both have stepped out of the bounds of normative feminine/sexual respectability. Such meaning is conveyed through a wide variety of regulatory social instruments, but this project's concern is with the middle-class use of symbolic authority to keep distance from 'inappropriately sexy' women. One of the ways it does this is by associating women's sexy selfies with excess, dirt and waste, just as working-class women's sexualities have long been formulated in the same way. In Chapters 4 to 7, I discuss in detail how dominant discourses employ language such as 'too much' and 'trashy' to delineate class and gender boundaries in this regard and to devalue certain forms of sexual display. As Skeggs (2004a: 99) suggests, 'that which is valuable as cultural capital is middle-class culture'.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the project is interested not in the class position of participants, but in how classed discourses operate to regulate and discipline women's sexy self-representations. In the context that Skeggs (1997; 2004b) describes, feminine respectability is framed as valuable and aspirational and has strict governing codes which, as Wood (2018: 218) notes, often mask 'class sensitivities at work'. Mainstream feminist commentary, which argues that female sexy selfie takers are in danger, often overlooks in its judgement the presence of disgust at women's sexualities and sexual displays that fall outside the class bounds of 'refinement' and 'delicacy', suggests Kipnis (1998: 140). In her excellent work 'Disgust and Desire' (1998: 140), Kipnis also proposes that the historic function of the gesture of disgust is not limited to appraisals of gender and pornography, but is a generalised middle- and upper-class response of 'disgust with sex and the body'. The performance of disgust then, does the work that Skeggs describes of distance-making from working-class culture and aesthetics.

Women's amateur, everyday, sexy selfies become subject to focused discourses which mask prejudices that cast women's overt, agentic sexy selfies as vulgar, lacking in feminine decorum and without that long-standing marker of middle-class becoming – respectability (Giles, 1992;

Skeggs, 1997). They are held, in this classed context, as objects of dangerous opposition to the project of respectability-making and require class regulation. At the heart of this are amateur aesthetics which demonstrate '"raunchy", "tarty" (that is, working class) sexual behaviour' (McKee, 2010: 136; see also Gill, 2012) and which activate the kind of protectionism that marks such aesthetics as transgressive. As Mort (2002: 28) notes, 'transgression functions to define the norm, shaping and crystallising ideas about the rules of correct moral conduct'. Central to this mindset is a paternalistic and self-styled guardianship of moral intervention (Skeggs, 1997) which often operates through the work of cultural gatekeepers.

Tara Chittenden (2010: 81), in highlighting the job of the self-appointed gatekeeper, notes that 'self-interests and values may be the motivating force behind their assumed role'. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of the cultural field (and I discuss this in more detail in the conceptual framework section in Chapter 3), Chittenden suggests that, in this context, gatekeepers believe young women to be sexually vulnerable and needing protective intervention into choices made about their own sexuality and sexual expression. She further argues that gatekeepers utilise this vulnerability discourse to regulate women's sexuality. As Stevi Jackson (2011: 16) argues, the rhetoric of sexualisation means that 'certain styles of working-class dress and conduct are read as indicative of deficient femininity, lacking in the decorum and sophistication of its middle-class equivalents'. The concept of sexualisation therefore becomes coded in the service of maintaining one's social field (Bourdieu, 1984) and in so doing, it performs a 'post-feminist symbolic violence' which re-inscribes social hierarchies that are based on class and gender (McRobbie, 2004).

Whilst these are contemporary concerns, many have argued that their origins can be found in middle-class anxieties about sexual impropriety beginning over a century ago (Egan and Hawkes, 2010; Damousi, 1997; Peiss, 1986; Walkerdine, 1998) and which produced a normative standard of feminine display that Skeggs (2004a: 16) suggests is 'historically, a particular version of middle-class moral femininity'. This can be characterised 'through associations with restraint, repression, reasonableness, modesty and denial' (Skeggs, 2004a: 99). In contrast, the socially-and-discursively constructed demure, refined and appropriately passive feminine subject exists only against that which it is not – working-class, excessive and 'disgusting' (Kipnis, 1998; Skeggs, 2004a). As Skeggs (2004a: 167) notes, '*feminine excess means women with visible sexuality*' (italics in original) and is 'marked on their bodies and coded as tasteless'.

Mainstream feminism often marks women's sexy selfies in this way and in so doing, it limits the opportunity for an adequate feminist consideration of the intersection of class with sexuality and leaves out women whose sexuality is experienced and performed at this intersection. As Kipnis (1998: 140) notes, '[i]nsofar as the feminist antiporn movement devotes itself to rehearsing the experience of disgust and attempting to regulate sexual imagery, the class issue will continue to be one of its formative blind spots'.

Whilst the performance of disgust here has a policing effect on sexual imagery, so too do popular characterisations of women's sexy selfies as 'inauthentic' or 'unnatural' (Tiidenberg, 2018). In these configurations, certain feminine stylistics such as pouty lips ('duckface'), obvious make-up, tight or

revealing clothing and body modifications are often construed negatively as fake, excessive (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020; Abidin, 2016), and tasteless (Skeggs, 2004a). Traits such as aesthetic modesty, subtlety and demure femininity are promoted, on the other hand, as the 'natural' and desirable (middle-class) standard for female presentation and sexuality (McCann, 2015; Kipnis, 1998). And, like other gendered and classed discourses, the privileging of ideals of feminine naturalness and authenticity reach back through histories which conflate them with moral goodness and feminine virtue (Attfield, 2016; Skeggs, 2004a). Holliday and Sanchez (2006) argue that moral contempt was, and remains, a middle-class device of 'othering' so-called hypersexual bodies – seen as grotesque and working-class – in order to maintain a moral social order that protects middle-class propriety.

In a contemporary context, mainstream media such as reality television make-over programs reinforce this narrative, as Angela McRobbie (2009: 130) points out, by positioning participants as lacking in grace and appropriate femininity. They are subject to 'correction' of their 'bodily failings' (2009: 130) by learning to wear the 'right' clothing and the 'right' make-up. This process affirms class distinctions and ignores the affective feminist potential of 'rude', sexy feminine aesthetics. 'There are hierarchies that are afforded to certain (female) bodies, degrees of agency in one's self-representation, perhaps at the expense of the visibility of others' (Farkas, 2015). As Skeggs (1997: 121) notes, 'we do not all have equal access to positions in discourse'.

When the language of naturalness and authenticity is used by middle-class feminists in aspirational terms, the concept of vulgarity takes on an especially acute class meaning and can be alienating for young women who do not conform to these standards. As Holliday and Sanchez (2006: 191) point out, '[t]o define these women as victims of the beauty industry and motivated by the pain of being outside normative (classed and raced) ideals of beauty effectively erases their subjectivity. Yet these are exactly the women that feminism claims to represent'.

The feminist sex wars

Underpinning the sexualisation debates is the feminist dichotomy of 'sex positivity' versus 'sex nervousness' (Queen and Comella, 2008: 278, 281). This danger-versus-pleasure binary (Basiliere, 2008; Echols, 2016) crystalised at the infamous and controversial 1982 Barnard conference, where opposing views on sex and pornography were so fierce that the conference is now looked upon as having created the 'feminist sex wars' (Basiliere, 2008: 1). Conference organiser Carol Vance suggests 'that women's sexuality is marked by a persistent tension between pleasure, on the one hand, and danger, on the other' (Echols, 2016: 11). Thirty-nine years on from the Barnard conference, it is apparent that feminism is still powerfully challenged by these tensions. I argue that the 'sex wars' have found renewed vigour, in part, through the prominence of self-styled sexual visibility that is afforded by the smart phone-social media complex.

Many mainstream feminists assert that in a patriarchal society, where power rests with men, women are unable to express their sexuality without it constituting a violence against them and

an automatic submission to patriarchal ideals. It holds that sexual exploration is dangerous for women and women's sexuality is necessarily informed by the risk of rape and assault that men pose. It is argued that a liberal feminist acceptance of pornography and an adoption of raunch culture 'encourages a wilful myopia with respect to the role of one's choices in a broader system of sexualised dominance' (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015: 15). Feminists who take this stance notably cite the work of Andrea Dworkin and her trenchant anti-pornography views. Dworkin saw 'harm done through pornography' to women 'as a legal injury of sex discrimination warranting civil redress' (MacKinnon and Dworkin, 1997: 2).

Others stake a claim to women's sexual pleasure and agency as possible within a patriarchal society (Vance, 1984; Lorde, 1993; Brown and Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2019) and, as Queen and Comella (2008: 278) suggest, capable of being understood 'as a potentially positive force in one's life' that is in contrast to 'sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous'. The concept of sex-positivity was born at the Barnard conference where proponents argued that a focus on sexual/patriarchal oppression 'unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live' (Vance, 1982 quoted in Basiliere, 2008: 3).

These debates find new expression in contemporary conceptualisations of sexualisation and the contrast in feminist appraisals of sexy selfies. As these selfies have come to occupy more and more space in visual culture, there has been a popular rise in fear that young people, and especially young women, are more vulnerable than ever to the 'external forces of 21st century sexual cultures' (Clark, 2014: 173). This evokes some of the sex-fearful discourses that the Barnard conference bore out. Sex positive proponents and many sexuality researchers have, in response, proposed a discourse whose framework positions women's sexuality in terms of a 'positive right to self-expression' (Albury, 2017: 722). Both camps reflect and inform a new, heightened attention on current attitudes toward female sexuality, whilst also demonstrating that the old, Barnard-born dichotomies are as alive as ever within feminism and the sexualisation debates. At stake here is female sexual agency and its scope within patriarchal structures. How might women engage with visual culture as a means of sexual expression and agency in a broader culture that largely fetishises them as sexually innocent or victim (Egan and Hawkes, 2008)? How might they contend with the privileging of fear-based discourses that position them as passive (Albury, 2017)? Might a hegemony of middle-class sexual respectability that demands women display sexual decorum, be challenged by young women's assertions of what could be termed, given current techno-affordances, 'aesthetic agency'? Might sexy selfies advance an often-missing discourse of female desire (Fine, 1988)?

Some newer studies are challenging fear-based arguments by bringing attention to women as active agents whose sexualised selfies are an expression of sexual autonomy (Albury, 2015; Dean, 2016; Ulman, 2014). Dobson and Coffey (2015: para 8), in responding to popular media panic over women and girls' 'sexualised' expression, argue that 'adding more positive messages of sexual embodiment for girls, alongside a focus on gender relations and power, is considered best practice by many experts in sex education, and also links with efforts in violence prevention' (see Tolman, 2002; Hasinoff, 2015; see also recent work by Emma Renold).

Whilst feminism generally maintains a consensus that women are expected to adhere to normative standards of appearance that are oppressive and sexist – and that they are subject to far greater pressure to meet these standards than men – resistance to these ideals in defence of women's bodily autonomy creates an unresolved ideological paradox for mainstream feminism. 'Stuck in an impasse between polarised positions' (Elias et al., 2017), the fear that some forms of feminine self-presentation are risky or self-objectifying, and also the desire to support women, has been difficult for the movement to reconcile in a post-feminist and neoliberal context.

Many uphold a 'fallacy of choice' (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015) argument and claim that supposed autonomous beauty practices by women merely reinforce oppressive misogynistic structures and the sexual objectification of women (Bordo, 1993; Whisnant, 2007; Chapkis, 1988). However, as Paasonen et al. (2020: 90) point out, objectification has been conflated with sexualisation such that it is 'presented as commonsensical', and that the impacts of this are 'far reaching and elementary in and for understanding objectification as a concern of feminist activism and research'.

Feminist standpoint theory presents a foundation that many have utilised to advance women's choices to beautify (Williams, 2017). It is argued that the agency present in these choices means that oppressive structures are transcended, challenging the fallacy of choice viewpoint. Some of the scholarly work in this area points out that empowerment discourses surrounding young women's presentations of sexiness or beauty often fall into a limiting subject/object or active/passive binary of the 'postfeminist, freely-choosing agent' versus the 'subjugated self-objectifier' (Jensen and Ringrose, 2014; Paasonen et al., 2020). Some others call for a more nuanced approach to women's sexy self-representations such as Amy Hasinoff (2014: 112), who calls for a reframing of the questions that are repeatedly asked in this regard and to consider the possibility that 'passivity is not inherently bad and that it is perhaps more indistinguishable from agency than people usually think'.

Tiidenberg (2014: 2) also offers a different view, conceptualising the selfie as a 'late-modern self -, and community construction practice'. In conjunction with online image sharing, she argues that the selfie gives users the agency to be one's own sexual storyteller. Similarly, selfies offer a space for minorities to author their own visual stories through 'reclaiming the power of portrayal' (Routh, 2016: 7). It is a space, Routh asserts, where the photographer is both subject and object and they might therefore be able to better imagine the kind of reality that suits them. In the possible refusal to conform to traditional photographic productions and aesthetic codes, selfies may be a way to resist cultural expectations of 'female sexual decorum' (Albury, 2017: 719).

Nonetheless, sexy selfies remain lodged in that critical impasse between two broad feminist positions – one which holds that women's sexy selfies are inherently degrading of women, dangerous to them and born of damaging pornographic norms; and the other which takes a 'sex-positive' approach in claiming that women's sexual pleasure is important and possible within patriarchal strictures and that sexy self-representation is one arena in which women can, in a relatively safe way, explore and express this aspect of themselves. This project makes no claims to resolve this feminist juncture, but to share some knowledge on the complexities of choice for women representing their sexual selves in contested visual spaces.

On Photography, aesthetic superiority and taste

Studies into selfies are underpinned by the distinct shift that photography has undergone in broader visual culture in very recent times. Photography has been through many so-called 'democratising' iterations and is, in this current 'socio-technical network' (Gómez Cruz and Meyer, 2012: 215), in its most profound (Gómez Cruz and Meyer, 2012; Lobinger and Brantner, 2015). It has 'become more pluralistic and expansive' (Bruś, 2017: 91) – a place where 'selfies are ubiquitous in our digitally saturated environments' (Tiidenberg, 2014). American art critic Jerry Saltz (2014) was moved by this moment for photography to declare the emergence of selfies as so significant that they must now be categorised as a new genre of photography (as opposed to simply a new style). Containing their own 'structural autonomy', he further suggests '[i]t's possible that the selfie is the most prevalent popular genre ever' (Saltz, 2014: para 3).

Instagram

Social media, of course, has provided a substantial (though not exclusive) structure for selfie visual cultures to burgeon and amongst the vast array of social media platforms, Instagram remains, eleven years after its inception, the most dominant platform for primarily visual content. In this 'profound' moment for photography, Instagram has performed a central role. Born from a retro-photographic chic, it encouraged users to shoot, apply creative filters and share their visions. Though it ditched the vintage 'Hipstamatic' iconography some years ago, it holds firm as the social media leader in platforming self-styled photography and aiding the cultivation of new visual styles. As Elisa Serafinelli (2018: 8) argues, 'the extensive use of Instagram represents the foundation of a new mobile visualities aesthetic' such that it has become, as Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020: 12) propose, 'an icon and an avatar for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures'.

Images made for Instagram are intended to be seen, shared and engaged with, and are designed to communicate ideas through stylistics that both create and then recreate a so-called 'Insta-worthy' look (Leaver, Highfield and Abidin, 2020: 12). These images *co*-operate, in a kind of mutually-reflexive feedback loop, with the platform which once birthed, and now repeatedly affirms and re-inscribes, a variety of 'Instagram looks'. More academically, these 'looks' might be referred to as a set of platform-specific grammars and logics. They have helped move the platform from a fledgling, playful photographic repository to a harbinger of significant aesthetic shifts in broader culture which draw on Instagram's well-established aesthetic and cultural norms. These shifts can be seen, amongst other places, in the visual language of contemporary art such as that produced by Amalia Ulman (2014) and Richard Prince (Plaugic, 2015), and also in fashion and advertising (Schöps et al., 2017) as much as the 'networked photography' of everyday sexy selfie takers.

The 'Instagrammatics' discussed here, though various and genre-specific, produce what Leaver, Highfield and Abidin (2020: 12) refer to as the 'templatability of visual social media on Instagram' – that is, certain aesthetics within visual social media cultures become recognisable as the 'platform

vernacular' (Gibbs et al., 2015) and are replicated by users' repeated application of them in their selfies. Is it possible to identify a set of 'templatable' stylistics adopted by women who take sexy selfies for Instagram and, if so, what could this offer in terms of understanding how amateur sexy aesthetics are classed and gendered?

Academics such as Amy Shields-Dobson (2011) and Rosalind Gill (2007a; 2009) suggest that these types of sexy presentations can be described as a Western aesthetic of 'heterosexiness' where women perform sexual desirability according to conventional tropes of feminine sexiness. Others describe them as 'porn chic' (Drenten et al., 2018; Lynch, 2012) – a way to reflect what they see as the influence of mainstream Western pornography on sexy selfie takers. In their research, Drenten et al. (2018: 49) produced a loose set of codable aesthetics that are found in sexy selfies. These are visual attributes such as 'physical poses (e.g., kneeling, holding breasts in hands), props and clothing (e.g., food, drink, bathing suits, lingerie), location (e.g., in a bedroom, at the beach, in a kitchen, at a gym) and other stylistic devices (e.g., stylized make-up, tattoos, dyed hair)'. How meaning is ascribed to these aesthetic markers however, is under-explored, as is any positive feminist potential they might have.

What is neglected here are the less obvious photographic affordances of smart phones and their contribution to Instagram vernaculars. In particular, most smart phones have a standard focal-length lens which literally shapes a subject in particular ways and, in so-doing, often contributes to the marking of images as amateur, since professional photographers largely avoid using wide-angle lenses to take portraits. Though this may not be explicitly read by non-professional audiences, my industry and pedagogical experience has taught me that 'the wide angle look' is one of the markers that is broadly and implicitly read as a marker of amateur photography.

Smart phones are built to default to a very wide-angle lens upon opening the camera app. Since it is the default, it is a commonly used lens (though others are now available to manually choose). Wide-angle lenses inherently capture a wide field-of-view and have the effect of distorting subjects, making them appear bigger than they are, especially where they are close to the edge of the frame. For this reason, professional photographers generally avoid using them to take portraits as they can make bodies seem overly large, stretched or disproportionate (though I note that professional photographers also choose this to intentionally distort bodies at times). The common use of this default lens on smart phones has fundamentally contributed to a sexy Instagram aesthetic of big, rounded bums and breasts, pronounced pout in lips, large eyes and long legs, amongst other attributes. This invokes Skeggs' previously-discussed theories on the middle-class tendency to marginalise that which it deems 'excessive' and 'vulgar'. As Skeggs (2004a)) argues, so-called excessive bodies have long-been constructed in middle-class narratives as working-class and disgusting and used as a way to create class distance. Participants, of course, do not see themselves this way and yet are subject to this kind of dominant commentary.

Further, the nature of wide lenses is that they provide the viewer of a portrait with a sense of physical closeness to the subject, so sexy selfies often create a sense of intimacy in the viewer that is at least partly attributable to camera optics. These kinds of visual grammars form the basis of this

Instagram vernacular of sexiness, and yet the mechanics of cameras are overlooked for the role they play in creating the aesthetic. Professional photographers often idealise longer lenses for portrait-taking and will mark those taken with wide lenses as having less value. It is a short step then, for those with power in visual culture, to mark the women who use these optics as less valuable.

To this point, it is argued that some aspects of Instagram (vertical video, for example) provide 'a rupturing of visual paradigms' (Ryan, 2018). I argue that sexy selfies on Instagram perform their own type of rupture, both to mainstream media representations of women's sexiness (since women are content creators, *en masse*, now) and to professional photographic claims on superior aesthetics. Female sexy selfie takers have created a new set of visual grammars of female sexiness which emerges from the parameters and affordances of smart phones and Instagram's visual idiosyncrasies.

Techno-shifts and jurisdictional protectionism

This rupture has given rise to a complication for photography in how it establishes the delineation between professional and amateur practices (Carrabine, 2012; Holschbach, 2016; McKay and Plouviez, 2013). The nature of the professions is that of 'a claim for the legitimate control of a particular kind of work' (Abbott, 1988: 60) where battles over 'jurisdictions' occur (Abbott, 1988: 2). These jurisdictions are areas of occupational interest that serve it, at times at the expense of competitors from 'adjacent jurisdictions' (DiMaggio, 1989: 534). The ubiquitous uptake of photography by amateur practitioners poses 'a challenge to the value systems of both [professional] photography and art institutions' (McKay and Plouviez, 2013: 128) and also to professional and institutional claims to aesthetic superiority – a superiority which Carbine (2013: 486-7) says 'enabled Imperial notions of progress and dominance to flourish' and which 'figures in the European classical art tradition'.

Though sexy selfie takers are usually not competing in an art or professional photographic world, custodians from each of these sites of image production nonetheless use selfie criticism to bolster their claims to superiority in visual culture. Art critic Sean O'Hagan (2018) demonstrates this tendency while reflecting on this time of an 'unprecedented flow of digital images'. For O'Hagan, 'the selfie has reduced the traditional idea of the self-portrait to a casual narcissistic reflex'. In suggesting that the selfie has *reduced* the traditional idea of the self-portrait, O'Hagan evokes Bourdieusian notions of taste and class distinction. His critique seeks to maintain the aura of the self-portrait to ensure the cultural objects produced by professional photography and fine art remain in rarefied terrain. O'Hagan reveals one of the ways that value is encoded into images and image-making, and how aesthetics are operationalised in the interests of class distance-making.

As jurisdictional boundaries have shifted in image-making, cultural gatekeepers have also upped their game, whether in response to the perceived threat of the 'casual narcissistic reflex' or 'pornified' self-representations (Paul, 2005: 1). The use of certain language, of course, is one avenue through which gatekeepers do the work of attempting to secure the exclusive bounds of their social field (in the Bourdieusian sense, which I discuss in detail in Chapter 3). There is the

language employed by O'Hagan, for example, as well as the multivalent aesthetic languages of images whose meanings are subject to the ways in which respective social fields construct them. In the discursive terrain of sexual visibility and under the broader banner of sexual politics, class sensibilities bear out in terms used by middle-class commentators such as 'disgusting' or 'trashy' (see #KardashTrash on Instagram and Twitter). Indeed, in the struggle for cultural value and recognition, female sexy selfies takers are subject to what Laura Kipnis (1993: 217) refers to as 'aesthetic judgment masquerading as knowledge'.

Taste and social power

Although all '"tastes" are to a certain extent formed collectively over time through a community of peers or connoisseurs' (Stock, 2010), it is the culturally powerful who are engaged in 'the colonizing operation of the aesthetic judgment, whose raw materials are the appeal to a transcendent sensibility and the vigilant enforcement of "good taste"' (Kipnis, 1993: 216). Central to this operation is the establishment of the idea in broader culture that 'good taste' is *inherently* constituted as such; that what makes it good is always-already there, rather than its truth having been discursively produced. And in this configuration, the value of cultural objects (including photographs) is conferred by those with social and visual power. Visual hierarchies are structured around classed 'standards' which are written into what is aesthetically acceptable and what is not (Burns, 2015). Bourdieu (1984) emphasises that art achieves its value and codings not through internal readings, but, as Carrabine (2012: 465) describes, through 'certain kinds of social power' and 'hierarchies of difference'. So 'judgments of taste come to function as markers of "class"' (Carrabine, 2012: 465).

Where the terms 'high art' or 'professional art' might be used to describe rarefied, cultivated and refined imagery (and these are not without their semantic difficulties), the notion of 'everyday aesthetics' (Murray, 2008: 147) is best understood as its opposite. It is an aesthetic that is lacking in the esteemed and established tropes that an art critic or similar professional eye might deem necessary in order to categorise a photograph as professional and/or a work of art (Holschbach, 2016: 188). Everyday aesthetics are amateur and unpolished and constitute a part of what Tim Clark refers to as 'the empirical mass of photography' (Campany, 2015). The selfie is an everyday, unrefined cultural object and is subject to institutional and classed condemnation which relegate it to 'low culture'. The sexy selfie is subject to further condemnation. Seen as the proverbial 'double threat', its form is an object of 'low culture' and its content suggestive of 'low class', according to a dominant middle-class narrative in mainstream commentary which is troubled by both the selfie as a 'cheap cultural object' (Abidin 2016) and the proliferation of an accompanying sexy aesthetic which evokes Skeggs' (2004a) 'excessive body'. The dismissal of them by art critics and professionals offers some insight into the structural gender and class biases that are built into visual culture. This is not to say that all sexy selfies are regarded by dominant commentators in this way, but that the aesthetic of conventional western 'heterosexiness' (Shields Dobson 2011) preferred by the project's participants, is.

In considering the sexy imagery of fine art nudes to that found in pornography, Feona Attwood (2018) points out that the respective aesthetics of each genre are valued and described in different ways. Drawing from the work of Nead (2002), Attwood highlights that fine art nudes are circumscribed as being for 'contemplation' and have 'transcendent value', and porn aesthetics are framed as belonging to 'motivation, promiscuity and commodification' (Attwood, 2018: 89). Advancing on this, Attwood brings to attention the fact that 'both art and porn involve the production of commodities' and the pleasures associated with looking at each are not necessarily experienced by viewers in the way that Nead describes. 'Even if they were, it is not clear why one set of pleasures should be seen as obviously "better" than the other' (Attwood, 2018: 85).

Drawing from McKee's 'Pornography as entertainment' (2012), this is important to note insofar as distinctions of class are affirmed through the disparaging application of the term 'vulgar' (and its likenesses) by middle-class commentators to women's sexy self-representations. He contends that '"vulgarity" does mean of the…common people': for there is clearly in current attacks on raunch culture an intemperate condemnation of working-class forms of sexuality' (McKee, 2012: 544). Further, he discusses that vulgarity has a long history, in counter to critics of raunch-culture and pornification (Tankard Reist, 2008) who claim that it is a recent (and alarming) phenomenon. McKee questions what is so 'terrible' about such displays of female sexuality and asks whether it is 'possible to make an argument for the undesirability of such an outcome without employing classed language like 'vulgar' or 'common'?' (McKee, 2012: 544). 'Critiques of pornography are often the product of one class's visceral intolerance of another' (Jancovich, 2001: 2). Whilst the participants who worked with me in this project are not making pornography, their selfies belong within the canon of images of women that are read, often in mainstream feminist discourses, in this way – and which participants themselves are highly aware of.

This thesis explores the concepts of 'vulgarity', 'taste' and 'sexiness' as they are applied to women's sexy representations, and also as they were affirmed or resisted by women who take sexy selfies for public display. While participants rarely used the words 'vulgarity', 'taste' or even 'sexiness', their understanding – and engagement with – these concepts was clear and consistently present, even if they used different language (such as "disgusting", "standards" and "hot"). What kinds of sexy imagery are permissible in public spaces? What kinds of structural conditions create, or deny, permissibility?

Conclusion

For this project, what begins to emerge then, is a nexus between the fundamentals of everyday photographic aesthetics, 'relations between social class, sexuality and taste' (Bragg et al., 2011: 290) and the social and political impact of women's sexy selfies. If fine art or professional photography is delineated by tastemakers, such as professional photographers and gallerists, as having a certain refined quality which 'perpetuates certain kinds of elitism' (Carrabine, 2012: 484) and is also the

validated standard in image-making (Perry, 2013), then what is to be said for the democratisation of photography and concomitant shifts in aesthetics? How do visual cultural codes and hierarchies adjust to new vernacular photographic modes of communication that are of the everyday? How too, does this meet with discourses surrounding women's sexual self-representation, their new status as both subject and object and the inherent agency which that enables? Narratives of appropriate 'female sexual modesty' (Charles, 2010: 63) underscore photographic aesthetics as much as they do public policy, education, parenting and media. They consistently position young women as lacking agency and at risk, yet shaming them for their sexy selfies (Albury, 2015; Tiidenberg, 2018). To this point, this gendered, classed and stigmatising framework has created only 'negative sexual rights' (Petchesky, 2000 in Albury, 2017: 719). Adults, Albury (2017: 716) argues, enjoy sexual rights that young people do not and quotes Petchesky who calls for a 'universal recognition of sexual autonomy or personhood, which extends to "children and youth as well as adults"'.

This project advances these debates through a comparison of the regimes of amateur and professional photography, within the context of sexualised imagery. I suggest that the aesthetic language of each will be revealing of jurisdictions of power that privilege professional, refined imagery over everyday, amateur imagery. This project aims to investigate whether sexualisation can be a means to explore assumptions about sexuality, high and low culture, and class. What, for example, is the difference between a selfie and a self-portrait?

I argue that, in the burgeoning research on selfies and sexy selfies, there is little attention given to the intersection of class and women's sexuality within feminist frameworks. In the following chapter I describe the project's unique methodological framework and the ways that it contributes to addressing this lack of discursive attention on women's sexy self-representations.

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Chapter Three

Research design and method

Introduction

This project emerged from my desire, as a professional photographer, to research and critique dominant discourses on the representation of women in contemporary Western culture, especially since I have contributed to this canon in a small way. I am particularly interested in debates about sexualisation, and how women should represent themselves as sexual beings. The manifestation of the so-called sexualisation debates take shape largely across the appraisal of photographic imagery, particularly those images taken by young women of their own bodies. The meeting of commercial portrait photography with academia is unusual but has provided the opportunity for a unique – and challenging – research design. Typically classed as non-traditional, it is practice-led and has collaborative creative outputs (photographs) at its centre, with an exegetical response to the data these photographs produce. The use of photographs in research is not new, however the method of creating them and analysing them in this project substantially differs from more conventional photo-based projects. I expand on this in the *Reflective and Practice-Led* section, below.

There exists a growing body of important academic work that deals with women's sexy selfie practices (see Abidin, Albury, Burns, Tiidenberg and Hasinoff). Most of this work (though not all) gathers its data through textual analysis rather than engaging with the women who are representing themselves in this way. By contrast, the design for this project placed a central focus on creating a qualitative, practice-led and semi auto-ethnographic study which engaged female sexy selfie takers as active participants in the generation of data. It privileges the co-creation of photographic images between women who make and display sexy selfies on Instagram and a professional photographer (me), and draws on the experience of researchers such as Bragg et al. (2011: 284) who, in reflecting on their own project, suggest that 'these more participatory, deliberative methods generated accounts of views and experiences that we would have been unlikely to access through other approaches such as questionnaires or conventional interviews'.

The images from the collaborations with participants were used in a 'compare and contrast' method of analysis, where the texts and practices of the participants' amateur photographic selfies were compared with the professional photographs of them. The contrast in aesthetics belonging to each set of images becomes the framework for a dialogic analysis with participants about respective practices and visual choices, each informing the other.

Several questions underpinned this process, such as: might it be possible to gain knowledge into both academic and popular discourses typically applied to each of these sets of images? What could this reveal about limiting beliefs, cultural norms and differences in the way that female sexuality and related aesthetics are perceived and affirmed or resisted? And, crucially, what could this comparative method reveal about whether aesthetic judgements of taste produced classed hierarchies in visual culture?

Because this thesis is 'by compilation', Chapters 4 to 7 (each of which takes the form of a journal article) contain brief overviews of this methodology thereby generating some repetition on the subject. This chapter, however, will cover substantial details of the research method that

were not able to be captured in the short journal-article format of subsequent chapters. The thesis consists of a piece of creative work (the book of photographs) and an accompanying exegesis. For this reason, UTS requires that the thesis be shorter than it would be for a traditional doctorate, with the creative work representing a significant contribution to the intellectual work of the project.

The research design for this project has the following key facets, each of which is expanded upon in the sections that follow:

- conceptual framework, which drives this practice through post-structural feminism, the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Skeggs and McKee;
- reflective, practice-led and qualitative inquiry using photoshoots as the chief source of data for analysis;
- the researcher in an auto-ethnographic capacity as a professional photographer;
- participants, being eight female-presenting (see below for what is meant by this) people who publish sexy selfies to their Instagram accounts;
- collaborate, compare and contrast using participants' own selfies to compare with the co-created images of them; and
- interviews (semi-structured) before and after the photoshoots.

Conceptual Framework

'Since the 1980s, feminist and critical researchers have called for methodological shifts that allow us to work more deliberately, consciously, and meaningfully with participants' (Rice et al., 2020).

In the previous chapter I reviewed the literature about sexualisation, selfies and feminist approaches to sex. Here I look at the theoretical work that informs the development of my research question, data-gathering and analysis. As I noted above in relation to methods, each of the journal articles included as Chapters 4 to 7 also includes an account of my conceptual framework, and in order to avoid excessive repetition I focus here on providing a sense of the overall intellectual framework that guides the project.

This research is underpinned by the theories of Michel Foucault on the discursive production of sexuality and power, and by Pierre Bourdieu for his demonstration of the relationship between the concept of 'taste' and class demarcation. It also relies on a post-structural feminist framework that is best expressed through Beverley Skeggs' important work on class and gender.

Foucault theorises that the discourses of the day will always inform the meanings made of social practices – that they are culturally, historically and socially constructed and cannot be abstracted from these sites. Beyond considerations of truths or falsities of claims made by specific disciplines within society, he was interested in *how* these disciplines function, with particular respect to 'the shifting ways that the body and the social institutions related to it have entered into political relations' (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984: 10). Foucault argues that a society's particular,

specific regimes of power and knowledge work to produce and regulate its subjects through power relations and that power is not centralised, but dispersed, shifting, relational and everywhere. Power is operationalised, maintained and changed 'through ceaseless struggles and confrontations (which) transforms, strengthens or reverses them' (Foucault in Weedon, 1987: 109). Fundamental to these power relations is individual subjectification – 'those processes of self-formation in which the person is active' as an object of knowledge and therefore 'always already implicated in circuits of power' (Foucault in Weedon, 1987: 110). Further, the social conditions and mores of the time will produce dominant, normative discourses through which individual subjects are assessed as belonging to or perverse to (outside of) them.

Foucault's theories hold then, that women's sexuality is constructed discursively and socially (Weedon, 1987: 105) and is also, as Skeggs (1997: 121) describes, 'foremost…a class-bound project'. Foucault's concepts of sexuality and gender, as Skeggs (1997: 121) notes, are 'produced through various technologies, institutional organisation and discourse, epistemologies and practices'. What power structures are produced and reproduced by women making and distributing sexy selfies? What regimes of power are at work to produce and control women's sexuality and how might these regimes of power manifest in photographic aesthetics? How do sexy selfie takers discipline and regulate their own bodies in respect of normative discourses surrounding female sexuality in this cultural context?

It is often noted that Bourdieu's theories initially seemed to offer little to feminism (Pini and Previte, 2013; Adkins and Skeggs, 2004) or ignored feminism outright (Skeggs, 2004b). McRobbie notes though, that Bourdieu demonstrated that women were clearly also subject to callous class distinctions (McRobbie, 2004) and his theories have proven useful for scholars working at the intersections of class and gender (Pini and Previte, 2013; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Skeggs, 2004a; Taylor, 2011).

Bourdieu's (1984) theories on 'taste' and 'the field' emerge here as key frameworks through which to critically approach classed notions of sexuality and aesthetics. For Bourdieu (1990), aesthetic judgements of cultural objects correspond to taste formation as they align with class-specific situations, rather than objects containing some kind of inherent meaning that sits outside of class. He maintains that photography is a field 'therefore defined in relation to the photographing subject, and not in relation to the object photographed' (Bourdieu, 1990: 109). Notably for this project, the practices and appreciations of low- and high-brow art forms have 'served to identify and even sustain class boundaries in society' (Veenstra, 2010: 86). Cultural capital is produced by delimiting a society's aesthetic output in the very interests of establishing class and maintaining this classed field. Bourdieu's conceptualisation of the field establishes further that, societally, groups divide themselves into distinct areas or fields that form capital (cultural or otherwise) and create unique sets of rules. Women's amateur, sexy self-representations and attendant practices are situated, therefore, in a discursive class context, just as my professional photography is situated in this way – though the regime of professional photography carries more cultural capital (see Chapters 4 and 7 for further explorations on this).

'The construction of sexualisation and by extension sexualised selfies, as a social problem then justifies the intervention of gatekeepers of a particular field to control that field' (Chittenden, 2010: 86). Bourdieu's early work on photography (1990) argued that even a medium which was democratic 'and had not yet acquired an elaborate set of aesthetic judgment criteria, could still sustain social hierarchies and class divisions' (Carrabine, 2012: 468). What are the markers of class in the aesthetics of sexualisation? And how does contemporary feminism contend with the differences between sexy representations and sexual objectification?

Owing largely to the unique research design, it has been difficult to ground this project in a singular feminist framework. I lean again here on Skeggs (2008) who laments that feminism created its own spaces in academia and left many class conversations behind. She takes a post-structural and socialist-feminist approach to her work and insists that 'much about class and gender has been falsely separated' (Skeggs, 2008: para 3). Invariably, I also employ an intersectional-feminist framework which contends with 'the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness in the context of antidiscrimination and social movement politics' (Cho et al., 2013). It asserts that feminism cannot achieve its aims if it is not inclusive of a diversity of women, nor cognisant of the intersection of gender with class, race, sexuality, ability, appearance, age and so forth.

All data gathered will be subject to post-structural textual analysis which takes the approach that meaning-making of texts is heavily informed by culture and that 'no single representation of reality can be the *only* true one' (McKee, 2003: 10). It holds that universal truths be met with suspicion (Foucault and Rabinow, 1984), yet allows that a culturally dominant discourse (Foucault et al., 1978) or set of discourses will be present in any focused post-structural analysis (McKee, 2003).

Reflective and Practice-led Inquiry

While creative, practice-related research is now established as a well-respected form of data-gathering (Hawkins and Wilson, 2017; Stock, 2010) there remain several points of disagreement about how it should be understood (Brook, 2010; Stewart, 2003) and operationalised (Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014). While Candy (2006) insists that all forms of data-gathering involving creativity should be named as either 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' (and distinguishes between the two), other writers insist on the importance of using a 'praxis' method (Stewart, 2003; Williams, 2013) or 'craft-based' (Blake et al., 2018) approach to this type of research. Smith and Dean (2009: 2) include the terms 'creative research' and 'practice as research' under this umbrella and note that 'the terminologies are a means to characterise the way in which practice can result in research insights, such as those that arise out of making a creative work'. Simple as this sounds, the process of locating this research project in a particular community of practice and theory has not been a neat one.

Much of the literature on the varying descriptors of creative, practice-related methodologies pertains to particular disciplinary conventions which relate to, but do not encapsulate, this project's research design. For example, there is a clear, contemporary understanding of the 'researcher as artist' where method is, roughly, written into the discipline itself – the practice of art-making is so central to the research that method design is about refinement of practice rather than establishing that there is a practice. It is also constituted by the privileging of the development of the art and artist (Skains, 2018). While fine art is not entirely unrelated to my professional photography practice (my degree is in fine art), I must be clear that I shoot commercial portraits for popular media and I present this as a selling point to prospective participants. While it offers a small disruption to the academic encounter with photography (few commercial photographers opt to do a doctorate), it presents a methodological – and descriptive – difficulty for me as there is little precedent upon which to draft the research design.

Like the conventions and methodological precedents found in other disciplines engaging in practice-based projects, fine art research has structure which my project can only 'cherry-pick' from, rather than tether to. This research methodology is informed then, by art-based methodologies, as well as 'reflection-in-action' practices (Schön, 1987), theories which describe the turn toward photographic collaboration (Palmer, 2013) and also a 'feminist praxis' which is employed to destabilise the power differential between participant and researcher (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch, 2012; Rice et al., 2020). Its fundamental design meant that a blurring of several boundaries needed to occur: between researcher and participant; fine art and commercial photography; industry and the academy; and the respective disciplines of art and humanities, each of which has its own set of languages and customs. As Jungnickl and Hjorth (2014: 137) note though, 'textures, ideas, objects, artefacts, places, people and emotions that are difficult to deal with within the traditional confines of social science' speak of the increasing need for respondent methods of inquiry that are not linear, but complex and allow room for cross-disciplinary approaches that invigorate the methodological imagination. It is a view likely to be shared by Hawkins and Wilson (2017: 83) when they insist that 'if your work is bringing into question or testing an established conceptual model, then you are doing research'.

Photography is well-established as a methodological tool for conducting research (Burles and Thomas, 2014; Castleden et al., 2008; Rose, 2012), but these conventions complicate, rather than simplify my research design. Gillian Rose describes three forms of photography which are commonly used as research tools and queries their potential for offering access to information in critical social science projects where there is an aim 'to account for social difference and hierarchy' (Rose, 2012: 299). Photo-documentation records a specific phenomenon, photo-elicitation has research participants as the image-makers and subjects of interviews which accompany their photographs, and photo-essays are a series of images constructed with an intention to elucidate, with images, on a chosen social situation. There is also the well-established technique of using 'photovoice' in social research (Palmer, 2013), which involves participants usually taking photos in response to a particular social situation. Researchers are divided on the best use of photographs

in practice-led projects, given the contentious nature of 'reading' images and making meaning (Schwartz, 1989). Many favour a methodological approach that has accompanying interviews (Glaw et al., 2017) so that the information a photograph contains can be better accessed, while others privilege photographic collaboration as meaning-making in itself (Palmer, 2013).

There is a departure in my research practice from the forms of photography described by Rose on two counts: the making of photographs is designed to occur in collaboration with research participants, and my status as a professional photographer enables a dialogue of comparison between professional photographic practices and amateur photographic practices, as they pertain to women's sexual self-expression. This design also enables unusual and especially prominent engagement from participants as they are encouraged to direct me, rather than the other way around (though naturally there is reciprocity). It is a practice akin to what Harper (2002: 15) suggests might 'be regarded as a postmodern dialogue based on the authority of the subject rather than the researcher'. Though I am in sympathy with this, my research design is intended to create something of an inter-subjective, 'shared agency' (Pink, 2013) between myself and participant, notwithstanding the obvious power imbalance that my structural privilege brings, rendering true mutuality impossible (which I discuss in Chapter 6). The approach allows insight into participants' perspectives as they reflect on their own and the co-created photographs, in conversation with me, and produces original data through an original method.

The final component of the research design is my own reflective practice on the regimes of professional photography, through my obvious experience, and in reading the co-created images through this prism – at once applying professional knowledge, and also accounting for professional (and therein class) privilege. I draw here on the 'reflection in action' theory of Donald A Schön (1987) who suggests this is a methodology which has sat too much outside of academic spheres – partly through a crisis in professional confidence and partly through a kind of 'ivory tower' mentality. He makes a claim for the unique importance of professional practice that is reflected upon, positioning it as a space for the further development of practice itself and for opening up enquiries into fields that have been segregated from traditional academic modes of inquiry. Schön (1995: 8) calls for 'an epistemology of practice' that assumes 'practitioners usually know more than they can say'. To this point, Schwartz (1989) cautions that there are limitations in using photography as a research tool with little understanding of the histories, cultures and social practices surrounding photography. A welcome point, from my perspective, which invites a unique, experiential positioning for the professional practitioner.

The particular practice-led and reflective methodological framework I have developed might best be understood as a 'container' which holds various methods, techniques, concepts and frameworks borrowed from across disciplines, theories and industry, and which, by its nature, promotes new knowledge. It is imperfect and somewhat fluid, with the potential for what Schwartz (1989) describes as an ambiguity that is useful for enabling a rich place for 'data mining' and what Jungnickel and Hjorth (2014: 139) insist is an 'inventiveness of methods for artists and ethnographers who operate not just as ways of knowing the social but also for engaging it'.

The Researcher-Practitioner

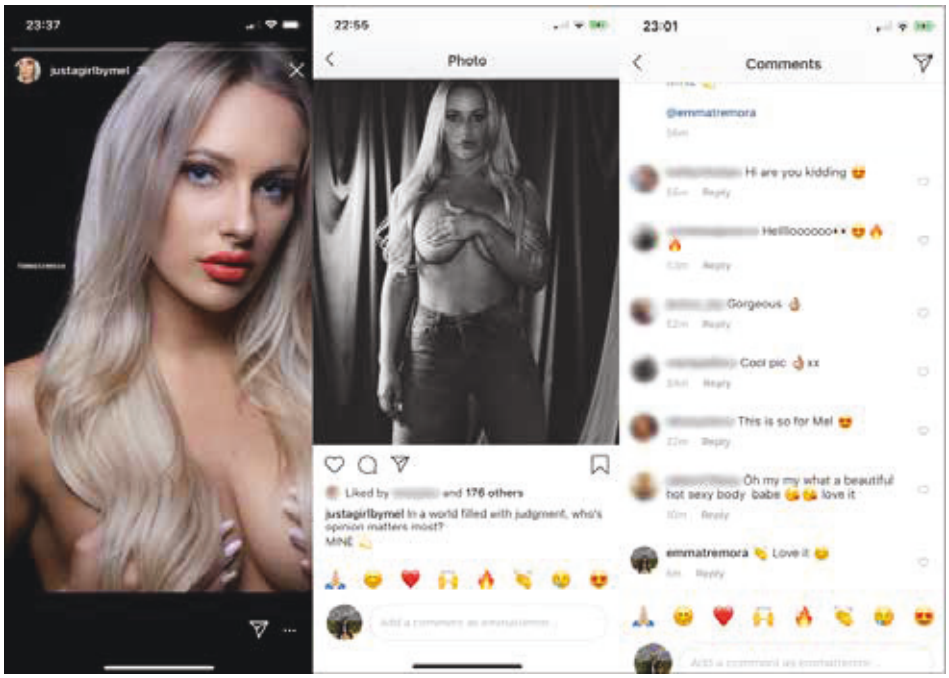
Given that the research design places myself as photographer and researcher in collaboration with participants, it feels appropriate, if unconventional, to describe a little of my professional practice and background and to foreground it at this point.

I have twelve years' experience as a professional photographer working across various Australian media and advertising platforms. My work is primarily commercial portraiture and clients include magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Marie Claire*, *FHM*, *Good Weekend* and *Sunday Life*; and advertisers such as Leo Burnett, DDB and JWT. I have been commissioned for billboards, book covers, editorial spreads, fashion and music promotion, with images ranging from highly-polished portraits designed to sell cream cheese to reportage-type portraits of female soldiers suffering post-traumatic stress disorder. I have been a finalist in the National Photographic Portrait Prize and the Moran Contemporary Photography Prize, and I also belong to a small art collective called See Jane Run which creates and exhibits photographic work on contemporary feminist themes. I have a commercial agent who represents me in Melbourne and Sydney.

My style is regarded as constructed, designed and tableaux – as opposed to journalistic, documentary or 'natural' – and might be related stylistically (but not in scale) with the mainstream aesthetic sensibilities of Annie Leibovitz (2008). I work largely from a commercial photographic studio where I often employ the use of extensive and deliberate artificial lighting (as opposed to daylight) and my shoots regularly involve an art director, stylists, hair and make-up artists and a producer. My photography is subject to a three-stage production process: pre-production (design, testing, location, model and prop sourcing); shooting; and post-production which is the retouching stage. This three-stage process also occurred in the collaborations with participants for this project.

I positioned myself in this project in a semi-autoethnographic way which largely took shape as reflections-on-practice, the inclusion of my industry knowledge and journaling which occurred after shooting and also after each interview. Below is a short excerpt from a journal entry from June, 2019:

> 10/6/19, up late working and I see that Mel tags me in a new post, following my sending her the latest lot of images (that she chose during our interview the previous Friday).
>
> In previous meetings and in the posting of her first lot of images (22nd May, 28th May and 3rd June), Mel expressed a reticence to show too much boob. She cropped the black and white that I thought has minimal 'boob' so that it wasn't showing that region at all. She continually uses the word 'tasteful'. I also get the distinct impression that she isn't showing more of her body as she is worried about the judgement of others, even though she says she's never experienced criticism. It definitely feels like there is a code she's adhering to and/or a set of aesthetic tropes that are informing her decision to 'keep it tasteful'.



So this choice by her to show these two images on 10/6/19 is very interesting as it feels like she is pushing her own boundaries and wanting to express without fear. Her caption is fascinating. I am struck by the idea that we might be informing each other's choices here.

11/6/19 8.36am I see that the photos are no longer there! Has she taken them down or Insta?'

Participants

I approached sexy selfie takers on Instagram by sending them a direct message which included my brief résumé and an invitation to do a professional photoshoot with me as part of a research project critiquing the sexualisation debates. I chose Instagram for its standing as the pre-eminent image-based platform amongst social media platforms and for its wide popularity as a site of sexy selfie dissemination (Tiidenberg, 2018). I employed a purposive sampling method which, as Rebecca S Robinson (2014: 5243) makes clear, is the 'iterative' and 'intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon' to engage prospective participants. This had its origins in a meeting with a researcher at an academic conference who

Figure 1. A sample of participants' selfies, as they appear on Instagram.

regularly posts sexy selfies (the style of which is described below) to her Instagram account. On the assumption that she would exist in a community of at least some like-minded women, I clicked on a number of her selfies with the purpose of investigating whether her followers, likers and commenters might be suitable for the project, so that I might then send them the abovementioned invitation.

The following parameters were established for participant inclusion. It was required that they be:

- living in Australia;
- female-presenting – in line with conventions of Western feminine 'heterosexiness' (see Dobson (2011) and Adriana (2018), and I acknowledge that this is a problematic term without describing what is meant by it in this context); and
- active on Instagram with a dominance of sexy selfies on their account, none of which appear to have any professional photographic intervention.

People who were identified as falling within these parameters (as discussed on page 32 and explored in more detail below) were contacted through Instagram with a direct message inviting them to be involved in the project in the following capacity:

- as a self-photographer (where their existing selfies would be included in the study);
- as a collaborator with me on the design, production, implementation and post-production of images of themselves, photographed by me; and
- as the subject of two semi-structured interviews – one before and one following the photoshoot.

Once a person agreed to be part of the project, I sent them additional information, including notice of ethics approval, and we agreed on a date for the first semi-structured interview.

I recruited and worked with eight participants. A project like this one, which involves deep and lengthy engagement with participants (including co-creation of materials), does not need as many participants as a large-scale quantitative survey, for example. I originally intended to recruit ten participants. Unfortunately, the spread of COVID-19 in Australia, and associated restrictions on travel and physical meetings, impacted my ability to recruit and to work with participants. In discussions with my supervisor, we agreed that the data gathered with eight participants is of sufficient scale to suit a creative doctoral project by compilation.

As mentioned in the previous section, I sought participants whose aesthetics aligned with what dominant Western discourses might describe as 'overt', 'rude' or 'vulgar' sexiness (Kipnis, 1999; McKee, 2012; Skeggs, 2004a). I expand upon this idea in more detail in Chapters 4 to 7, where I demonstrate that such discourses are classed, though this is often masked by so-called 'concern' or 'innocent' expressions of taste. My profession gives consistent attention to making women appear 'respectable' (Skeggs, 2004a) or to them displaying 'appropriate' (read middle-class) femininity (McRobbie, 2009). I wanted to work with women whose aesthetic choices are often marginalised both by some academic feminists and the kind of dominant, mainstream commentary that attaches to my profession. My work in Australian visual culture, academic spheres and my own middle-class status has meant that I understand, to some degree, the ways aesthetic hierarchies are operationalised, and I wanted to hear from, work with and 'see' women whose aesthetic has not been valued.

In assessing how this kind of sexiness might be read as 'overt', 'rude' or 'vulgar' for the purposes of approaching prospective participants, I looked for a combination of all or some of the following aesthetic markers: nakedness or near-nakedness, full and/or pouty lips, strong make-up, colourful or prominent fingernails, an incline of the head, a focus on breasts, a focus on buttocks, selfies shot near-nude with a mirror and/or in a bathroom or bedroom, revealing clothing, tattoos and fairly direct or bright light. Stylistically, much of this could be described in not-very-academic-terms as 'the Kim Kardashian look'. It was Kardashian, after all, who featured in my opening sentence each time I used the 'BBQ statement' description of my research as a way of quickly conveying the kind of aesthetic I was working with. Participants were then chosen based on their display of this aesthetic, their interest in the project and the viability of us working together (at one stage a woman from Perth wanted to be a part of the project, but neither she nor I could make the trip across the country). Many women did not respond to my initial request to them and it soon became clear that 'I needed them more than they needed me'. Consequently there was no shortlist to work from where I could choose participants. Largely it was a drip-feed of interest and so it was that if timing and location were conducive to both parties, we decided to work together.

As I write this, I am starkly aware of the loaded nature of each of these descriptors and how subjectively they might be read – or troubling they may seem to some readers. This is complex cultural and methodological terrain. At the time of designing this approach, I reflected at length

on the kinds of aesthetic biases I might possess and the extent to which they might emerge as symbolic violences for the participants (see more on this in Chapter 4).

Meanings which are attributed to sexy (or any) aesthetics are constructed discursively, relationally and in ever-shifting ways. As Foucault (1984) argues, aesthetic value is produced through hierarchies of power which use language (visual or otherwise) to delineate difference. Bourdieu (1984) found clear differences by class in his research subjects' aesthetic and stylistic preferences, and argued that there was no innate value in the preferences of middle- and upper-class people to those of working-class people. He proposed that the power differential between classes enabled middle- and upper-class tastes to dictate where aesthetic value is attributed and that this creates aesthetic systems of 'symbolic violence' for those whose tastes do not accord with the dominant group.

In attempting to establish a set of sexy aesthetic criteria and their class implications, it is necessary to hold the arguments of Foucault and Bourdieu in mind while assessing what kinds of cultural powers might be dictating the value of certain sexy aesthetics and thereby enforcing class structures. I return here to my earlier discussion about Kim Kardashian's appearance on the cover of Vogue and Anna Wintour's leveraging of this to position Kardashian as aesthetically 'low class' by inferring she is not tasteful. Kardashian is world-famous for a sexy aesthetic which emphasises overt display of her buttocks, breasts, pouty lips, tight-fitting clothing, obvious make-up and amateur, everyday-nude selfies. It is these qualities which Wintour is referring to when she marks Kardashian as lacking in taste. Because of her cultural power (marked in part by the way her privilege allows her to criticise others wilfully as she will not 'fall' from her comforts for so doing), Wintour demonstrates precisely what Foucault and Bourdieu refer to – and help us to understand why the sexy aesthetics of Kardashian (and women who emulate her) come to be regarded as 'trashy' – a word often associated with the working class (Skeggs, 1997).

Further to this, I note that recent work by Drenten, et al. (2018), which discusses sexualised labour in the context of female social media influencers, draws a link between so-called porn-chic imagery and negative outcomes for women who create such imagery. The authors therefore cast this kind of imagery as consequently lacking in value. Despite their claim to focus generally on platformed sexualised female labour, they direct their concerns only at women who display something akin to the Kardashian aesthetic. Indeed they specify the nature of this aesthetic: 'Throughout our data, influencers consistently pose in ways that highlight body parts, wear tight, short and revealing clothing and employ gestures such as gently pulling their hair, touching their parted lips and simulating undressing.' (p.51). While the authors are not Anna Wintour, they possess a level of cultural, social and class power as academics which allows them, in the Bourdieusian sense, to dictate where aesthetic value is attributed. Their highlighting of only one kind of sexy aesthetic as problematic (there are many kinds of sexy aesthetics!) provides insight into the discursive and relational ways that such aesthetics come to be marked as classed.

The photographic industry to which I belong is a component of such systems. It has constrained the breadth of acceptable aesthetics by often perpetuating an ideal of female sexuality

Figure 2. Some behind-the-scenes shots in studio.

and presentation which is in accordance with norms of middle-class feminine decorum. Image 'grammars', such as pouty lips or 'excessive' tattoos, are here regarded as negative feminine traits, and such terms are intentionally used in a 'symbolically violent' way to ensure hierarchies of power in visual culture (and more broadly) are maintained. The rhetoric of sexualisation means that 'certain styles of working-class dress and conduct are read as indicative of deficient femininity, lacking in the decorum and sophistication of its middle-class equivalents' (Jackson, 2011: 16). The concept of sexualisation therefore becomes coded in the service of maintaining one's social field (Bourdieu, 1984) and in so doing enforces difference and prejudice.

My fear then, was that in seeking participants whose images contained 'negative' grammars, I might be contributing, perversely, to dominant discourses which have rendered some women's sexualities unfair sites of concern. I worried that in using these aesthetic descriptors, I would be perpetuating a form of class and gender discipline (Burns, 2015) on prospective participants. I

rested somewhat in the knowledge that the foundations of the project would safeguard partly against this since the key research drive is whether an analysis of aesthetics in this context might reveal the nature of classist discourses. The project is fundamentally about the way in which aesthetic markers are read. If there is bias, class or otherwise, against certain sexy aesthetics, then it was important to name these aesthetics from the outset and to notice where differences between professional and amateur aesthetics might be producing and affirming class hierarchy.

The process was initially uncomfortable but eased as I came to understand that value is placed on aesthetics in a deeply cultural way and that a dominant culture often fails to recognise its capacity for arbitrary value-making, preferring instead to believe that aesthetics which accord with its tastes are inherently 'right' or morally 'good'. Singling out prospective participants for aesthetic markers which my own Western, white and middle-class culture generally constructs as lacking in value initially made me wonder if perhaps I was not paying enough attention to the power relations at play. This changed once it was clear to me that to undertake research in this area necessitated an engagement both with the producers of these marginalised aesthetics and with a method of self-reflection that would facilitate co-created, cross-cultural production of data. None of this, of course, addresses any other ways that relations of power played out between me and the

participants: these are discussed in Chapters 4 to 7, though there is not the scope here for the level of analysis this warrants. It would, in itself, make for an interesting, stand-alone research project.

Lastly, I wish to state that I make no claims about the class status of the participants. This research project examines the aesthetic languages of particular images and the ways class prejudice may be read into them.

Collaborate, Compare and Contrast

The methodological device of collaboration is not new. There is a recent 'turn towards' collaboration in contemporary photography (Palmer, 2013) and an increasing inclusion of participants-as-collaborators in research projects (Aldrich and Al-Turk, 2018). Harper (2002: 23) suggests further that the collaborative effort of two or more people deliberating over the meaning of photographs is 'an ideal model for research'. Partly, it is in the spirit of research 'integration and inclusiveness' (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch, 2012) and a desire to elevate women's voices into the academy that I choose a collaborative approach to the research design. It has been designed to be in community with other scholarly work that utilises participatory photography, such as that undertaken by Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch (2012) and Leon-Quijano (2019), and to also operate as a unique method that brings together two different regimes of photography – a technique perhaps especially useful at this time of image ubiquity (Jurgenson, 2019).

There is a myth that characterises a general view of photographers as solo artists who rarely work in collaboration with others and, as Palmer (2013) points out, this myth largely disables the possibility for recognising that much of photography is co-created. In the commercial photography industry, for example, shoots are routinely crafted by a team of people that might include an art director, hair and make-up artist, wardrobe or set stylist, model, producer and retoucher as well as the photographer. And yet, there is often an aggrandisement of the photographer, despite the co-created nature of the photoshoot. Copyright of images usually automatically belongs to the photographer and rarely are collaborators credited in the way that photographers are (in magazines, for example). The same can be said of art photography where many disputes over authorship have arisen from a model claiming rights or money owed to them by a photographer who ignored their collaborative labour.

The collaborative approach taken here acknowledges the history of this myth and its sidelining impact on under-acknowledged collaborators, and seeks instead to disrupt this dominant narrative such that the work is actually collaborative and that it is promoted that way. Participants were encouraged, from the outset, to treat the shoot as though they had commissioned me to shoot for them. This means they step into both an art director and model role. I asked them to provide me with image references that approximated the look they wanted to achieve and to expand on why they liked the images. They were also asked to write a handful of words to describe themselves and then a handful of words to describe their aspirational selves. I, too, provided image references in

response to theirs as a way to prompt discussion, and these were usually quite stylistically varied so as not to be too leading. This process sometimes flowed back and forth several times before the participant and I agreed on a design.

Following this, I would usually seek out an appropriate location to carry out the shoot and send rough images of the location to the participant for approval. Venues included a photographic studio or a space that was already fitted with décor or furniture that was in keeping with the shoot design. At times we shot in cafes, once in a movie theatre and another occasion on a rooftop carpark. Before and during the shoots, there were lengthy discussions about what the participant would wear and what kind of hair and make-up treatment they might (or might not) like. One chose to do her own. Following the shoot, the participant received all the images and was asked to select favourites, which I would then retouch, again in conversation with the participant. All participants (except one) uploaded some or all of these images to their own Instagram accounts and I uploaded some to mine. Throughout this process I journaled my reflections.

Drawing from Laurier et al.'s (2008) work with professional and amateur video editors and also some elements of photo-elicitation methodology (Rose, 2012), each participant and I would sit together with all of the photos while I conducted the second semi-structured interview. Their comparative observations of the co-created images with their own selfies, as well as some comparison between co-created images, then formed the core data for an analysis of aesthetic difference and underscored my own comparative analyses. This process of immersion in the shoot and ensuing reflective dialogue about what the shoot produced might be likened to an 'inside and outside' (Gibson, 2010: 11) experience which both generates and synthesises knowledge. This method of comparing and contrasting images is used to assess the aesthetic break-down of images so as to gain some knowledge into the kinds of class and culture-bound meaning-making that arises from their reception. It also allows some insight into the importance of visual/cultural context and how this might inform why some sexy aesthetics become legitimised whilst others are marginalised.

Schwartz (1989: 120) suggests that 'photographic meaning is conceptualised [by others] as being contained within the image itself' and goes on to challenge this idea by proposing that photographic 'meaning is actively constructed, not passively received' in a dynamic process of interaction between the photographer, spectator and image. The method I have employed here plunges together two photographers, two spectators, one model and a series of amateur and professional images and, through dialogic conversation, insists on enlivening Barthes' (1988) theory that photographs are 'polysemic' – that multiple meanings can be constructed of them. Out of this, a little new knowledge may be gleaned.

Interviews

Each participant engaged in two semi-structured interviews. The questions that follow are a sample of the kinds of questions a participant would be asked in the first interview, ahead of the photoshoot.

1. How do you describe the way you represent yourself?
2. What choices do you make about the visual aspects of your images?
3. How do these choices relate to the way you like to represent yourself?
4. Who or what influences your choices about how you represent yourself?
5. How do they impact your choices in this regard?
6. Are you aware of the so-called sexualisation debates?
7. Do you have a political position on them, with respect to your own representations?
8. Popular opinion believes much of the kind of imagery you create is damaging, both for you and other young women. That it might be corrupting of your innocence and 'vulgar' or 'trashy'. What do you say to this?

And this is a sample of the kinds of questions a participant would be asked following the photoshoot:

1. How did you find the shoot? Was it what you expected?
2. Why did you say 'yes' to the shoot in the first place?
3. There is an element of control you have to hand over to me. Was that okay?
4. Which images do you like the most (of what we shot) and why? Any particular photos that really inspire you? Any of them leave you cold?
5. Between these images [participant looking at a number of similar co-creations], which do you prefer and why?
6. What did you hope you would get from these photographs that would be different from your selfies?
7. What is sexy to you? What is sexy to you in a photograph? What influences your thoughts on sexiness?
8. What would you not do in a photograph? Why?
9. Do you feel any pressure to look a certain way?
10. A lot of discussions on women taking selfies like this focus on authenticity versus fakeness. Do you have any thoughts on that?

At the conclusion of this 'research methods' section and ahead of the following set of discussion chapters, I return, briefly, to the key argument of this project: that mainstream feminist discourses which focus on risk and harm to women who take sexy selfies, often mask prejudice regarding

class and gender. Through the privileging of professional and fine-art sexy aesthetics over everyday, amateur sexy aesthetics, women's bodies become subject to social regulation which marginalises their sexual and self-representational experiences. It is a form of middle-class policing which seeks to 'make respectable' the female bodies of sexy selfies that it has discursively 'othered' as lacking in 'appropriate' feminine sexuality.

The next four chapters of this thesis are dedicated to discussion of the project's original findings that have shaped this argument and also to the significant contribution that these findings make. Each chapter, as mentioned, has been structured according to the requirements of the journal that it has been published in (or submitted to). Since they are 'stand-alone' papers which have been compiled into this particular thesis format, I have provided a foreword to each, as a way of linking them, and also a short statement immediately following chapter seven to link with the final chapter of the thesis. Each chapter draws on the interview data from multiple participants, co-created photographs as well as their own photographs and components of the journaling that I did throughout the project.

Chapter four concentrates on the findings gathered in working with Simone, chapter five focuses on the findings gathered in working with Bec, chapter seven engages with the data produced in the collaborations with both Michelle and Mel and chapter seven reveals findings from the work with both Blair and Kris.

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Chapter Four

‘It’s classy because you can’t see things’: data from a project co-creating sexy images of young women

Foreword

This paper was prepared for the journal *Feminist Media Studies* and was accepted for publication on November 17th, 2020. It is the first of four substantive chapters included here which discuss the project's findings in detail. "It's classy because you can't see things" was written according to the requirements of the journal (including keeping to no more than 8500 words) and contains an abstract, introduction, description of the research project from which the paper emerged and its methodology, a brief review of relevant literature, discussion of findings and conclusion. The chapter focuses on participant Simone. It is made up of a number of the images that emerged from the photoshoot with her, as well as her own selfies, and it expands on other aspects of the unique collaboration with her, including interview data and pre-production methods.

This chapter locates Simone's sexy selfies as 'problematic' within the mainstream feminist discourses of concern that I have discussed in previous chapters. It demonstrates how comparing her images with those we co-created can reveal some of the ways in which classism operates in the sexualisation debates through language – both aesthetic and verbal. These languages are often mobilised by mainstream feminist discourses (here described as 'academic' and 'public' discourses), to justify interventionist and regulatory approaches to women's sexy selfie making practices. It further demonstrates how the respective regimes of professional and amateur image-making produce and affirm certain hierarchies in visual culture which are often overlooked amidst the dominance of moral panic and protectionism over women's sexy self-representations.

What constitutes sexy? When is it ok to be sexy in a photograph and what conditions dictate this?

Abstract

Public and academic debates about sexualisation suggest that selfies taken by women of their own bodies, for display on Instagram, are sexualising and harming them. This paper reports on a 'compare and contrast' project where a professional photographer (myself) took photographs of women who are sexy self-representers on Instagram. It is an examination of the aesthetics and practices of amateur and professional photography in this context, and draws attention to the role of class in making aesthetic judgements about women's sexy selfies. I argue that these respective photographic regimes produce and affirm their own sets of values which reveal the hierarchical and prejudiced nature of visual (and wider) culture as it relates to representations of women's bodies. I report on the verbal and visual languages used by participants and myself to make visible differing classed standards, through the concepts of what is 'tasteful' and what is 'vulgar'. Dominant discourses about sexualised self-representations of women that focus on risks to the selfie-taker mask prejudices regarding class. The privileging of professional or 'high art' aesthetics over amateur, 'everyday aesthetics' perpetuates a policing and marginalising of women's bodies and sexualities and helps maintain long-standing ideals of female respectability and sexual decorum.

Introduction

'It's sexy because you can see the bum, but it's classy because you can't see things', Simone tells me. I've asked her to describe what sexy means to her, in the context of her selfies on Instagram. She explains that she loves displays of sexiness, but laments that her own photographic outputs are not regarded with the same level of acceptability as professional or fine art images, even if all are in so-called 'sexualised' terrain. 'If it's professionally done and you can see it's professionally done – accepted. If it's not professionally done, it automatically gets classed as "just another butt photo". Just another girl on Insta trying to show it off'. Simone is acutely aware of the double standards which permeate her experience of making 'sexy selfies' and disseminating them on social media. She is aware of the dominant standards for women in this space and the limitations that come with them: 'I don't think there should be a standard. I want one place where it is ok to wear what I want to wear'.

Simone has a feed on Instagram: *_mind_yo_business_son*. She uses it to upload photos she takes of herself wearing lingerie or a bikini, sometimes dresses and other times t-shirts tied to reveal her abdomen. The shots are deliberate and unaffected. They directly communicate a message of overt and expressive sexuality and they invite (Simone says) a desirous gaze. They also invite, as do the Instagram feeds of her peers, a contemplation of the standards she touches on. What are they? Who maintains them and what is their function? Drawing on data generated by a project co-creating sexy representations of young women, this article argues that these standards, though obviously multi-faceted, often include class prejudice revealed through the concepts of what is 'classy' and what is 'vulgar' (Skeggs, 1997: 2; Skeggs, 2004a). They are maintained by cultural gatekeepers, in line with Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) theories of 'the field' and function, as class-bound projects do, as devices through which the 'uncultured' interloper may be detected and duly excluded (Chittenden, 2010). The focus of my attention is the application of these judgements of taste to women's sexualised self-representations, in particular where the reading of these images appear as feminist judgements of 'concern' for the self-representer.

I focus on Simone as a case study emerging from a larger project which is described below, but also draw on other participants to illustrate my arguments. In addition, the project substantially relies on the experience and knowledge I have gained as a professional photographer and art school student. I take a self-reflexive and at times auto-ethnographic approach to this as a means through which to examine how cultural and class differences are structured and reproduced.

I begin with some establishing images followed by the methodological approach; an analysis of the term 'sexy' in this context; and then a detailed consideration of the visual and verbal languages used by the participants and myself. Figure 1 shows two images of Simone. The image to the left is one of her own selfies and to the right is one of the photos we co-created. These images are further contextualised and explained in the next section.

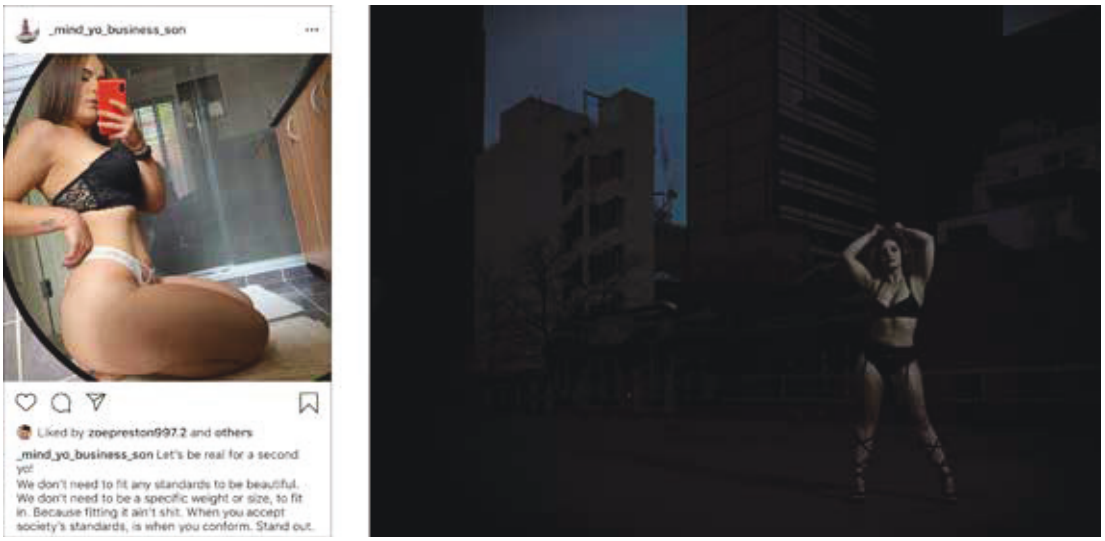

Figure 1. Simone Ryan in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

Engaging with sexy selfie makers

The project from which this paper is drawn involves an engagement between a professional photographer/academic (myself) and eight amateur female photographers who create 'sexy selfies' for Instagram. It privileges the co-creation of images between us. The two parties collaborated to produce new photographs of the selfie-taking participant, intended for upload to Instagram and as the basis for a 'compare and contrast' discussion. The project aims to provide new data about the aesthetic systems used by female sexy-selfie takers, a new perspective on the aesthetic systems by which current professional photography represents female bodies, and to make visible the differences and relationships between them. I approached prospective participants through Instagram using a purposive sampling method. I initially engaged followers of a colleague who uploads sexy selfies to Instagram, then approached some of their followers and so on. The parameters were that they live in Australia, be female-presenting and that their Instagram feeds predominantly contain 'sexy selfies'. My searches were almost entirely visual and dictated by some conventional tropes of mainstream western female sexiness. I discuss the question of what constitutes 'sexiness' in the next section.

I draw upon ten years working as a professional portrait photographer in Australian media and advertising to inform the construction of these shoots. I work in commercial and art photography, with regular commissions from publications such as *Marie Claire, Good Weekend, Rolling Stone, FHM* and clients such as Kraft, Lendlease, Bank of Melbourne and the ABC. I also belong to a photographic art collective called See Jane Run and have had portrait work appear in the National Photographic Portrait Prize. I'm conscious of the disparity in values and aesthetics between

commercial and art photography and have attempted to position myself somewhere between the two. I have cultivated an aesthetic which might be described in relatively commercial/professional terms – the portraits are visually pleasing and accessible to the viewer; they are carefully crafted through design (as opposed to documentary or photojournalistic approaches) and have a 'studio' feel that comes from controlled lighting and composition.

I am very familiar with co-creation, having worked regularly with art directors, make-up artists, stylists and brand managers. With this project I am interested to see how co-creation with amateur sexy-selfie producers helps make visible the aesthetic systems used by participants and draw comparisons with my own. I encouraged each participant to bring their ideas and wishes for how they would like to be photographed and suggested they treat it as though they had commissioned a professional photoshoot. Each shoot was different, and yet collectively they produced a set of languages which help make explicit the standards that Simone refers to and how aesthetic judgements of taste function in the context of debates about sexualisation. In interpreting the data, I used a post-structural approach and drew from both Alan McKee's *Textual Analysis* (2003) and Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2012) as frameworks for analysis.

The photoshoots took place throughout 2019. Each participant was engaged in a semi-structured interview before and after the photoshoot, and in 'pre-production' discussions so that we both arrived at an agreed-upon idea. We shared reference imagery and the participants described to me their character traits and aspirations. I knew that none had been professionally photographed so I encouraged participants' creative input and consciously created safe and relaxing environments. Yet I am aware that my professional status creates a perception of legitimisation and knowledge that affords me what Burcu Korkmazer, Sander de Ridder and Sofie van Bauwel (2020) refer to as an 'authoritative voice'. The context in which these co-creations are made is a hierarchical visual culture laden with standards and judgements about what makes 'good' photography and it has a long history of privileging both the traditionally-learned and the professional eye. This uneven distribution of power diminishes, of course, the possibility of truly mutual collaboration and yet we are still producing new information about the production of sexy selfies through a (primarily) visual dialogue between two agents.

In most shoots, I involved a make-up artist and stylist. We primarily attended to the concepts that the participant and I had designed and also allowed for creative meandering to lead us to unplanned shots. Following the photoshoot, participants chose their favourite images and I retouched them. Every selected image underwent some post-production, in consultation with the participant. Most received a grading treatment (a global colour palette, tone and contrast application) and others had attunements related to skin smoothing or artefact removal (a clean-up of errant leaves on the ground for example). One requested small modifications to her body shape. All participants except one uploaded a series of these images to their Instagram feeds and I uploaded to mine. We then engaged in the follow-up semi-structured interview where we looked through the images together and talked about them. Amongst other questions, I asked about their experience in shooting in a professional setting; I placed images side-by-side and asked them to

explain why they preferred one over the other; I asked what beauty meant to them; if they were aware of the sexualisation debates; where they saw their images within these debates; and would this experience change anything about their self-photography. The analysis was completed by my own journaled reflections. For clarity, none of the participants were monetising their images, nor did they regard themselves as artists, in the mould perhaps of Leah Schrager (Schrager, n.d.) or Whoretography (Waring, n.d), but all were conscious to make images with attention to a set of preferred aesthetics.

Each participant was aware of the disciplining impact of the discursive moral panic surrounding selfies (Miltner and Baym, 2015) where their bodies are subject to discourses of risk, shame and agency (Dobson and Ringrose, 2016; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015; Korkmazer et al., 2020). As Anne Burns (2014: 2) notes, the kind of female subjectivity associated with selfie taking is subject to 'male-issued rules' which offer 'conventional rewards for the women who submit to discipline'. In this vein, I argue that female sexy-selfie takers are subject to the regulating and disciplining effects of gendered and classed power structures, which guard against female sexual expression that is 'immodest', 'vulgar' or speaks of so-called sexual impropriety. At the heart of the sexualisation debates is a discourse of middle-class respectability which configures women who take sexy-selfies as in need of correcting so that they meet a standard of 'female sexual decorum' (Albury, 2017: 719). In this configuration, there is little room for female agency, as choice is delegitimised and regarded as ignorant.

A visible part of sexualisation debates in the past decade has been a strain of feminist writing which worries about young women 'self-objectifying' through 'pornified' (Murphy, 2017; Gill, 2008; Dines, 2010) behaviour, including posting sexy selfies on social media. It is a risk-focused concern which is found in dominant public and academic discourses (Attwood, 2018; Paasonen et al., 2020). Underpinning this concern are popular fears of the creep of 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005): that is, that culture in general is becoming increasingly sexualised and that girls are particularly subject to it (Choate and Curry, 2009). It is argued that this places young women in danger. There are wide-ranging fears expressed about public shaming (News24, 2016); body image (Durham, 2009) and mental health issues (Rush, La Nauze and Australia Institute, 2006); loss of innocence (Liebau, 2009; Vuk, 2009); negative impacts on academic, career and personal development (Choate and Curry, 2009); the engendering of sexual servitude to men (Gemmell, 2015); and exposure to that which is 'predatory or creepy'. (Tankard-Reist, 2018: para 9) These positions of concern are contestable – little attention is brought to female sexual subjectivity or the significance of sexy selfies to the shooter. The rhetoric of concern can also be read as paternalistic interventions into women's choices which aid justifications for new forms of policing women's bodies and sexualities (Chittenden, 2010; Thiel-Stern, 2014; Sullivan and McKee, 2015; Smith and Attwood, 2011). As new self-representational forms for women burgeon, so too do regulatory practices which seek to curb or influence them.

Some writers have suggested that such concerns reveal 'class sensitivities at work' (Wood, 2018: 634) and that risk-focused discourses mask prejudices which cast women's overt, agentic sexy

selfies as vulgar, lacking in feminine decorum and with an absence of that long-standing marker of middle-class becoming – respectability (Giles, 1992; Skeggs, 1997). Yet little attention is given to the classed nature of these debates and interventions. As Yvette Taylor (2011: 3) identifies, 'sexuality frequently neglects class studies, just as class analysis ignores sexualities'. In contemporary western cultures, the concept of respectability as a signifier of class manifests in a variety of forms, but perhaps none more so than in matters of women's sexuality (Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2011). It has a relationship to historical interventions into women's choices and in regulating women's bodies which bears out as 'classed fears about the sexualisation of culture' (Wood, 2018: 633). I argue that the above-mentioned concerns arise, in part, from middle-class distaste for 'low culture' and that young women's everyday, overt, sexualised aesthetics have become a site of disgust for middle-class observers (Skeggs, 2004a) who employ discourses of concern to marginalise sexy selfie takers in the interest of maintaining class distinctions (Bourdieu, 1984).

Though my focus is on class, I acknowledge the history of feminism's exclusion of other marginalised groups and the value of academic feminist writing which takes a broader intersectional approach with regards to representation. The complex relationships between class, race, gender, sexuality, ability, religion and age shape the distinctions that are made between representations that are regarded as acceptable and those that are not – the visual privileging of what another photographic subject, Blair, refers to as 'skinny white girls'. However, there is not the scope in this paper to adequately examine the breadth of these intersectional relationships.

Whilst authors such as Katie Warfield (2018: 84) have brought important attention to the 'affective, embodied and material dimensions' of selfies (in the face of facile mainstream discourses) and Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz (2015) to the experiential and sexually liberating possibilities of them, selfies are predominantly regarded as frivolous cultural objects (Abidin, 2016; Burns, 2014). Sexy selfies are no exception. They are often constituted by a kind of **'**tits and arse' (Printweek, 2004: para 2) vulgarity which is typically regarded as being in opposition to 'classy' photographs. Bourdieu's (1984) work on 'distinction' was germinal in making clear that aesthetic judgements are not innocent, but are closely associated with class. He argues that 'cultural capital' is vital for social mobility, and that the concept of 'taste' is developed by those who are most powerful in society. Looking at the forms of photography and decoration preferred by his research subjects, Bourdieu found clear differences by class. He argued that there is no innate value to upper-class aesthetics over working-class aesthetics: and that discourses which privilege 'tasteful' aesthetic systems are a form of 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Feminist writers, such as Kathy Peiss (1986), brought these class-based insights together with an analysis of gender to examine the way that middle-class women have viewed working-class women as 'vulgar' and in need of saving. Beverley Skeggs (1997; 2004a; 2004b) has undertaken perhaps the most expansive and detailed analysis of the relationship between class and gender in Western culture, and the ways in which feminism is caught up in class judgements. Similarly, Alan McKee (2012: 543) argues that middle-class commentators use the language of aesthetics to reaffirm class distinctions that are applied to women's sexy self-representations. He notes

that 'vulgar' literally means 'of or pertaining to the common people' while '"rude"…also means "lacking in knowledge or book learning"' and suggests that there is a disturbing condemnation of working-class forms of sexuality in current attacks on raunch culture. In the contemporary Australian context, the taxonomy of class is contested (Sheppard and Biddle, 2017). In this project I'm not making claims about the class-position that the subjects claim for themselves – it is not my intention to profile participants. The focus is the discourses that are used to make sense of young women's self-representations – which, as I show in this article, are still very much informed by classed language and judgements. This project is interested in understanding if 'judgments of taste function as markers of "class"' (Carrabine, 2012: 465).

What makes a selfie sexy? Who decides and why does it matter?

One point of entry into these discourses is through an examination of sexiness. The concept of female sexiness is classed (Naezer, 2018). It is typically applied to middle-class sexualities as respectable, refined, suggestive and natural; whereas lower-class sexualities are configured as vulgar, 'slutty' and 'loose' (Gill, 2009). The concept of 'sexy selfies' draws from a generalised, popular understanding of what it is to be conventionally 'hetero-sexy' (Dobson, 2015) in the western tradition. Sexiness is therefore located and explored in two places: through the everyday, Instagram-celebrity-aesthetic favoured by participants and through the professionalised, middle-class aesthetic of my photography. Regular, amateur selfies are seen to be feminine vanity projects and have been diminished as vacuous and cheap (Abidin, 2016; Senft and Baym, 2015). Adding the term 'sexy' has further reduced their value because in this context, sexiness is associated with low-class, vulgar expressions of sexuality. It's a neat contrast to consider that the 'self-portrait' still exists in a world of ubiquitous selfies. It remains as a way for professional photography to maintain distance from the everyday and assert an aesthetic superiority. Consider, for example, the respective classed connotations of both the sexy selfie and the nude self-portrait. In language alone, the nude (not 'naked') self-portrait delimits its field and the aesthetic language of each reveals jurisdictions of power which privilege professional, refined imagery over everyday, amateur imagery.

The recent democratic uptake of photography by amateur practitioners challenges the value and jurisdictional power of professional photography and art institutions (McKay and Plouviez, 2013: 128). It also challenges professional claims to aesthetic superiority that Carrabine (2012: 487) says 'enabled Imperial notions of progress and dominance to flourish' in traditional European art. This superiority is echoed in photography critic Sean O'Hagan's (2018: para 9) concern that 'the selfie has reduced the traditional idea of the self-portrait to a casual narcissistic reflex'. It is a value judgement based on taste and class distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) which aligns with authors whose concerns about sexualisation manifest as a shaming of sexy selfies (Shah, 2015). The ever-present 'daily practice of photography' (Stallabrass, 2014: para 9) has shifted boundaries for professionals and alarmed those for whom amateur imagery poses a threat.

Figure 2. Simone Ryan's sexy selfies, as they appear on her Instagram feed

The participants' use of language, both verbal and visual, demonstrate an understanding of these cultural demarcations that govern women's sexual self-expressions. Says Simone: 'I think sexy to me is something that runs alongside desirable. To me [it] would be seductive but not trashy'. Her conceptions of sexiness – and that of the other participants – align with various online guides which offer advice on how to take a good sexy selfie. One such site, *Bad Girls Bible* has a page called '7 ways to take a stunning sexy selfie!' (Adriana, 2018) and suggests the use of 'your favourite pushup bra'; that 'heels and boots flatter your legs' and to consider 'choosing flattering lingerie'. It also advises the use of bold make-up and encourages the consideration of key angles in composition, suggesting the importance of 'the angle of your hip or swell of your butt'. It talks about good choices in lighting and the use of filters sparingly so that images are not overdone: '…you (probably) don't look like Kim Kardashian. Your photos shouldn't undergo extensive Photoshop'. The page also dedicates considerable space to choosing a sexy pose, including the following: 'lie on your stomach on the bed with your knees bent behind you. It's sexy and fun while flattering your breasts!'; 'For a more boudoir photo, arch your back seductively' and 'make eye contact with the camera'. Figure 2 shows some of Simone's sexy selfies, as they appear on her Instagram feed.

At the pre-production stage, Simone sent me a variety of images of women dressed and posing like Kim Kardashian. I then sent some references of my own, in keeping with her suggestions. From over twenty images, Simone chose three she preferred: one of a *Playboy* model in stark black and white; Kim Kardashian, professionally photographed, wearing neutral lingerie, hands on hips and staring down the viewer; and Kate Moss, semi-nude, in a strong stance, also staring down the viewer. I asked Simone to describe herself in a handful of words and also to give me several words that she thought could describe her 'aspirational' self. She proposed the following:

Who am I:	**Who I want to be:**
goofy	sexy
funny	goofy
outgoing	inspiring
sensitive	strong
dependent	independent
chunky	fit and healthy

I also asked her what sexy meant to her. In addition to her earlier words on desirability and being 'seductive, but not trashy', she said:

> To be someone who tempts others. Strong. Strong would be, being able to hold my own, to know that I don't need someone to hold my hand in situations, to somewhat have my own back. Another word I want to be and it's a big one that I forgot – is Fierce. That look in someone's eye that just makes you shudder somewhat you know?

These are two of the photographs that Simone and I created:

Figure 3. Two images Simone Ryan and I created

I bring to these images my professional, academic and inevitably middle-class aesthetic language. The visual style in the co-creations sit readily in an art or commercial photography canon. I am interested in capturing a sexiness in Simone and I want to do this with a visual language that is more coded – or less direct – than her own. That is, that the images' semiotic components are suggestive rather than explicit and they utilise visual tropes that are less immediately accessible than Simone's images. My time at art school taught me that the more densely coded that art is, the more highly prized it would be in the art world. Critique sessions taught students that if a work wasn't easily understood, it surely had an intellectual rigour to be applauded. Students were encouraged to obfuscate meaning in their work and deny the audience any easy interpretations. Academic staff spoke of 'sophistication', 'complexity', 'contemporaneity' and 'conceptuality' in their expectations of what artworks should contain. Though the term 'coded' was never used, it is implicitly contained in the vague nature of this language and reveals what Laura Kipnis (1993: 217) refers to as 'an aesthetic judgement masquerading as knowledge'. Imbued in this language too, is a distance from the everyday and the obvious concomitant class distinction.

I could never embrace such an exclusionary, ascetic and arbitrary model of art appreciation. Yet I am conscious to encode these photographic collaborations with at least some of the signifiers which appeal to this aesthetic field - as an extension of my tastes and in the interests of my own cultural currency. I do this with lighting that evokes a sombre mood; lenses which create a sense of distance from, or unusual closeness to Simone; the addition of a mask on Simone's face or a trench coat worn provocatively; the moody cityscape; the intentional lens-blur/movement; narrative suggestions and the privileging of a mirror (Figure 4) to ironically illustrate the vanity/narcissism commentary that flourishes in selfie discourses. In comparison with Simone's photographs, the images are gentler, darker and her body is more hidden (Figures 3(a) and (b)). They are crafted with a conscious attention to a contemporary, professional portrait style with a chiaroscuro which promotes intrigue and evokes an emotional response. Simone holds the camera's cable release (Figure 3(a)), simulating the taking of a selfie (whilst I do the shooting), to complicate subject/object discourses. I invite a deep looking. I want the viewer to question what is going on and to be seduced by the dark mood. I'm careful to light the edges of Simone because I know this provides shape and visual interest. I have my audience in mind and I know how to reach them. I am appealing to what Beverley Skeggs (2011: 496) terms the 'bourgeois gaze', though I am not conscious of this until I reflect upon it later.

Like Simone, I too seek a desirous gaze. One whose approval allows me continued access to some of the most exclusive spaces in visual and intellectual culture. With this in mind I must consider if my own set of aesthetic codes helps to demarcate a class boundary which both affirms and extends my dominant cultural capital; and marginalises women's vulgar (I use the term here objectively) displays of sexuality. As Skeggs (2004a: 100) notes, 'Distance from working-class objects is a requirement of establishing the middle-class field'. Though I am loathe to admit it, perhaps my visual language inclines toward a kind of aesthetic respectability and suggestive eroticism which satisfies the tastes of those for whom everyday sexy selfies are too much, too overt, too vulgar. It surely protects my place in the social field and reinforces class distinctions.

The participants demonstrate an awareness of these nuanced languages in visual culture. They know the power of certain types of photographs to produce normative ideals of female sexiness and still they complicate these ideals. Simone states her belief that professional images contain a 'classiness' that amateur sexy selfies do not. She speaks of sexiness as aesthetically overt and classiness as that which is hidden. Another participant, Bec, describes her experience shooting collaboratively: 'It was sexy, but in an empowering way. It was a different kind of sexy... It also showed me that I don't have to show as much skin as I can to be (seen) in a sexual way. The facial expressions, the way I pointed my toes – I'd never really thought about it before. I see "sexy and free" in a different way now'. Their particular reading of sexiness into their own images and our collaborations highlights how judgements of taste ascribe value to the images and to the women who make them. Bourdieu emphasises that art achieves its value and codings not through internal readings, but through social power and 'hierarchies of difference' (Carrabine, 2012: 465). Further, Sally Munt (2000: 102) suggests that the working class aesthetic is a dominated aesthetic. 'It is aware of its impropriety and lack of authority in an alien judgement world'.

Too much? Too far?

'[I]n engaging in "sexy" performativity girls still walk a very fine line between getting it "right" and getting it "wrong", and consequently being labelled a "slut" by peers' (Ringrose, 2010 cited in Dobson, 2011: 2) Bec has a nuanced understanding of the elements that make for a 'good' photograph and how the employment of these elements in her own images keeps them from being read as having gone 'too far'. Another participant, Blair, was clear in saying that she would happily take sexy selfies, but that she would not appear nude in any – 'I wouldn't show my vagina!'.

The first point that became clear from this process is that the young women who are posting sexy selfies are aware of the discursive regimes in which they are working, and the value judgements they involve. Simone acknowledges that 'it's classy because you can't see things'. She knows that sexualised photographs are more acceptable if they're professionally done: that regimes of professional image-making produce and affirm a type of cultural capital that sexy-selfie taking amateur photographers cannot access. She is aware also, that that which is hidden is more highly regarded. She knows that one of the aesthetic codes for female sexual decorum and respectability is to not show 'too much'. This phrase, or one similar, was uttered by almost all of the participants as they described what might be popularly read as too overt/too vulgar/too slutty. 'Too much' would be to step over a line which delineates sexy from slutty and therefore respectable from vulgar.

What constituted 'too much' was explicitly described by some as having their legs wide apart with their vulva visible, showing their naked breasts or appearing to look like a porn star. Each of the participants believe that their selfies maintain a 'classiness' by the hiding of these aspects of their bodies; by a suggestion of sex, rather than a vulgar expression of it. They were each knowledgeable about the social expectation of respectability regarding women's displays of sexuality and all

Figure 4. An image Simone Ryan and I created

expressed discontentment that this constrained their freedoms of expression. Bec laments, 'People who don't know me, judge me. People get so shocked and find it disgusting because it's ingrained in our heads in society'. Simone too, suggests, 'you do you' which is a now-common phrase used by younger generations as an encouragement to potential detractors to 'be yourself, whatever that might be, and leave me to be me, free of your judgements'. Notably, none of the participants used language like 'slutty' or 'trashy', though when they said 'too much' or 'too far', it was clear that they believed I understood that this is what they meant. In this context, the language of 'too much' or 'too far' becomes highly classed.

A second point is that the young women are creative practitioners who are working to make images that they can be proud of, within the discourses in which they operate. Their creativity (and mine) is best understood as 'the original, fresh, and external expression of the imagination of the maker by using the medium to convey an idea, message or thought' (Kaufman, Glăveanu and Baer 2017: 129) and also in line with Attwood's (2018: 123) view of '…self-representation as a form of creative activity that involves others'.

Bec was clear in her assessment of what was 'too much' (in her words 'too far'): 'Taking it too far is when the whole point of the image is just to get attention'. Bec showed me the Instagram

account of a woman whose images she felt were focused only on showing her body to illustrate her point. She noted that these images lacked any consideration of other aesthetics. For Bec, these aspects of her own images are important and help to ensure that they are not seen as having gone 'too far'. Says Bec:

> They're just naked photos of her but they've got the emojis over [her nipples and vulva], but it's not, like, a flattering photo though either. It's not a pretty photo of her, it doesn't show her in a nice way. When it doesn't flatter you…when the photo is just based on showing the (body) parts…it's not a nice taken photo. I dunno, I just think that's like pushing it out there in a way.

Simone too, describes a particular threshold of acceptability that she encounters and her frustration at its existence. She refers here to one of the images she and I created (see Figure 4):

> If I saw someone else doing it then…someone skinnier would be fine…If she had smaller boobs and they weren't squished, and you could see the nipple…I'd probably be like, that would be too much to be putting on Instagram, but in reality it's not – it's just self-expression.

Simone's frustrations might be seen in light of '…the new ambivalences of post-feminist sexualities where girls should be "up for it" but where young women's sexualities are increasingly policed' (Wood, 2018: 637) and tied to 'classed discourses of shame' (Wood, 2018: 639). Ever-present too, when participants say 'too much' is the notion of working-class excess (Skeggs, 2004a: 100-103) and that excessive displays of sexuality are regarded as morally reprehensible and even disgusting. Laura Kipnis (1999) argues that a reaction of disgust is a marker of class distinction and that this is problematic for typically white, middle-class feminism's protectionist discourses on pornography which tend to focus on gender only. It follows that this kind of reading of women's sexy selfies (as disgusting, excessive and 'pornified') limits the opportunities for feminism to adequately reckon with the intersections of class and gender (and other traditionally marginalised groups who have long sought a feminism which includes them). As Kipnis (1999: 140) notes, 'Insofar as the feminist anti-porn movement devotes itself to rehearsing the experience of disgust and attempting to regulate sexual imagery, then class will continue to be one of its formative blind spots'.

The participants' aesthetic language and views of what was 'too much' differ from the views of some feminist writers and from dominant moralising discourses on women's sexuality (Naezer, 2018) which hold that the shooting and disseminating of sexy selfies is already 'too much'. Like a perverse taxonomy of 'sluttiness', what is regarded by one group as sexy and classy is regarded by another as vulgar and tasteless. Too much for one is sexualised nudity, too much for another is taking a sexy selfie at all. The first participant I worked with, Mel, identified quickly that she and I were from 'different worlds'. The concept of sexiness therefore becomes coded in the service of

maintaining one's social field, enforcing difference and prejudice. It is a distinction made along class lines (as well as racist, sexist and gendered ones) where so-called vulgar, everyday aesthetics are demonised as classless and trashy and the female makers of these aesthetics are marginalised for lacking in bourgeois respectability. As always, access to power and capital are at stake. It begs the question, who controls the language of images?

Conclusion

This project has been a fascinating and challenging exploration of new methodological terrain. Whilst I'm under no illusions about the nature of the power relations that inevitably exist between researcher and participant (and between professional photographer and amateur photographer), I strongly endorse creative collaborations of this nature as a way to make respective collaborators' tacit knowledges explicit. The 'compare and contrast' method I have used leaves me acutely aware of the languages and aesthetic markers which belong to dominant culture and which, by virtue of their dominance, become regarded as 'the standard'. Indeed, the visual languages I bring to this process talk to 'high end' spaces in visual culture such as art galleries, magazines and advertising and afford me access to some of the most highly regarded visual realms.

To this point, the jurisdictional nature of the photographic professions and the gatekeeper effect combine with long-standing ideals of respectability for women's expressions of sexuality to marginalise women who represent themselves in ways that are critiqued as being vulgar. They help to affirm and maintain a reserved and polite standard for women in their expression of their sexual selves. The advent of the smart phone/social media complex has provided women a new avenue for self-expression and given rise to forces which belong to a history of judgement of women's sexualities and the policing of women's bodies – at times in the name of feminism and specifically feminist protectionist discourses. Judgements of taste look like standards that are 'always-already' there; that are inherently good or morally right; and which lend weight to responses of concern that are in fact masking a class-based response of disgust.

In comparing and contrasting the respective photographic regimes of this study, what has emerged is a vocabulary and set of visual clues which indicate how judgements of taste function to affirm class boundaries and marginalise those whose tastes sit outside of the dominant. The findings reveal how discourse and visual language is employed to produce, reproduce and challenge Foucauldian (1984) power relations by drawing on expressions and reaffirmations of social norms and practices, specifically those which are class-based.

While intersectionality is beginning to seriously shape feminism and produce a genuine challenge to centralised, white, middle-class feminism, the intersection of class is often still overlooked, particularly when it is combined with matters of women's sexuality. It may be that a new version of the feminist sex wars (Basiliere, 2008) is emerging, with the obvious technological affordances and concomitant, ubiquitous sexy images. Let it not rage without serious attention

to the marginalising effects of judgements of taste and to the needs of women for whom making sexy selfies is important. In neoliberal and relatively pluralistic times, we may have lost a lot of the foundational language once used to understand class concerns within feminism. This needn't mean we lose the impetus to both study these class concerns and to attempt to create new and relevant languages.

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Chapter Five

Instagram as site of sexy solidarities: a classed analysis of beauty as social utility

Foreword

This paper was submitted to the journal *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture* on January 22nd, 2021 and is still under review. Like the other discussion chapters in this thesis, it was written according to the requirements of a specific journal and contains some repetition from the previous chapter, with particular regard to the description of the research methodology and situating of the overall project.

This chapter discusses the ways that participants manage their own beauty practices whilst they experience mainstream feminist discourses which often speak of their self-presentations

as damaging for them, other women and also for feminism. It extends the argument that middle-class feminism maintains a level of symbolic authority over women's sexy selfies through the performance of disgust at their so-called 'tasteless' displays of beauty. It does this through an examination of western constructs of beauty and sexiness, including the long-standing difficulties that feminism has with its own position on women's self-presentation and its preferential regard for feminine 'respectability'.

Comparing and contrasting the participants' own selfies with our co-creations enabled a dialogue between us about aesthetic difference in this regard. This, in turn, produced some rich data on visual currency and systems of value which often degrade the sorts of aesthetics that the participants produce, but which, perhaps (in part) *because* of these systems, also produced online communities of solidarity for women who take sexy selfies.

The chapter is structured with an opening abstract, then introduction, a description of the overall project, a short review of relevant literature and then a concentration on the data produced by my engagements with participant Bec, with supporting data from Simone and Blair.

Abstract

This paper considers the structural and classed ways in which the concept of beauty is managed by young women and by feminist commentators through reporting on data created by the photographic collaborations of a professional photographer (myself) and a number of sexy-selfie taking women. I argue that it is possible to think about ways that beauty is productive rather than destructive to women, particularly in digital networks, and that feminism must consider its own forms of symbolic violence through the concept of taste, which marginalises working-class women's sexualities. Despite popular criticism, women who are engaged in sexy-selfie making and concomitant beauty practices exist in strong and supportive communities of like-minded women. These networked communities produce a type of female solidarity which is a counter to popular, neoliberal discourses of self-interest (as it pertains to selfies); to middle class aesthetic standards; and to feminist concerns that beauty practices are necessarily harmful.

Introduction

This paper emerges from a project which involves an engagement between a professional photographer/academic (myself) and eight female sexy selfie-taking participants. It is a project which privileges the co-creation of images between us. The two parties collaborated to produce new photographs of the selfie-taking participant, intended for upload to Instagram and as the basis for a 'compare and contrast' style of discussion. The project aims to provide new data about the aesthetic systems used by female sexy-selfie takers, a new perspective on the aesthetic systems by which current professional photography represents female bodies, and to make visible the differences and relationships between them. It primarily draws attention to the role of classed standards of representation of the female body that often operate beneath feminist concerns of sexual objectification.

I argue that dominant discourses of concern regarding female beauty and sexuality are sometimes constructed by middle-class tastes which can marginalise women who choose to demonstrate their beauty practices in overtly sexy ways. I present a challenge to these concerns, particularly where they are adopted by feminists, and encourage an expanded understanding of beauty as that which may, at least, be useful and valuable to some women. I examine the current feminist concerns about sexualisation and raunch culture (Charles, 2010; Gill, 2008; Ringrose, 2011) and locate this in historical discourses on female beauty and class. It is not my intention to disregard the obvious demands that a misogynistic culture makes of women's appearances; neither to suggest that sexy selfies offer liberation from *The Beauty Myth*. I'm interested, however, in the productive and supportive outcomes that female sexy selfie takers experience through choosing their own beauty-making practices despite both patriarchal constraints and the 'bourgeois gaze' (Skeggs, 2011: 496), through the formation of supportive online communities, and the role that the concept of beauty plays in this.

The Project

The project from which this paper emerges involves the engagement of a professional photographer (myself) with eight women whose Instagram accounts are populated almost entirely with their own amateur, sexy selfies. The project is interested in learning about the ways that academic and popular discourses are applied to these respective sets of images and the practices around them, with a particular focus on how such discourses often mask prejudice regarding class and gender.

Following university ethics approval, prospective participants were approached directly through Instagram using a purposive sampling method. The only parameters for selection were that they lived in Australia, had mostly amateur sexy selfies on their account and were female-presenting in a way that was suggestive of some conventionally western, mainstream tropes of femininity and sexiness, such as those described by Amy Shields Dobson (2011) as 'hetero-sexy'.

The women contacted were given the project description and invited to collaborate with me on a professional photoshoot of themselves. The aim of this was to create a set of new, professional images that could be used to 'compare and contrast' with their own selfies, in order to generate discussion about (amongst other things) aesthetic difference and cultural value, how the sexualisation debates factor in such images and affect participants, and issues of symbolic authority and visual currency.

This research methodology was structured so that photoshoots were co-created at all stages, including pre-production, during the shoot and in any retouching that followed. Each participant was encouraged to think of the shoot as if they had commissioned me to help generate their visual idea/s and each joined in two semi-structured interviews, one before and one after the shoot. I also kept a reflective journal throughout the process.

I arrive at this project with ten years experience as a professional portrait photographer and I draw on this knowledge in a semi-autoethnographic way to inform a significant aspect of the project. I have worked in multiple media spaces in Australia and for clients such as Marie Claire and Rolling Stone magazine, Good Weekend, Sunday Life and advertising agencies such as JWT, Leo Burnett and DDB. I have been a finalist in the National Photographic Portrait Prize and I am part of a feminist fine-art collective which has exhibited in Sydney and Melbourne. I am aware that commercial and art photography occupy different places within visual culture and I have engaged with both in my professional life.

The photoshoots took place in 2019 and 2020 at various locations, depending on the design direction that myself and the participant had decided on. Each shoot involved a make-up artist, except for one who preferred to do her own. Several had a hair stylist and some had a wardrobe stylist. I am very familiar with collaborative shooting, having worked with art directors, stylists, models, magazine editors and make-up artists. Many (though certainly not all) shots underwent post-production treatment such as editing of skin tone, colour balancing, tonal shifts for additional mood and artefact removal (such as a mark on the ground) and one participant requested a minor alteration to her body shape.

All participants except one uploaded multiple co-created images to her Instagram account with accompanying captions and, following this, we engaged in the second semi-structured interview. In this process we looked through the images while talking about them. At times I displayed several images from the shoot to ask which of them they preferred and why and at other times we compared the aesthetics with their own and opened up conversations about what it is to be sexy in an image. Amongst other questions, I asked about what beauty meant to them, what they had experienced in the professional setting and if they understood the ways that their images sometimes feature in the sexualisation debates. For the purposes of clarity, none of the participants saw themselves as an artist, nor were they monetising their images. Most described a desire to engage with others online and experiencing joy in that.

Feminism, beauty and the gaze of respectability

Feminism is troubled by the concept of feminine beauty. It holds itself to be at once a bastion of resistance to misogynistic strictures on women's physical appearance and a movement for the rights of women's bodily autonomy. 'Stuck in an impasse between polarised positions' (Elias et al., 2017), it has been unable to account for its distrust of feminine beauty practices alongside its urge to support women. There is little argument amongst feminists that standards of appearance for women are oppressive and sexist – the pressure is far greater on women than men to adhere to normative, western standards such as thinness, whiteness, smoothness and youth (Bordo, 2003; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Naomi Wolf's treatise on the matter in *The Beauty Myth* (1990) provides an enduring touchpoint for the 'problem' of beauty and few serious challenges to her stance have occurred since. Many feminists have engaged with the notion of 'objective' ideals of beauty, taking standpoint theory as the basis from which to champion a woman's choice to beautify (Williams, 2017), in whatever ways she sees fit, and that these choices transcend oppressive structures by their agentic nature alone. Many further still have critiqued this argument as a 'fallacy of choice' (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015: 1) and claim such choices merely uphold damaging structures of misogynistic oppression which sexually objectify women (Bordo, 1993; Whisnant, 2007; Chapkis, 1988).

Intersectionality, however, has complicated this simple either/or proposition through recognising that different groups of women engage with beauty in ways that differ from the aforementioned normative standards (see @curvynyome, @taramossauthor, @jess_megan_ and #bopo, all on Instagram, as examples). In so doing, it has turned an obvious and critical focus on feminism's hitherto relative exclusion of women who are not white and middle-class (Crenshaw, 1991; Williams, 2017). This paper is concerned particularly with the intersection of class and beauty and takes the view that feminism's middle-class dominance has normalised an aesthetic standard for women's appearance which privileges so-called respectable and tasteful presentations and consequently marginalises women who display beauty in overt and sexy ways. I suggest that the feminist 'problem' of beauty is at least partially tied to its distaste for presentations of beauty which fall outside of so-called respectability norms.

Such aesthetic standards find their roots in historical measures of class, where beauty came to signify higher status to the degree that its discriminatory properties held appeal and 'accorded well with social order unapologetic about station, class, hierarchy, and the right to exclude' (Sontag, 2005: 4). Holliday and Sanchez Taylor (2006), in a richly written synopsis of the history of beauty, extend this idea by illustrating how beauty was, in early Christian times, associated with men and higher status. Women's beauty was made 'other' and was often defined in two ways: as natural and good (for those who eschewed make-up and adornments) and as grotesque and bad (for those who used overt beauty enhancements or had non-conforming bodies). Each was assigned their respective high and low-class status. Moral contempt was reserved for those seen as grotesque or vulgar and their bodies were othered as exaggerated, dirty and working class (Skeggs, 2004); while

'natural' bodies were 'characterised by grooming, beauty and grace' (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006: 182). Such configurations came to be regarded as inherent and inform much of the way that contemporary feminine beauty aesthetics are classed. As Alan McKee (2012) argues, women's sexy selfies are subject to middle-class commentaries which use the language of aesthetics in order to maintain class distinctions. Angela McRobbie (2009: 130), too, in her analysis of 'make-over' television in the UK, makes clear that participants are regarded as having little or no taste and '…bodily failings' in need of correcting with the 'right' clothing and the 'right' make up.

Accordingly, Kim Kardashian is not getting it right – her bodily displays are 'too vulgar' (see #KardashTrash on Twitter and De Largie, 2016) but sexy selfie-taking, Instagram-using artist Amalia Ullman is, since her images are a deliberate fine-art project (Sooke, 2016). Both take sexy selfies and upload them to Instagram and both exist in the same neoliberal framework which commodifies them and their images. Both have agency and both work in a patriarchal system. Kardashian has been routinely dismissed as being 'trashy' while *The Telegraph* (2016) asked if Ullman's work might be the first Instagram masterpiece. Notably, Ullman's selfies in fact draw from the particular sexualised aesthetic that Kardashian has cultivated and which has become synonymous with her name. It is this 'Kardashian aesthetic' of overt, 'heterosexy' (Shields Dobson, 2011) feminine beauty that is visible in the selfies of this project's participants and which also inspires the kinds of class-bound, moral judgements long associated with women who beautify themselves in so-called vulgar ways.

The sexualised subject is constructed in class conflict, notes Skeggs (1997: 4) and meaning is ascribed on the bodies of working class women as sexually 'degenerate' and 'dangerous' and therefore in need of regulation by those interested in maintaining control of, and distance from, working class women (Skeggs, 1997; Taylor, 2011; Damousi, 1997). In these conditions, it is not difficult to understand why the rise of so-called raunch culture and postfeminist sexual subjectivities have alarmed middle-class feminists. As Ariel Levy (2005: 81) says, 'Why is this the "new feminism" and not what it looks like: the old objectification?'.

Sexy selfies are subject to feminist scrutiny which decries them as sexual objects and also to middle-class 'distance making' which construes them as disgusting. In contrast, gallery-bound portraits of nude women are ascribed value as if it were always, intrinsically there. Bourdieu's seminal work on 'distinction' (1984) made clear the notion that cultural objects are closely tied to class and that value is ascribed to them in subjective and arbitrary ways by those with class power (Pini and Previte, 2013). The concept of 'taste' then comes to function as a device through which these arbitrary distinctions are hidden and cultural fields of exclusion are made and maintained. Whilst Bourdieu has been criticised for overlooking feminist concerns in this regard (Moi, 1991), his work has been highly useful for those writers examining the intersection of class and gender. His theories implicate dominant, middle-class feminism in the structural complex that regulates how women, particularly young women, *should* perform beauty in order that it has (they have) cultural value.

The art world's age-old female-nude can escape then, the kind of middle-class feminist scrutiny that is applied to the everyday beauty aesthetics of young women's sexy selfies. As Feona Attwood

(2018: 85) notes, '…the female nude in fine art has often been seen as representing cleanliness and order… Naked women in pornography have, in contrast, been associated with dirt and disorder and the stimulation of desire'. Though the participants in this project are not producing pornography, their images sit aesthetically in a continuum of images of naked women that are read, in varying degrees, in this way. Attwood (2010: 742) also points out that 'Public debates about sexualization have fastened rather obsessively on symbolic objects and representations'. The focus on the symbolic has promulgated what Attwood (2010: 743) refers to as a series of 'laments' amongst anti-sexualisation movements for that which is deemed to have been lost – standards of decency, religion, authenticity, morality and so on. Such laments extend to the view that 'trashy culture' and 'unladylike behaviour' (Attwood, 2010: 743) has burgeoned. In this context, women who make sexy selfies are lamentably not performing what McKee (2012: 544) calls 'acceptable – that is, middle-class – version of femaleness'.

Amidst – or perhaps despite – feminist concerns about beauty, especially overtly sexual iterations of it, women are still engaging with beauty practices and performed sexiness. I argue that for women who share Kardashian-style sexy selfies on Instagram, and therefore fold into the raunch-culture discourse, they are finding a utility in their images which gives them pleasure (Cahill, 2003; Fine and McClelland, 2006; Lorde, 1993; Queen and Comella, 2008), touch, self-care, confidence, play, connection, purpose and, importantly, community. It is a concept that is often overlooked with respect to young women's public sharing of sexy selfies on social media or to women's uses of beauty.

A good deal of scholarship on digital networks has highlighted the concept of community as a useful way of understanding people's online behaviours and connections (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020; Leaver et al., 2020; Baym, 2015). However, feminist scholarship in this vein has inclined instead towards overlooking the presence of female communal solidarities by condemning beauty as that which has been used to set up competition between women. In Angela McRobbie's (2009: 130) rich work on post-feminism and symbolic violence, she brings important attention to mainstream narratives which elevate this idea, noting a desire by commercial television in the UK to promote '…a return to old-fashioned, "school-girl" styles of feminine bitchiness, rivalry and bullying…' in a direct aim to increase competition between young women.

Typically, women who employ beauty practices and sexy aesthetics in selfies are characterised as vain, vacuous (Senft and Baym, 2015; Warfield, 2015; Abidin, 2016) and competitive with each other (Blake et al., 2018) or engaged in 'digital narcissism' (Pham, 2015: 221). Popular commentaries which assume selfie takers to be vain often also assume that women's engagement with beauty practices pits them against one another – that their use of beauty must simply be an attempt to out-manoeuvre other women who, presumably, are competing for the same men. In assessing the chances that women had of forming friendships with each other under the 'influence' of beauty, Gosselink et al. (2008: 321) wondered, 'how can women really trust or get close to others who are judged and judging on the basis of beauty culture competition?'. And yet, as Crystal Abidin (2016: 16) notes, '…selfie products and practices offer new ways of framing the selfie

as a tool which has the potential to insidiously undermine prevalent discourses'. Where female sexy selfie takers are framed chiefly in these neoliberal terms, there is evidence that community solidarities of sexy selfie takers go some way to undermining these prevalent discourses. In an intersectional, post-structuralist and popular-feminist landscape, there is a rising consciousness that beauty, though still problematic in a misogynistic culture and still subject to class hierarchies, is a source of pride, pleasure and connection for women.

Bec

> Beautiful to me is…lingerie and showing off your body as much as you could. Also confidence, silly as it sounds. It's kinda like being alive and having a bright spark in you kinda thing…Coz you're a bright, living person.

Bec has an Instagram feed made entirely of her sexy selfies. She also collaborated with me on a professional photo shoot and two semi-structured interviews. During one interview, I asked her why she thought people were judgemental about her selfies. She said:

> I think it's from our grandparents…having to wear long dresses and modesty, no sex on the first date and everything. I think women have always been a little bit like that. There are so many rules on us and we literally can't do anything right no matter what we do.

She later added: 'If they wear a tank top they're a fucking slut' as an impression of those who would judge her beauty choices. Her observations, and those of other participants in this project, reveal the familiar tropes of 'female sexual decorum' (Albury, 2017: 719) that result from what Laura Kipnis (1986: 96) refers to as the 'colonising operation of the aesthetic judgement'. These tropes operate through class prisms to discipline and limit women's sexual freedoms. Bec is reminded that she is not 'getting it right': that dominant, middle-class feminist concerns about women's sexual objectification often masks the belief that women's overt displays of sexuality or beauty are not inherently problematic, but that certain types of them are.

A little-explored question in feminist debates on beauty is: what is it about vulgar aesthetics that so offends middle-class tastes? Perhaps it is the potential that vulgarity – or crassness – has for insubordination; for anti-respectability; and for flipping the middle finger to established power (Kipnis, 1999), that so worries middle-class feminism. As Kipnis (1999: 129) notes, 'religious morality, class pretensions and feminist censoriousness duke it out with the armies of bodily vulgarity'. Says Bec:

> I think people get so shocked when there is a confident woman that they think it's damaging and like, it's like disgusting kinda thing. You're not really being a feminist if

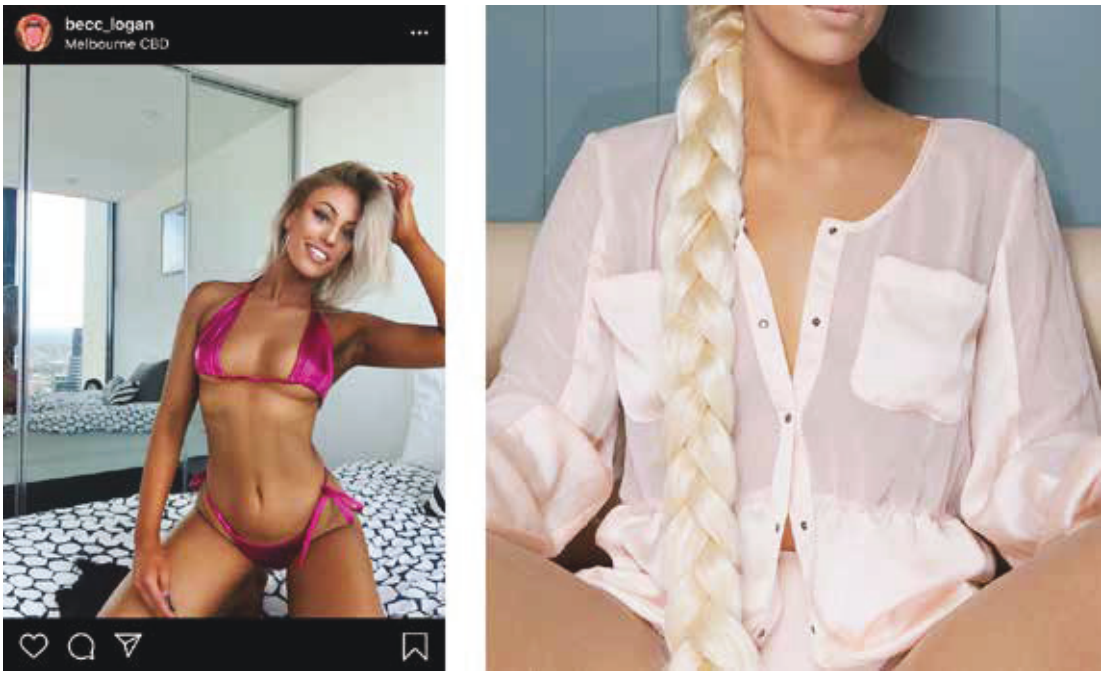

Figure 1. Bec Logan in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

> you're like, judging women and making your whole argument about their appearance… feminists should just be like, does it matter how you present yourself?

Figure 1 shows two images of Bec. She and I collaborated on the image to the right and to the left of it is one of her own selfies. A comparison of the two reveals something further about doing beauty and sexual expression in the 'right' and 'respectable' way.

The aesthetics in Bec's selfie are overt, direct, playful, colourful and conventionally 'heterosexy' (Shields Dobson, 2011; Adriana, 2018). They are illustrative of what Heather Widdows (2018) describes as the new beauty ideals: thinness, firmness, smoothness and youth. They also accord, discursively, with Instagram's sexy, immediate, vernacular aesthetic which might be loosely described as 'bright walls…Millennial-pink everything, all with that carefully staged, color-corrected, glossy-looking aesthetic' (Lorenz, 2019) and is also characterised in academic terms as 'the new aesthetics of normalization' (Leaver et al., 2020: 2), which, the authors note, evolve over time. Bec wears heavy make-up and a shimmering pink bikini – all markers of a contemporary 'hotness' and she has positioned herself in front of natural light. There's a sense of familiarity, a 'could be there with her' vibe that affects an intimacy with the viewer. I argue this is occurring because of her pose, setting and apparent ease, but also for that fact of it being a selfie – it's just you and her after all, right? Says Bec:

> My Instagram is always like an alter-ego. I hate wearing make-up, I don't like washing my hair, I'm a tomboy. In a way, it's a kinda protection sometimes, like I wish I could be that girl! Like a boss bitch who doesn't care about what anyone else thinks. That's me on my good days.

She has a strong consideration of the elements that create beauty in her photos:

> I really think about my photos, like…I bought a white wig and I'm going to get white lingerie because…that's like a "photography photo". There's beauty in them and either they're aesthetically pleasing or the colours match, there's a sunset in the background… Little things like that.

Bec's selfie might be called 'pornified' in dominant, middle class commentaries (Dines, 2010; Paul, 2005; Levy, 2005). The opening line to Pamela Paul's 2005 book *Pornified* reveals something of the conditions that are placed on women's sexual expressions: 'What's a nice girl like you doing writing a book about porn?' (Paul, 2005: 1). The message for women is that to be beautiful, overt displays of sexuality must be minimized and so-called goodness promoted. It is another in the long line of messages women receive which ties their presentations of beauty and sexuality to moral imperatives (Widdows, 2018; Marwick, 2010) and which pressures them to be respectable.

In contrast to Bec's selfie, our co-created image is suggestive, not overt. It is marked by muted colours and deliberately artificial light in a way that creates an unusual flatness and evenness in tone. The crop (framing) attends to contemporary, commercial-aesthetic trends and is also designed to encourage the viewer to wonder what is immediately outside of the frame. It ties to conventions of commercial fashion imagery which often homogenises female beauty (as white, thin, young and typically attractive) and yet occupies relatively rare air in the visual hierarchy. Fashion photography is, notably, a fundamental component of many Bachelor of Art/Photography programs. Though both images have a boldness to them, one of the notable departures from Bec's selfie to the co-created image is that her body is more covered. This was my idea and is one which I note with reflection is based, more or less, on a desire to present female beauty in a suggestive, somewhat more hidden way. There is still a sexiness and playfulness here, but this image is constructed in terms to be understood by a middle-class audience as feminine beauty which is eroticised (barely-closed shirt, face cropped out except for full lips) in a nuanced way. I lament that this incarnation of female beauty and sexuality might belong, at least in part, to what Kipnis (1999: 140) refers to as '…the social project of removing the distasteful from sight'.

The co-created image is also ironic. And it is this notion of irony that perhaps best illustrates the classed nature of women's 'beautifully sexy' imagery (McRobbie, 2009). I employ what Charles (2010: 68) would refer to as a 'parodic, ironic or playful' set of aesthetics in how I work with Bec. I deliberately use some stereotypically heteronormative, feminine components such as pink clothing, bright blonde hair, legs open in arguably pornographic fashion and a giant girlish plait.

The irony is that my position as a professional photographer, with its middle-class trappings, allows me to play with these tropes of sexiness and beauty in a way that is safe for me. My privilege allows me to employ irony as an aesthetic device which invites my audience to safely encounter Bec's sexualised body in a way that will not be read as vulgar or objectifying. My professional privilege means my photos exist in a dominant context (Abbott, 1988; Portwood and Fielding, 1981) where my expositions of beauty and sexiness will be regarded as art or as fashion/editorial works – both of which claim much higher cultural currencies than sexy selfies. In the attention I pay to making work that talks to my middle-class social field (Bourdieu, 1984), I affirm my place there and distance myself from aesthetics which would trouble my relationship to my field. I am conscious that my knowledge of photographic aesthetics brings me a cultural capital which allows me access to some of visual culture's most exclusive spaces.

My life in the photographic industry has provided me with an acute understanding that middle-class, feminist ideals of 'rightness' are very much written into the languages of images and that they are operationalised both to maintain distance from working class culture and to enforce conservative, hegemonic norms of 'good girl' sexuality and beauty play. This gives rise to feminism's ahistorical regulation of female bodies that do not display the correct norms of beauty and sexiness (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2006). As I take photos (of Bec and others), I am conscious to create a beautiful image. I pay attention to all of the components that will bring beauty to the image – composition, lighting, pose, the look of a model, the colour palette and so on. It is important to me to garner an approving audience and to make beautiful objects, just as those things are important to Bec. Our audiences may be different, but our aims and processes are very similar. Yet I am not subject to moralising discourses on beauty, nor shamed for the way I present Bec's sexiness. It is an immunity to charges of vulgarity and tastelessness that the regimes of middle-class image-making to which I belong, grants me.

These are two further portraits from the photoshoot with Bec:

Figure 2. Two images that Bec Logan and I co-created

Bec spoke to me a lot on the subject of beauty. More than once she talked about inner beauty:

> Beauty to me means feeling confident & comfortable in your own skin. True beauty I believe is loving who you are as a person, loving what you stand for and what you're passionate about; loving your soul is just as important as your appearance.

Bec reflects further on this as she recounts her experience of our shoot (and the occasional presence of other people moving through the location):

> I dunno what went over me. I think it was the confidence of feeling empowered, not shamefully looked-upon. Like, usually people walk past when I'm taking [my own photos], I like, hide, but I was alright with it [our shoot]. I think it was just the feeling of, I had my hair done, I had my make-up done, I felt really pretty, I dunno – it was like sexy, but in an empowering way. I felt strong, not…vulnerable or too exposed. It was a different kind of sexy in a way.

Shortly after the shoot, I received an email from the shoot's wig stylist who conveyed to me that he was '…quite taken aback and entranced by Bec's sudden shift from reserved and unsure blonde to raven Beauty In Total Control of Herself [sic]'. And I note the presence of this in the image to the right in Figure 2. Bec stood and adjusted her shirt, knowing I was photographing her and quietly and visibly embraced the kind of power and confidence she and Steve both spoke of. She is vulnerable in the partial exposure of her breasts and directive of the camera's gaze at the same time. She does not turn away. It was an unplanned shot and one which allowed Bec's inner beauty to be visualised. Though she would typically be read as passive here, given her downward gaze and the appearance of having been 'caught' in the moment by the camera, she had a knowing comfort in her performance of McRobbie's 'beautifully sexy' which placed her confident, subjective and chosen sexiness at the forefront. Figure 3 shows two further shots of Bec which illustrate this.

The relationship that female sexy-selfie takers have to beauty, sexiness and their own bodies is at odds with dominant narratives which casts their images as tasteless and vulgar; and which reminds them that the choice to create their own beauty objects (sexy selfies) is anti-feminist. Where they experience pride in their own photos, they are told they are trashy; where they feel joy in their appearance and sexual subjectivities, they are told they are dupes of patriarchy. At work is a reductive form of feminism unable or unwilling to acknowledge that its demarcation of class boundaries has contributed to a visual culture where beauty (and value) is ascribed to those who use it in respectable, middle-class ways.

Figure 3. Two images that Bec Logan and I co-created

The sexy selfie sisterhood

As mentioned earlier, feminist critiques of beauty often argue that the concept sets up women to be in competition with each other whilst ignoring the formation of communities that can and do form in spaces where female beauty practices feature. Sexy selfie-taking women on Instagram is one such community and it appears to be affording women a space of personal affirmation, shared solidarities, safety and resistances to normative forms of bourgeois respectability. It has been argued (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020) that it is trivial to make distinctions between online and offline communities (as humans will behave the same way no matter the technology). Whilst there are, naturally, immense similarities in communities both on and offline, the ubiquitous dissemination of social photographs has enabled new forms of community to emerge, with characteristics unique to the online experience.

I draw here from Nancy Baym's extensive work on networked communities and in particular her assessment of their fundamental qualities: 'a shared sense of space, shared practices, shared resources and support, shared identities and interpersonal support' (Baym, 2015: 77) Each of the participants in this project clearly identified as belonging to a networked community of female sexy selfie takers that embody these traits. I would add that they share an aesthetic of conventional

sexiness also. It is the participants' use of a particular set of beauty practices which productively creates and bolsters the group's positive, shared attributes, by Baym's measures. Bec reflects on her experience of this community:

> Recently I've personally seen a huge difference in the attitude towards girls posts and the general Instagram community. I've also seen so many more girls commenting on other girls photos encouraging and basically fangirling them rather than sleazy comments from boys that I only used to see. I feel like girls especially have gotten over shaming and judging other girls confidence in photos. I think as a whole, girls are starting to realise how much women have going against them without the bullying and judgement from other women. Lately there's been so much more body positivity, acceptance of quirks and differences and love of uniqueness.

Bec belongs to a community of supportive women who regularly post uplifting comments on her selfies. For privacy reasons, I have slightly altered each comment here, but they are to the effect of: 'Beautiful!', 'You are stunning', 'You're SO beautiful' and 'you're so hot wtf'. These comments illustrate both the community of solidarity she operates in; and the confluence of beauty with sexiness in this context also.

Bec tells me that the main reason she takes and shares sexy selfies is that she had severe anorexia throughout high school and uses her selfies to take pride in her now healthy body. Through beauty-making on her terms, she builds her own 'good self' – one that is not prescribed for her by protectionist discourses of sexual shame or moral imperatives of 'goodness'. 'Doctors were like, "you're not gonna make it to 18" and the fact that my body did that – I feel like I need to be proud of that now. I wanted to show off what I had to get rid of my insecurities in a way'.

Another participant, Simone, effusively tells me about her experience of girl solidarities in the sexy selfie network:

> I feel certain girls, who happen to post very 'out there' images are the ones who will lift others up. I assume because we know what down in the ditches is like, and so we'd rather keep our fellow girls from going down there…girls uplifting girls is insaaaaaanely more appealing than a guy saying the same thing. When a girl says it to another girl, we see it as the purest thing because we don't think there is a motive behind that, unlike with a guy.

The data from this project reveals strong communities of female support which use the concept of 'beauty' to build relationships rather than drive competition. These networked communities produce a type of female solidarity which is a counter to popular, neoliberal discourses; to middle class aesthetic standards which shame the individual; and to feminist concerns that beauty practices are almost always harmful to women. Says Bec:

> People are starting to mature and see that there is so more much to life than Instagram and likes. I think people's priorities and general need for validation has also completely changed. Whenever I see girls posting photos like this, I'm like 'good on her' far out she looks good!

I suggest there is supportive evidence for employing a more nuanced appreciation of women's continued engagement with presentations of beauty and sexiness that include a recognition of these communities as valuable in the way that more mainstream online communities are regarded. With the focus here on the visibility and value-making of working-class women's sexualities, there is an opportunity to better recognise the online spaces that women co-habitate, share and support each other. Such an approach might move beyond hand-wringing over so-called self-objectification and reveal class-based aesthetic bias; as well as the rich digital intimacies of peer affirmation and collectivism in sexy-selfie communities.

This is not to say that such communities automatically offer an anti-patriarchal panacea – this is not a piece on false ideals of freedoms of choice. It remains that normative beauty standards do restrict and, at times, harm women. They are disproportionately levelled at women and feminism's ongoing fight for structural change is crucial. After all, 'norms provide much of the tradition that organises online communities' (Baym, 2000: 141) and, as Shields-Dobson (2015) notes, women's bodies are still gazed-upon in these online spaces, in ways which reflect the structures of gendered representation. However, within such strictures, women are engaging with beauty and performing sexiness in productive and positive ways nonetheless. And they do so in an arena which is subject to high levels of criticism and classism. Ironically, while the individual selfies they produce have high visibility and are overwhelmingly an aspect of everyday life (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020), their communities are undervalued by dominant commentators. In contrast, online selfie communities of women which are political or artistic in nature occupy a more comfortable space of acceptance in mainstream commentary.

The social movement #BodyPositivity provides one example of a more visible and acceptable female and political networked community. Recently too, the #WomenSupportingWomen movement gained enormous traction globally through the mass sharing of artfully-styled black and white self-portraits, meant solely to function as monikers of feminist, female solidarity. Where discourses on these movements afford a legitimacy of respectability which allows them relatively safe and sure access to digital public spaces, discourses of shame dominate the sexy selfie space (Tiidenberg, 2018). These discourses give little attention to the experiences of connection and affirmation that members describe as a feature of their community. As Tiidenberg and Gomez-Cruz (2015: 83) note, in relation to the sharing of sexy selfies online, 'Sharing, commenting, reblogging and actively participating in the community socially reinforces ways of looking and experiencing bodies in a new, body-positive, feminist and queer-friendly way'. I add that participation in sexy selfie communities also enables a collective pushback against otherwise marginalising commentaries which 'lament' their lack of respectability. At times such commentaries provide

a force for connection among these communities, particularly given the spectre of classist and prudish (and sexist, fatphobic and racist) community standards (Crystie, 2020) which regularly remove sexy selfies. Little is yet understood about what impact this 'deplatforming' (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020: 165) has on women's online communities and further studies in this regard would be welcome.

Conclusion

In the reckoning that contemporary feminism is doing regarding which women it represents and how it negotiates beauty, one of its blind spots appears to be class, and in particular, the intersection of class with women's sexualities. There is an undeniable claim that feminism can make to having revealed the gendered nature of beauty standards, but it is yet to articulate why women's expressions of so-called vulgar beauty are held to be especially problematic. In its focus on gender in this regard, feminism has often overlooked the ways in which aesthetics become classed.

In order to combat the damaging effects of what Beverley Skeggs (2011) terms the 'bourgeois gaze', it is necessary to consider the aspects of feminism which have a pejorative engagement with vulgarity in presentations of female beauty. The participants' images trouble the norms of bourgeois respectability; the norms of feminine decorum; of subject/object relationships; the history of photography's heterosexual male gaze; and certainly the norms of middle-class taste. Though their images offer such antagonisms, some feminists argue there is no gain for women whose conceptualisations of beauty produce overtly sexual representations of the female body. I have demonstrated a classism at work here and the need for particular aspects of feminism to decouple its tastes in beauty and aesthetics from its condemnation of women's sexy selfie practices. While there is certainly validity in some of the feminist concerns regarding body politics, it's clear that concerns about so-called self-objectification often ignore the positive and affirming experiences of women who make 'beautifully sexy' selfies. Such concerns fail to acknowledge how the concept of beauty, as it is mobilised in feminist thinking, is narrow and at times marginalising.

As I have argued, practices of beauty which take expression in sexy selfies can be productive and useful to women where they function in the formation of solidarist, online, female communities (they are useful in many other respects also, but they are not for discussion in this paper). The participants' selfies and our co-creations offer a new point of reference for these discussions and highlight especially the way that symbolic power operates in feminist discourse. In this context, it is necessary to interrogate the intersection of class with feminism, in order to potentially activate a broader and more inclusive conceptualisation of beauty, sexiness and women's sexualities.

One other participant, Blair, might best conclude this. She is relaying a comment that she received on one of her sexy selfies on Instagram, which demonstrates the positive, useful and unique communal impact of sharing her beauty and sexiness in this way:

> "I love your body. Thank you for being confident, it really gives us bigger girls more confidence." Honestly at the end of the day, yes I do want to upload a nice photo, but that's what makes a difference I think – if I'm making some one feel a certain way, in a positive way, then that's job done.

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Chapter Six

"So when we do have a say?" On sexy selfie making as a standpoint for *seen-ness*

Foreword

This paper was submitted to the journal *Sexuality & Culture* on September 17th, 2021 and is still under review. As with the three other discussion chapters, it has been written according to the requirements of a particular journal and maintains some of the repetition that I have previously mentioned.

Whilst this chapter maintains an attention to the central research question and secondary questions regarding classed and gendered discourses within the sexualisation debates, it also reports on what has emerged as a critical juncture for debates about sexual objectification. Data from the project revealed that conventional feminist concerns about objectification and the so-called 'male gaze' have been made problematic by the autonomous and agentic nature of sexy selfies. Can we confidently declare that the male gaze is as prominent in women's selfies as it has typically been in more traditional forms of photography where men often photography women? What can we say of the relations of power between the looker and the looked-at if we as viewers are witnessing the subjective choices of the self-taker? And what also can be understood by the inclusion of a professional, female photographer to this dynamic?

Though this chapter focuses on the data produced with Michelle and Mel, it argues for what I term the *seen-ness* of each of the participants – and female sexy selfie-takers broadly. This takes account of the standpoint of selfie shooters in ways that bear witness to them as they wish to be seen, and that this is not unlike the act of deeply listening to a verbal standpoint, about which there is growing academic discourse.

The chapter is structured again as per the requirements of the journal with an opening abstract, then introduction, brief description of the project and a review of the relevant literature. Two substantial sections follow, which draw on the project's data to open-out the idea of seen-ness, to examine how so-called professional photography functions in visual culture to 'legitimise' representations of women and to consider the possibility of new gaze structures to meet with the obvious techno- and cultural shifts.

Abstract

As photography's technological advancement has afforded women greater self-representational opportunity and control, new discourses of concern have emerged over women who create sexy selfies. I argue that these discourses are, in part, mired in outdated notions of the heterosexual male gaze which figure sexy selfies to be a contemporary reflection of the ongoing dominance of male sexual desire over the passive and objectified female subject. Using data from a project which involved the photographic collaborations of a professional photographer (myself) and a number of sexy-selfie taking women, I propose to promote the concept of *seen-ness* as a counter to male-centered gaze discourses and ideals of 'proper' feminine/sexual presentation. Like theories

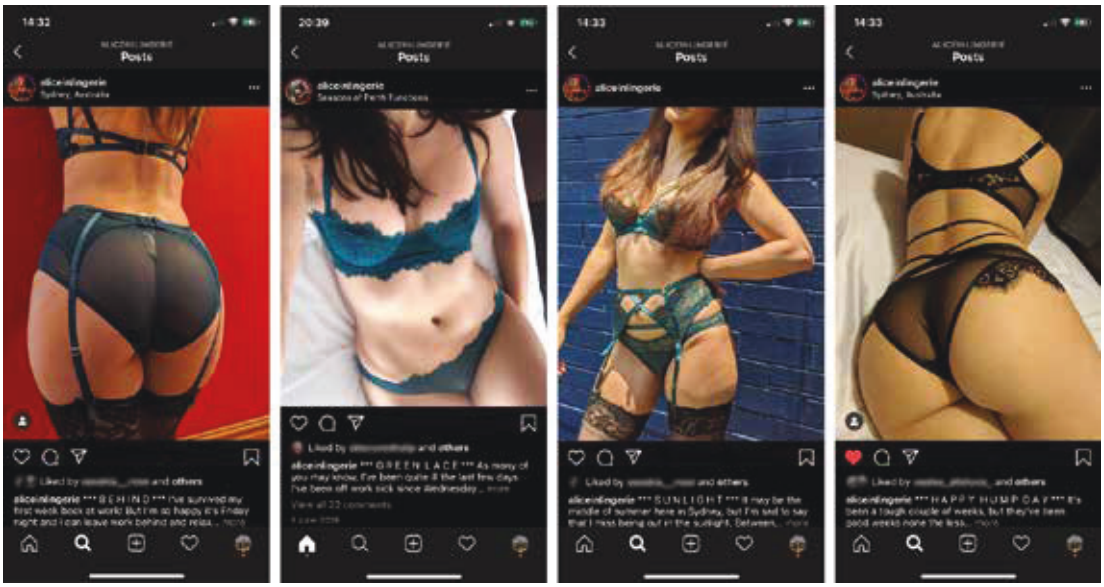

Figure 1. A sample of Michelle ten Bohmer's selfies as they appear on Instagram

on 'listening' to create a *to-be-heard-ness*, there is an ethical imperative for viewing/gazing to create a *to-be-seen-ness*. I will further argue that sexy selfies have brought objectification discourses to a critical juncture where relations of power between the looker and the looked-at are much less clear and in need of new frameworks for analysis.

Introduction

'I can work in finance and I can look after myself and I can still be a sensual, sexual being, but don't ever treat me with any disrespect,' Michelle tells me. 'Treat me as a human being because I'm still a person and I deserve respect. So it's that kind of message I'm trying to get across, *so other people can see that* and I can feel comfortable to bring my sexuality and y'know not be ashamed of being me' (emphasis added).

Michelle takes sexy selfies and uploads them on Instagram. She uses the platform to explore aspects of her sexuality by uploading photographs of herself in lingerie and engaging with responses from viewers. She is clear in her desire to self-express in this way, to be respected and also to let her audience know the importance to her of these two things. She wishes to be seen in a particular way and is careful to present selfies photographed only from the neck-down. Michelle's images invariably invite feminist discourses on sexual objectification, power, agency and photographic representation. They also offer some insight into the shifting nature of these discourses, as they

adjust to large techno-cultural shifts in image making. Figure 1 is a sample of her selfies as they appear on Instagram.

As photography's technological advancement has afforded women greater self-representational opportunity and control, an increase in mainstream moral panic has run concurrent with women's particular choice to self-represent in a sexual way. This panic folds into the limited and limiting concept of self-objectification which typically positions sexy-selfie taking women as victims of the now-vernacular 'male gaze'. Some academics argue that these images represent self-objectification (Linden, 2019; for an overview of these discourses, see Tiidenberg, 2018), others suggest that by ascribing agency to Michelle's decision, I am engaging in a 'fallacy of choice' (Kiraly and Tyler, 2015), whilst others yet argue that selfies can be a 'self-affirmative and awareness raising pursuit' that may be read 'as a practice of freedom' (Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015). In this article, I argue that objectification discourses are at a critical juncture where sexy selfies demand to be read in new ways which conceptualise sexual subjectivity beyond post-feminist empowerment/agency discourses and disempowerment/male gaze discourses to foreground instead the subject's self-gaze.

Drawing on data generated by a project co-creating sexy representations of young women, this paper argues that the concept of the male gaze that was developed in the 1970s is persistent in contemporary visual culture and also limiting for feminist appraisals of sexy selfies, particularly where these selfies offer a rebuttal of sorts to conventional notions of compliant 'female sexual decorum' (Albury, 2017: 719). I draw attention especially to the dominance of discourses which foreground female passivity (she is *looked-at*, she is *gazed-upon*) and which consequently marginalise women's own representational experiences. I propose instead to promote the concept of *seen-ness*, from the perspective of the sexy selfie taker, where the notion of *being seen* incorporates both the literal meaning of the word and its deeper suggestion of a recognition of selfhood, identity or, frankly, however it is the selfie taker intends to *be seen*. This centralises the subjectivity of the selfie-taker, rather than the 'looker' and re-orients the dominant, typically-objectifying gaze to *see through her eyes.* Though some important contemporary academic work is being done on 'listening' and 'voice' to promote the standpoint of otherwise-marginalised speakers, little critical work has focused on the image as a means through which women can – and do – demand that their sexualities be *seen* and 'heard'.

I focus on Michelle as a case study emerging from a larger project which is described below, but also draw on other participants to illustrate my arguments. Of the eight participants in the study, each expressed their own standpoint for how they would like to be seen, but the journal article format prevents the full exposition of this data. The project also substantially relies on the experience and knowledge I have gained as a professional photographer. I take a self-reflexive and at times auto-ethnographic approach as a means through which to examine the ways that visual culture both promotes and obfuscates the *to-be-seen-ness* of female sexy selfie takers. Lastly, I will argue that women's significant (in number) uptake of sexy-selfie making practices raises substantial questions about conventional objectification when relations of power between the looker and the looked-at are less clear than ever.

Co-creating images with sexy selfie makers

This project set out to produce data about the ways in which women who create their own images wish to be seen and to understand how that functions in a culture which privileges, and gives power to, the so-called male gaze. Using a purposive sampling method, I approached prospective participants on Instagram who were female-presenting, living in Australia and who had Instagram accounts which were populated largely with amateur sexy selfies. My searches were informed by selecting for some visual tropes of conventionally-western, mainstream-heterosexual and hyper-feminine sexiness, such as those described by Amy Shields Dobson (2011) and Drenten, Gurrieri and Tyler (2018) and which are detailed on a web page called '7 ways to take a stunning sexy selfie!' (Adriana, 2018). It is my contention that these types of aesthetics have not been valued in image cultures with power and cultural currency and I wanted to work with and hear from women who could talk to this.

I draw on my ten years of experience as a professional portrait photographer working in mainstream Australian media, advertising and design to partly inform this project, in a semi-autoethnographic way. My photographs have appeared in magazines, billboards and book covers and I have also had work shown in various photographic prizes and fine-art exhibitions. I am interested in applying my knowledge in this field to co-create images with amateur sexy selfie producers in order for our respective aesthetic systems to be made visible and to draw comparisons between the two.

I invited participants to take part in a collaborative photo shoot and semi-structured interviews where we engaged in a compare-and-contrast method of analysis of our respective sets of amateur and professional images. I encouraged participants to view the photo shoot as though they had commissioned a professional photographer and to express their ideas and desires for what they wanted the shoot to be. The photo shoots were carried out over 2019 and 2020 and each participant was engaged in two semi-structured interviews – one before the shoot and one after. I placed a strong emphasis on pre-production discussions leading up to the shoot, which helped to ensure that myself and the participant were in agreement on the direction, style and design. Most shoots included a stylist and make-up artist and some retouching was applied to images that were selected by a participant and myself. The photos were then uploaded to the participants' Instagram feeds and also to mine. Following this, we focused the second interview on looking at, and discussing the co-created images while I asked (amongst a number of questions) about what they experienced in a professional setting; how beauty factors into their image making; what they hoped the images communicated to an audience; and if our collaboration would lead to any changes in the way they made their own selfies. The process was completed by my own privately-journaled reflections.

To be heard, to be looked-at, but to be seen?

Ten years ago, I worked as a photographer for a community newspaper where I was sent out to cover an array of stories. One in particular was to take a portrait of a man named Len who was angry at some proposed development in his old suburb. I approached his house and found Len waiting at the front gate for me. As I introduced myself, he said, 'hmph, a lady photographer'. I stayed professional, Len soon moved on and we got the job done. However, it was a reminder to me that women's place in photographic cultures and industries has typically been peripheral. Despite a rich history of influential female photographers, the cultural consciousness still sees 'male', when it constructs the image of a photographer. The one area in this field that women have, of course, been foregrounded, is in front of the camera's lens. Women have been photographed extensively, mostly by men. It is this gendered dynamic, and its place within misogynist cultures, that underpinned the seminal work of John Berger on women's 'looked-at-ness', and Laura Mulvey's on the 'male gaze'. They foreshadowed a string of feminist critiques on the sexual objectification of women and underscore many debates on how power is operationalised in the realm of sexual representation. Much has been written on both Berger and Mulvey, including observations that some of their theories do not hold up contemporaneously. However, I raise aspects of their work again as they offer new relevance to discourses on sexy selfies and what has emerged as an important cultural moment for photography and the gaze.

In 2007, the Musée de l'Elysée in Switzerland hosted an exhibition titled 'We are all Photographers Now!' which responded to the burgeoning uptake of everyday photography that had been facilitated by the obvious and immense socio-techno affordances of smart phones and social media. It challenged assumptions about the conventional production and consumption of photography and recognised the significance of the cultural shift towards a new, more democratic mode of image making and sharing (Rubinstein and Sluis, 2008). As Frosh (2015) notes, this shift was substantial enough as to demand new language, such as 'the networked image', coined by Rubinstein and Sluis (2008); 'algorithmic photography' by Uricchio (2011); and of course, the word 'selfie', as detailed by Linden (2019). It prompted the assertion from Gómez Cruz (2012) that photography had entered its 'fifth moment' (having yielded only four substantive techno-cultural shifts in its entire 200-year history), and inspired the declaration from American art critic Jerry Saltz (2014) that selfies are so significant, they must now be regarded as a new genre of photography (as opposed to simply a new style). Containing their own 'structural autonomy', he further suggests 'It's possible that the selfie is the most prevalent popular genre ever' (Saltz, 2014: para 3).

The ubiquitous smart phone-social media complex and its flagship, the selfie, have advanced critical thinking in photographic theory and visual culture and, where women's sexy selfies are concerned, have also complicated debates on the so-called 'male gaze'. It was Berger (1972) who first asserted that women have a quality of to-be-looked-at-ness: 'men act and women appear… the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an

object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight'. It proposed a binary power imbalance between men and women such that the male gaze was thought to be inescapable, with women seeing themselves – the looked-at – through the prism of heterosexual male desire. Mulvey's work on this in the 1970s, through her focus on cinematic pleasure, gave clear terminology to a second-wave feminism which was, amongst other things, angry at the sexual objectification of women in representational arenas. She coined the term 'male gaze' (1975) as a way to advance the theory that men were active, subjective viewers of women who were passive 'objects' of their desirous gaze.

Mulvey's critique was embraced by a radical feminist ideology which drew links between her theory and its trenchant stance against pornography. It is an ideology which can be found in current anti-sexualisation and anti-pornography campaigns. Though she was subject to some serious criticism within the academy, which she later formally addressed (1989), the legacy of the original concept of the male gaze is so profound that the term has entered the vernacular and is commonly used as shorthand for 'the sexual objectification of women by men'.

At its inception, the concept was relatively secure. During the 1970s, many more men than women were image-makers, directors of photography, advertisers, artists, porn producers and cultural decision makers. They were supported by cultures of systemic masculine dominance and permissible misogyny which enabled male heterosexual fantasy to flourish in many spaces of cultural and media production. In response, a number of female photographers chose to make self-portraits in ways which were designed to challenge masculine dominance, through 'expressing their agency by managing the sexual representations that patriarchy demands of them' (Paasonen et al., 2020: 27). They were known in the 1970s as 'exhibitionist artists', with the work of Hannah Wilke a notable example. Leveraging from her sculpture practice, she attached mini vulval simulacra to her torso and photographed herself nude with the intention of complicating discourses on acceptable femininity, vanity, beauty and sexual objectification. She was criticised for being too conventionally beautiful, a point that feminist art critic Ann-Sargent Wooster (1990) thought undermined the possibility of her being taken seriously. Though Wooster granted Wilke this: 'In her photographs of herself as a goddess, a living incarnation of great works of art or as a pin-up, she wrested the means of production of the female image from male hands and put them in her own' (Wooster, 1990: 31). She made clear that her beauty and sex appeal were problematically not feminist enough: 'The problem Wilke faced in being taken seriously is that she was conventionally beautiful and her beauty and self-absorbed narcissism distracted you from her reversal of the voyeurism inherent in women as sex objects' (1990: 31). Wooster demonstrated that feminism had rules for women who represented their bodies in a sexual manner and contributed to an ideological framework which related women's sexual-representational expressions only to men. Such rules are echoed in feminist critiques of sexy selfie takers where conventional feminine presentation practices through selfies are framed as vain and narcissistic (Senft and Baym, 2015) and if not outright anti-feminist, then, as with Wilke, *not feminist enough*.

While the respective work of Mulvey, Wilke and Wooster intersected neatly to demonstrate a key aspect of the 1970s feminist zeitgeist, their standpoints are evident today in the limitations

faced by women whose sexy selfies are moored in these histories of binary, male-centered gaze structures. This cultural moment that is the uprising of amateur photographic processes and outputs has seen women, en-masse, produce and distribute their own images and do so with a desire to be seen and valued. Many of them are choosing to make sexy selfies for public consumption. They are agents of their own sexual depictions. And this has made the concept of the male gaze and the 'gendered nature of subject/object relations' (Paasonen et al., 2020: 20) less secure than before. It has also provoked criticism which invokes the 'male gaze' theory and tends to point to so-called raunch culture (Levy, 2005) as that which hyper-sexualises young women, leading them to problematically 'self-objectify'.

While there is some academic discourse of this nature, such as Megan Tyler's argument that women today have a 'fallacy of choice' (2015) when it comes to their own representations; and the worries of Liz Linden's (2019) concern that women who take sexy selfies are reinforcing the aesthetics of the male gaze; it is discourses found in popular culture which especially promulgate these notions of the gaze. Though Kim Kardashian 'is probably the figure that comes most readily to mind as an influencer of the selfie practices of many…', notes Linden (2019: 197), she is subject to a great deal of criticism which position her selfie aesthetics as tasteless (see De Largie, 2016; #KardashTrash on Twitter) and accuse her of '…capitalizing on and reinforcing the aesthetics of the male gaze' (Linden, 2019: 197). There is a panic about young women's media and self-representational practices which is not new (see Renold and Ringrose, 2013) and it focuses acutely on sexy representations. Though women have gained substantial control over their own sexy representations, their agency and power in this regard has had little impact on long-standing male gaze structures which continue to render their images as objects of sexual subjugation to heterosexual men. As McCann (2020: 81) points out in critiquing anti-raunch-culture proponents Ariel Levy and Nina Power (amongst others), '…the logic of objectification that both Power and Levy work with centres specifically on the operation of the male gaze'. McCann (2020: 75) notes also that '…objectification has often been rendered ahistorical and untethered from racialised and other coercive bodily regimes. This version of objectification is, at its worst, seen as the fault of individual women who cannot unyoke themselves from the male gaze, signified by how these women "do" their embodiment'.

The *photograph* is seen as especially complicit in the kinds of objectification and gaze structures that McCann describes, for both its physical, object form and its capacity for indexicality – a recording of 'real' human presence (Bourne, 2014). It is at once redactive (what happened before or after the capture? Which body parts are shown and which are not?) and expansive (from one distant country to another, I can *show* you my desire). And yet women who centre themselves in their own photographic, representational narratives are subject to discourses which construe their self-fashioned sexual images as self-objectifying and belonging somewhere outside of them (i.e. to the male gaze) (Tiidenberg, 2017), even as they literally testify through the lens (see Figure 2).

Michelle captioned this image, one that she and I co-created, with: 'Glowing because I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel loved, I feel understood'. And yet Michelle understands both the self-

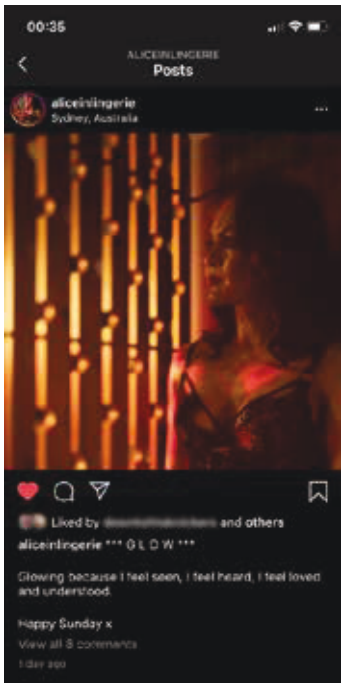

Figure 2.
An image Michelle ten Bohmer and I co-created, on her Instagram account

affirming power of her imagery and also the binds that limit the prospect of her being seen as she wishes when she laments:

> It can't ever be ok a woman just wants to do this for herself. So men have this really funny way sometimes, in my experience, of bringing it all back to them. Everything that happens has to have something to do with them and then they dictate which way it goes.

This paper is not a call for a simple transcendence of male gaze structures, but an argument for the *seen-ness* of real, affective documents of female sexuality which ask to be divorced from limiting constructions of sexual subjugation to men. I argue for this concept of *seen-ness* as that which recognises histories of patriarchal dominance in image cultures, but which demands a shift from the colonizing influence of the male gaze to the subject's perspective. It asks the viewer to gaze upon themselves in the act of gazing in order that they 'listen' to female sexy selfie takers.

Long-standing normative ideals of a central, heterosexual male gaze live in popular media commentaries (Tiidenberg, 2017) and yet, this research reveals that women who take sexy selfies often experience something different to this narrative. I draw attention especially to the ongoing dominance of discourses which conceptualise women's sexy self-representations as *problematically* sexy for both their heteronormative 'raunch' aesthetic and so-called passive submission to male fantasy. Little attention is given to the consequent marginalising of women's visual and verbal statements

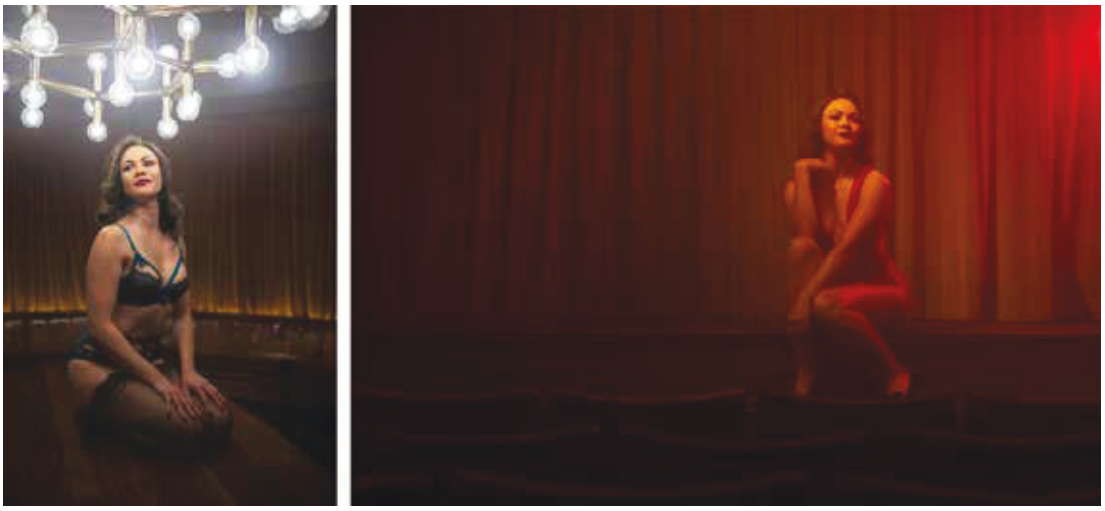

Figure 3. Two images that Michelle ten Bohmer and I co-created

and even less attention to the gendered and often classed double-standards contained within such critiques. Nor do these critiques allow for the affective feminist potential (Shields Dobson, 2015; Tiidenberg and Gómez Cruz, 2015) of sexy female representation which are less mediated by men than ever before. As Koskela (2004: 199) argues, 'sometimes it is more radical to *reveal* than to hide'.

Seen-ness operates in the literal meaning of the word; and by its deeper suggestion of a recognition of selfhood, identity or, frankly, however it is the selfie-taker intends to *be seen*. It is not intended as a neat resolution to real issues of disempowerment for women, but to agitate for a decentralizing of the male gaze in order that women's representational experiences become more visible and more valued. Little has been written on the concept of seen-ness. In the next section I present findings from my collaborations with two participants – Michelle and Mel. I also use Joke Hermes' important notion of 'respect' for women - where discourses of 'concern' often hold sway - as a framework for analysis, alongside recent critical work on 'listening'.

To-be-seen-ness

> 'I'm showcasing another part of myself that I would not be able to show every day. This is not just who I want you to think I am, it's really a part of me' – Michelle.

Images of women are the foundational site of the conceptualisation of the male gaze. The images of participant Michelle in Figure 3 are two of a number that she and I produced and shot together, following a long conversation about the ways that she presents aspects of her sexual self online.

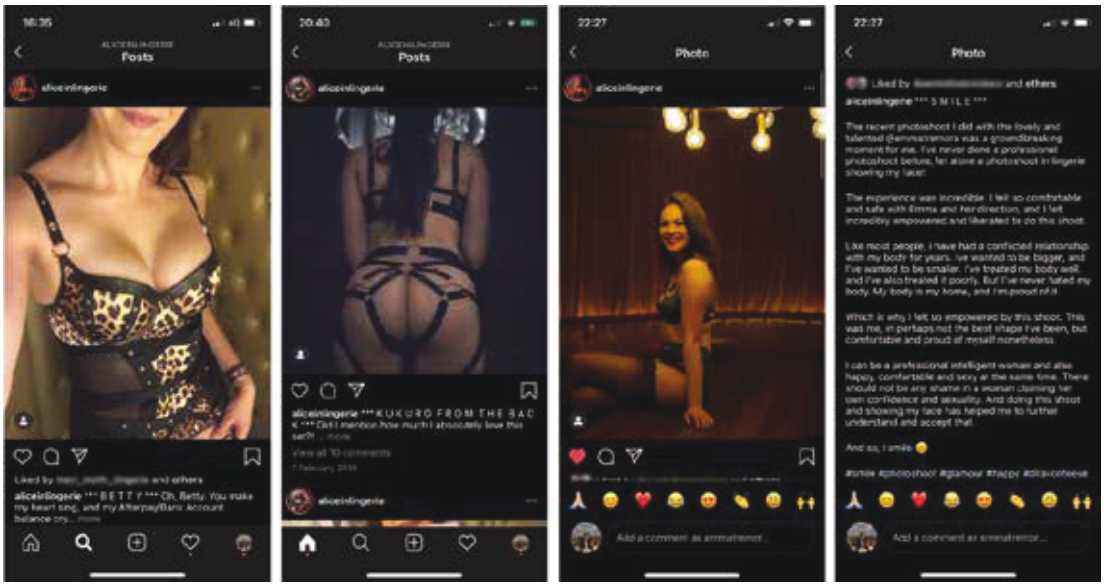

Figure 4. Images from Michelle ten Bohmer's Instagram account

Michelle's Instagram feed, up until this photo shoot, was populated with only her selfies, each one shot strictly from the neck down, no face. On this she says:

> I'm very mindful that I work in corporate so that's why I'm very much about – it's not about my face because it's not an attention thing for me. It's not for attention of any of the guys, it's just for my – it's like a hobby for me, another form of expression which, y'know, working in corporate I find I can't really be me. There's my work me, which I'm completely fine with, but I can never be fully me so it's like another facet of my personality I'm actually glad I'm able to show.

Michelle suggested before our shoot that we include her face in the images – that she had thought a lot about this and was ready to show her face on her Instagram feed and felt a political imperative to do so – "I don't think women should have to feel the need to hide themselves." Though we collaborated at all stages of the shoot, Michelle arrived at this point with no prompting from me. Figure 4 shows three images and a caption that Michelle currently has on her Instagram account. The two on the left are her own selfies and third from the left is one of the images we co-created. The panel on the right is the caption she wrote with this co-created image. In it she says:

> I can be a professional, intelligent woman and also happy, comfortable and sexy at the same time. There should not be any shame in a woman claiming her own confidence

> and sexuality. And doing this shoot and showing my face has helped me to further understand and accept that.

Michelle demonstrates a desire for visibility and is specific in the ways she wants to be seen, while also being aware of the narrow standards placed on women whose statements of seen-ness breach barriers of acceptable displays of feminine sexuality. In so doing, she complicates conventional notions of the male gaze. Michelle's images and our co-creations might initially appear to invite a typical male gaze. The aesthetics accord with conventions of western heterosexiness that might be read in the Foucauldian (1979) sense of the hegemonic discourse which establishes and maintains cultural attitudes and collective memory. However, Michelle tells me multiple times that her images are not intended for men. In discussing some judgement she experienced initially in uploading her selfies, she says:

> Y'know, "all these sluts trying to show off, blah blah blah all vying for the attention of men", like really negative feedback. Um, I'm like, *but it's not for men.* And that's what I don't understand – it's not for men, it's for me.

And yet, there is a gentle incursion to be made into Michelle's claims that her selfies are for her. Since she makes her images public and engages an audience, they are, to some degree, also for other people. I believe Michelle though, when she tells me they are for her and I take this contradiction to mean that her entire regime of selfie making is for her – and this includes the gaze of others. The audience are a component in the overall photographic joy she creates for herself from outfit selection through to audience reception.

How then, to make sense of Michelle's requests to be seen outside the male gaze when her context and aesthetics conform to the kinds of visual tropes that would likely provoke an accusation of acquiescence to the male gaze? For even Hannah Wilke's photos with feminist political statements was not enough to keep feminist criticism of this nature at bay. Is it enough to champion Michelle's agency, her choice to be subject *and* photographer? Her own gaze is literally paramount in her selfies after all. If her selfies are read as acts of self-objectification, does she also have any subjectification? And who, precisely, is her audience? One response to these questions is that Michelle is creating images within a set of normative social structures that traditionally marginalise and shame the voices of women or mislabel them as lacking in power and agency. And she is doing so in ways which break from the conventions of 'proper' feminine presentations which hold that women's sexuality should be reserved, suggestive, genteel. In rebelling against shaming discourses, Koskela (2004: 199) points out that 'to be (more) seen is not always to be less powerful'. Brager (2017) notes that we exist in a culture of representational violences which promote an erasure and/or misrepresentation of 'improper' representations of women's sexualities. Such violences are moored in histories of binary, male-centred gaze structures and can make for difficult conversations about sexy selfies as objects through which women can find

power. The words of participant Mel might better sum this up: 'Wouldn't want my Dad to find my selfies!'

Michelle is not unaware of these structures, lamenting 'It can't ever be ok if a woman just wants to do this for herself'. She does, however, use her voice and her visual language to direct the viewer's gaze to her gaze. She cannot control how they will see her, but she can creative-direct her own narratives, her own image and the way in which she engages with the gaze of others. In a grossly unbalanced visual arena, Michelle is asking to be looked-at, on her terms. As Parkins (2020: 101) suggests, 'women's participation in boudoir sessions [our photoshoot approximates this] is an expression of their desire to be erotically evident'. Michelle and I created images that we want an audience to look at, to see a woman in lingerie, showing her face on Instagram for the first time, comfortable in herself and her *seen-ness*. She imagines first, and then discovers, an audience that shares in her seen-ness. Their gaze is a testament to her 'erotically evident' self:

> I felt so good I took a selfie [after putting lingerie on she had just bought] and I posted it on Facebook because I hadn't felt so good about myself for such a long time. So as ridiculous as it sounds, I just wanted other people to know how good I felt when I hadn't been feeling so good. And I actually got some quite positive comments about it… so then over time every now and then if I felt really good, I'd share it. I feel good, but also I've got so much lingerie now, it's just I think it's a disservice to not share that!

And yet, as I write this, I note the voices of concern which say that selfies are a 'fantasy of the self simply as seen' (Linden, 2019); that women who take them are creating a 'pornified aesthetic' which '…positions women and girls as existing for men's sexualised consumption' (Drenten et al., 2018); and that the intersecting gazes of colonialism, capitalism and misogyny (Brager, 2017) cannot be simply ushered aside in favour of pseudo-celebratory empowerment discourses. Indeed. But the point here is to engage in a new way of looking which centres the experience of the female selfie taker, not the male gaze (actual or symbolic) and demands a respectful seen-ness such that women's subjectivities are visible foremost. This is reminiscent of discourses on *visibility* where the desire to be seen is positive and often political, such as those associated with the queer movement or Indigenous rights, for example. Visibility work is usually about group needs however, and doesn't adequately offer a conceptual pathway to new gaze structures in the same way that the idea of seen-ness can do. Academic work on the body and visibility has overwhelmingly been concern-focused, 'where the body is often identified…as a site of social or cultural 'problems' (Coffey and Watson, 2015: 1), the well-known notion of visibility provides a useful accompaniment to the new idea of 'seen-ness' and suggests that acts of looking can be done in positive ways.

Academic work on 'listening' and 'voice' offers a productive way to think through the under-examined ideas of 'seen-ness' and 'vision'. 'Ruth Lister (2004) defines "voice" as the right to participate in decision making across social, economic, cultural and political spheres' (Tacchi, 2011: 655) and Tacchi (2011: 655) suggests this definition has '…largely been limited to an

Figure 5. Two co-created images of Mel

interest in the basic act of voice, not the wider reasons for valuing voice'. Not all voices get heard equally, of course. Tanja Dreher (2009), in this vein, points out that discursively privileged people have more say in the public sphere and often perpetuate hierarchies of value which amplify certain voices and make others peripheral. Researchers in this tradition have insisted that it is imperative that academics 'listen' to the voices of the people about whom they write. Listening is, they argue, not a simple matter of hearing, but goes beyond that to involve a serious attempt to understand what people are saying. I argue that this logic can be extended to the visual. The 'voices' of women who take sexy selfies are found primarily in their visual languages and these languages are often assigned less value than their representational counterparts in galleries or other conventionally refined and gate-kept spaces (Phillips, 2020). The point is, power exists where voices desire being heard and where bodies desire being seen. To communicate is one thing, to be *heard and valued* is another. And to be *seen and valued* is yet another again. Particularly in this cultural moment of photographic ubiquity and visual currency.

The participants in this project are aware of the hierarchies of value in visual culture and also that context will impact their seen-ness. Says Mel, 'People are gonna judge it differently rather than me just posting a picture if it's coming from like an academic article sorta way…'. This brings attention to the types of seeing that are present in women's sexy selfie making cultures and the necessity of what listening theorists describe as an ethical approach to listening (Brager, 2017; Dreher, 2009) where the audience is held to account for the ways in which they are listening – or

seeing in this case. Rather than seeing women as 'to be looked-at', in the Berger/Mulvey tradition, the challenge here is to understand them as *demanding to be seen*.

In consciously elevating the subject/photographer gaze (the selfie taker), it is possible to '… engage the selfie as a dominant and enlarging practice of assertion and performance of lived existence' (Bruś, 2017). In this vein, I propose, as Hermes (1995) does, an intervention into feminist discourses of *concern*, in favour of *respect*. Through this frame of respect, can we look at Michelle and declare that to be looked-at means she is powerless? Is it inherently a submission of power to want to be looked at? Says Michelle of the shoot we did together:

> I felt incredibly empowered and liberated to do this shoot. My body is my home and I'm proud of it. This is me. Perhaps not everyday me, certainly a glammed-up version, but still me. This is me feeling comfortable in my skin, feeling beautiful and glamorous and feeling alive.

Michelle speaks of her own power and the ways in which she makes this power visible in photographs. Despite her clarity of self-vision and desire for the ways in which she wishes to be seen, the sexual nature of her images draws ongoing feminist concerns of false consciousness. Sharon Lamb (2010: 301), for example, suggests 'a false kind of subjectivity' exists in girls who visibly perform their sexuality and that ideological discourses create in them a mistaken belief that they are acting autonomously. Yet Lamb's 'girls' are imagined, for the purposes of her argument. Visibility and seen-ness are obviously absent in discourses which do not include the women of which they speak. Says Hermes (1995: 3): 'Feminists using modernity discourse to speak on behalf of others who…need to be enlightened; they need good feminist texts in order to be saved from their false consciousness…I would advocate a more postmodern view in which respect rather than concern…would have a central place'. From respect, seen-ness is possible.

Berger and Mulvey contributed to powerful and important knowledge on seeing and being seen in male-dominated culture, but they neglected to include the unique, qualitative representational experiences of women, or to wonder if there might be more to unequal relations of power than gender. The experiences of women for whom beauty matters and is useful; who invite the male gaze; who get pleasure in sexy self-representations; who do it for themselves; who gain confidence in the practice and who feel uneasy about feminism telling them how they should live their lives all offer counterpoints to the persistent and relatively singular nature of arguments which focus on the male gaze.

Says Michelle, after I asked her about double standards in representation and media:

> 100%. It's a societal thing. You look at it from a deep level…Is this because we're in a patriarchal society and women don't have power? So when we do have a say?

The professional photographer's gaze

This paper is chiefly about women's photographic practices and power. The project it emerges from was designed to compare and contrast the image-making regimes and aesthetics of a professional photographer (myself) and a number of amateur female photographers with a view to learning what their differences could reveal about aesthetic hierarchies and cultural value. It presented, naturally, a complex engagement with power between myself and the participants and raised questions about my own gaze in this context.

In my ten years as a professional portrait photographer, I have been disinclined to photograph women. Whether in a commercial context or an art one, I have resisted photographing women as it has too often felt fraught with heterosexy standards that I feared I couldn't replicate – or perhaps didn't want to. I worried I wouldn't be able to meet the desires that women had for themselves to look beautiful. I carried assumptions about gender and operated, as my industry does, in relatively binary ways. I was bothered by nagging thoughts that it is more difficult to 'get it right' with a woman, than with a man. And I feared that I might objectify women. Not through intent, but through the seemingly inevitable logic of the male gaze. So it has been a challenge to photograph the women in this project, all of whom have a pride and comfort in self-representations of sexiness and sexuality. Whose gaze is present in my own photography? How do I enact my own seen-ness while ensuring a platform for these women to do the same?

Like anyone, I gaze through a number of prisms. I am cis-female, white, queer and mostly middle class, to name some of them. I also have a professional photographer's gaze – a so-called expert eye which intersects with these prisms. It informs my style of art direction; drives me to carefully construct images in the tradition of contemporary tableaux and also editorial portrait photography; enables the application of learned lighting techniques which draw on the cannon of commercial portraiture; and to finesse images in post-production. I am aware of the cultural value in my professional gaze – it holds a currency that allows me access to elite spaces in media and arts. And I want to impress. I want to be seen for this skill. My desire for seen-ness is like that of the project's participants, but the institutional (visual culture industries) support I enjoy and the professional style of photography I create make it more likely that my images will be attributed value than the selfies of the project's participants.

In this context, I return to Michelle's question, "so when do we have a say?" and to the power structures in visual culture which shifts her amateur voice to the margins, while elevating the professional one. It is an insidious process where professional photographers are granted a 'legitimising' function. That is, there is a trust that their gaze will 'make legitimate' a subject who might otherwise be accorded marginal status by a dominant group. As Stephen Frailey (2019: 10) notes, with regards to a photo of a homeless woman taken by famous photographer Andres Serrano, 'Serrano uses the visual rhetoric of formalised portraiture that gives currency to the prominent, to recognise and elevate those without, thus seizing the language of power to portray the powerless'. This is not to suggest that the project's participants were powerless, this was far from the case. But

it remains a difficult truth that my professional gaze and aesthetics accord with some measure of cultural exclusion. Indeed, 'The nude itself may not be the point of the picture but only nominally the subject; the real subject is the photographer's aesthetic allegiance' (Goldberg, 2005: 196).

Though there is an imperial nature to my photographic gaze and a power that comes with the 'aura' of academia, there is too, a knowledge exchange that has occurred between myself and participants in this collaborative process. We developed an 'intersubjectivity' based on mutual respect, trust and a willingness to support each other's respective desires for seen-ness. I was and remain, conscious of the obvious imbalance of power between myself and the participants. The sheer nature of my inviting them into the project can serve as an unfortunate reminder to them that they are regarded as 'different' and are asked, at times, to justify their choices to make sexy selfies. Yet the power is not all mine. My initial attempts to garner participants yielded very little response from female sexy selfie takers. Though I highlighted my professional photographic resume, I got little interest and quickly found myself needing them more than they needed me. However, those who did join the project almost always deferred to me once we were in the studio setting: "Oh you're the creative, you tell me." The studio has an aura too. And yet there was a positive enabling that it brought to every participant. Each reported elevated confidence following the shoot and that they were able to see themselves in new ways. Each felt comfortable with the gaze of a female photographer and reassured by both my professional status and the university backing of the project. It is a reminder that inside patriarchal structures riven with attachment to limiting notions of the male gaze; inside a hegemonic visual culture which privileges the expert, women can still find points of connection which enlarge knowledge, interrupt hierarchies of power and enable new possibilities for being seen and for being valued.

Conclusion

Women's place has been indeterminate and peripheral in photographic cultures and industries and in conversations about sex. Our sexual desires and fantasies have largely been relegated, ignored, stigmatised and shamed. Male fantasies, however, are written onto billboards, magazine covers, into songs, poetry and literature and show up in countless movies. As a commercial photographer, asked oftentimes to reproduce these stereotypes for mainstream media and advertising, I have wondered whether, within systems of image-making and the broader system of masculine dominance, women's sexual selves can be seen in ways that do not relate necessarily with male desire. And yet, while photography is complicit in some of the structures which enable male dominance, it is rapidly affording new spaces for female visionaries, many of whom are demanding to be seen in ways which do not necessarily involve men and which firmly ask for a gaze of respect. And it is an easy brushstroke, so to speak, to discuss photography's complicity when ultimately it has been networks of privilege and power which have used photography's tools to amplify its own voices and suppress others. As Tacchi (2011: 655) notes, 'voice requires recognition' and needs to

be 'valued rather than simply facilitated'. As the academic call to effectively listen to those with less access to privileged spaces rises, might it also include 'visual voices' – the aesthetic standpoints of women for whom sexy selfie-making is an important practice of sexual selfhood. Presenting oneself to be looked at can be an expression of power after all.

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Chapter Seven

"Why does she have to wear make-up? She looks better natural!" Staged photos and sexual subjectivities

Foreword

This paper was submitted to *Journal of Visual Culture* on June 9th, 2021 and is still under review. It is structured according to this journal's requirements of an abstract, introduction, project overview, short literature review, discussion and conclusion. It also has two substantial sections which discuss relevant findings.

This chapter continues this project's key examination of classed and gendered discourses that underpin the texts and practices of women's sexy self-representations, but with a concentration on the ways that dominant discourses of so-called 'naturalness' and 'authenticity' are applied to women's sexy selfies. One of the key points of inquiry across this research project has been how mainstream feminist concerns about 'raunch culture' mask prejudice regarding class. Just as a privileging of 'high-art' over 'everyday' sexy aesthetics produces hierarchies of value which marginalise some women, so too does a privileging of so-called 'natural' feminine aesthetics, where sexy selfies are often considered 'fake' or 'vulgar'.

This structuring of sexy aesthetics is proscribed by middle-class tastes to reinforce classed ideals of femininity and female sexuality and data from this project revealed that participants often experience these ideals as a form of symbolic violence. I argue that certain aspects of visual culture allow (and encourage at times) certain 'fakenesses', such as those found in constructed fine art and commercial photography, but do not allow the same of selfies. This double-standard perpetuates class hierarchies and marginalises the sexual self-representational experiences of participants and other female sexy selfie-takers.

Abstract

As women's sexy selfie making practices have burgeoned, so too have popular and feminist discourses of concern about them. One aspect of concern is that they are inauthentic or 'unnatural' presentations of self - where naturalness is assumed to be an aspirational feminine ideal. I argue that naturalness discourses are operationalised to reinforce long-standing, classed ideals of feminine sexual presentation which marginalise some self-representations and legitimise others. In the large volume of academic work on selfies and the power structures which regulate women's bodies, little attention has been paid to the intersection of women's sexuality with class and the aesthetic codes which function as limits for women whose sexy selfies fall outside the norms of feminine acceptability, read in class terms as *respectability*. This paper emerges from a project which examines the aesthetic components of the sexualisation debates through the co-creation of images between a professional photographer (myself) and women who take amateur sexy selfies.

Introduction

Being 'natural' is a good thing – at least in aesthetic discourses used to evaluate women's selfies. When model Paulina Porizkova chose to post a selfie at the start of 2021 – 'Here I am – truly naked on this first day of 2021,' she wrote in the accompanying caption. 'No makeup no filters no anything on my face but the nearly fifty six years of life. One year older – and at least twenty wiser' – *US* magazine celebrated the choice of a 'a stunning, natural selfie' (Petrarca, 2021). Women who take selfies are often subject to discourses which call into question their authenticity (Abidin, 2016). A number of feminist writers have previously pointed out the class dimension of assessments about appropriate femininity, whereby middle-class versions of femininity are judged to be more attractive and often more authentic; and working-class versions are vulgar, offensive, or even anti-feminist (Skeggs, 2004; Kipnis, 1998; McRobbie, 2009). In this article I use data drawn from a project co-creating images with young female sexy selfie takers to illustrate and explore the ways in which discourses of naturalness and authenticity are used to dismiss certain kinds of self-representation and legitimise others.

My argument draws attention to a perceived lack of naturalness in women's selfies, where naturalness frequently stands for a kind of aspirational and virtuous femininity that is generically heterosexual, white, passive, genteel, and, particularly, middle-class. Additionally, women who choose to take *sexy* selfies are often subject to discourses which suggest that their visual sexiness (including pose, outfit, make-up, body modifications and so on), post-shoot filters and social media use is excessive and unnatural – that it renders their selfies 'cheap cultural objects' (Abidin 2016) and the women who take them as, variously, lacking in feminist smarts, vain, trashy, delusional and unwitting agents of a burgeoning raunch culture (Tiidenberg, 2018; McCann, 2015; 2020). Such discourses are often presented ahistorically, despite having roots in long histories of both the policing of women's bodies and the attribution of moral goodness to women who demonstrate appropriately middle-class naturalness and authenticity in their presentations of self**.**

The so-called unnatural woman, often read as grotesque or excessive, has been historically regarded with suspicion (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006; Brown, 2005) whilst the 'natural' woman has been valorised as appropriately feminine. And while these kinds of distinctions of naturalness are clearly made along gender lines, they are also made along class lines, where judgements of taste in feminine aesthetics are operationalised symbolically in ways which re-inscribe long-standing social-sexual hierarchies. As Brown (2005: 81) notes, 'where the classical [natural] body is the dominant normative model representing middle- and upper-class beliefs and values, the grotesque body is emblematic of all things socially unacceptable and hence lower class'. I am interested too, in photography's role in naturalness discourses and in particular the aesthetic components of images which reveal class distinctions. I argue that naturalness and virtue are ascribed to certain images and in certain contexts, even when a great deal of fabrication has gone into producing them and that this renders the charge of 'fakeness' often levelled at women's selfies, problematic and worthy of deeper inquiry.

The Project

This paper reports on findings from a project which considers the aesthetic components of the sexualisation debates. It queries the ways in which value is attributed to images and how this intersects with feminist and popular concerns about the growth of so-called 'raunch culture' (Levy, 2005). Findings suggest that there is a normative resistance to the kinds of sexy aesthetics produced by female sexy selfie-takers and that such resistance often contains class anxieties about the 'impropriety' of sexy aesthetics which do not accord with 'appropriate' displays of feminine sexuality.

The research design brings together eight women who take amateur sexy selfies for their Instagram accounts and a professional photographer (myself) in a professional, collaborative photoshoot of the selfie taker. The aim is to produce a set of co-created images which are then used in a 'compare and contrast' style of analysis with the participants' own selfies, in order to generate new data about the respective systems of image-making pertinent to each. The expectation is that this process will reveal something of the ways in which classed and gendered prejudice operate within debates about the sexualisation of culture.

Participants became engaged in the project through my contacting them directly via Instagram, using a purposive sampling method. With formal Ethics approval, I shared the project details with them and asked if they would be interested in collaborating on a professional photoshoot with me and being involved in two semi-structured interviews. The parameters for inclusion were few – that they be female presenting, living in Australia and have an Instagram account with a dominance of amateur sexy selfies. My searches were also informed by a preference for women whose general aesthetic was informed by what Amy Shields-Dobson (2011: 1) refers to as a western style 'heterosexiness', by which she means imagery that appears 'in terms of aesthetics and the visual appearance of bodies, to reinforce current notions of feminine gender performativity as 'sexualised', and seem to be appealing to a similar gaze economy as that produced in conventional heterosexual pornography'.

Over 2019 and 2020, I collaborated with eight women (ultimately photographing six due to COVID-19 restrictions). For each shoot, I invited the participant to creative-direct whatever vision they had for themselves. Some were clear with such vision, while others deferred to me as 'the creative'. We both spent considerable time, prior to the shoot, designing a 'look and feel'. We shared reference images, talked about aesthetic preferences and I asked each participant to tell me five words that she thought best described her and five words that described her aspirational self. We also met for approximately an hour for a semi-structured initial interview. The shoots took place across various locations, including photographic studios, a café and a movie theatre.

At the post-shoot stage, I performed a basic edit on the photos (colour correction and tonal balance, for example) and sent all of the images to the participant. Each (except one) uploaded a series of these co-creations to her Instagram account and I uploaded some to mine. We then engaged in a second semi-structured interview where we discussed these images and their own

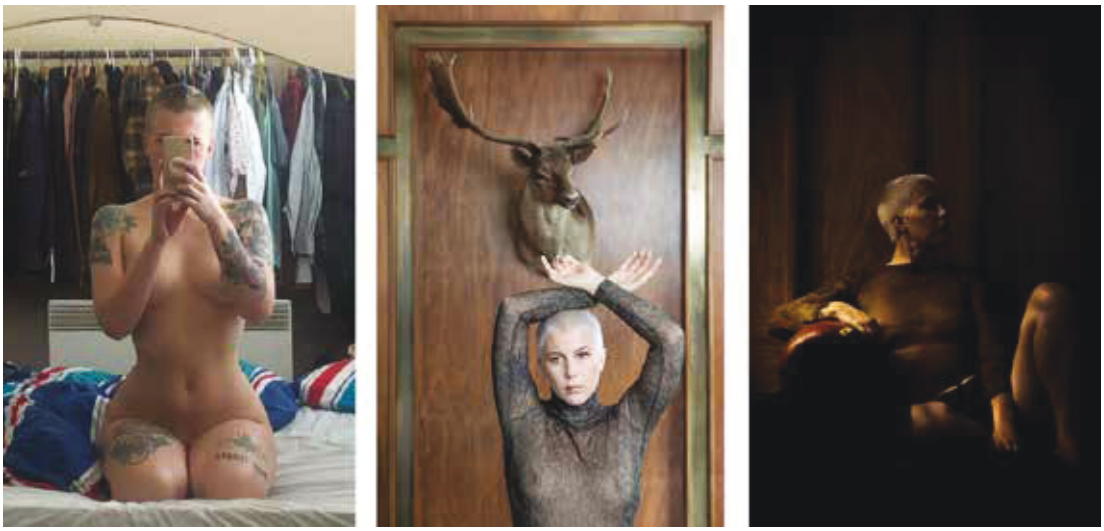

Figure 1. Kris Wilson in one of her selfies and two co-creations

selfies, in the context of the sexualisation debates. I asked them, amongst other things, what they wish to communicate with their images, what limits they placed on their own representations and what, if any, judgement they had experienced in disseminating their images on a public platform. Though each shoot was different, they collectively produced rich insights into some of the ways that discourses of 'naturalness' function to marginalise some forms of feminine, sexual expression. The process was completed by my journaled reflections.

This paper places a primary focus on the collaborations with Blair and Kris and draws also from some discussion had with participant Michelle. Figure 1 shows a sample of one of Kris' selfies (left) and two of the images that she and I co-created, to the right. I fear these will be read as 'before and after' shots. They should not be – this set of images is intended as an establishing sample of images of Kris, to underpin the discussion here.

This project set out to produce data about the ways in which women who create sexy selfies engage with the concepts of naturalness and fakeness, and to understand how those concepts function in the circulation and discussion of their images in their online communities. Using a purposive sampling method, I approached prospective participants on Instagram who were female-presenting, living in Australia and who had Instagram accounts which were populated primarily with amateur sexy selfies. There were no other parameters, but my searches were informed by some conventionally western visual tropes of mainstream heterosexual and feminine sexiness, such as those described by Amy Shields Dobson (2011) and which are detailed on a web page called '7 ways to take a stunning sexy selfie!' (Adriana, 2018).

I draw on my ten years of experience as a professional portrait photographer working in mainstream Australian media, advertising and design to partially inform this project, in a semi-

autoethnographic way. My photographs have appeared in magazines, billboards and book covers and I have also had work shown in various photographic prizes and fine-art exhibitions. I am interested in applying my knowledge in this field to co-create images with amateur sexy selfie producers in order for our respective aesthetic systems to be made visible and to draw comparisons between the two. I encouraged participants to view the photo shoot as though they had commissioned a professional photographer and to express their ideas and desires for what they wanted the shoot to be.

The photo shoots were carried out over 2019 and 2020 and each participant was engaged in two semi-structured interviews – one before the shoot and one after. I placed a strong emphasis on pre-production discussions leading up to the shoot, which helped to ensure that myself and the participant were in agreement on the direction, style and design. Most shoots included a stylist and make-up artist and some minimal retouching was applied to images that were selected by participants and myself as 'favourites'. Participants then uploaded these photos to their Instagram feeds, and I to mine. Following this, we focused the second interview on looking at, and discussing the co-created images while I asked (amongst a number of questions) what they experienced in a professional setting; what they say to those who suggest their images are fake or lacking in naturalness; what they hoped the images communicated to an audience; and if our collaboration would lead to any changes in the way they made their own selfies. The process was completed by my own privately-journaled reflections.

Appropriately natural and properly feminine

Sexy selfies are a phenomenon which have impacted culture in highly significant ways. Visual culture, for example, has seen the rise of commercial imagery adopting the phenomenon's everyday-sexy aesthetic such as that found in American Apparel's 2017 campaign (2017) or the recent visual branding by lingerie company bras N things (2021). Women, also, are increasingly asserting a form of visual agency through making them (Tiidenberg, 2018); and, arguably, sexy selfies are driving feminism to engage in a new form of the 1980s 'sex wars' (Basiliere, 2008). Sexy selfies make public women's agentic displays of sexuality, shown through their own amateur images and designed for an audience's gaze. Their rising visibility and substantial cultural impact has prompted popular fears that young women are becoming 'pornified' (Dines, 2010). However, as McKee and Sullivan (2015: 63) succinctly note, 'Public concern over intricate and convoluted bonds between pornography and technology are only the latest in a long line of media moral panics' whose origins, as others have noted, can be found both in middle-class anxieties about sexual impropriety beginning over a century ago (Egan and Hawkes, 2010; Walkerdine, 1998; Peiss, 1986; Damousi, 1997); and in ongoing anxieties about the meeting of women's sexualities with technology (Hasinoff, 2013).

Such panics configure sexy selfie takers as a threat to the stability of the social order, as Katrin Tiidenberg (2018) suggests, and consequently a 'justification' is set-up for the social regulation of selfie-taking behaviour through the shaming of women who take them. Tiidenberg (2018: 89) observes that 'selfie shaming is a cultural discourse that aims to control people, in particular women and minorities, to conform to the existing norms of their (in)visibility'. Tiidenberg also argues that selfies are likely to be subject to the kind of panic which focuses on visibility and the right to be seen. Whilst I certainly agree, I would add that *sexy* selfies stir another form of moral panic which asserts that women who take them are fake and lacking in feminine naturalness – where such naturalness is tied to notions of authenticity and held to be morally virtuous. To present outside of such 'appropriately' natural femininity is to transgress long-held conventions of feminine presentation and sexuality and, as Mort (2002: 28) notes, '[sexual] transgression functions to define the norm, shaping and crystallising ideas about the rules of correct moral conduct'.

Some tips in Cosmopolitan (Gulla, 2020: para 15) magazine on taking sexy selfies gives some insight into these naturalness/authenticity discourses: 'If you're looking for a top tip to make your pictures pop, Frankie suggests using some baby oil or coconut oil to give you that natural glow. "Right before it's time to take pictures, I cover myself in oil. The shiny sheen helps the light to bounce off my natural highlights and curves, and it looks amazing on camera"'. As does the valorising by *US* magazine (Petrarca, 2021: para 1) of model Paulina Porizkova's aesthetic choice in a recent selfie: 'The model celebrated the first day of the year with a stunning, natural selfie'. Even rapper Kendrick Lamar (2017) lets us know his ill-feeling towards so-called fake self-presentations in his song 'HUMBLE', 'I'm so fuckin' sick and tired of the Photoshop…Show me somethin' natural like ass with some stretch marks'. And beauty brand Dove, ever the champion of what they term 'real beauty' for women, produced an advertisement recently which warned young women about the dangers of selfies. The 'Dove Reverse Selfie' video (Watson, 2021: para 3) 'features a young girl locked into the artificial world of social media' whose use of make-up and retouching in the making of her selfie is 'undone' by Dove reversing the footage back to her pre-made-up, pre-retouched-self while suggestively sad music plays. It aims, of course, to convey that the unmade-up, unadorned woman is more authentic and virtuous.

In the signalling of naturalness as the preference for women's presentations in each of these examples, value is conferred on those who reduce make-up, use of filters and 'Photoshopping' and who offer their natural, 'naked' selves. Words like 'truly' and 'wiser' suggest that natural presentations of beauty should be aspired to, whilst tying women to neoliberal, post-feminist *find the true you* ideals (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2006). Even the title of Lamar's song, 'HUMBLE', in conjunction with the song's lyrics, imply a moral good in simple, authentic pictorial representations of the female body, even (or perhaps especially) in a sexualised context. There is a tacit suggestion then, that naturalness is the desirable opposite of fake, but overlooked in this context is both the arbitrary nature of what constitutes 'natural' and 'fake'; and that discourses which valorise so-called natural female bodies often operate symbolically

to regulate women into 'appropriately' – that is, middle-class (respectable) feminine subjects (Skeggs, 2004). Such regulation 'others' alternative femininities and re-inscribes norms of female sexual prudence and feminine decorum.

As I have argued elsewhere (2020), sexy selfies are constituted by sets of aesthetic languages which give rise to the imposition of schemes of classification and hierarchies which ultimately hide the arbitrariness of their foundations (see also Jancovich, 2001; McRobbie, 2009). Elites rely upon symbolic power to maintain class distinction, argues Bourdieu (1984), and middle-class feminism does this through discourses of taste and shame. Katrin Tiidenberg (2018: 88) expands on the concept of shame within regimes of sexy selfie making:

> Shame is a very efficient way for regulating people's behaviour, as it makes us ashamed of our selves not just our actions. In essence then, shame means we take in and incorporate the judgment coming from outside – we internalize it. So, selfie shaming is a cultural discourse that aims to control people, in particular women and minorities.

Anne Burns (2014: para 3) too, notes the high interest in regulating selfies: 'selfies are subject to a particularly high degree of regulation, in terms of what should be shown and where selfies should be taken'.

Such discourses decry the sexy selfie taker's use of obvious make-up, loud clothing, pouty lips and plastic surgery as excessive and fake (Tiidenberg and van der Nagel, 2020; Abidin, 2016) whilst giving value to modest, suggestive, so-called natural and unchallenging representations of the female body and sexuality (McCann, 2015; Kipnis, 1998). Despite selfies emerging from new technologies, these classed value judgements are not new.

Holliday and Sanchez Taylor (2006) powerfully describe how women's presentations have historically been defined in two key ways: as natural and good (for those who eschewed make-up and adornments) and as grotesque and bad (for those who used overt beauty enhancements or had non-conforming bodies). They paraphrase historical discourses to illustrate this point:

> Women who paint their faces usually do so for seduction – using sexuality to confuse men, usually with some ulterior motive in mind. Women using make-up are thus bad women, as opposed to unpainted good women. So naturally beautiful women are good, falsely beautiful made-up women are bad – bad because they have a sexuality (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006: 182).

Moral contempt was reserved for those seen as grotesque or vulgar and their bodies were othered as exaggerated, dirty and working class (Skeggs, 2004); while 'natural' bodies were 'characterised by grooming, beauty and grace' (Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006: 182).

Since naturalness is associated with moral goodness and women's sexy selfies are regarded by some as fake (or unnatural) presentations of self, it follows that women's representational

experiences in this context become marginalised and ill-defined (or misrecognised) by dominant, middle-class discourses as 'rude' or even 'disgusting'.

Pushing the boundaries of normative femininity

The experience of others' disgust and judgements of taste was a concern for all participants in the project. They are aware of discourses which decry their so-called lack of naturalness, but they have a different take on this. Participant Michelle was firm on her view:

> I've heard people complain about me wearing make-up – y'know why does she have to wear make-up? She looks better natural! All these negative things…They're forgetting a lot of the time it's for that individual. If they feel better about it…why would you judge them?

Other participants have had plastic surgery – an extreme example of 'unnatural' beauty practices. Says participant Blair about responses to her 'thick' (her word) body: 'I feel more accepted in America. Here is more skinny white girl look. Everybody is beautiful in their own way, but I've been singled out for what I look like, in the past, which wasn't nice'. Blair described how Melbourne's strip clubs had shut their doors to her because she is a larger-than-average sized woman. She has a rich understanding that the world she moves in values her sexuality less than the 'skinny white girl' and she has suffered some harassment because of her body shape. I ask her where her confidence comes from:

> Plastic surgery! But also who I am as a person. You can have the body of a goddess, but still not have the personality. I had the personality, I just needed the body so y'know, plastic surgery [laughs lightly]. The two came together.

In our photographic collaboration, we focused on showing off Blair's nude body and poking fun at gendered, feminine and classed standards. The images we made together are called 'Australian Beauty' as a satirical pushback of beauty standards (lifting from the film 'American Beauty') and her pride in her big butt was central to the shoot and to resisting normative, polite feminine standards, but also to the idea of naturalness, since her butt is surgically enhanced. Figure 2 shows two images of Blair: her own selfie to the left and one of our co-creations to the right.

There exists a significant literature of feminist writing about plastic surgery (Bordo, 2003; Davis, 2003; Holliday and Sanchez Taylor, 2006; Widdows, 2018), much of it focusing on the degree to which we can describe cosmetic surgery as demonstrating women's agency in patriarchal cultures. Blair's ease with what is often popularly regarded as fake (her plastic surgery and her 'contrived' selfies) was a feature of my meetings with her. She spoke with pride of her desire to

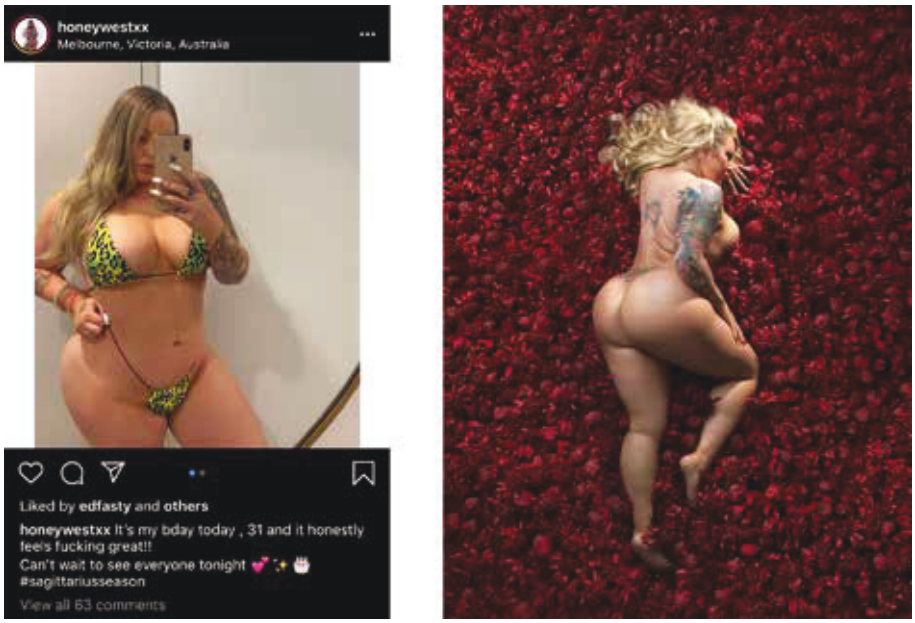

Figure 2. Blair Scharrmacher in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

appear sexually appealing through her choice to wear bold-coloured clothing and also her choice to perform for the camera. She had little interest in fashioning her body for normative standards of feminine naturalness and in fact took an opposite approach with an attention to deliberately cultivating a body that suits her.

She exuded a confidence and ease in the studio that I have rarely seen in my twelve years of regularly photographing people. It was striking and gave me a heightened respect for her choice to alter her body so that it would align with her personality. Blair was clear in what she wanted and needed for herself and I was careful to try to represent her as *authentically* as possible. I am aware of the irony of creating highly-constructed and carefully designed images which aim to reflect an authenticity of the subject. But maybe that's partly the point – constructed images (including Blair's selfies) are reflections of precisely how the subject and/or photographer wishes to be seen, thereby moving beyond typical discourses of *fake* and *natural*. I must note, that I have clumsily lumped together Blair's selfie with our co-created image for their shared constructedness, but this overlooks the important contrasts between the images, which I will address in the next section.

Blair makes clear her lack of interest in appearing typically naturally-feminine and feels more authentically herself when she is constructing both her body and her sexy selfies to match her personality. By contrast, some subjects embraced the language of being 'natural' – although the selfies they produced that met their own criteria of being 'natural' might not meet Cosmopolitan's definition of natural. To this point, I also collaborated with Kris who inspired me to create a more

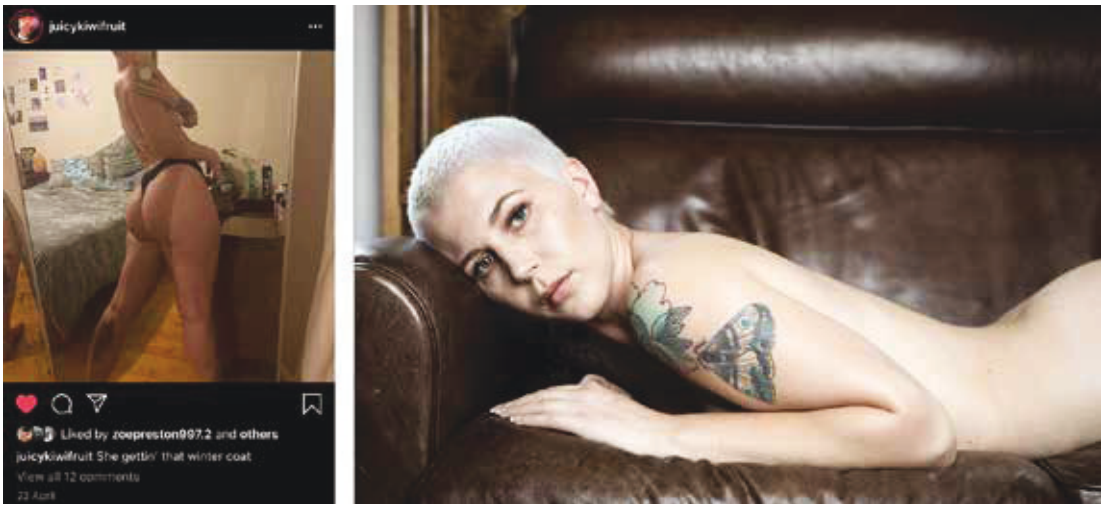

Figure 3. Kris Wilson in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

conventionally natural scene, with fewer props and more use of available window light. When I asked Kris how she likes to present herself in terms of high construction of self, versus more simple presentations, she made it clear that it isn't a binary proposition and that she trusts her audience to appreciate the complexity of her different images:

> I think I do a bit of both – the selfies that I post will have a filter on and be edited, but then I'll post stories where I'm talking to the camera really close up in my dressing gown with no make-up, no filter talking some rubbish so I post both and I feel very comfortable doing that. So people see both sides and I don't really mind coz people at the end of the day know what's edited and what's not.

Figure 3 shows two images of Kris. The one on the left is her own selfie and the one on the right is one of our co-creations.

Kris expands on what naturalness means to her: 'I'm just trying to make a flattering shape without the typical "out on a sat night" girl posing with a hand on the hip, head back…Yeah that doesn't really feel very natural to me.' With regards to one of the photos we created (Figure 3): 'The pose is just a little bit more unique and natural'. Kris tells me she also utilises small body modifications to retain an appearance of youth: 'I can see my face sagging down a bit and I've recently had filler 'n stuff to fix that [laughs] It's just part of ageing I guess, but I can just notice it around my jowls.'

Dominant commentaries on women's sexual self-representations idealise feminine sexuality as natural and make women who take sexy selfies problematic for their perceived 'unnatural' feminine

excess (Tiidenberg, 2018; McCann, 2015; Nicholls, 2019). Both Blair and Kris are aware of the limiting nature of these commentaries and each, in their respective ways, is nonetheless pushing the boundaries of normative femininity and feminine sexuality which are so deeply contained within these dominant discourses.

The legitimising lens

Amongst the judgements that they are fake, inauthentic or 'too much', there is a further, popularly expressed, criticism of sexy selfies that they cannot be regarded as natural because they are *constructed* images. Lobinger and Brantner (2015), in their research into how selfies are read as authentic or inauthentic, make this clear when they suggest, "If the situation seems to be set up in order to take pictures, the resulting self-photographs were considered as inauthentic." Of course, all photographs are 'set up' to some degree – but some photographs are 'set up' to appear natural. Such constructed naturalness is valued in dominant aesthetic discourses. Take the example of the photographic nudes created by internationally renowned photographer Ryan McGinley in 2013 (see https://tinyurl.com/ycv6v8cd and https://tinyurl.com/3k2yxdwj). Essayist Christopher Bollen (2017) responded to this work by valorising their authenticity on the grounds of them not being selfies: "McGinley offered a stage without any need for staging or rehearsal; the results could be perceived as anti-selfies in their celebration of more authentic selves." Yet McGinley's 'stage' is well understood as highly constructed, as detailed in a review of his 2013 exhibition in Paris:

> Since 2005, McGinley has spent each summer developing his ongoing body of road-trip photographs. He and his crew travel the country to capture non-professional models in a variety of natural settings. The production of these images has evolved greatly since their inception – what began as fly-on-the wall documentation now consists of rigorous and intense production schedules, elaborate safety precautions, and mobile studio lighting. The situations are meticulously staged. (Fabio, 2013: para 1)

While McGinley's images exist in a different context to the majority of sexy selfies, they nonetheless offer rich insight into some of the ways in which hierarchies of value in photographic culture are cultivated and maintained. They also help to reveal the ways in which the concepts of authenticity and naturalness are coded visually to demarcate acceptable feminine sexuality from unacceptable feminine sexuality – and how these come to function as markers of class, largely through the work of 'the gatekeepers of the business of visibility' (Tiidenberg, 2018: 88). As a commercial portrait photographer, I am acutely aware of the ways in which the business of visibility constantly inscribes and re-inscribes norms of acceptable femininity. Clients regularly request that I photograph female subjects as, variously, approachable, natural or gentle. Softer lighting than is generally chosen for male subjects is often used and poses are

employed which convey a safe, demure femininity such as chin down; body turned a little away from camera so as to seem non-confronting and to appear thin; the head tilted in a gesture of gentle inquiry or playful ease; and the head peeking over the shoulder to offer a suggestive, but not overt sexuality.

Such norms obviously arise through a multitude of forces, not least of which is the way in which commercial photography has '…increasingly depended upon a sanitised female sexuality to sell goods' (Brown, 2012). Brown sheds further light on this through her study of 1920s American modelling agent pioneer John Robert Powers:

> He needed a new type of female visage to be represented in these print advertisements: pretty, to be sure, but not 'artificial', stagey or vampish…models who possessed not only beauty, but breeding, intelligence and naturalness'. He sought what he called 'the natural girl'…the Powers girl is now respectable. (Brown, 2012: 38)

Kris is aware of the limitations placed on her by respectability discourses and of the double-standards these discourses produce in visual culture when she tells me about a photographic model friend who contacted her about her selfies:

> She said I was not respecting myself by posting more provocative, revealing photos, even though she was, y'know, the same sort of photos of her were in, like, massive advertising campaigns on an even bigger platform essentially, but, because that was her job and she was getting paid for it, it 'wasn't the same thing'.

Kris talks to what I term the 'legitimating lens' – that is, that representations of women's sexual bodies are often made to seem natural, authentic and acceptable through the intervention of a professional photographer's aesthetic and, in no small measure, their standing in middle-class visual culture (and their aesthetic and standing are in a feedback loop). Professional photography has been complicit in the construction of imagined authenticity and trades on notions of essentialism which reify the concept. Katrin Tiidenberg brings this idea to sharp attention in her critically important book 'Selfies' (2018: 82) where she notes, 'As literary scholars Anna Poletti and Julie Rak (2014) say, authenticity is an effect not an essence. It is a created, constructed category in our lives, not vice versa'. Tiidenberg extends this idea to the performative nature of self-presentations, a concept which is well supported by McCann (2015) in her work on feminine representations in a British reality television show where the 'excessive' female body is regulated to more normative standards. But, as Tiidenberg points out, performance is a daily activity for us all**,** in a variety of ways, and this includes the activities of the professional photographer. Yet professional outputs are granted a legitimacy that is not extended to amateur, sexy selfies.

My own photographic practice is marked by high-level construction, design and attention to detail and these are all traits which I brought to the respective collaborative spaces with Blair and

Figure 4. A co-creation with Kris Wilson, before and after retouching

Kris. The photoshoots with each of these women required pre-production meetings to discuss 'look and feel', location hunting, prop and wardrobe sourcing (extensively so in the case of Blair's shoot), some 'test shooting', studio booking and the arranging and briefing of a make-up artist, wig stylist and assistant (again in Blair's case). Prior to each shoot I journaled and drew sketches of my projected images and also of my artificial lighting setups. I carefully discussed all of this with both participants. Each set of images underwent extensive post-production (retouching) also, as illustrated in the collaboration with Kris as it appears in Figure 4.

For the collaboration with Blair, it was important to achieve a 'bed of flowers' look and for this to appear as realistic as possible. I note with irony now that we opted for hundreds of fake Australian flowers since real flowers would have rapidly wilted under studio lights. Budget constraints meant that we couldn't buy enough fake flowers to completely cover the area around Blair's body and so we carefully photographed a number of sections of 'bed', each covered with flowers, then stitched them together in Photoshop, along with the chosen image of Blair, to give the illusion of a bed of flowers (see Figure 5).

Throughout the shoot, great attention was placed on Blair's body position to best show off her proud, nude self as she wished and to create an overall pleasing shape for the audience I had in mind. We arranged her wig and placed flowers that strategically overlapped certain parts of her body to ensure the upcoming retouching effected an image that looked 'real'. I lit Blair with a large studio 'softbox' to create soft light on her skin and angled it in a way that produced enough shadows to create shape in her body, but not angled such that the shadows would be heavy and

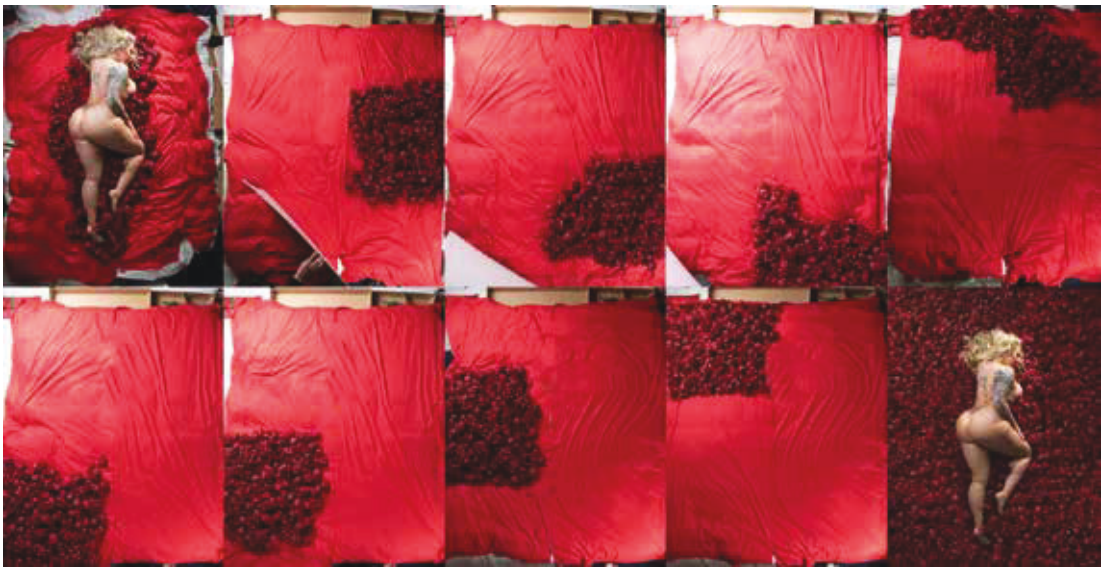

Figure 5. Plates used to construct a co-created image of Blair Scharrmacher

create a dark mood. I added a spotlight which was angled to glance off her hair in order to create a highlight on the wig, both to make the blonde more pronounced and to accent this edge of her, for visual interest. Lastly, another spotlight provided an accent or edge-light on her right thigh and breast. The combination of these lights brought a three-dimensionality to Blair's body which helped to communicate the beauty of her curves and sexiness to the viewer. I knew too, that this kind of lighting, combined with particular retouching techniques, would produce an aesthetic which has commercial/professional appeal. I am aware, as I work with Blair, that my aesthetic tastes talk to high-end spaces in visual culture and also that the grasp I have on crafting these particular aesthetics brings a 'legitimacy' to Blair's sexy representations of self in spaces where middle-class tastes dictate what passes for visual currency.

Our collaborations and my own photography generally, are just as constructed as Blair and Kris' sexy selfies, most likely more so, but they are less likely to be dismissed as 'cheap cultural objects', as displaying inappropriate femininity or as inauthentic. Just as McGinley's careful staging of his subjects is overlooked in favour of plaudits for 'authenticity', the collaborative images from this project do not have their fakery brought into question. Like McGinley, I get the benefit of some sort of essentialised naturalness yoked to my aesthetic style. Which is not to say that viewers won't notice that the image was constructed – they likely will, but because it accords with middle class tastes, its contrivances become coded as refined. And just as Bollen (2017) demonstrates in his reading of McGinley's work, refined aesthetics have become synonymous with naturalness; and rude, vulgar aesthetics have become synonymous with unnaturalness and are therefore lacking in

moral approbation. And this kind of lack is constituted as a threat both to the social (class) and sexual order and becomes operationalised through regulatory actions which attempt to discipline the self-representational behaviours of women.

To this point, Kris has had many photos removed by Instagram and her account deleted for supposedly violating their community standards. Her anger at this is palpable and intensifies when she reflects on the platform's double-standard: 'Big accounts like Playboy and Victoria's Secret – they get to stay up so that's when it becomes a bit more political because it's not fair. We're not making them money, so they delete it'. Kris is correct in her point about money, but I would also argue that Playboy and Victoria's Secret maintain their images on Instagram also because their aesthetics tie to traditions of normative feminine sexuality and naturalness, whereas her own selfies push the boundaries of acceptable femininity with their explicitness and obvious sexuality. In her comparison of Playboy magazine with Hustler magazine, academic feminist Laura Kipnis (1998: 131-132) goes to the heart of this:

> Even beyond its explicitness, Hustler's difference from Playboy…is in the sort of female body it imagines. The Hustler body is an unromanticised body: no Vaselined lenses or soft focus here.

And:

> The sexuality Hustler delivers is far from normative…in stark distinction to the Playboy/Penthouse body, the Hustler body has an interior, not just a suntanned surface. It's insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal…All of this is certainly a far remove from the sleek, laminated Playboy/Penthouse body.

To return briefly to the concept of excessive displays of femininity brought by Skeggs (2004) and McCann (2015), the sexy selfies taken by Blair and Kris certainly push the bounds of the normative, feminine body and acceptable presentations of female sexuality. Kris notes when referring to her model friend who condemned Kris' choice to take and show sexy selfies, 'She was trying to say she was coming from a place of concern'. And it is discourses of 'concern' which characterise the project of feminist and middle-class intervention into the self-representational practices of women, especially young women. Under the banner of 'concern', non-normative expressions of feminine sexuality in selfies get coded as unnatural and women's bodily autonomy becomes subject, once again, to the pernicious policing objectives of self-appointed moral guardians.

Conclusion: the affective feminist potential of 'rude', sexy feminine aesthetics

This article sits within a growing body of literature which calls into question the nature of dominant concerns regarding current forms of women's sexual self-representations. My contribution to this literature is to foreground the notion that middle-class anxieties are an under-examined phenomenon in the sexualisation debates; and that they exist as a latent aspect of feminist concerns regarding women's sexy selfie practices. Through largely popular discourses which valorise so-called feminine naturalness (understood variously as white, thin, genteel, unadorned, authentic and passive), class-bound tastes are revealed and class demarcations activated. Taste in 'appropriate' femininity comes to function here as a device through which middle-class distance is cultivated and maintained from *other* forms of femininity and sexuality. And the marking of these boundaries helps to maintain the hegemonic-cultural – and class – order.

In line with McCann's (2015: 239) call for a 'greater consideration of the resistant possibilities of femininity', this article advocates for a greater consideration of the affective feminist potential of 'rude', sexy feminine aesthetics. To paraphrase Markula (2003), in their questioning of limiting standards of naturalness, and through performing their own versions of femininity, Blair and Kris produce the possibility of transgression through new sexual subjectivities and a rejection of the regimes of shame so often found in this territory. The images that they and I co-created and the processes surrounding them provided unique and vital insight into the representational subjectivities of each participant. They also offered a touchstone for examining how visual legitimacy is conferred by cultural gatekeepers and that certain visual signifiers carry more cultural value than others.

As I have demonstrated in this article, naturalness is valued and seen as virtuous in women and fakeness is often derided in dominant discourse. However, little attention has been paid to the selective damning of fakeness, which, in this context, acts as a form of symbolic violence against women who do not subscribe to appropriate feminine/sexual (read middle-class) norms. My own photography, and that of other professional photographers, is crafted with high contrivance, after all, and yet occupies a space of legitimacy in visual culture. Our photographs' fakeries are overlooked and in fact often lauded. So when popular and often feminist concern heralds fakeness as problematic, it is worth asking if the charge of fakeness has become a proxy for the much more indelicate, stigmatised – and definitively classed – suggestion that a woman might be 'vulgar', 'trashy' or 'slutty'. Clearly, after McGinley, it is not fakeness that so troubles commentators, but the way that fakenesses are created and presented. As Tiidenberg (2018: 82) notes, 'All of our interactions and self-presentations are performative'. 'Naturalness' included.

Afterword

This concludes the four substantive discussion-of-findings chapters. There were many more findings to emerge from this research project than was possible to build into this thesis and it is my plan to release these additional findings through further academic publications.

The following chapter is the final thesis chapter – the conclusion – and it takes a somewhat more reflective approach than convention might otherwise dictate. At the beginning of this project, I was nervous about, and resistant to, the idea of having myself included in the research, even in a small way. It felt navel-gazey at best and narcissistic at worst and realistically, I felt insecure about bringing the 'lowly art' of commercial photography into the more esteemed institution of the academy. I'd be destined to be found out as a phoney!

It has only been relatively recently that I have properly come to understand that there is a rich breadth of knowledge which exists outside of the academy and which is useful and important to link to academic knowledge. I hope you will allow the following conclusion, in some defiance of convention, to take you through a short journey of my own intellectual journey in this research project.

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Chapter Eight

Conclusion

In the early stages of my collaboration with Mel Dansie, Mel made it clear to me that she wanted to shoot in a highly stylised way, with attention to sexy clothing, careful make-up and what she called 'looking hot'. My inclination, in response, was to honour those requests, but to do so in a way that created a somewhat dark mood and a suggestive, sultry sexiness. During the shoot, I invited Mel to look at each image 'in real time' as it appeared on my computer screen (it was positioned so she did not have to move from in front of the camera), and as the shoot progressed, she responded to what she saw by bringing a more and more pronounced embodiment of this kind of sexiness. We worked together in a reciprocal way – I would direct her, to some degree and then remain silent as she moved, felt and thought her way through a series of poses. Sometimes we would pause to look at what had been captured and then begin the cycle again, each of us contributing in our respective ways to a final set of images.

This image of Mel (Figure 1) is what I would regard as one of those moments of rich creative synergy where each of us brought, more or less, what the other was looking for, as much as our own aesthetic desires, and found something new that was then crafted into a split-second render. It demonstrates both the power of this kind of creative collaboration and something of the classed discourses within the sexualisation debates that I have discussed throughout the thesis.

Mel's use of it on her Instagram account is interesting as she has captioned the image with 'Don't chase people, attract them'. For Mel, the image casts her as sexy and attractive, but in a subtle, suggestive and somewhat passive way. When compared with her own selfies, we see a departure from her own aesthetics which are generally brighter, show more of her body and more directly communicate an obvious sexiness. In her selfies, Mel is clear that she would like to be seen for the frankness of her sexiness. With our co-creation, she is aware that the image holds sexual power for the opposite reason – that which is hidden is valuable. Just as the middle-class institution of art school taught us that to encode a work was to imbue it with intellectual value, so too does mainstream feminism tell us that suggestive, unobvious forms of female sexual presentation hold more value for women than direct, 'vulgar' presentations. It is a classed and gendered concept which is often used to strengthen class boundaries, maintain structures of power in visual culture and to limit the sexually expressive capacity of young women.

The discussion of this image and Mel's engagement with it helps to foreground the approach I will take with this conclusion. Rather than simply repeating the findings from the project, I offer a more personal perspective which reflects on the intellectual journey I have taken while doing this research. This includes shifts in my own thinking and knowledge, discussion of what the shoots meant to the women involved – and the shifts that they experienced, the significance of the findings and a consideration of what comes next if we are to better understand the relationships that class, sexuality, gender and aesthetics have to each other, with particular respect to the ways mainstream feminism encounters them. At the risk of breaking too much from convention, I have structured this conclusion more like an overarching essay.

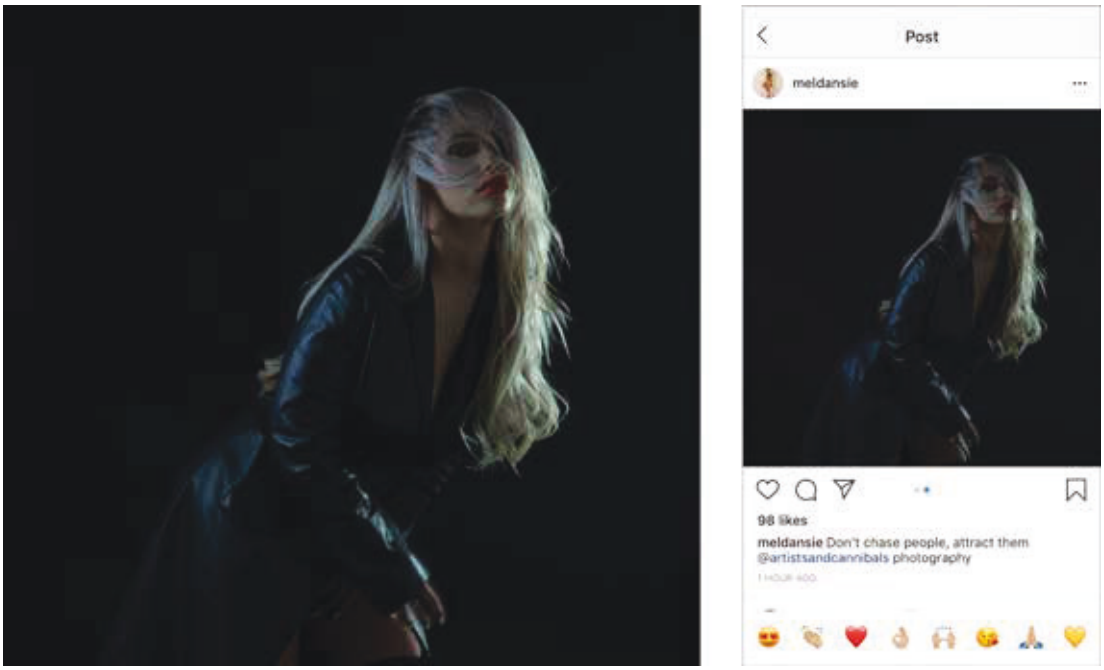

Figure 1. Mel Dansie in a co-creation and as it appears on her Instagram account

Who gets to be sexy in the public sphere?

Sometime near the beginning of the project, I was stuck in a number of feminist rabbit holes. These were dilemmas that feminism has been wrangling with for some time, such as how to reconcile an individual woman's choice for bodily autonomy (a central tenet of feminism after all) within neoliberal, patriarchal frameworks that damage the collective efforts of female advancement; the inclination to support female beauty regimes with the knowledge that normative standards of beauty can be harmful to women; and the prospect of doing academic work that focused largely on one particular 'intersection' of feminism while the clarion call for a broad intersectional approach rang loud. My supervisor reminded me that my project was not designed to 'solve feminism' but to open up feminist thinking in small ways that may not have been adequately considered before. It was momentarily disappointing, as I suspect I had high hopes that I would, indeed, offer some kind of serious solution to the problems that feminism had been toiling with for decades. Why do a doctoral project if you can't offer big solutions to big problems (so I thought)?

I am grateful for Professor McKee's gift of perspective. With grandiose ideals put to rest, I began to understand that the value of this research project was in its relatively narrow positioning within studies of class with sexuality, in the context of visual culture and women's sexy self-

representations. I had been worried about what I was leaving out and then saw what mainstream feminism frequently leaves out: adequate critical attention to middle-class bias in its apprehension of young women's sexy self-representations and perhaps of young women's sexualities more broadly. Intersectionality has challenged a feminism that has traditionally made whiteness and middle-classness paradigmatic in its construction of 'woman', but even with this challenge, effective self-critique at the seat of feminist power that would yield tangible change for women outside of this paradigm is often absent. In other words, dominant feminism has not yet adequately owned – or acted upon – certain biases which limit the lived sexual (representational) experiences of some women.

This research project set out to examine the aesthetic and classed dimensions of the sexualisation debates at this particular techno-cultural moment of selfie ubiquity and accompanying moral/media panics. It asked what might be revealed in comparing the texts and practices of professional photographs of young women with the texts and practices of their own amateur sexy self-representations, regarding feminist and public discourses that are typically applied to the respective sets of images. It theorised that sexy selfies taken by women attract dominant feminist and popular discourses which, while focusing on risk to the selfie taker, actually mask prejudices regarding class. The project was further constructed to explore what kinds of limiting beliefs, cultural norms and difference might inform the ways that female sexuality and related aesthetics are perceived and affirmed or resisted. It asked how aesthetic judgements of taste function with regards to women's self-representations and if they produced classed hierarchies in visual culture. If so, would a privileging of certain sexy aesthetics over others perpetuate a regulatory mindset which seeks to discipline 'unruly' female bodies into long-standing, gendered and classed ideals of 'appropriate' and 'respectable' feminine sexuality?

The project's unique research design followed no known methodological precedent and had the feminist aim of collective female engagement as well as positioning typically less-heard female voices more prominently in academic processes. While initially challenging for me (how does commercial photography move into the academy with few examples to draw from?), the design soon opened up a number of rich empirical avenues and new insights into the structural barriers associated with women's sexy image-making in Western culture.

As more participants became involved and therefore more images were available for analysis, I feared that comparisons would be read as 'before and after' shots, in the vein of make-over reality television shows whose aim it is to make people (usually women) more 'respectable' or 'classy'. Even though the co-creations were made with collaborative input from both of us, they have a professional, highly-stylised, finished appearance (in keeping with my photographic training and industry aesthetic) which is suggestive of having 'improved' upon the participants' selfies. However, the interview process and my own reflections on the photographic institutions (both industrial and pedagogical) which have supported this type of aesthetic brought rich insight into the ways sexy imagery is classed – and this helped to break down the notion of 'before and after'.

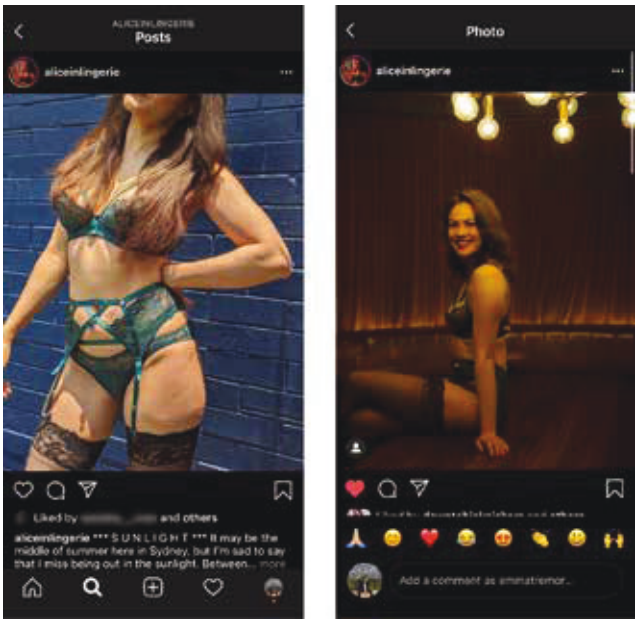

Figure 2. Michelle ten Bohmer in her selfie (left) and our co-creation (right)

The images of Michelle ten Bohmer in Figure 2 illustrate both the early fear I had and, with deeper looking, the way that class and gender bias is often re-inscribed through the cultivation of visual hierarchies. At left is one of Michelle's selfies and to the right is an image she and I collaborated on. She is the subject of both photos, is wearing the same outfit in both photos, is ostensibly 'sexy' in both photos and yet each image inspires very different discourses, many of which contain classist and gendered assumptions about the ways women are supposed to present – or, more to the point, the ways they are *not* supposed to present. One of those feminist rabbit holes is the lack of unity on how women should present themselves; it is a notable point of missing discourse amidst a wealth of criticism about how they should *not* present themselves.

In Michelle's selfie, she displays more of her body, is more brightly lit and more colourful than in the co-created counterpart. Her chosen stylistics and pose accord with typically Western 'hetero-sexy' presentations, whereas the co-created image, by comparison, is darker, sexually suggestive (rather than obvious) and conceals much of her body even though she is wearing lingerie. She has her legs crossed, her face is visible and she has a friendly smile. Though all photographs have a polysemic nature (that is, they contain multiple meanings), the 'image grammars' here, compared with Michelle's selfie, are largely informed by middle-class codes of respectable and demure feminine presentation – and this is an influence I brought to our collaborations. Reflecting on my own aesthetic tastes as a professional photographer, listening to participant requests and their understanding of the discourses which limit their expression ('It's classy because you can't see things') and teasing out

the cultural meanings made of women being sexy in images brings this research project to a point of conclusion about the problematic way that feminist and public discourses are applied to both amateur and professional photographs when it comes to public expressions of female sexuality. Who gets to be sexy in the public sphere depends on what kind of sexiness is on display.

Findings revealed that dominant discourses typically privileged so-called refined, subtle or polite aesthetics over those deemed too 'vulgar' or 'overt'. Contained in this privileging is the enforcement of middle-class expectations of normative, demure femininity, cast as more valuable and less threatening to middle-class boundaries than 'tasteless' sexy representations. This, in turn, marginalises – and at times shames – the self-representational experiences of women whose aesthetic preferences sit outside of this norm. And while class encapsulates all genders and ages, young women have been the particular focus of these discourses.

Simone was especially generous in describing her experiences, both as a self photographer and in collaboration. I am grateful to her for the shift she helped me to make in understanding my own professional privileges and that the 'sexy language' I speak has class currency. Figure 3 speaks directly to this. It is a screen shot from her Instagram account of one of the images that she and I co-created, and Simone has captioned it with, 'Thanking this beautiful lady @emmatremora for making me feel that classy type of sexy hey!'. She is genuine in this comment, but also expressed her disdain for the standards of sexual display which codify the female body in classed terms. She shared with me that she loves 'sexy' but knows that limits are placed on her self-expression if she does not conform to feminine norms in this regard. She discussed how Instagram would routinely remove her selfies for having 'transgressed' their community standards and she also told me about the anger of successive boyfriends who watched porn but shamed her for her selfies. She enjoys that her selfies allow her to express desire and be desired but has experienced being called 'trashy' and has lost numerous friends for publicly displaying her selfies. Simone is aware that professional realms of image making such as advertising, fashion and film often produce and affirm standards of feminine sexiness which are more permissible than her own – and that they are the standard against which she regards herself as lacking in class. I am reminded here of Beverley Skeggs' (1997: 74) important insight into the subjective experiences of the young women in her research on class, sexuality and gender: 'The classifying of themselves depended upon the classifying systems of others'.

Following Figure 3 is another of the co-creations that Simone and I made (Figure 4), in three iterations – at left is as it appears 'straight out of the camera' with no retouching, the middle version is after I have retouched it (my idea, not Simone's) and to the right is my posting of it on my Instagram account. Though Simone had no objection to this, it was not amongst the dozen images she chose to upload to her Instagram account.

Just as Kim Kardashian has been subject to accusations of 'vulgarity' and 'trashiness' for her selfies, the participants in this project have experienced similar judgements. And just as Ryan McGinley's nude female subjects have been afforded valuable classifications like 'natural' and 'beautiful', so too is my professionalised aesthetic regarded as 'respectable' and 'refined' and therefore more accepted in typically middle-class spaces such as art galleries and mainstream magazines. Of course, social

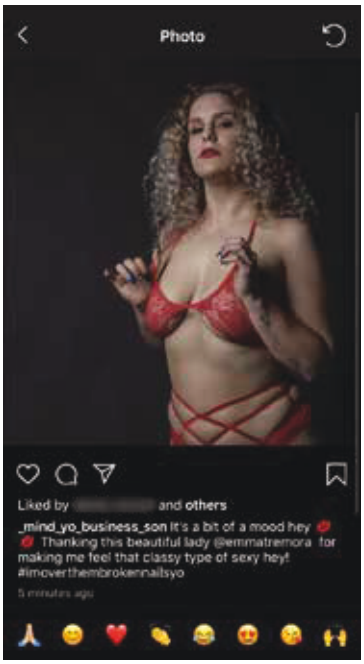

Figure 3.
Simone Ryan in a co-creation

value equals social power, and it is to this point that these research findings are significant. If we (the participants and I) can demonstrate, through collaboration and comparisons of aesthetic preference, the disparity in value placed on amateur and professional sexy aesthetics, then we can begin to ask new questions of mainstream feminism which interrogate the ways that taste is used by cultural guarantors, such as Anna Wintour, to demarcate exclusive cultural spaces, and how this is experienced as a form of symbolic violence by some women.

The project's findings suggest that such guarantors do the work of gatekeeping certain class and gender boundaries through the rhetoric of 'sexualisation' or 'raunch culture' and its attendant discourse of *disgust*. Under a broad banner which says 'young women are at risk of a culture of sexualisation' (and the term 'sexualisation' itself is poorly defined), gatekeepers find a proxy for fears that women who take sexy selfies might disrupt the sexual social order. Discourses which foreground risk and danger to the sexy selfie-taking woman often mask class prejudice and at its heart is the notion of middle-class respectability. Nowhere is this notion more prominently mobilised than in the mainstream feminist performance of disgust at young women's choices to display their bodies in sexually overt ways.

Such an argument is not new, but it has been little considered in scholarly responses to the sexualisation debates and especially to young women's sexy selfie making practices. The emergence of the knowledge that responses of 'disgust' and calls for 'respectability' feature in participants' selfie regimes further enabled new insight into other ways that dominant discourses regulate and discipline women.

Figure 4. Simone Ryan in a co-creation and again as I have retouched it

Data from the project revealed that women often performed beauty and sexiness through their selfies within (and sometimes because of) the limits of regulatory discourses, with many noting that their selfies were subject to the critique of being 'too much' or 'slutty'. Notably, many found strong communities of solidarity on Instagram despite (or because of) marginalising discourses about their aesthetic preferences. Other findings demonstrate that the language of 'naturalness' and 'authenticity' was symbolically harmful for women who used plastic surgery or photo filters, for example (especially given professional photographers often confect scenes and retouch images); that professional photography is implicated in limiting 'gaze' structures and in the amplification of exclusive preferences for 'tastefulness'; and that sexy selfie takers overwhelmingly feel good about what they do and wish to be seen as confident agents of their own sexual representations. Every woman I worked with on this project told me that she gained confidence from her own selfie practice and through our collaborations, including Bec who said she saw 'sexiness in a new way now' and Michelle who found a courage to show her face for the first time in her sexy representations. At times, I think they were surprised that I would even ask a question about what they gained, such was their belief in the joy of making sexy photos.

Recommendations: What next?

Methodological

One of the most significant aspect of this project is its unique research design. While many research projects use photography (such as those that draw from photo elicitation techniques) or engage with photography through content analysis, this project co-created images with participants in a professional-practitioner-led photoshoot.

This method enabled a 'feminist praxis' to take place, which is designed to destabilise the power differential between participant and researcher (Giritli-Nygren and Schmauch, 2012; Rice et al., 2020) – not that I can ever claim we were equal – and also brought the vastly different modes and ideals of image making that participants and I had into immediate proximity. Notwithstanding my (and the academy's) mediating influence, it also allowed participants' voices to be more directly heard, literally and aesthetically (to be more *seen*). I endorse this type of creative collaboration as a way to make clear the tacit knowledges that all contributors have. The comparative method employed alongside interviews, pre-production discussions, my reflections-on-practice and obviously the shoot itself have brought acute attention to the languages and aesthetic grammars used by dominant, middle-class feminism and broader culture which have come to be regarded as 'the standard'. This largely visual study, which pressed together practitioners who rarely align, produced a set of visual clues that indicate how judgements of taste function to affirm class boundaries and marginalise women 'failing' to meet the requirements of sexual respectability.

Pedagogical and industrial

In teaching photography to bachelor students, we lecturers would discuss what aesthetic components constitute a good photograph – as if this inherently existed and a student just needed to be shaped into being able to recognise and reproduce it. What we failed to adequately ask is what had informed our conceptualisation of a 'good' photograph. How do systems of value operate to make hierarchies in visual culture? Undoubtedly, we felt we were teaching students to become better photographers – and this is true for their technical know-how – but were we also re-inscribing normative, classed tastes into their visual language? 'Visual literacy' implies a learned way of appreciating imagery – and therefore a noble thing, but it masks the deeper project of cultivating in students a 'literacy' which is more attendant to the tastes of those with power in visual culture. Not that I would suggest we entirely throw the book of visual literacy out, but that we teach this with significantly greater attention to the Western, middle-class standards which inform them – and who or what is left out of this visual paradigm.

I recall a moment near the end of my Honours year at art school when one of the professors told me that he thought I was doing good work, but that I had not yet 'grasped the language'. Grasping the language, of course, is like finding the key – or knowing the password – to the club. And it holds currency. As I near the end of this research project, I am conscious of the new languages I have learned and my nervousness to use certain terms, for fear that the cultural guardians will rat me out as the interloper I ever am. One of those terms is 'sexy', especially when applied as 'sexy images' or similar. I felt the pull to say 'sexual' images or 'sexualised' images to try to convey an intellectual rigour, as 'sexy' seemed gauche to me. Gauche is a term that is applied to unsophisticated people or things, and often to the working-class. I have caught myself seeking distance from it and trying to demonstrate that I know the password. But sexy is the perfect word for this context and we are missing out in academia if we cannot use it freely. Why should the working-class have all the fun?

I remain a professional photographer, schooled in both technical, commercial photography and fine art and then later through the unofficial apprenticeship of 'assistant photographer' in a professional studio. I have created portraits for Australian media for twelve years and I love my craft and many aspects of the photographic industry. But it, too, could benefit immensely from loosening its hold on conservative ideals of feminine respectability. Advertising has a rich history, of course, of inscribing and re-inscribing all manner of myopic stereotypes, including some that are gendered and classist, and my engagement as a photographer with this in future would be markedly different from years past.

In more immediately practical terms, I suggest that the photographic industry would also benefit from a more democratic embrace of collaboration – one that includes and credits the work of all contributors. This project provides insight into the ways the professional photographic industries (commercial, art and pedagogical) can re-assess how they structure authorship. Within media and advertising spaces, photographers have a higher status than their collaborators, even when there is a relatively equal share of the work amongst collaborators. Stylists, hair and make-up artists, art directors, prop artists and others are rarely credited for their work in the way that a photographer is, despite their vital contribution to the success of the shoot. I call time on the narrative of the 'solo genius' (often masculine) photographer and the hierarchy this constructs. Collaborations are collective and only as effective as each member's contribution.

Scholarly uptake

The important work by Beverley Skeggs on class, gender and respectability has fundamentally informed this research project. As I contemplate how to endorse greater academic uptake of studies into women's sexual self-representations and class, I am drawn to her comment that 'much about class and gender has been falsely separated' (Skeggs et al., 2008: para 4). She goes on to say:

> I sometimes think it is sad that feminists went off and created their own spaces in academia – fantastic spaces that were needed, politically, for a time but they became very separate. I went into those spaces and fought quite a lonely battle to put class on the agenda. (Skeggs et al., 2018: para 4)

The findings in this project have demonstrated both the presence of classed language in discourses on women's sexy selfies and the ways aesthetic taste functions to demarcate middle-class boundaries. There is a rich volume of academic work which is generating important knowledge about the many barriers faced by female sexy selfie takers, yet few of them (with notable exceptions in scholars, such as Katrin Tiidenberg and Anne Burns) turn to the issue of class. Further inquiry must also open-out feminism's positioning on objectification. Women's sexy selfies have brought objectification discourses to a critical juncture where relations of power between the looker and the looked-at are much less clear and in need of new analytical frameworks. Can a selfie-taker

really self-objectify if she is subjectively active in the entire process of making and disseminating a selfie? Mainstream feminism often propagates the accusation that women who take sexy selfies are suffering from false consciousness – the idea being that if they knew more about feminism, they would not take such selfies (or perhaps they would take them in a more 'respectable' way). In this scenario, the accuser assumes they know more about what is best for the selfie taker. Do they? Can feminism address this in ways that do not arise from a class-based assumption of a 'knowledge divide'?

While this research has made some forays into these arenas, it has its obvious limitations. Further studies that work with women's sexy selfies and foreground the issue of class would be of benefit to studies across feminism and media, visual culture, social media, as well as to the sexy selfie takers themselves.

Final reflections

I noticed recently that several of the women who collaborated with me in this project have somewhat changed the aesthetic in their sexy selfies. In the case of Michelle, Bec and Simone, for example, it is a shift towards a more considered (in a design sense) and more highly stylised look. They are sexy in a new way (see Figure 5). Perhaps these changes have nothing to do with our time together, but I would like to think that between us, we were able to create some tangible exchange of knowledge. I can confidently say that what I have learned from participants has profoundly and positively affected my understanding of power and sexual politics, of image grammars and Western culture's meaning-making practices and of the ways that photography can both enliven women's sexual expressions and complicate them (when multiple 'gazes' become involved, for example). The women who collaborated with me on this project have changed the way I see through the lens. I am deeply grateful to them for this and hope that they too, have gained something from our time together. The photographer-nerd in me would be ecstatic if they were even somewhat more expanded in their visual language – just so there are more 'words' to choose from. It is more fun.

There are so many things I want to say at the end of this thesis. There is still that impulse to neatly wrap-up with a declaration that these photographic collaborations solved feminism, or at least the problem of sexual objectification discourses. It falls fantastically short of that mark but succeeds in provoking a series of new questions in this context. How should women represent themselves? Should there be limits on their sexual representations? If so, what might they be? How can mainstream feminism apply gender justice frameworks to all women if it continues to sideline some women as inappropriate and vulgar? Can it address why it is offended by vulgarity in the first place? It barely needs to be said, but feminism has been and continues to be critical in the resistance to structures of misogynistic dominance which harm women, but it must also contend with its own structural problems and inclination to hive-off class boundaries in the name of protecting women's bodies.

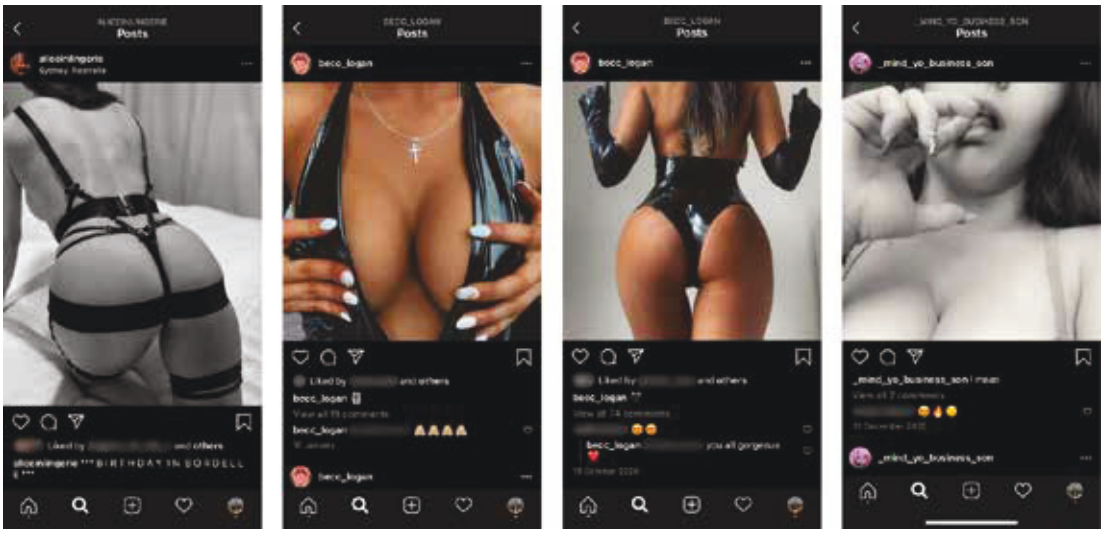

Figure 5. From left to right: Michelle, Bec, Bec and Simone

I began the writing of this thesis by describing the ways 'selfie queen' Kim Kardashian is criticised for her 'overt' displays of sexiness. In the middle of writing this conclusion, some seven years on from the condemnation that accompanied her appearance on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, Kardashian attended the Anna Wintour-hosted 2021 Met Gala in an outfit that covered her entire body, including her face. None of her skin was visible. While some praised her look, she was also, again, subject to broad criticism (Cartwright, 2021; Davis, 2021). Though Kardashian has not spoken directly about the meaning of her outfit, she did retweet a fan Tweet that read: 'For someone who is always criticized for being overly sexual, Kim showed that she can cover every square inch of her skin and still find a way to be criticized and ridiculed' (Durney, 2021).

It was Wintour herself who suggested that she was impressed by Kardashian's shift towards being more covered, the barely disguised inference being that she was classier in covering up. Perhaps Kardashian's Met Gala outfit was designed to bring attention to the conflicting discourses that place women like her as 'too much' (skin, obvious sexiness) and 'not enough' (respectability, feminine decorum) at the same time. Discourses within mainstream feminism consistently declare how women should not present themselves but fail to state how they *should* present themselves. Kardashian's body suit is a timely riposte to the multitude of critical voices, who have, for years, told her how *not* to dress, how *not* to be sexy. Perhaps it is a public relations stunt, but it is nonetheless powerfully representative of the way that women's bodies and sexualities are configured in contemporary sexual and class politics.

On the subject of such politics, there is an irony here that is not lost on me. I have self-critiqued in this project by calling out the ways that my aesthetic languages talk to middle-class spaces, but I

have also championed the images that have arisen, in part, from this middle-class aesthetic as a way to value the 'seen-ness' of the women in them. Can I have it both ways? This makes me ponder the possibility that what I am experiencing is reflective of what mainstream feminism often does too: it positions its politics as understanding of its inadequate response to women who are not white and middle-class, but continues to promote its own knowledge and structures as the paradigmatic means through which to achieve the gender justice it seeks.

Should dominant feminism and concomitant popular discourses do the kind of self-critical assessment needed to alleviate this condition, it would necessitate a deconstruction, of sorts, of its tastes in sexiness and its fears that young women are always-already passive vessels for male sexual fantasy, rather than the possibility that they could be agents of their own sexualities, even in misogynistic cultures. It would also necessitate a considered inspection of what underpins feminist claims of false consciousness when women perform their sexual selves in this way. Class has been missing from much intersectional feminist discourse, but for that to change, mainstream, middle-class feminism must be prepared to sit in the discomfort of relinquishing symbolic authority over young women's sexy representations.

Who gets to be sexy in the public sphere? Why?

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... too much?

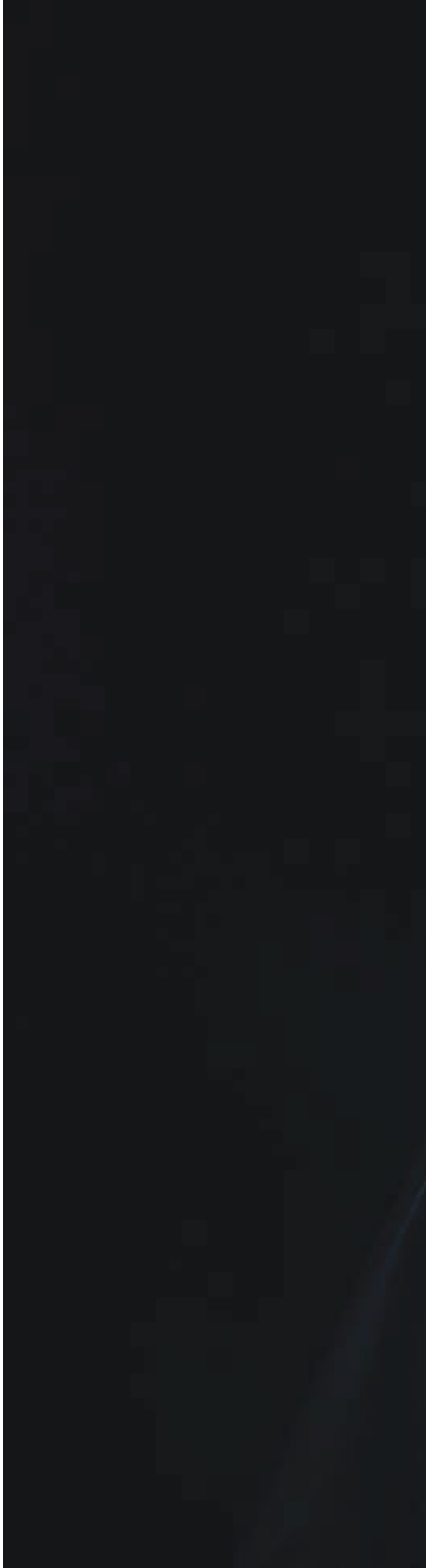
A collection of sexy photos by:

Emma Phillips
Melissa Dansie
Bec Logan
Simone Ryan
Blair Scharrmacher
Michelle ten Bohmer
Kristina Wilson

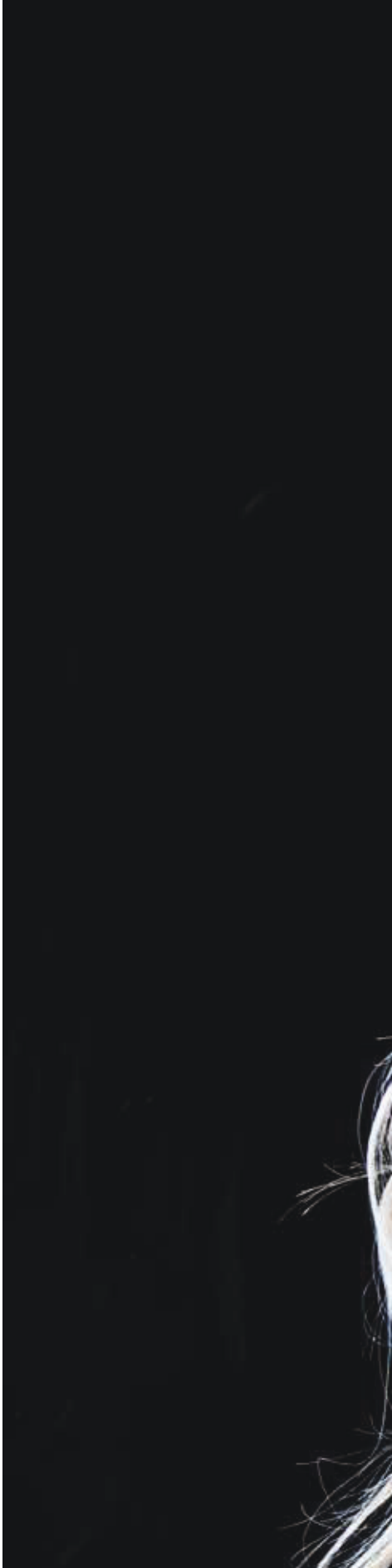
“It’s kind of too much and not enough at the same time.”
Kristina Wilson

Melissa Dansie

"I'm sure if I was a published model, and this was something like that, it would be looked upon in the arty manner that it is. But because it's me and I'm not, it wouldn't be viewed like that."



"In a world filled with judgement, whose opinion matters most? MINE."



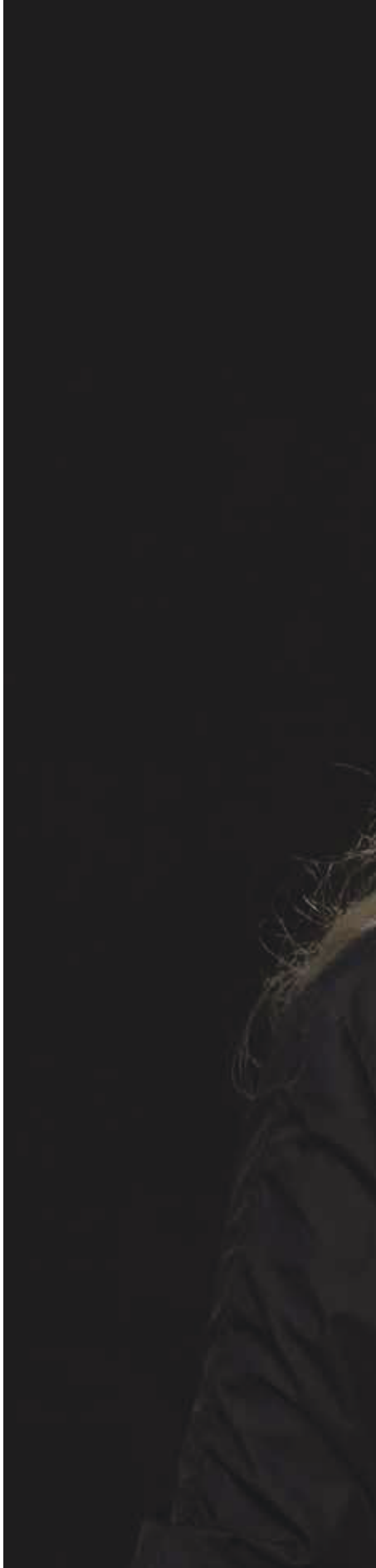
Kristina Wilson

"My Insta has kinda developed now into more of an expression –
an ownership of my body and my sexuality."

“You’re just doing it to get male attention, right? That’s it. And if that was the case, why is that a bad thing anyway?”

Blair Scharrmacher

"For a long time I really liked that skinny look, but as I got older I learned to really appreciate the curves I have and I enhanced them with plastic surgery. They show a lot of thinner women in Playboy still. I haven't seen too many bigger models."



“Happy people are always more beautiful. Positivity, to me, is more beautiful. It doesn’t matter if they have resting bitch face or if they are smiling. Y’know, it comes across in their photos.”

Bec Logan

"The one major thing we can do is stop shaming other women. We have the power to do that."

“It’s about celebrating my body after an eating disorder. I’m really proud of my body. I wanted to show off what I had to get rid of my insecurities in a way.”

Simone Ryan

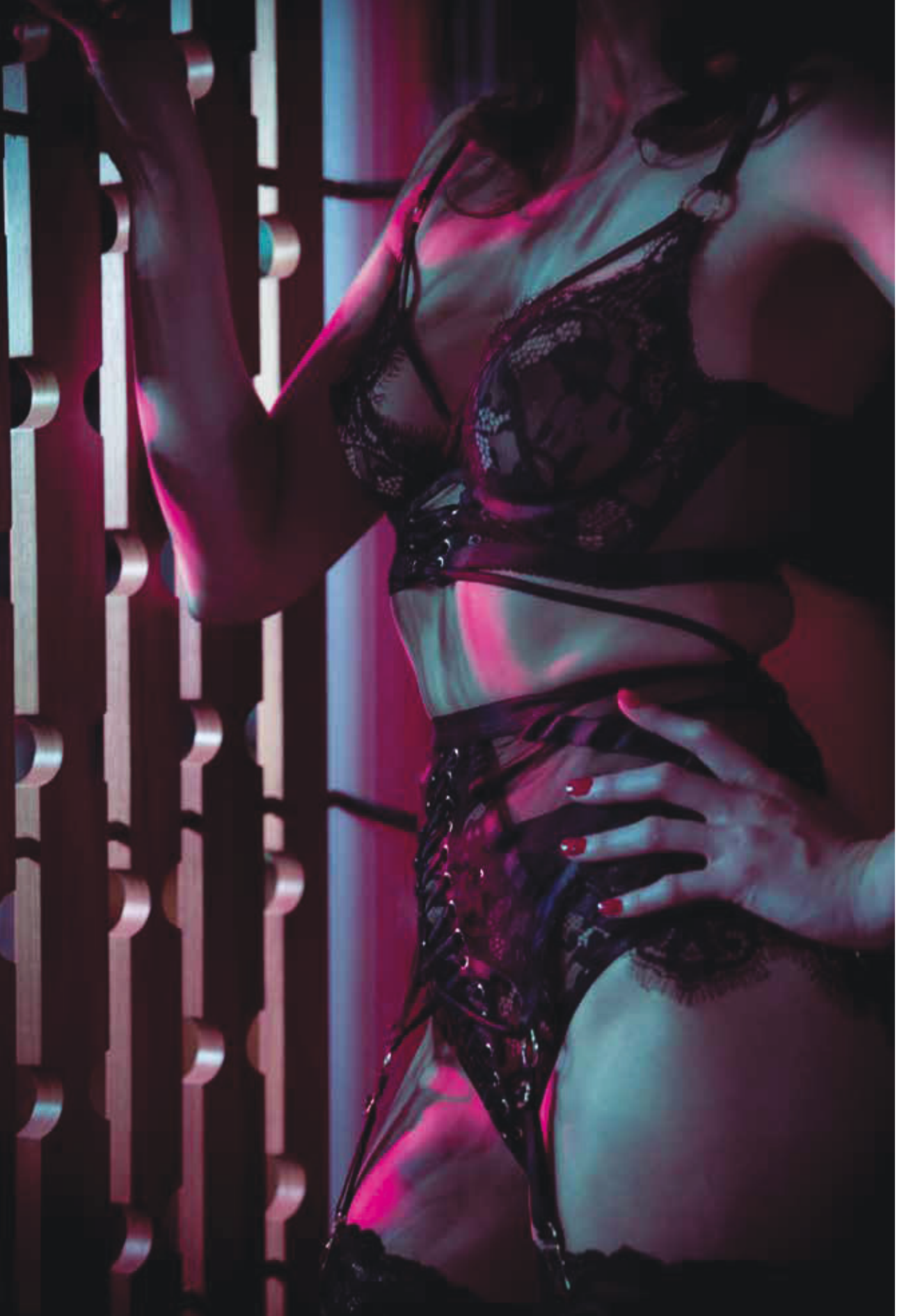
"Trashy is a fine line. It's the photo. It's not the person so much, it's the way the photo portrays you. I think classy is just being sexy, but in secret."

“I have never felt so confident as I did in your shoot. You really made me feel how I want to feel in my general photos!”



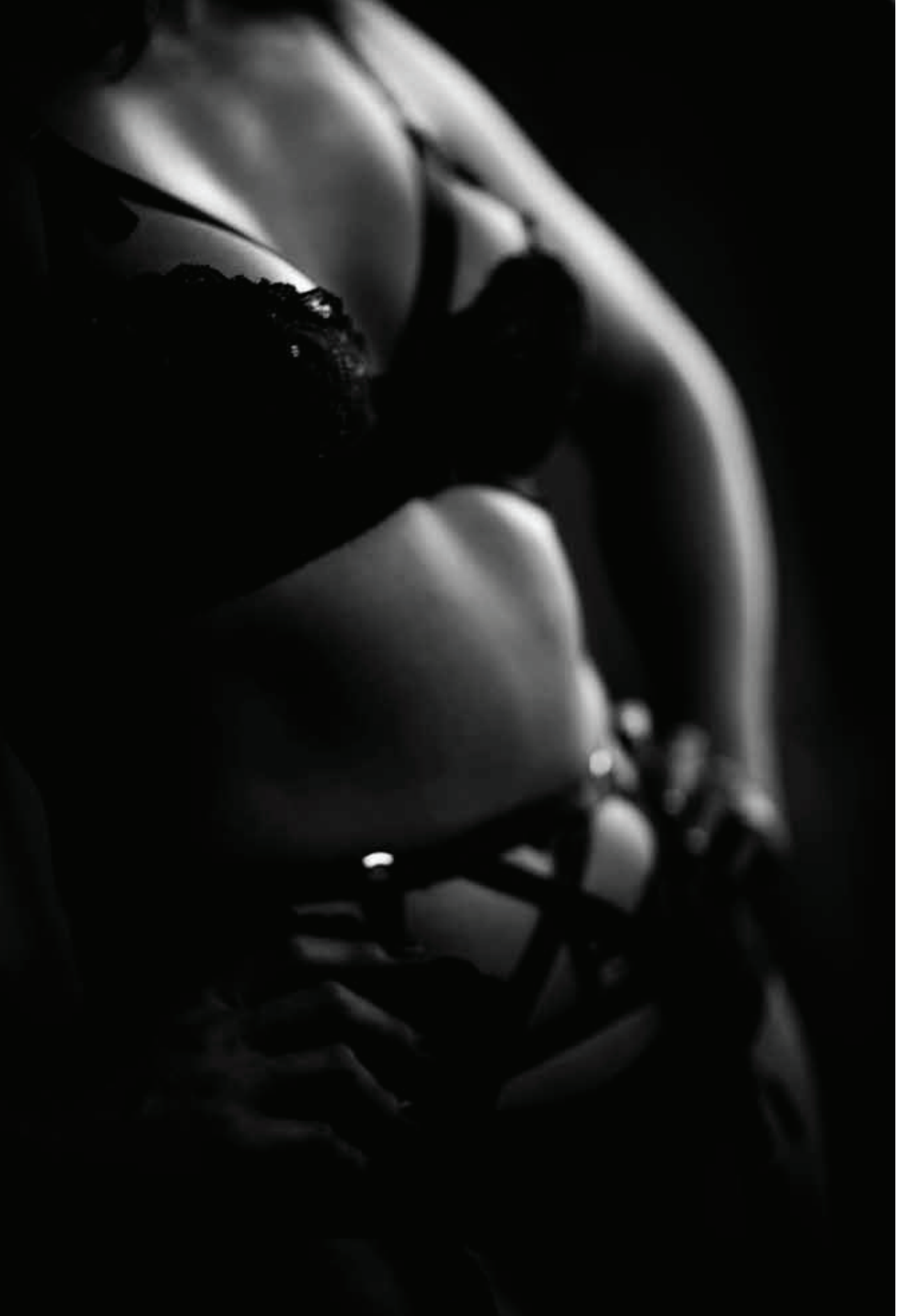

Michelle ten Bohmer

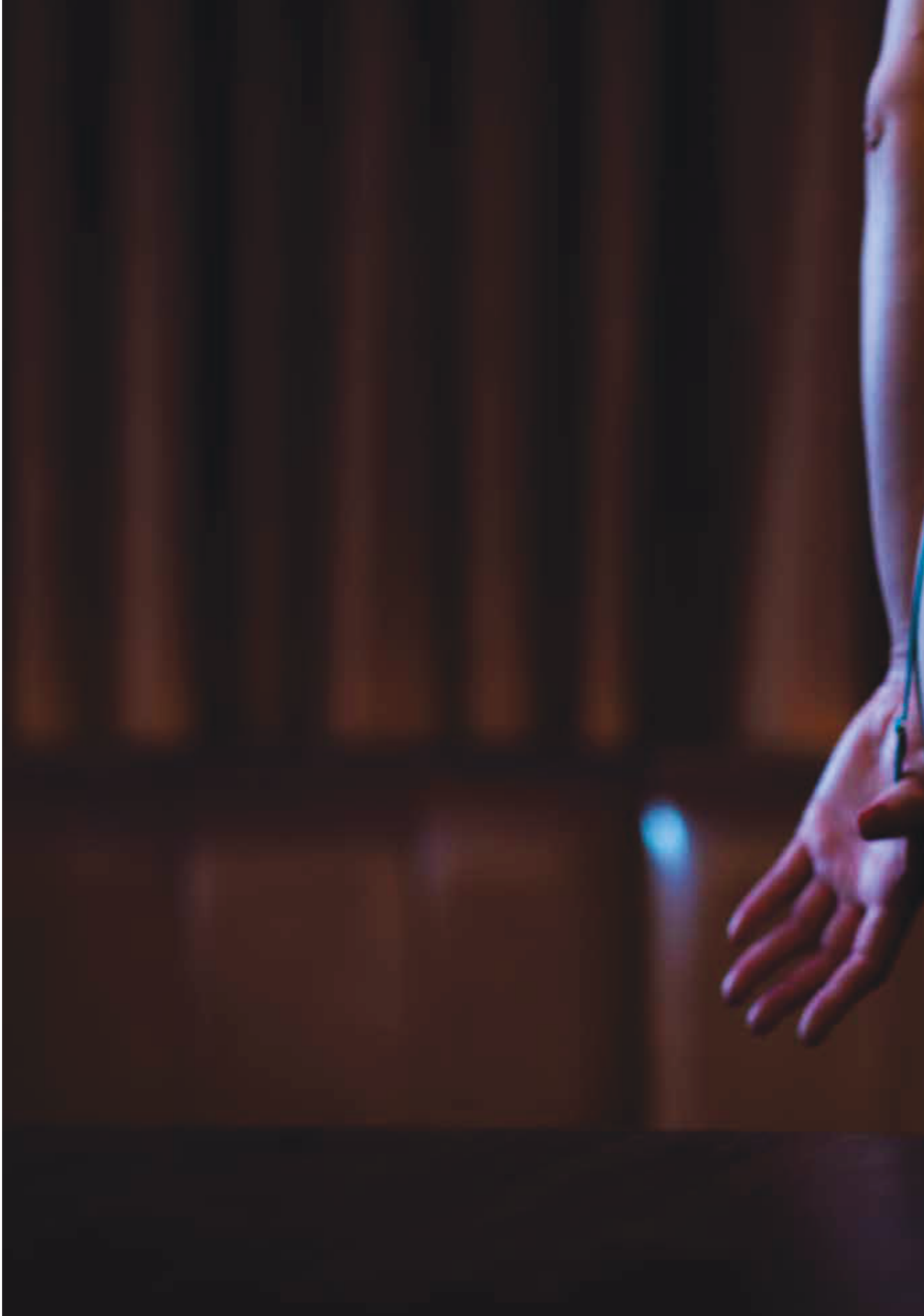
"It's that whole Madonna/whore thing I suppose. You can't be both you can only be one or the other. Society's got a very limited point of view on what women are and they forget that we're very multi-faceted."




MALE

"Kudos for making me feel so comfortable and allowing me to show a side of myself that I feel I have been keeping under wraps. Empowered women empower women and I thank you for that."





“My body is my home and I’m proud of it.”

Melissa Dansie
Art direction: Melissa Dansie and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Edwina Hollick
Hair and make-up: Melissa Dansie
Wardrobe: Melissa Dansie
Post-production: Emma Phillips

Kristina Wilson
Art direction: Kristina Wilson and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Lucia Ondrusova
Hair and make-up: Kim Tavares
Wardrobe: Kristina Wilson
Post-production: Emma Phillips

Blair Scharrmacher
Art direction: Blair Scharrmacher and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Julia Charles
Hair and make-up: Andi Coventon
Wardrobe: Steve Monroe
Post-production: Emma Phillips

Bec Logan
Art direction: Bec Logan and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Julia Charles
Hair and make-up: Nathalie Prince
Wardrobe: Steve Monroe
Post-production: Emma Phillips

Simone Ryan
Art direction: Simone Ryan and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Lucia Ondrusova
Hair and make-up: Kim Tavares
Wardrobe: Simone Ryan
Post-production: Emma Phillips

Michelle ten Bohmer
Art direction: Michelle ten Bohmer and Emma Phillips
Photographer: Emma Phillips
Assistant: Julia Charles
Hair and make-up: Ryan Farrajo ta
Wardrobe: Michelle ten Bohmer
Post-production: Emma Phillips