



Sexy selfies, girls and the performance of heterosexuality

This research study is submitted as a full dissertation in fulfilment of the Master's in
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Abstract

Research has shown that teenage girls' engagement with sexually suggestive selfies often places them in a position of passivity and subordination to the male gaze, reinforcing stereotypes about female sexuality. This study explores this phenomenon by utilising the ontological frameworks of Deleuze and Guattari, along with feminist interpretations of concepts such as "assemblage," "becoming," "territorialisation," "de-territorialisation," and "affect." The study examines how social media platforms can both expand and restrict teenage girls' sexual expression. It argues that while posting provocative selfies can serve as an opportunity for girls to explore their sexuality, it can also perpetuate dominant ideologies rooted in heteronormative norms, ultimately reinforcing male entitlement over girls' bodies and limiting their agency.

In the South African context, these dominant ideologies are further complicated by racialised beauty standards and slim-thick ideals, which perpetuate hierarchies of femininity. Data was collected from 30 black teenage girls through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions that included photo elicitation. The results highlighted the conflicting experiences that girls face when navigating their online sexuality. While they actively perform heterosexual desirability through sexy selfies, they simultaneously encounter harmful gender norms that restrict their expressions of sexiness.

The study concludes that new feminist materialism provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex dynamics at play when girls negotiate their sexuality online. This approach should be further developed and incorporated into future research. The study also recommends that stakeholders such as government officials, educators, and parents create safer spaces for teenage girls to express their concerns about social media. Teachers should be provided with resources that address the gendered risks young people face online, and teenage girls should be educated on safe ways to navigate online sexual expressions.

Glossary of terms

New materialist: Puts equal emphasis on the world's materiality, the social and natural aspects of it.

Assemblage: A method to understand systems produced from separate entities or different parts that carry their own autonomy outside of each other, however, possess the ability to come together and form a viable whole (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980).

Selfie: Self-portrait made in a reflective object or from arm's length typically using a smartphone or a digital camera.

Heterosexual: A concept that promotes being sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

Becoming: Removal of parts that are undesirable in their original meaning and bringing forth about new meanings.

Deterritorialise: Altering social relations to form new relations.

Territorialise: The process of establishing boundaries, identities, and power relations within a material-discursive framework

Entanglements: Atomic individuals which carry fixed boundaries that seize the opportunity to interact or combine with other pre-existing entities (Barad, 2007).

Intra-action: The connection of human, things, and more-than-human forms that pre-exist with their own autonomy but carry the ability to act within one another.

Affect: Emotional or experiential qualities that arise from the interactions between various elements within an assemblage.

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Chapter One

1.1. Introduction

The rapid development of mobile technologies, the widespread use of social networking sites, and the surge in image-sharing on social media platforms have made it easier for individuals to present their sexual identities to a global audience, faster and with less effort than ever before (Belk, 2013). Image-centric social media platforms like Tumblr and Instagram are gaining a substantial user base, becoming increasingly important in our daily lives (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015). Likewise, Facebook, the largest social networking site, has been shown to facilitate communication through image-sharing. As a result, Kim and Chock (2017) note that people are spending more time crafting their online self-representations, carefully selecting the images they share, with a focus on self-enhancement and ensuring their self-portraits appear attractive. This study investigates how posting 'sexy' selfies on social media platforms provides heterosexual teenage girls with various ways to express their sexual identities. Additionally, it explores the role gender plays in shaping the experiences of teenage girls as they use selfies to communicate their sexual identities.

In one of the many online selfie tutorial videos a YouTuber Ruslana Gee (2019) demonstrates specific poses girls could practice in getting a worthy and “sexy” selfie. She recommends to her 3.2 million viewers that to attain instant fame they should portray selfies that are model inspired. In one of her posing tips, she discusses the “sexy eye” pose where girls have to take strands of hair from the front and tie them at the back of their heads to lift their faces and eyes. Another facial pose she recommends is the “cheek biting.” Although she cautions it as dangerous, she continues to utter how it is effective in giving a “model face.” She puts emphasis on different camera angles girls could practice giving the illusion of “innocence” when the camera is facing up or “mysterious sexy face” when the camera angle is facing down. There are plenty of other young women giving tutorials of such nature to give their followers and viewers the opportunity to be “Insta famous” or accumulate many likes on social media platforms using selfies. Another YouTube video by Yetta Yo Brown (2018), titled “How to take the perfect sexy selfie,” instructs girls to pose with their tongues out and eyes to perform a “sexual gaze.” She further encourages her viewers to wear more revealing clothes or

underwear that will showcase breasts and buttocks as she states that will invite the male gaze and ensure a successful amount of likes and following on the Instagram social networking site. Scholars have illustrated that selfies are a symbol of playfulness or being subversive in self-expression (Ehlin, 2019). However, selfies are now used to navigate sexuality on social media platforms where girls are confronted with contestations and objectification of their bodies. Girls who conform to normative standards are rewarded by accumulating social capital and tangible benefits. The various techniques illustrated by the selfie-taking tutorial videos mirror the normative standards of femininity depicted in women through mass media productions, which identify them as childish, indolent and hypersexualised (Doring et al., 2016).

Drawing on new feminist materialist concepts such as assemblage I am invested in examining what new meanings are reproduced in girls' experiences as they narrate how they navigate their sexuality on social media platforms using 'sexy' selfies. The study considers different ways in which the girls' new meanings are produced and how these meanings intra-act, affect and are affected by other materials found in assemblage (Corple & Linabary, 2020). Therefore, the study looks at materials and the relationship it has with other objects such as the mind, bodies, ideas and consciousness that all intertwine to give new meaning to the experiences of girls performing heterosexuality on social media platforms (Warfield, 2017). Through engaging in photo elicitations, the study will demonstrate how 15-19-year-old girls in a South African high school are entangled in everyday depictions of sexual identities on social media. In this regard, the study will illuminate how teenage girls challenge normative standards and enable sexual agency using selfies while also confronting traditional binary norms that condition online society to place scrutiny and hypersexualised femininities on girls' sexual online identities.

1.2. Background to the study

A selfie can be defined as a "self-portrait made in a reflective object or from arm's length" (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015, p. 74). Scholars suggest taking and sharing selfies has become part of our cultural norms in contemporary society, particularly for young people. According to Taylor (2014) in a broad study concerning technology usage amongst the youth, it was discovered that out of every three photographs taken by the involved participants, one was a selfie and more than half of the millennials in the study had posted and shared their individual

selfie on social media platforms. Koliska and Roberts (2015) argue that for many young people taking and posting a selfie enables self-discovery, where an individualistic and distinct online identity is constructed. However, selfies can also be an act of attention seeking. This is where individuals calculatedly participate in social media with the objective of attaining attention, self-validation and further raising their social status, worth, reputation and relevance in peer groups (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

Research consistently highlights gender-based differences in selfie-related behaviour, indicating that women are more likely to take and post selfies than men (Qiu et al., 2015). Women and girls tend to take more photographs before selecting one to post, and they also spend more time editing, filtering, and altering their selfies, using tools like Photoshop and image cropping (Dhir et al., 2016). Additionally, women often pose in more sexualised ways and devote considerable time to deleting or untagging images they find unflattering on social media platforms (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). These findings suggest that women are active participants on social media, but they also place a greater emphasis on how they are perceived by the online community. This focus on appearance correlates with higher instances of self-objectification among women in digital spaces compared to men (MacAndrew & Jeong, 2018).

While some research suggests that sharing selfies on social media platforms can lead to positive outcomes, such as boosting confidence and providing a means for positive self-expression (Tiidenberg, 2014), other studies have found that selfies can also have negative effects on young people's mental health, especially among young women. Studies suggest that this is partly because selfies tend to conform to and legitimise hypersexualised femininities and conventional beauty standards (Pereira, 2016). When teenage girls fail to meet these standards in their selfies, they may experience lower self-esteem and a negative body image (Janak et al., 2023). Social media platforms can exacerbate these issues by reinforcing existing gender norms and pressuring young women to take and share selfies that conform to widely accepted ideals of sexualised attractiveness (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

However, girls' expressions of sexuality through social media should not only be reflected through moral panic lenses but also as an opportunity for girls to negotiate their sexual agency. According to Bhana and Nathwani (2022), girls should not be viewed as helpless, innocent and always at risk but rather should be viewed as active agents in the practice of their bodies. As a

result, Colosi et al. (2023) argue that girls are then confronted with ambiguous messages in relation to expressions of sexuality. Whilst they are encouraged to challenge binary gender norms through the performance of heterosexuality, they also face the probability of being slut shamed and condemnation of their morality if they choose to do so.

Colosi et al. (2023) stipulate that not many studies have highlighted “teen girls’ reflections of sexuality or expressions of sexiness in general” (p.2). Therefore, this study sees it as important to investigate girls’ experiences concerning how they navigate their sexuality on social media platforms. The topic ‘Sexy selfies, girls and the performance of heterosexuality’ seeks to answer the question ‘how do teenage girls express their sexuality through social media platforms?’. Ringrose (2011) suggests that girls present themselves with an image of a good girl where they perform ‘desirable but not too slutty femininity’. Given these research studies, it is crucial to understand girls’ own experiences of expressing sexuality on social media. Moreover, girls’ experiences must be highlighted to inform schools about the complexities and challenges teenage girls encounter when they navigate their sexuality by posting 'sexy' selfies on social media platforms.

1.3. Rationale



Figure 1.1: My selfie.

My motivation for this study stemmed from my own experience as a sixteen-year-old teenage girl in 2012. Owning a smartphone for the very first time, I got to experience the good along with the harshness of social media. Without being aware of the realities of social media I posted my picture on Facebook, the social networking site where I connected with many of my school

friends. The image stayed days without accumulating a single like. Consequently, I began being conscious of my physical appearance in every picture I was going to share. Through constant observations of other girls' pictures who were accumulating thousands of likes, the similarities they possessed are that they were all showing more skin, pouting, and posing seductively. Therefore, I figured the only way to attract more attention to myself was by expressing myself using similar strategies. Thus, I posted a selfie which to me seemed like it was portraying a 'sexy' identity. Rolling up the t-shirt I was wearing to reveal my abdomen and placing my hand on my head while looking directly into the phone camera, I had imagined the pose was feminine enough to be accepted and celebrated in the online world while also cautiously avoiding being 'too sexy' to avoid scrutiny and slut shaming. However, it was met with negative views, the few comments I received pointed out the negatives in my body. I was called "flat chest" "big nose" and "dark skin" "dirty with scruffy hair", my clothes and styling were pointed to be not feminine at all. I was being ridiculed for having a seductive pose without any 'feminine' features. I was left feeling uncomfortable and conflicted because I liked my outfit and selfie, but it had invited negative scrutiny in my body because it did not fit into ideal constructions of femininity. As a result, it is important to highlight how teenage girls perform their sexuality on social media platforms to assist them in finding better and safer strategies to navigate their sexualities on social media platforms.

My second motivation to conduct this study stemmed from my professional experiences as a teacher, family member and a part of the community. As a schoolteacher who is highly active on social media platforms, I am appalled at the experiences teenage girls are confronted with concerning how they express their gender and sexuality on social media platforms. Girls post their pictures with filters and numerous others are pressurised to FaceTune and Photoshop their images posted online. I had been observing one of my cousins who is a teenage girl in high school girl. She was taking selfies of herself in a school uniform, and after a while, she decided to shorten her skirt and portray a seductive pose in the selfie. She specifically stated how she was doing it to accumulate many likes and attention. This is where my curiosity took motivation to investigate how girls perform their sexuality through 'sexy selfies'. Social media platforms are continuously gaining momentum among teenage girls globally. However, like in the offline world girls are met with views underpinned by traditional norms suggesting femininity should be hypersexualised through clothing, dancing, and seductive poses. Consequently, investigating experiences on how girls express their sexuality on social media

platforms might shed light on how teachers, government and learners themselves can confront the complexities reinforced by social media and innovate safe ways for young people to negotiate their gender and sexuality using selfies on social media platforms.

1.4. Objectives of the study

- 1.4.1 To investigate how teenage girls use selfies to express their sexuality on social media platforms.
- 1.4.2 To investigate how gender shapes teenage girls' experiences of expressing sexuality through social media platforms.

1.5. Questions to be asked

The following questions were used to guide the study:

- 1.5.1. How do teenage girls use sexy selfies to express their sexuality on social media platforms?
- 1.5.2. How does gender shape their experience of expressing sexuality through selfies on social media platforms?

1.6. Theoretical framework

This study adopted a new feminist materialism (NFM) framework to investigate how teenage girls express their sexuality using sexy selfies on social media platforms. According to Warfield (2017) and Braidotti (2011), this is where we are paying attention to agents of complex human and non-human entities coming into assemblage. According to Corple and Linabary (2020), there are existing entanglements between material and online realms. In this study, I examined how these entanglements of human (bodies) and non-human (social networking sites, smartphones, dresses, minds, selfies) reveal numerous ways in which teenage girls negotiate and navigate their heterosexuality on social media platforms. Social media platforms manifest a safe space for teenage girls to practice their sexual agency without

authoritative voices from parents. This study used the new feminist materialism to highlight how teenage girls network and connect with their inner bodies, materials (smartphones), social media and sexuality to navigate and understand their negotiation of sexual agency and how gender influences their sexual expressions on social media platforms.

Additionally, this study utilised Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and the concept of heterosexual matrix. According to Butler (1990), gender is a performance of repeated actions where the heterosexual matrix highlights how in gender relations heterosexuality offers privilege. These gender performances are not innate attributes, rather they are conceptualised upon with our interaction with the environment. Therefore, they are consistent with the social and cultural norms that are acceptable at the time. The different contexts ranging from educational settings, church, family, friends, and even social media all determine how we perform gender (Scarcelli et al., 2021). This study drew on this framework to give intel on how social media spaces and sexy selfies influence teenage girls to perform and negotiate sexuality within the context of heterosexuality, risk and pleasure. Teenage girls' selfies are discovered to perform sexually explicit content that suggests sexual willingness to the male gaze. This confirms how girls' bodies are objectified and assumed to only be used for male gratification and subordination. Even when Tiidenberg (2014) suggest 'sexy' selfies can be used to reclaim power and challenge normative standards, teenage girls are still found to be confronted with scrutiny and slut shaming if they do not conform to femininity standards dictated by society. Therefore, using this theory allowed the study to investigate how girls perform heterosexuality to navigate their sexuality on social media platforms.

1.7. Context of the study

The study was conducted at Mpumelelo High School (pseudonym), a school located within Umlazi Township, southwest of Durban on the south coast of KwaZulu Natal. I chose this school as the perfect location because it was convenient, and I am familiar with the community that surrounds it therefore it fitted as a suitable research site. The geographical location of this school signals an urban area characterised by socio-economic challenges. Consequently, some of the learners attending this school are victims of single-parent households and child-headed families who battle unemployment and poverty on a daily basis. There are 1,032 learners

present at Mpumelelo High School. The population is made up of 477 girls and 555 boys, all African. The school functions as a quantile 3 school. This system of grading was employed by the Department of Education (DOE) in 1996. It locates schools that are non-fee-paying and receive governmental funding which includes the feeding scheme. The quantiles function in descending order where quantile 5 is a well-resourced school and quantile 1 is the poorest of schools. Presented below is the map of Umlazi where the school is located.

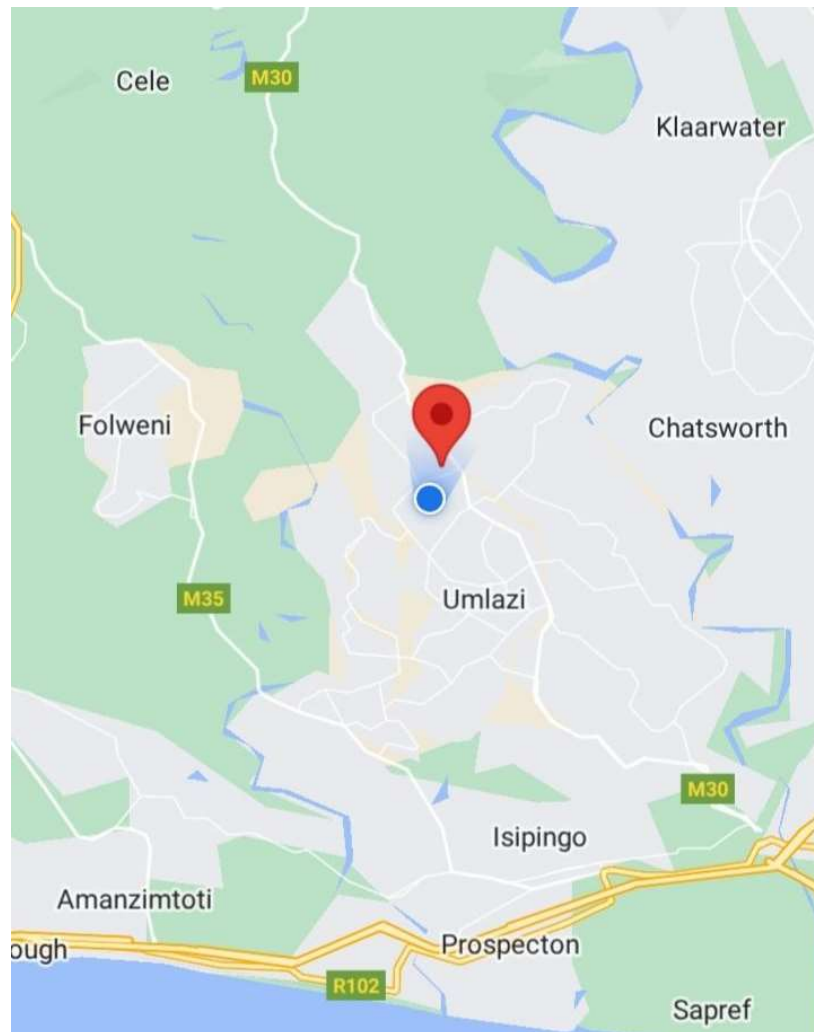


Figure 1.2: Map of Umlazi, KwaZulu-Natal.

1.8 Research methodology

1.8.1. Research design

The research method that was used in this study is qualitative in nature. The qualitative research method is explained as “the study of nature of the phenomena, as well as their quality, different manifestations, the context in which they appear or the perspective from which they can be perceived” (Busseto et al, 2020, p. 1). Furthermore, this study adopted the case study method to gain in-depth insight into primary issues in real-life. This study was further guided by the qualitative research methods and located within the interpretivist paradigm. According to Bush et al. (2019), this paradigm seeks to examine and reflect upon human experiences; therefore, interpretation is key. This is where the researcher is responsible for communicating the real lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm is underpinned by the view that reality is subjective, constructed by social settings and thus human experiences can be narrated in multiple interpretations (Bush et al., 2019). The interpretivist paradigm was paramount in the study as it allowed me to unpack the phenomena of how teenage girls navigate sexuality on social media platforms using the subjective views of participants. The study further investigated how gender and sexuality shape the experiences of teenage girls in relation to how they perform their sexuality on social media platforms. Therefore, the interpretivist paradigm narrated the subjective real-life experiences of participants in social media and gave perspective through the social lenses of how teenage girls negotiate their sexuality through social media platforms.

1.8.2. Selection of participants and sampling strategy

Sampling forms part of an important role in a study thus it is crucial to employ sampling techniques that suit the research design (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). This study employed two sampling techniques, the first being the purposive and the second as the convenience sampling technique. This qualitative study purposely examined the digital experiences of 30 black teenage girls between the ages of 15 to 19 from Mpumelelo High School at Umlazi Township in KwaZulu-Natal. According to Anderson and Jiang (2018), teenage girls are more prone to use social media platforms than boys. Bell (2019) further argues more scrutiny is

placed upon teenage girls and how they choose to express themselves through image sharing on social media platforms than their peer boys. Therefore, there is an imperative need to investigate the experiences of teenage girls within these age groups as they are in a transactional period from teenage to womanhood and thus take interest in sharing images to cater for the male gaze (Tiidenberg, 2014). Participants were chosen following a criterion that suggests they should possess prior experience with social media platforms. Moreover, participants were to voluntarily take part in the study on the basis that they possess a smartphone, are heterosexual teenage girls and are readily available for the study. The purposive sampling aided in locating the appropriate participants for the study and the convenience sampling technique allowed easy accumulation and access to participants partaking in the study.

1.8.3. Data collection methods

The methods to collect data that were explored in this study included photo elicitation, open-ended individual interviews that are semi-structured (Appendix 1A) focus group sessions (Appendix 1B). The study used photo-elicitation methods as a stimulus for conversations surrounding how teenagers express their sexuality on social media platforms. According to Church and Quilter (2021), photo elicitation can be described as an interviewing method to draw information from participants using photographs. I chose various images depicting a 'sexy' girl with minimal clothing and asked questions based on it. This allowed me to gather in-depth rich data.

Following the photo-elicitation method were the semi-structured individual open-ended questions. This data collection method gave room for flexibility and adaptability, and it allowed me and the respondents to move away from the rigid structure of conversations and allowed me to probe further into responses from participants to attain rich data. Brinkmann (2014.) maintains that semi-structured individual interviews should be flexible and allow researchers in qualitative studies to alter their questions throughout. Moreover, open-ended questions allow participants to give more details, be creative and provide factual, unrestricted responses (Brinkmann, 2014). The duration of semi-structured open-ended individual interviews was forty-five minutes to one hour. These interviews were conducted at the convenience of learners during the second lunch break. The information gathered from the interview was audio

recorded and stored in the form of digital files, notes and the verbatim was transcribed. Focus group discussions were another data collection method utilised in the study. According to Richard and Lagman (2015), focus group discussions are used in qualitative studies to obtain a deep understanding of social issues. Moreover, focus group discussions allow for participants to feel more at ease to share their views, perspectives and experiences. Photo elicitation was used to provoke discussions among participants and elicit further information as Richard and Lahman (2015) depict it as the greatest method to elicit information. The focus group interview was timed for an hour. The study was underpinned by three focus groups with ten participants in each group.

1.8.4. Data analysis

Data analysis is pivotal in any research study. It can be explained as the summary of data that was collected. It is where data collected is scrutinised and searched for patterns, meanings and interpretations (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017). The data collected was translated from isiZulu to English as the participants used isiZulu as their home language and I also used the same language to communicate and interview. Thereafter, a thematic analysis approach was employed. This permitted data to be analysed and organised on the basis of emerging themes from interviews and photo elicitation methods. Inductive data analysis technique was utilised. According to (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017) inductive data analysis refers to data being categorically organised and thereafter patterns and relationships being spotted from the categories. This thematic analysis allowed the study to interpret the experiences based on how girls use sexy selfies to navigate their sexuality on social media platforms. Following the thematic organisation was the diffractive analysis which puts focus on plucking new feminist concepts into the emerging themes. This was done with the objective of producing new ideas that do not repeat similar scholarly works.

1.8.5. Ethical considerations

Owing to the sensitive nature of the questioning in the study, teenage girls were allowed to refrain from answering questions they felt uncomfortable answering. Before the beginning of the interviewing process, the study was explained to participants, and they were ensured

confidentiality of their responses. The process of data collection commenced only once permission from the registrar of the University of KwaZulu-Natal had been granted. Following this, the Department of Education also granted permission for the study to take place. A formal letter (Appendix 2A) was issued to the school gatekeepers who are the principal along with the chairperson of the SGB to request permission for the study to be conducted inside the premises of the school. Many of the participants were under legal age, thus parents were given consent forms to sign (Appendix 2B) that granted permission for their children to take part in the study. The participants were also given consent forms (Appendix 2C) which enabled the researcher to use the data obtained from the study. As participants use isiZulu as their home language which is the same language I use. I conducted interviews using the isiZulu language which enabled participants to respond with flexibility.

The participants were assured anonymity and given the chance to choose their preferred pseudonyms. To ensure the participants were at ease partaking in the study, I ensured to make participants feel comfortable by constantly assuring them of my confidentiality and confirming to only share with the public what the participants allowed me to share. I also added a disclosure statement in the consent forms that should my findings uncover any criminal activities I am legally and ethically obliged to report the crime. Participants were also given permission to withdraw from the study at any given point. For students who experienced any form of trauma emotionally, I contacted the psychologist at the Umlazi Section L Municipal Clinic where free counselling is offered to assist those students who needed counselling.

1.8.6. Overview of chapters

Chapter One

This chapter offers an introduction and overview of the study. The dominion of social media platforms was briefly discussed, together with its connotation of hypersexualising teenage girls. The key research rudiments were also defined namely: rationale, research objectives and questions, location of the study and methodology. Lastly, the chapter illustrated a synopsis of the forthcoming chapters in order to create a design for readers to follow.

Chapter Two

This chapter focuses on providing the literature review from various perspectives of scholars underpinning the hyper-sexualisation of teenage girls in social media platforms concerning local and international spectrum.

Chapter Three

This chapter presents the theoretical framework that supported the study. The new feminist materialism was used to describe and put into context the entanglements between heterosexual teenage girls and materials to understand the new meaning of how teenage girls navigate their sexuality on social media platforms.

Chapter Four

This chapter presents the methodologies employed to seek out the experiences of teenage girls as they negotiate how to express sexuality using selfies on social media platforms. Accounts of the research design, location of the study, sampling, data collection methods and data analysis will be presented. The integration of trustworthiness and validity in the study will be illuminated.

Chapter Five

In this chapter, the derived data from the interview process will be analysed and allocated into emerging themes through thematic analysis. Following is plucking the emerging themes accordingly to appropriate new feminist concepts.

Chapter Six

This chapter presents data in continuation of chapter five where more themes will be unpacked and analysed using the thematic and diffractive analysis.

Chapter Seven

This chapter highlights the findings discovered from Chapter Five in order to obtain recommendations and interventions that can diminish the unscrupulous social media standards of how teenage girls should perform their heterosexuality on social media platforms. Furthermore, this chapter will introduce the consolidation of the entire study. The study's research questions and objectives will be highlighted and concluded.

Chapter Two: Literature review

2.1. Introduction

Numerous research scholars have illustrated social media as one of the most important vehicles that seek to reinforce idealised notions of desirable heterosexuality across the online and offline spaces (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Dickason 2023). Prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat among others are contemporary spaces where teenage girls find opportunities to display their sexual identities (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). However, the patriarchal, oppressive system of heterosexuality that enables male sexual entitlement leaves teenage girls at risk of constrained agency (Janak et al., 2023) and vulnerability to subordination from males who police how they should express their sexualities on social media (Ringrose et al., 2013). Girls are then left with limited options thus they contest for power through means of presenting desirable ‘hetero-sexy’ images that are motivated by hyper-femininity and directly cater for the male gaze (Ringrose et al., 2013). Presenting selfies that are hypersexualised and conform to normative beauty standards further grants teenage girls immunity to privilege and status that translates even in the real-life world (Naezer, 2020). Evans and Riley (2015) note that the way girls engage with their sexualities on social media is a call to expand on ‘technologies of sexiness’ where contrasting messages emerge as desirable heterosexuality can simultaneously be a source of pleasure and for objectification in teenage girls (Ringrose et al., 2019; Janak et al., 2023; Bhana & Nathwani, 2022).

Women and teenage girls who partake in the ubiquitous culture of taking ‘sexy’ selfies are often subjects of discourses that aim to scrutinise their authenticity and vilify their morality (Abidin, 2016). Studies have noted how teenage girls are confronted by double standards, unsolicited sexual comments and unwarranted sexual advances when displaying their ‘sexy’ selfies on social media platforms. Furthermore, they are denied agency under the disguise that femininity is passive and permits male subordination (Davis, 2018). These studies are noted from countries such as the Netherlands (Naezer & Oostehout, 2020); the United Kingdom (UK) (Ringrose et al., 2013; Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; h Ringrose, 2016), the United States of America (USA) (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Dickason, 2023), in Australia (Middleweek, 2020), and China (Wang et al., 2019; Liu & Keane, 2021; Shao, 2023). Other scholars debate how performing heterosexuality through means of taking and sharing ‘sexy’ images should not

only be categorised as an act to slander women and teenage girls but should be viewed as a method to liberate women and permit agency in how they choose to negotiate their sexualities on social media platforms (Tiidenberg, 2014; Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015; Mpofo, 2022; Doring et al., 2022). This phenomenon does not only end on the global stage but is further discovered within the context of South Africa, where it is depicted, that teenage girls take and share self-sexualised selfies on social media platforms to attain social capital (Sprague et al., 2022; Mpofo, 2022; Dunn & Falkof, 2021) and that these selfies are further conflicted by the rampant global normative beauty standards (Janak et al., 2023). Therefore, this confirms that taking and posting selfies that are sexy is an activity tangled by complexities that seek to emphasise the tension between the self-shooting act and the varying normative assumptions about gender and bodily ideals. Furthermore, it highlights the issues of agency, autonomy, and power struggles in practices of looking at and being seen as heterosexual women (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015).

In this review, I seek to draw both from global studies and emerging body of research contextualising the South African spaces, to further investigate the complexities confronted by teenage girls about how they express their sexualities on social media platforms using ‘sexy’ selfies. The themes that will be explored in the review include defining ‘sexy’ selfies, the sexualisation of femininities using selfies on social media, the normative beauty standards prevalent in selfies, and conclude by the empowerment ideology reinforced by the self-shooting practice. Following this, the objective is to review how teenage girls’ agency is challenged, constrained, or permitted to empower or disempower young women’s bodies and their sexual identities on social media platforms. I will use teenage girls and young women interchangeably throughout this chapter as they present relatively the same meaning.

2.2. What are ‘sexy’ selfies?

Sexy selfies assist young girls to navigate their sexualities on social media platforms. According to Karaian (2015) the term ‘selfie’ can be defined as a specific kind of image: it is classified as a self-portrait one has taken of themselves by themselves at arm’s length or in a reflecting mirror. Selfies are often illustrated as a gendered phenomenon where most scholars have observed that the ubiquitous culture of taking and sharing selfies is dominated by women and teenage girls (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Burns, 2019; Liu & Keane, 2021). Selfies

come in different genres, there are selfies taken of just feet (Sales, 2016), belfies (the bottom or backside), the helfies (hair selfies), welfies (working out selfies) or relfies (relationship selfies), nude selfies (Tiidenberg, 2017; Dickason, 2023) and sometimes selfies that are taken in dangerous situations (Bates, 2016; Tiidenberg, 2018). It is argued that context matters in 'sexy' selfies as participants from Naezer (2020) articulated that bikini selfies taken in the bedroom are viewed as more sexual than bikini images taken at the beach. In defining 'sexy' in selfies, Naezer (2020) articulates that bodies that look a specific way are central to the meaning of sexiness, the fashion and contexts all make up the fundamentals of a 'sexy' selfie. Ringrose and Harvey (2015) and Davis (2018) illustrate that bodies that are generally viewed as sexy in selfies are those that emphasise the explicitness of breasts and buttocks, it is bodies that are slim but also show curviness, particularly in the chest and bottom area (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015), they must possess a smooth and pretty face that is symmetrical, fairer skin, full lips, and long silk hair (Warfield, 2016; Chua & Chang, 2016).

In the context of the USA, Grindstaff and Valencia (2021) suggest that selfies never authenticate the self, it is rather the influence of social norms that are always at play to systematically shape how femininities envision their bodies and further legitimise the subjectivity and visibility of women. Caldeira (2020) illustrates that young women want to stake a claim in the feminine, heterosexual culture. For instance, girl selfies that depict faces covered in green clay masks seek to emphasise the connection between femininity and the efforts put into the process of beautification. Sexiness in selfies shared on social media platforms is observed to enact paradoxical discourses (Grogan et al., 2018). Sexy selfies give their authors the opportunity to negotiate sexual identities on social media and in doing so, they are confronted by vilifying and objectifying comments thus putting them at risk of moral panic. However other scholars have disputed such notions by arguing that selfies present opportunities to challenge the boundaries of dominant heteronormative standards (Dickason, 2023). Teenage girls are able to experience sexual pleasure in fun and positive ways through posting and sharing of sexy selfies which defies the binary norms that lock them into sexual passiveness.

2.3. Sexualisation, objectification, and the male gaze on social media platforms

Popular discourses have emerged with concerns relating to sexualisation and objectification in contemporary contexts. It is deemed to be problematic more distinctively for teenage girls and young people (Renold & Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose & Ragonis, 2018; Phillips, 2022). According to the APA (2007), sexualisation can be defined as “a person’s value that solely stems from his or her sexual appearance or behaviour to the exclusion of other characteristics; a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness with being sexy; a person is sexually objectified: that is, made into a thing for others’ sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making” (p.1). Historically, mainstream media was the primary source where teenage girls found opportunities to engage with sexualised content; that is through television, magazines, and radio (Van Oosten, 2021). However, with the progression of technology, social media has enabled ‘autonomy’ for young women to perform ‘sexy’ as main characters by providing sexy images taken by themselves (Middleweek, 2020; Phillips, 2022). As a result, authors argue that there is fear emanating from the culture that surrounds us becoming immensely sexualised and young women succumbing to methods of self-objectification through ‘pornified’ behaviour and taking and sharing of sexy selfies on social media platforms (Garcia-Gomez, 2014).

A research study by Stuart and Kurek (2019) in New Zealand where 30 thirty schools were randomly selected focusing on 262 adolescent girls between the ages of 13-16, investigated the selfie behaviour among young women in relation to seeking attention, sexualisation of selfies and overall focus on images taken with the intention to be attractive. It found that more teenage girls than boys frequently take sexualised selfies that can translate into negative cyber experiences. Additionally, the increment in selfie taking and posting is said to increase the rate of sexualised selfies shared on social media which further exacerbates the exploitation and victimhood of teenage girls. Teenage girls feel pressured to perform hypersexuality in their selfies as they receive more attention and engagement on social media thus the meaning of attractiveness becomes synonymous with being ‘sexy’ (Phillips, 2022b). As a result, these selfies are subjects to both conform and legitimise the sexualisation of femininity (Phillips, 2023).

In the quest to further understand the sexualisation of young femininities on social media Ringrose and Renold (2013) explore in their study by bringing a series of articles together how sexualisation manifests in a girl child, where they state the term ‘sex’ becomes synonymous with ‘girl’. They further debate how the innocence present in young women is exploited through fetishisation from men, they depict “sexual innocence is now so fetishised that it has become an irretrievable lost object” (Ringrose & Renold, 2013, p. 249). Stemming from the patriarchal culture that believes girls’ bodies are the face of morality (McClintock, 1995), this innocence present in young women portrays an ambiguous message where it could act as a shield and barrier for young women’s agency. In the study of Korkmazer et al. (2020) investigating through the theoretical analysis of printed media found in magazines and newspapers concerning youth on social media in Dutch-speaking Belgium, interchanging innocence with girls was found to manifest unequal gender power relations. The desire from men to control, protect and police how women practice their sexual identities is rooted in the ideology that femininities are unable to safeguard their own bodies and thus should refrain from explicitly showcasing them in the online public world (Salter, 2016).

Similarly, Charteris et al. (2018) argue in their study that youth sexual innocence, which is closely linked with childhood innocence, is exploited on social media. In their findings, they articulate through views from parents how young women participating on Snapchat are confronted with cyber-sexual harassment and cyberbullying through the sharing of explicit selfies. They further depict that there is a grooming culture present on social media. One parent participating in the Charteris’ et al. (2018) study articulates how her daughter’s older boyfriend kept requesting her nude selfie numerous times and she ended up having to intervene as this boy concluded by controlling her daughter (Charteris, 2018; p.214). This is where girls first receive unsolicited images of ‘nudes’ from boys to legitimise the sexual behaviour and solicit girls’ attention, furthermore, this request proves as a transactional bid to receive nudes back from girls (Mandau, 2020; Oswald, 2019). Moreover, Ringrose et al. (2013) and Mandau (2020) note that boys gain excessive attention and popularity from their peers through the practice of sharing and sending nude bodies belonging to teenage girls. Thus, there is consistent pressure for teenage girls to sexualise their bodies so boys can legitimise their masculinity.

It is further noted that there is evidence showcasing dominating sexual double standards on social media, where boys partaking in the practice of sharing nude selfies do not succumb to the same circumstances confronted by girls sharing nude selfies (Ringrose et al., 2021). This was confirmed in the United Kingdom where 144 young people between the ages of 11-18 were used in a study to explore their experiences of receiving explicit images from the opposite sex. The findings showcased that teenage girls were confronted by double standards. Through receipt of 'dick pics' they were confronted with stigmatisation more than the men who had sent them (Ringrose et al., 2021). The findings illustrated by Naezer and van Oosterhout (2021) suggested that other girls do offer consent and warrant dick pics coming from men. However, it was further argued by Berndtsson and Odenbring (2021) that it does not hold the same value. Boys are elevated in their status when they acquire girls' nudes whereas teenage girls are slut shamed. A study by Endendijk et al. (2020) concurs with this view as it investigated the stereotypes linked with sexual behaviours concerning men and women. Their findings argued that there are existing stereotypical views which depict that there are expectations for men to engage in frequent sexual activity and they are positively received whereas women are slut-shamed and suffer negative scrutiny for engaging in similar behaviour.

In a USA study conducted by Davis (2018), a textual analysis was implemented to a total of 600 Instagram posts from the Four-Year Party page with an estimated number of 81 500 followers and College Nationwide with 57 600 followers. The author's findings revealed that young women were displayed as sexual objects both on the Four-Year Party and College Nationwide pages. The daily posts on these pages were dominantly characterised by selfies of young women and teenage girls across colleges in the USA, their faces remained anonymous, but their bodies belonged as subjects for male satisfaction. In these selfies, they depicted bodies with no clothes, seductive poses and most comments focused upon breasts, buttocks, and the shape of bodies. These findings suggest similarities with the findings of Stuart and Kurek (2019) which states how women are only valued as sexual objects and materials to only satisfy the male gaze. Furthermore, it concurs with the notion of how men fetishise young femininities (Ringrose, 2013; Ringrose et al., 2021). According to Mazibuko (2022), young women in South Africa are confronted by similar occurrences of sexualisation on social media, evidence of this was illustrated through observation of young women who performed a sexual dance called 'John'Vuligate' and posted it on various social media platforms including Twitter. These young women aimed to disrupt dominant discourses around the formations of femininity, however,

she further acknowledges that in their quest to challenge normative sexual standards, they were still confronted by sexualising comments and scrutiny due to their sexual body movements.

Related views were further noted in a study with the objective of observing the degree of sexualisation on videos from the TikTok social networking site and aimed to further compare it with young people's narratives (Soriano-Ayala, 2023). The study looked at 12 active and most-followed TikTok participants between the ages of 8-17 from Spain. TikTok is highlighted as fundamentally a fun, light-hearted online site for socialising, entertaining and overall talent showcasing (Boffone, 2022). Other scholars have likened it to 'digital cocaine' where the experience of scrolling on the FYP (for you page) is deemed addictive (Zeng et al., 2021). However, it was discovered that there is also immense hypersexual behaviour emanating from most accounts of young women on TikTok (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2023). The common sexual behaviours observed showcased performances of seduction in gestures such as the biting of lips, the sticking out of the tongue, the usage of songs that carry sexual connotations and meaning, the wearing of minimal clothing which reveals cleavage and backside and further accentuating the chest (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2023). Participants as young as ten view such behaviour from teenage girls as being 'loose', granting masculine attention and abuse. It is illustrated that heterosexual young women conform to self-objectifying and self-sexualisation in these videos to accumulate attention and grow their social media following (Ringrose & Ragonis, 2019). However, they are often met with unsolicited sexual comments and unwanted sexual advances from men that they have become desensitised to the harassment and can actively block or just choose to ignore the perpetrators (Adams et al., 2022; Ringrose et al., 2021). The hyper-sexualisation discourses are highly gendered, and recognisable as only exclusive to women (Charteris et al., 2018), hence participants in this study affirmed it is mostly young women who partake in suggestive and sexy dances displayed on social media platforms (Soriano-Ayala et al., 2023).

A research study by Liu and Keane (2021) conducted in the Republic of China showcased the multiplicity of identities in the loan naked selfie that is taken and shared across online platforms dominant in China such as Baidu Forum, Weibo and QQ chat groups and other 'forbidden' global platforms such as Twitter and Tumblr. The loan naked selfies are explained as selfies taken by young women with the purpose of being arranged as collateral damage in the prevalent

loaning systems (Liu and Keane). According to authors Liu and Kean (2021) the naked selfie “takes the place of traditional collateral such as property or investments and operates as both a promise and as financial protection” (p. 3622). They further suggest these images possess another dimension of pornography. The selfies demanded by creditors are specified to showcase the face, breasts and sometimes vaginas. Therefore, it is noteworthy that this phenomenon is not gender-neutral, there is gendered language prevalent even in the advertisements, and the demand for naked bodies with explicit visibility of body parts such as breasts before the loan is granted gives evidence that the debtor is usually characterised as a woman who is sexualised (Liu & Keane, 2021). Similar to studies by Davis (2018) in the USA and Stuart and Kurek (2019) in New Zealand, the loaning process is constructed through the consumerism of the female body as only as a commodity (Mazibuko, 2022), it is built upon the sexual imagination, the shame and humiliation in the vulnerability of women’s naked bodies and further leads to practices such as revenge porn (Bates, 2017) in the cases where the monetary amount is not fully paid by debtors. Warwick (2017) states that these actions are normatively gendered and reinforced by unequal gender relations, where the entitlement to survey bodies of women and masculine sexual desire takes precedence over ethical issues concerning violations of women’s privacy.

Mpofu (2022) explores in his study the objectification of a woman’s body, the concept of booty power and the consumption of a woman’s body in the contemporary popular culture. Investigating five young South African women in between the ages of 18-19 who participated in an online trending video where they were showcasing sexy dancing moves of ‘John Vuli gate’ popular dance. In the dance Mpofu (2022) illustrates “dancers have to bend forward a bit, with their hands open in front of them as if they were holding the buttocks of a curvy woman (what is colloquially called the “booty” especially when referring to women), while the dancer’s own booty is also protruding and shaken sideways with intermittent and rhythmic straightening up, changing direction and repeating the move” (p. 188). This video ignited widespread debate across the country, with some pastors condemning it as an abomination and an incitement to rape, while many heterosexual men viewed it as gratifying the male gaze (Mpofu, 2022). As a result, the findings of the study demonstrated how the power of a woman’s ‘booty’ constructs heated debates surrounding the agency of women, rape culture and victim shaming and blaming. Moreover, bodies of young women are victimised by objectification due to the clothes they wear and how they choose to perform their ‘sexy’. Just like global studies

have shown, young women in South Africa face restrictions on their sexual agency (Zachery, 2023). In a culture deeply influenced by patriarchal norms (Janak et al., 2023), masculinity on social media still adheres to the belief that men can control, subordinate, and scrutinise women's bodies (Van Oosten, 2020).

2.4. Purity culture and young women's bodies

According to Owens et al. (2021) purity culture is characterised by six themes. That are: virginity, prominence of modesty, lack of physical affection, the denial of female bodily autonomy, sexual gatekeeping and lack of education on sexual consent. Deriving from these themes, purity culture can be defined as the promotion of sexual abstinence underpinned by Christian values and Biblical ethics (Welcher, 2020). Research studies have found that the dominance of Christian values in purity culture teaches women to be conscious of how they dress to forbid lust from males which alleviates responsibility from men and places shame on women's bodies (Barnett et al., 2018). Furthermore, women are taught to gatekeep sexual incentives which makes it their duty to deny men sex, whereas men are given an escape in the role of sexual control. As a result, in the occasion of a sexual assault, the woman may blame themselves for the way they had dressed or failing to gatekeep sex from the perpetrator (Klement and Sagarin, 2017).

Research studies illustrates that there are complex relations between religion and sexuality. A growing body of literature stipulates that linking specific aspects of religion with sexuality results in negative outcomes (Michael, 2019). This is stated in a study by Coleman et al. (2022) where their findings depict that religious beliefs cast hypersexual behaviour as morally corrupt. Furthermore, media outlets critic the use of fear and disgust as methods to instil purity culture among young girls. Moreover, women who wear tight yoga pants and refrain from covering their skins were found face slut-shaming and degrading remarks from online community (Michael, 2019). Those who engage in explicit sexual activities are labelled using metaphoric language such as “broken teacup” or a “dirty piece of tape” (Calhoun, 2017). As a result, those who are exposed to purity culture and engage in pre-marital sex view themselves as damaged goods or reparable (Hardy & Willoughby, 2017). Virginity becomes the epitome of woman's identity and a valuable gift one can offer their husband as purity culture instil in women that abstinence from sex will lead greater sexual benefits which can set unrealistic standards withing the context of marriage (Coleman et al., 2022).

Online discourses concerning the disclosure of sexual victimisation were found trending on one of the most dominant social media platforms, Twitter. A study by Bogen et al. (2020) sought to explore these narratives found by the hashtag #Churchtoo, they disclosed how teenage girls, women and boys were subjected to sexual abuse, institutional harm, emotional abuse and psychological abuse. Through this hashtag it was further explored how the church used its privilege and authority as means to alleviate accountability from perpetrators. Some of the victims shared how perpetrators who are pastors used religious scriptures to justify their actions and alleviate responsibility (Allison, 2021). Responses from the online community were highlighted to be divided, most of the Twitter comments reflected negative responses where they blamed the victims for the abuse (Bogen et al., 2020). This gives evidence on how social media platforms perpetuate unequal power relations where men are dominant, and girls are to remain passive and powerless in their bodily autonomy (Setty et al., 2022).

2.5. Selfies and normative beauty standards

Research studies have investigated how physical attractiveness plays a role in personal perception, where it was revealed that individuals who are more attractive are held to a higher standard, favoured and are less likely to receive a block in the online world (Yan & Bissell, 2014). They are viewed as more desirable and attain a huge following and engagement on social media platforms (Kim & Chock, 2015) and further possess success in social interactions (Chua & Chang, 2016). Historically, normative beauty ideals were closely linked to traditional views of attractiveness (Yan & Bisell, 2014). For instance, women in China and Japan were viewed as beautiful and healthy if they possessed a round face and slight plumpness (Jackson, et al., 2020). In traditional Korean communities, attractive women were those who were average and overweight in size and represented abundance (Yan & Bissell, 2014). In the Hispanic culture, bodies that were curvy and oversized with skin that was tanned were viewed as attractive and fertile (Schooler & Daniels, 2014). However, with the globalisation that presented opportunities for cultural assimilation, beauty standards are now heavily influenced by ideals stemming from Western culture (Jackson et al., 2020; Ando et al., 2021). Universal beauty standards in contemporary societies are now illustrated as round faces, thin fit bodies, round eyes, round lips, and pointy noses (Lazuka et al., 2020). Social media platforms have further enabled pressure particularly on young women to conform to such Westernised beauty ideals (Duff & Hund, 2023).

2.5.1. Make-up, filters and photoshop in selfies

A study using qualitative means was conducted in China to explore how young women represent their identities using selfies that have been altered and modified through apps (Shao, 2023). Thirty interviews were held with educated women between the ages of 18 and 30 living in the urban city. The findings of the study suggested that taking and posting selfies that are edited, altered and ‘photoshopped’ has become a ubiquitous culture in their everyday lives (Shao, 2023). The participants in the study alluded to using apps such as Meitu to alter their facial structures in selfies i.e., narrowing their jawlines, adjusting the sizes of noses and eyes, and acne removing and smoothing their facial textures. Scholars depict young women build their online identities using the foundations defined by normative beauty standards hence they feel it is necessary to post altered images of themselves to further conform to ideals of femininity (Ma, 2022). One participant in the study admitted to photoshopping her facial features to meet the traditional beauty standards of a Chinese woman, “in my opinion, large eyes and double eyelids are essential features of Chinese beauty today. I really admire those who have them” (Shao, 2023, p. 8). According to McRobbie (2015), young women define femininity by the perfection of beauty and thus put themselves under pressure to achieve the depicted standards of beauty.

Caldeira et al. (2021) conducted a study using women from across the globe who are active users of Instagram. The study followed in-depth conversational interviews to generate data. The women participating in the study were described as ‘ordinary’ i.e., “not celebrities or Instagram famous users” (Caldeira et al., 2021, p. 1075). The findings of the study suggested that there are contrasting views on how teenage girls and women depict their beauty ideals using selfies. While Instagram encourages young women to use filters and photoshopping tools in their selfies, another perspective emerges where young women’s authenticity in these selfies edited images is scrutinised and vilified (Caldeira et al., 2021). Popular accounts on Instagram namely from ‘insta-influencers’ and celebrities promote the lifestyle of excessive glamour, idealised, and conventionally unrealistic standards of beauty where such actions are viewed to encourage ordinary young women to fall victim to constructing the ‘edited self’ (Marwick, 2013). According to Manovich (2017), Instagram is a social networking site constructed as an aesthetically pleasing platform with an objective to make altering and filtering tools accessible to anyone with ease. Young women choose to alter their appearances as a means to conform to

the aesthetic nature of Instagram which in turn rewards them with instant popularity (Chae, 2017).

Similarly, a study conducted by Phillips (2023) in Australia demonstrated how dominant discourses now view naturalness in selfies as value and position women who promote 'fake' selfies as ridicule. The study was conducted using women from Australia who were not only actively using Instagram but had posted numerous amounts of 'amateur' selfies on the social media platform. Phillips (2023) organised photoshoots with these women to investigate how they performed 'hetero-sexy' ideals through visual representations. 'Hetero-sexy' in terms of Westernised culture alludes to images that conform to aesthetics (make-up) and refined visuals of bodies that seek to further reinforce how the current idealised notions of femininity are 'sexualised' (Hawker & Carah, 2021). Participants who had excessive make-up and edits in their selfies illustrated how they were chastised by online communities. One participant alluded that "women who paint usually do so for seduction" (Phillips, 2023, p.7). Goodness and morality are now framed as women who do not succumb to overly edited and 'painted' images of themselves. Such actions give evidence of attempts to regulate women's bodies and sexual identities by echoing historical notions that respectable femininities are passive and should not seek to glamourise their bodies by using external sources such as editing tools and make-up (Rantala, 2020).

Lawrence and Cambre (2021) conducted a study in Canada investigating how young women edit their selfies and perceive filtering behaviours from others. The findings argued that faces that are heavily edited and altered receive the most engagements. The participants illustrated that there is a rampant assumption that most images they come across are filtered and edited, therefore tuning-up tools have become centralised in the practice of sharing and posting selfies (Lawrence & Cambre, 2020). Concluding the results was the discussion of how there are existing anxieties about the authenticity filters produce or rather fail to produce. For example, participants alluded to how they would come across a face on Snapchat and think "oh my God, you're pretty" (Lawrence & Cabre, 2021, p.8) only to come across the person in real life and feel the person does not look the same. Evans and Riley (2013) posit social media platforms have provided a context where every individual has the potential to achieve the unobtainable beauty standard. However, young women are left suffering from anxiety as they fail to obtain

the same standards of beauty in real-life contexts (Chua & Chang, 2016). Much like the young women from Australia (Phillips, 2023), there is a fixation on providing selfies that are authentic or at least look ‘natural.’ However, in their ‘naturalness,’ they must still conform to the ideal notions of normative beauty depicted on these social media platforms. This is comparable to a study in the USA that investigated adolescent girls between the ages of 14 and 17, where it was revealed, teenage girls are also victimised by anxieties due to the normalised behaviour of selfie editing (Terán et al., 2020).

2.5.2. Thin bodily ideals, fat shaming in selfies

Performing desirable heterosexuality on social media platforms is heavily curated by bodily ideals. Mascheroni et al. (2015) conducted a study in three European countries, (Italy, Spain, and the UK) where young people between the ages of 11-16 were investigated on how they construct their online identities through pictures, it further explored how pre-teens and teenagers’ discourses appropriate, legitimise and resist peer-mediated conventions of presenting their bodies. The findings illustrated that there is pressure among adolescents to always appear ‘picture perfect’ in their online selfies. For, instance, one of the perfect body prerequisites is to have space that is visible between the inner thighs (thigh gap), plenty of young girls practice different slimming diets and some end up suffering from anorexic behaviours trying to attain this aspect of a thin bodily ideal (Mascheroni et al., 2015). One participant who uses Facebook to post most of her selfies uttered, “My stepsister is as old as me, but she is ... a bit overweight, fatty, has very curly hair, so she does not receive many likes” (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

According to Williams (2021), fat bodies on social media are censored especially on Instagram, there are notions rooted in fatphobic stereotypes that depict fat women are undesirable, lazy, not disciplined, desperate and lacking self-awareness. As a result, fat young women on social media are viewed to get less engagement and attention due to perceptions stemming from undesirable heterosexuality (Harjun, 2019). Teenage girls on social media define their value and beauty according to how they are perceived by their peers and the rest of the online communities. The approval from peers is shown through the accumulation of many likes and comments, failure to accumulate such engagements can potentially provoke psychological

damages like body dysmorphia, anorexic, bulimic behaviour, and narcissism (Stuart & Kurek, 2019; michaekmiddleweewarfiemeeus et al., 2019). Similarly, the study conducted in the South African context by Dunn and Falkof (2021) signals thin bodily ideals are synonymous with attractiveness in femininity. Drawing from 10 in-depth interviews with 10 black women they discovered how these Instagram “micro-celebrities” owe their success and huge following to investing in their appearances. Hence, these 10 black women emphasised showcasing slender bodies to fit the beauty ideals (Dunn & Falkof, 2021).

Studies reveal people who are ‘fat’ do not feel comfortable appearing in public spaces due to the knowledge of how their bodies become subjects for attention (Gailey, 2014). Hynnä-Granberg (2022) in her study opposes the term ‘fat’ as it subjectively carries offensive meaning to people bigger in size. She chooses to use what her participants term as ‘larger-than normative’ to describe themselves. Hynnä-Granberg (2022) investigates five Finnish women who participated using their images and selfies in the hashtag #righttobeseen. The hashtag accompanied selfies that were taken from gyms to sexy selfies in the fitting rooms where partaking ‘larger than normative’ members had to try a clothing item they had never tried before. The findings of the study argued that while there is a level of empowerment in pushing the boundaries of normative femininity in ‘larger than normative’ women sharing their never-before-seen selfies, there is also shaming that stem from the condemnation of weight. One participant stipulated she was embarrassed to take a full-body selfie in a gym while everyone was present. The rampant online patriarchal beauty standards are rooted in policing women’s bodies, to be viewed as feminine and appeal to ‘hetero-sexy’ ideals means one cannot be fat (Schott, 2017). Therefore, ‘larger than normative’ bodies are marginalised and cast outside of the hegemonic feminine standards. Afful and Ricciardelli (2015) argue in their study that to transform normative beauty ideals, women must take the authoritative to eradicate fat shaming through fat visibility and fat acceptance.

2.5.3. Bodily hair discourses in performing desirable heterosexuality on social media

Body hair removal is a common practice for women coming from all corners of the globe, it is articulated that women comply with removing bodily hair as they feel it is a personal choice,

natural and hygienic practice (Fahs, 2022). However, studies show it is a gendered norm that is socially constructed and further conforms to heteronormative beauty standards that aim to dictate what is acceptable in femininity (Braun et al., 2013). Social media platforms have enabled further shaming of women who refuse to practice hair removal. A study conducted by Darwin (2017) in the USA argued how the imagery of a 'real woman' associated with body-positive movements promotes fat visibility but shows there is a stigma associated with women's body hair. The study generated data using selfies from different women who were portraying 'the real woman' 'natural beauty' imagery. The selfies had been sent to online campaigns advocating for body positivity. The researcher then relied on online feedback comments to gather different views from the public. As a result, Darwin's (2017) further findings suggested that there is a great threat possessed by white women's bodily hair against the gender ideology that is patriarchal. According to Satre (2014), there are numerous activists who raise awareness against photoshopping and body-shaming and use social media platforms to promote body positivity. However, Darwin, (2017) discovered that all models used in these campaigns were hairless from neck to toe, and campaigns promoting hair on legs and underarm legs are limited. Feedback comments showcased that women who had not shaved their underarms were called men, gay, and dude depicting that hair removal is socially constructed as a feminine beauty ideal which further suggests it is rooted in patriarchy and misogyny (Mills et al., 2017; Smelik, 2015).

Similarly, a study conducted using Brazilian women found that they experience 'pain' and shame related to the type of hair they possess (Oliveira et al., 2022). The study used women who were active on the YouTube social networking site, the women had to have at least one million followers and possess the type of hair that is curly and coiled. One participant who had shared a video about getting a 'big chop' (cutting hair) illustrated that she did not receive positive comments from the online and offline world. Hair is treated as a major element in discourses of beauty and identity, in some cultures hair is treated in a very sacred manner and is connected to spirituality (Navarro et al., 2023). Hence, the findings of the study showcased that hair can be used to police and dictate women's identities. For instance, women who had curly coil hair suffered discrimination and marginalisation and were omitted in the discourses of beauty (Oliveira, 2022).

Similarly, a South African study by Dunn and Falkof (2021) found that prominent women on Instagram indicated that investing in their appearance often involves having long, straight, and silky hair (weaves). These findings suggest that social media platforms reinforce westernised beauty standards, moreover, young heterosexual women are stigmatised for displaying their true hair identities (curly, coiled hair) (Oliveira et al., 2022) thus they would rather conform to performing beauty using counterfeit identities (weaves) that are socially acceptable for social media platforms (Dunn & Falkof, 2021).

2.5.4. Fairer skin or darker skin in selfies?

The culture of celebrity lifestyle is prevalent on social media platforms. Young people find possibilities to directly engage with some of the biggest personalities they only experience in magazines and television through social media (Marwick, 2013). In the South African context, it is argued that young people's perception of beauty is heavily influenced by contemporary celebrity culture (Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017). Exploring four South African female celebrities using conversational methods that took place with young women relating their views pertaining to messages of beauty depicted on social media. It was revealed that celebrities perpetuate the ideology of normative beauty standards. Many celebrities share their lifestyle choices on social media platforms, one occurrence notable is that of the former Kwaito star, Mshoza, who decided to share her skin-lightening journey on Facebook. Although some comments were positioning her skin bleaching as self-hate. Some young women confirmed that they had a desire to acquire a lighter skin too. Moreover, men alluded to preferring light-skinned women as that normally elevated their status among other men as they would get praise for being with a 'beautiful' girl (Motseki & Oyedemi, 2017). It is noted that the legacy of apartheid and cultural colonisation had an immense role to play in reshaping beauty ideals, where it was viewed that lighter skin presents a social advantage (Jha, 2015; Bhana, 2022). However, in contemporary contexts, social media platforms continue to pervasively and strongly reinforce the idea of fairer skin supremacy upon young women (Dlova et al., 2014).

In another South African study, Janak et al. (2023) analyse how assemblages emerging from 'techno-sexual' contexts connect with other materials to constrain young women's capacities to perform desirable heterosexuality thus locking possibilities for new sexual becoming. Thirty girls between the ages of 13-18 were examined on how they use social media to negotiate their

sexual identities. One of the emerging sub-themes discussed the capacities which constrain teenage girls on social media, for instance, being dark-skinned. It was demonstrated how the fluidity of assemblage as it networks with other materials potentially oppresses and sexually objectifies teenage girls who do not subscribe to normative ideals of hetero-sexy. Young women who have fairer skin are depicted as the standard for sexual desirability whereas darker-skinned girls are degraded and their capacities for sexual desired experiences are terrorised (Janak et al., 2023).

2.6. Empowerment in selfies

Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) conducted a study in USA, Australia, and Canada. Nine women who are bloggers and self-shooters (act of taking selfies) participating in the NSFW (Not Safe For Work) community found on Tumblr were used to explore the study. Investigating how the practices of selfies come together with normative, ageist and sexist assumptions of the wider culture to further understand how looking becomes possible in specific ways for women. The study revealed how selfies can enable women to feel empowered and appreciate their body experiences to challenge normative standards. Women showcasing explicit body parts are normally degraded and sexualised. However, in this study, Tiidenberg and Cruz (2015) argue how women find new, different meanings in engaging with their bodies through the practice of selfie-taking. Furthermore, these women resist the notion of participating in hetero-normative beauty standards and refuse to allow the dominating consumerism tactics that exhibit women for profit, they choose to command power over their bodies without any external influence.

Similarly, a study by Tiidenberg (2018) focusing on selfies posted on Instagram with hashtags over #40 and #50 looked at how women are resisting ageist and sexist norms by using selfie images. Using twenty-six women as participants the study found that women are normalising the process of ageing through self-confidence and visibility of their bodies. Women joining the hashtag using their selfies were defiant to dominant discourses labelling ageing femininities as invisible, undesirable, and only suitable to roles of caretaking. Outer beauty in older ages is depicted as not sustainable thus as women get older, they lose their membership to participate in heteronormative beauty ideals (Wolf, 2009). However, these women were using social media to highlight that age does not constrain the performing of 'hetero-sexy' ideals. Therefore, social

media and the practice of taking and sharing selfies should not be viewed with moral panic as it can offer agency for women to disrupt traditional binary limitations (Tiidenberg, 2017).

Selfies shared on social media can be used as activism for teenage girls and women. Middleweek (2020) concurs with this notion by exploring a study advocating for sex-working women in Australia and around the world who are active on Twitter. The study explored the Twitter hashtag #FacesofProstitution which was accompanied by selfies of sex workers from different parts of the world. #FaceofProstitution advanced women to challenge negative views stemming from mainstream media about the practice of sex work and sex workers themselves. Women were aided by these selfies to resist stereotypical views that regard them as ‘whores’ or victims. Therefore, the social media selfie provides itself as a tool to establish agency for women marginalised by patriarchal standards, and it further encourages mobilisation from collective organisations of women to transform the traditional ideology of femininity (Mazibuko, 2022). This phenomenon was further observed in a performing arts school in London, where learners between the ages of 10 and 16 created a group with the objective to combat and bring visibility to their grievances as teenage girls. Transcripts and media coverage of this group revealed that girls used social media to resist surveillance and subordination of their bodies (Retallick et al., 2016).

2.7. How this study adds to the overall body of literature

Young girls’ exposure to social media has been often categorised as risky and focus on sexual exploitation, victimisation, and promiscuity (Ringrose et al., 2022). However contemporary studies demonstrate that social media platforms possess the potential for a positive impact on young people. For example, studies show that posting sexualised selfies can empower young women and allow them the opportunity to learn and expand their knowledge about their sexual identities (Tiinderberg 2018). A growing body of research has explored the relations between gender and sexuality in online spaces, however there is a significant dearth of South African studies examining ways in which teenage girls use ‘sexy’ selfies to negotiate heterosexuality on social media platforms. This research study addresses this gap by exploring various ways in which teenage girls perform heterosexuality through the practice of sexy selfies in South

African spaces. By investigating the intersections between of digital technology, gender and sexuality, this thesis explores complex dynamics prevalent in online sexualities. The findings from this research study will foreground the ways in which social media reinforces and challenges binary gender and sexuality norms, producing new insights into the methods teenage girls use to navigate and negotiate their sexual identities on social media.

Furthermore, this study is underpinned by new feminist theoretical concepts. According to Deleuze and Guattari (1988) this perspective highlights the agency of matter in social phenomena. With this perspective at hand, this study seeks to challenge traditional scholarly works through putting equal emphasis on both human and non-human subjects in investigating human experiences. Foregrounding the agency of non-human material entities will broaden the analysis through including human bodies, materials and objects (Routh, 2016). New feminist materialist concepts will deepen the analysis in investigating the intersectionality of technology and human bodies, particularly in how social media platforms acts as active agents in producing new experiences as they intersect with teenage girls. This is crucial in contemporary settings as technological advancements continue to transform the landscape of human experiences (van Oosten, 2021).

2.8. Conclusion

International research was extensively consulted in this review considering the significant dearth of South African research pertaining to how teenage girls navigate their sexualities using ‘sexy’ selfies on social media. Launching the review was the definition of ‘sexy’ selfies where it was discovered that not all selfies are ‘sexy’ or promote sexual content. There is a criterion observed throughout the studies that can categorise a selfie as ‘sexy’. It is depicted that sexy selfies are a gendered norm therefore, sexiness in selfies can be described as young women showcasing their bodies in an explicit manner, with seductive poses and minimal clothing, for instance emphasising the breast and buttocks area (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015; Mascheroni et al., 2015). The following theme observed in the study is the sexualisation, objectification and the male gaze prevalent on social media platforms. Hypersexuality and self-objectification in images shared on social media are teenage girls attempting to conform to hegemonic standards of femininity that depict women as objects to satisfy the male gaze (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015).

Young women's bodies are under constant surveillance and scrutiny stemming from toxic masculinity. It is found from both global and local contexts that the sexualisation of selfies characterises women to suffer from unsolicited sexual comments, unwanted sexual advances, and sexual double standards on social media (Davis, 2018).

Normative beauty standards were highlighted in the review where further sub-topics underpinning traditional beauty standards were discussed. Emerging sub-topics were make-up, filters, photoshop, thin bodily ideal and fat shaming, bodily hair in performing desirable heterosexuality on social media and fairer skin or darker skin in selfies. It was found that young femininities on social media are curated by normative beauty standards authorised by celebrities (Motseki & Oyedemi, 2018). Furthermore, allowing girls' agency was dependent on their physical appearance, hence studies showcased that many selfies posted were altered through editing and photoshopping apps (Lawrence & Cambre, 2021; Caldeira et al., 2021; Phillips, 2023; Shao, 2023). For instance, it was cited young women had to conform to fairer skin ideals and those who were dark-skinned were sanctioned from beauty discourses (Janak, et al., 2023). Moreover, those who had posted selfies with make-up were demonised and their authenticity questioned. As a result, there were contrasting views in the discourses of beauty. Women are expected to conform to normative beauty standards by putting effort into their appearances however they must remain authentic and 'natural'. Such views alert us of how social media acts as a platform to police and curate women's bodies into the ideal femininity stemming from traditional norms.

Concluding the review was the empowerment of selfies theme. The ambiguous message carried by the practice of selfies is observed through the global and local discourses. While teenage girls sharing sexy selfies on social media are victimised by sexualisation, objectification and rampant normative beauty standards (Ringrose et al., 2013; Warfield, 2015; Janak et al., 2023; Mazibuko, 2022). Selfies can equally enable a contradictory experience where young women are given the power to control and navigate their sexual experiences. Selfies were used as activism on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram (Middleweek, 2020) where Tiidenberg (2018) articulated they grant women agency and allow them to challenge and resist norms such as ageism, sexism, and classical heteronormative standards. Moreover, this chapter discussed the study's contributions to the overall body of literature. The following chapter will discuss the theoretical frameworks that will underpin this study.

Chapter Three: Theoretical framework

3.1. Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical framework for the study and to enhance the understanding of how teenage girls manage their sexual experiences on social media, specifically through the posting of 'sexy' selfies. This study will be informed by the new feminist materialism (NFM) which stems from the post-humanism ideology that encourages us to put more emphasis on the materiality around us and refrain from viewing the human as the sole subject in producing meaning (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013; Fox & Alldred, 2020; Ringrose & Renold, 2018). Using a materialist lens, the study seeks to investigate how human and non-human assemblages provide girls with affordances that enable their online sexual experiences (Janak et al, 2023). Furthermore, a Butlerian (1988) lens will be employed to understand how these assemblages are plugged into the heterosexual matrix. In this chapter, I will present these ideas in the following sections. Firstly, I will explore the theory of new feminist materialism. Next, I will outline the concepts of 'assemblages,' 'becomings,' and 'affect' proposed by Deleuze and Guattari. Subsequently, I will examine Barad's notions of 'entanglements' and 'intra-action.' Finally, I will further discuss Butler's concept of the heterosexual matrix.

3.2. New feminist materialism

The term 'new materialist' is defined by Braidotti (2013) as post-humanist or post-anthropocentric. It is a 'material turn' that is proposed to put emphasis on the world's materiality, the social and natural aspects of it, which distinguishes it from the post-structuralist method that centres itself around texts and language (Barad, 1996; Braidotti, 2006). Deleuze and Guattari (1984) further iterate that new materialisms move from justifying the world through 'systems of thought' or 'discourses' and rather concentrates upon social production as a substitute for social construction (p.4). Fox and Bale (2018) demonstrate that new feminist materialist scholars are engaged with capacities provided by matter, how other materials affect, are affected, and interact with matter. According to Fox and Alldred (2020), the approaches found in new feminist materialism consider materials such as human bodies; other animate

organisms; material things, places, spaces, and the natural and the built environment that these contain while further including material forces such as gravity and time, (p.1).

In this study, new feminist materialism is interested in investigating the human (bodies of teenage girls) and non-human materials (selfies, social media, abstract thoughts, smartphones, dresses, mirrors) and how they come together (assemble) to produce meaning in social experiences. Viewing through the materialist lens how teenage girls navigate their online sexual identities using selfies aims to shift away from making the individual body the subject in producing meaning, thus scrutiny is further extended on the arrangement of tools which are (phones, cameras, selfie sticks, dresses, make-up) and settings (room, bed, beach) in taking these selfies. Moreover, the effect from ‘affect’, sensationalism and the feeling of the affect within the phenomenon is investigated (Warfield, 2017). New feminist materialism seeks to explore how teenage girls’ bodies as matter relate with other materials such as phones, social media and dresses to explore the capacities or incapacities in how they express desirable heterosexuality concerning online spaces (Janak et al., 2023). Warfield and Demone (2018) illustrate that the socially mandated selfies and images posted by young people on social media platforms are characterised by networks that are more than just technologically curated but are further “affectively, discursively, and materially” influenced (p.3).

3.3. Deleuze-Guattarian concepts ‘assemblages,’ ‘becomings,’ ‘affect’

New feminist materialism is underpinned by various concepts that are crucial in comprehending the empirical works informing gender and sexuality studies. One of the most influential concepts in the new feminist materialism is that of the assemblages as described by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). Assemblage posits itself as a method to understand systems produced from separate entities or different parts that carry their own autonomy outside of each other, however, possesses the ability to come together and form a viable whole. Deleuze and Guattari (1980) use the analogy of a rhizome in defining the concept of assemblage. The roots underpinning the rhizome are said to be subterranean, constantly in pursuit of what serves and feeds it best. The formation of relationships between matter within the assemblage is depicted as a ‘rhizome’ to emphasise how they’re constantly outflowing as they seek to expand through

branching out, joining or simply reversing with other matter to conform to its endless process of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Janak et al., 2023). ‘Sexy’ selfie production behaves in a similar manner, there are prevalent separate entities that are networked for the selfie to become a fully viable product that is meaningful. According to Routh (2016), a selfie is produced through the selfie taker persistently establishing networks between ‘semiotic chains’ (technological gadgets), organisations of power (social hierarchies) and the circumstantial influences which are related to the photographer’s efforts, culture, and social interests (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). The assemblages present in the creation of a ‘sexy’ selfie are characterised by more than just that of digital materials. Abstract materials such as emotions and thoughts are further discovered (Warfield, 2017). In their study, Janak et al. (2023) propose the concept of ‘techno-sexual’ assemblages where teenage girls’ experiences of hetero-sexy are created through human and more-than-human formations. The technological materials meet humans to create sexual explorations, i.e. (bodies, selfie sticks, mirrors, dresses, social media platforms, filters, celebrity culture, cell phones, ideas, norms, videos, and selfies) that seek to intra-act with one another producing means for capacities to be ‘affected’ or to ‘affect’ (Barad, 2007; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Castell (1996) illustrates to us that technological advancements such as mobile devices offer experiences of affect and agency, they serve us with platforms to share and display our sexual identities (Ringrose, 2013), create memories, and further afford us representational means, and further give insight on ‘spaces of flow’ discovered on social networks.

New feminist materialism offers the concept of assemblages to make us understand that there is relationality in matter: materials such as bodies, things and social constructions create their meaning by forming relationships with other materials that are bodies, things, and ideas (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Fox & Bale, 2018). Consequently, the network in assemblages constructs a space for materials within to overlap, bend and emerge. Furthermore, assemblages are not hierarchical, meaning there are no elements or materials considered more superior, developed, and advanced than the others (Blaise, 2013). In her article Warfield (2017) was examining young women’s experiences in the process of taking selfies and images of their faces and bodies to post on social media, Warfield (2017) noted how when young women were taking selfies, matter relationality was observable. The technologies involved in taking images, the technologies of data recording, the lighting, the poses, the cell phones, the placement of hands, the hair, the size, and shape of the room where the selfie is being taken and the props

available. All these materials were related and equally took part in producing meaning which prompts the importance of using the concept of assemblages in investigating our reality.

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1983), assemblages are illustrated as ‘desiring-machines’ which are noted to exist everywhere. In other words, Fox and Alldred (2013) suggest that this can be understood as sexuality exists in every space, you can find it in business structures, it is discoverable in politically motivated movements, moreover, it is observable in law and all societal relations. Ballantyne (2007) mentions that these desiring machines are vigorously in operation without our knowledge or attention to produce the desire we do. Renold and Ringrose (2016) assert that Deleuze and Guattari move away from psychoanalytic thinking which is rooted in viewing desire as a lack of space that is essentially waiting to be filled by obtaining a desired material object, for instance, love, a delicious meal, or purchasing something new. In contrast, Deleuze and Guattari (1984) point out that one of the characteristics of desire is that it is a process of production rather than lack, desire does not belong to the subject but rather the subject is informed by social formations in producing desire. As a result, Carboni and Ringrose (2016) acknowledge that “desire makes connections (hence the language used of the machinic), but it is not oriented toward or directed by something (i.e., the Imaginary) and does not sit outside the social-technological, in fantasy”. According to Fox and Alldred (2013) assemblages volunteer platforms for territorialisation of the body’s desire, further constraining capacities of what it can do. For example, Carboni and Bhana (2019) sought to investigate how teenage girls in the South African context were understanding their relationship with online sexually explicit materials/porn (SEM) where the findings showcased that although these teenage girls viewed women partaking in online SEM (Sexually Explicit Materials/Porn) as agentic and powerful. However, they were equally confronted by views that depicted male supremacy as subordinating women through dictating their sexual identities in the online world. This shows how cultural assemblages (heteronormative norms and male dominance) give leeway for techno-sexual assemblages to territorialise teenage girls’ agency on social media platforms (Carboni & Bhana, 2019).

However, Deleuze and Guattari (1988) emphasise that assemblages operate in dynamism where matter is continuously in a state of infinite becomings (Janak et al., 2023). In the realm of new feminist materialism, scholars Fox and Alldred (2013) elucidate the notion of

'becoming' as a dynamic process. They describe how relational assemblages continuously evolve in diverse and unforeseen manners, forming a chaotic network of both habitual and non-habitual connections. This intricate interplay is constantly in flux, forever reassembling in novel and unpredictable ways (Potts, 2004, p.19). According to Deleuze and Guattari (1988) the ongoing and unpredictable ways brings forth distinct movements such as “territorialisation” and “de-territorialisation”. For example, normative beauty standards territorialise black teenage girls’ sexual becomings and locks potential, but girls can also perform sexuality in ways that challenge and de-territorialise the assemblage providing opportunities for transformation. Braidotti (2013) brings to spotlight the concept of virtual feminism where a subject conforms to the process called ‘becoming’ through continuous reinvention of themselves when manoeuvring matters concerning identity, power imbalances and oppression. This is where Braidotti (2013) further delves into how women are constantly obsessed with the need to develop themselves into the realisation of perfection owing to the influence of social media. ‘Becoming’ is likened to the Deleuzean concept of rhizome however it is not a process of analogy or imitation, it is depicted as a new method of being that is functional through influences rather than imitations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Teenage girls are constantly taking measures such as filtering and photoshopping their selfies. Others go to the extent of plastic surgeries and are victimised by eating disorders as a means to attain an ideal body shape due to influence from celebrity culture and social media (Tiidenberg, 2018; Mazibuko, 2022). The changing of the face and body from their authentic form, for instance, through make-up and filters shows us that teenage girls are endlessly finding new ways of ‘becoming’ to fit in the feminine standards curated by social media (Lakhan, 2021; Janak et al., 2023; Shao, 2023). According to Routh (2016), the process of ‘becoming’ is illustrated as the removal of parts that are undesirable in their original meaning and bringing forth new meanings. The ‘sexy selfie’ creation exhibits similar attributes, it is an act of embodiment that seeks to distribute and continuously transform the subject’s knowledge and concept of self (Routh, 2016). According to Janak et al. (2023), it is suggested that matter is considered ‘vibrant’ and embedded with ‘thing-power’ that, when enacted, can either transform girls into new sexual ‘becomings’ or serve to constrain them depending on its relations within the assemblage (Bennett, 2010, p. 16).

Underpinning the theory of new feminist materialism, Deleuze (1988) highlights the Spinozist concept of ‘affect’ that seeks to substitute the traditional concept of ‘agency’ and can be simply

defined as the capacity to affect or be affected (Fox and Bale, 2018). According to Barad (1996), all matter (i.e., a pornographic selfie) possesses the ‘agential’ capacity to affect, as opposed to fixed moulded clay by the agency of human imagination, and consciousness. Fox and Bale (2018) elucidate that within an action or event, ‘affects’ are what networks matter to other relational matter (e.g., the viewing of a pornographic site by a boy). It is not possible to predict what a body, abstract, or idea is capable of doing until it is observed how it interacts with other materials in a particular assemblage. Thus, with this perspective at disposal, the possibilities of what matter (bodies, physical components, and ideas) can do within an action or event are due to consequences of how it affects or is affected by other relations in matter (Deleuze, 1988). Therefore, according to Fox and Bale (2018) ‘affects’ can be illustrated as engines of assemblages, they hold the power to psychologically, emotionally, physically, and socially alter capacities. Renold and Ringrose (2018) draw from this concept of Deleuze and Guattari to explore the ‘phallic touch’, a concept which illustrates that pornographic body pictures which are shared without consent online are not to be viewed as just merely representations but carry autonomy to be fully ‘affective’ as the physical touch. Warfield (2016) details how through the selfie production, the affects are flowing deep within. This is where the women taking selfies epitomise the reactions that would come from their audience, choose to adopt normative standards in gendered self-representations and champion good selfies, while discarding the ugly ones (Warfield, 2018). According to Fox and Bale (2018), assemblages propose opportunities for expansion, and to be more different. However, they also constrain and limit our possibilities.

3.4. Karen Barad’s entanglements and intra-actions

The new feminist materialism concepts from Barad are like those of Deleuze and Guattari as they both underpin relational ontologies. Barad (2007) concurs with the notion of decentering the humanist approach and adopting a more-than-human worldview. However, Hein (2016) distinguishes the Deleuze-Guattarian works as those of immanence and difference while associating the works of Barad with transcendence and identity. One of the foundational Baradian concepts in new feminist materialism can be referred to as entanglements (Murriss & Bozalek, 2019). For Barad, entanglements do not simply mean being joined or the mere connection of two separate entities, it refers to the questioning “of the very nature of twoness,

and ultimately of one-ness as well” (Morris & Bozalek, 2019; Morris, 2022). In entanglements the relational ontologies do not pre-exist as discrete or passive, it is the atomic individuals which carry fixed boundaries that seize the opportunity to ‘interact’ or combine with other pre-existing entities (Gamble & Hanan, 2016). As a result, all bodies, things, objects, feelings, and thoughts are relational and entangled entities (Kleinman 2012). According to Brown et al. (2020), the Baradian concepts force us to rethink the language we use in producing our world’s reality.

Barad proposes the term ‘agential realism’ which proposes that in reconceptualising materiality, matter is not rigid but possesses the ability to be agent and intra-active (Barad, 2007). Investigating the world using intra-action means looking within the phenomenon, intra-action is different from the notion of ‘interaction’ which is described as the network of distinctive entities. Barad (2007) suggests that intra-action is the ‘mutual constitution of entangled agencies’ (p.33). Therefore, intra-action can be described as the connection of humans, things, and more-than-human forms that pre-exist with their own autonomy but carry the ability to act within one another (Kleinman 2012; Ingram, 2022). This study draws from the Baradian concepts to examine how teenage girls are entangled with other matter as they navigate their sexualities on social media platforms using ‘sexy’ selfies. The entanglements this study is investigating are that of teenage girls’ bodies and social media, the experiences their bodies are confronted with and how these bodies ‘intra-act’ with human and more-than-human forces. Scholars drawing from Baradian concepts elucidate that in technological encounters, it is important to investigate the agency of non-human materials such as photoshopping apps and interface design (Duguay, 2016). As Barad (2007) argues, there is no individuality in matter, everything is tangled in other words “existence is not an individual affair” (Barad, 2007, xi).

Evidently, in the production of online self-identity through images, there are prevalent entanglements observed between technological materials, race, and gender (Walker Rettberg, 2014). For instance, social networking sites such as Instagram and Snapchat cater tools that encourage young women to shade their skin tone to whiter and resize their noses to fit Eurocentric feminine beauty standards (Walker Rettberg, 2014; Evans & Riley, 2013; Janak et al., 2023). Bhana and Nathwani’s (2022) study illustrate how teenage girls navigate their gender and sexuality and further interpret online porn through entanglements of “print media,

magazines, online music videos, bodies, body parts, gendered discourses, matter, thought, ideas, feelings” (p. 9). According to Warfield (2020), selfies are also a product of entanglements from separate entities which are the camera, body and image, spaces that when intertwined can emerge within the phenomenon. Moreover, Barad (2007) is not interested in investigating how pre-existing entities interact but rather the focus is on how intra-actions transpire within the entanglements of a phenomenon. Warfield (2016) articulates that in a selfie the separated entities that are intra-active constitute of body, technology and expressed sense of self. The process of intra-action from matter, human and non-human entities occurs when they entangle together to capacitate or incapacitate teenage girls’ agency in expressing sexuality on social media. Girls’ capacities are intra-actively induced through the entangling of matter which can both be viewed as agentic and productive in their experiences of negotiating online sexuality (Bhana & Nathwani, 2022).

3.5. Butler’s theory of performativity and heterosexual matrix

The gender performativity theory stemming from Butler (1995) suggests that gender is fluid, it is not only fixated on the idea of woman and man. However, it stipulates that gender is built on repetitive bodily performances of gender from an individual that are shown through characteristics such as mannerisms, gestures, appearance, and actions (Lakhan, 2021). Furthermore, Butler (1990) argues that one of the primary key players in shaping gender and sexuality performance is culture. It reinforces men and women to perform their gender and sexuality according to the sex they were assigned to at birth. In this study, Butler’s theory of performativity is recruited by teenage girls who engage various sexual performances such as taking of ‘sexy’ selfies and sharing them in online spaces as means to confirm their heterosexuality. In offline spaces, girls are dictated on how they should behave in society. Similarly online spaces enforce traditional binary upon them, thus they are ostracised if they choose to act outside of that phenomenon. Henceforth, they are motivated to navigate their sexualities in private interactions found in online spaces. Tiidenberg (2017) suggests how teenage girls challenge traditional binary norms through using sexual selfies to reaffirm their heterosexuality and control the narrative of how they perform gender and sexuality on social media. Therefore, this study examines how teenage girls use socially constructed gender rules as an influence to negotiate their sexuality on social media platforms.

The women and girls who refuse to conform within the spectrum of rigid gender binaries and seek to go against the rules of heterosexual matrix suffer immense discrimination from society. According to Butler (1990) the heterosexual matrix can be defined as the preconceived notions that every man and woman is heterosexual unless stated otherwise. It is a heterosexual framework with the aim to condition everyone and everything of sexual identities as binary. According to Hoskin (2019) the heterosexual matrix from Butler's (1990) work sheds insights on the dichotomies prevalent in gender representations. Butler (1990) emphasises different methods in which performances of gender were characterised, implemented, communicated through means of desire and digital sexual traditions. According to Butler (1990, p.41) men view women as "heterosexual exchange and distribution." As a result, women are only good for transactional and negotiation purposes from boys and men who objectify women as solely sexual species. There is prevalence of such performances even in online spaces, where it is depicted that hypersexualised and provocative selfies of teenage girls are used as currency and their distribution is for the male gaze and can further elevate status of men (Liu and Keane, 2021; Ringrose et al., 2021). The theory of performativity from Butler (1990) is articulated by Garcia-Gomez (2014) as expressions and identities that are gendered, moreover, it is gender roles, sexuality, and performances that are rooted in heteronormativity in both online and offline contexts. There are detectable dichotomies in how men and women perform their sexual identities in the digital spaces. Men favour the use of discrimination, masculine dominance, violence whereas women are embedded in performing acts that permit self-expressions and empowering.

According to Butler (1988; 1990), the enforcement of heterosexuality and heteronormativity creates gender binaries that do not empower women. There are unwritten rules dictating how men should behave, granting them social power and entitlement, while women are subject to a different set of rules that undermine their value and aim to damage their reputations through condemnation. These double standards in sexual behaviour, perpetuated by heterosexuality and moral discourses, have a historical precedent but continue to persist in contemporary society (Mazibuko, 2022). It's crucial to dismantle these norms and establish equal systems to level the playing field between men and women. The integration of technology with gender and sexuality provides women with opportunities to navigate sexual risks, redefine their sexual identities, and explore their agency and desires. In South African contexts, it has been noted

how girls seek to conform within the practices affirmed by the heterosexual matrix. The constant pressure, regulation, and policing of young femininities in how they choose to express desirable heterosexuality has become part of normative traditions thus it comes as no shock that young women are now desensitized to it (Janak and Bhana, 2023).

Butler's theory of performativity and heterosexual matrix considers the body as the sole agent in producing gendered performances. However, this study draws from the new feminist materialism to foreground an alternative view that proposes human and more-than-human assemblages can both provide capacities for agency in producing heterosexual performances (Renold and Ringrose, 2018; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). As a result, adopting the new feminist materialism approach into Butler's work illustrates the interconnection that takes place between the social and the material world to produce new possibilities for girls' online sexuality experiences. Re-thinking reality using new feminist approach forces us to abscond viewing bodies as mere passive objects for cultural expressions and representations however permits viewing the body itself as lively, agentic, dynamic process that is productive within itself (Van der Tuin, 2011). For instance, bodily performances or gestures such as dieting to achieve a slim body ideal can be looked at as core feminine expressions of reality, related to the female sex and further linked with the cultural rules of heterosexual femininity (Coffey, 2021).

However, according to Zembylas (2017) this action can be depicted "as enactments, of which the symbolic is just a part, not the whole meaning" (p.3). Butler recognises culture as one of the main factors in shaping repeated gendered performances. However, according to Fox and Alldred (2021) within the sphere of reality, digital technologies are found to act as agents of socialisation where exploring affects is permitted. Handyside and Ringrose (2017) illustrate that these social productions come to life when bodies (human) merge with the more-than-human materials for reactions and responses to be affectively produced using digital applications. Thus, the gendered bodily performances illustrated to emanate from the heterosexual matrix can be investigated using the concepts of new feminist materialism to explore how teenage girls constitute their normative sexual experiences on social media.

Butler's theory can further aid in deconstructing normative assumptions about gender and sexuality that emanate from digital contexts. Whereas new feminist materialism emphasises the agency of non-human materials (Fox and Alldred, 2015). The intersectionality between

these two theories can assist researchers to generate new methods in challenging and interpreting normative understandings of gender and sexuality. Using new feminist materialism enables the researcher to explore how participants resist and conform to the heterosexual matrix through their interactions with non-human entities, therefore authorising the investigation concerning the active role of digital spaces as material entities in shaping teenage girls' sexual performances. For example, this research investigates how teenage girls use sexy selfies to express sexuality. Therefore, new feminist concepts will explore how digital technologies and other non-human materials (Instagram, Facebook, dresses, images, etc.) act as prominent material entities in producing teenage girls' gendered performances.

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter examined theoretical frameworks that are best suited for this research study concerning how teenage girls navigate, negotiate, and challenge their online sexual experiences using 'sexy' selfies. New feminist materialism theory was broadly explained, it was shown to highlight how human (bodies) and more-than-human (technology, dresses, social media, selfies) materials intertwine to drive social production and agency. The concepts drawn from Deleuze and Guattari (1980;1988) underpinning the NFM theory namely the 'assemblages', 'becomes' and 'affects' were explored. They emphasised how it is crucial that we decenter the humanist approach in determining our reality. Through assembling the human (bodies) and more-than-human (cameras, phones, dresses) forces we reconceptualise the meaning of social production. They further illustrated how through the process of 'becoming' teenage girls' bodies are constantly seeking new ways to be seen as sexy. The Baradian (2007) concepts of 'entanglements' and 'intra-action' were further adopted to highlight how matter entangles and intra-acts within bodies to capacitate or in-capacitate teenage girls' agency in their online sexual experiences. Concluding the chapter was Butler's (1990) theory of performativity and the concept of heterosexual matrix which articulated how girls are capable of constructing various gender and sexual identities that permit empowerment in virtual spaces. Integrating the conceptual theories of gender performativity, heterosexual matrix and new feminist materialism shows how highlighting both human and more-than-human materials provides new possibilities for heterosexual desires.

Chapter Four: Methodology

4.1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the methods that were used in exploring teenage girls' experiences in navigating sexuality using selfies on social media. Guided by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Barad (2007), this study refutes the notions that view the research process as a reality produced only through humans. However, it seeks to illuminate how more-than-human materials take equal opportunity as active agents in the research processes. Adopting the new feminist approach to conducting research in the context of South Africa is still in its infancy stage and thus carries no blueprint for how to sufficiently design a new research project. However, I take inspiration from researchers who have explicitly engaged with new feminist concepts and have experimented with developing methods that creatively explore bodily sexual experiences.

I begin the chapter by first outlining the early stages that informed the research process. The research participants and sampling technique were crucial in achieving the objectives of the study. Following is the precise inclusion used to select teenage girl participants. Thereafter the research location is outlined. Researching online sexualities in schooling contexts is explored with the objective of showing the dynamics that took place in conducting sexuality research within a predominantly black township school. Next, preparing for research which comprised of achieving ethics and engaging with participants is discussed. Using new feminist materialism methods in consulting sexuality studies is further explored to illustrate the dynamics that shaped the research project under the influence of new feminist materialism theory. Data collection methods are discussed which comprises of photo-elicitation methods and focus group discussions. Affects produced in the study will be examined to narrate the importance of de-centering the humanist approach in research by allowing non-human materials to become equal active agents in reshaping the research process. My positionality as a black woman conducting sexuality and gender studies was discussed. Thereafter the diffractive analysis approach is further explored. Lastly, trustworthiness, credibility and reliability are discussed.

4.2. The early stages of research

4.2.1. Research participants and sampling technique

This research study was conducted through the use of various qualitative data collection methods namely individual semi-structured interviews and photo-facilitated group discussions. Initially, thirty-three teenage girls agreed to take part in the interview process. However, only thirty were able to successfully participate in the study while others voluntarily withdrew citing troubles with getting consent letters signed by parents. The participants in the study were between the ages of 15 years old to 19 years old. They all lived in a township setting located southeast of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. The participants were specifically recruited from the Further Educational Training (FET phase), which starts from grade 10 to grade 12 in the South African context. Ten participants were recruited from each grade. All the participants were able-bodied and did not show any signs of needing assistance to be looked after. All participants disclosed their sexual identity as heterosexual.

A purposive and convenience sampling technique was employed to underpin this qualitative study and investigate rich data on how teenage girls express and negotiate their sexuality using ‘sexy’ selfies on social media. Studies argue that there is a difference in the sampling approaches. Convenience sampling refers to the easy accessibility of participants, whereas purposive sampling is where the researcher has a specified criterion used to select participants suitable for the study (Etikan; et al., 2016; Robinson, 2014). A specific criterion that was used following the guidelines of a purposive sampling technique included age, gender and level of education. Moreover, participants had to have smartphones, prior experience with social media and posted a selfie of themselves before. The population in Umlazi township is considered to be 99.9% black (Frith, 2011) and participants collaborated with this as they all identified themselves as black regarding race and Zulu when it comes to ethnicity, during the course of one semi-structured individual interview, a participant illustrated how her mother was of Indian descent. However, she still regarded herself as black. Biographical data was asked at the beginning of every individual interview as a means to break the ice and allow participants to familiarise themselves with the researcher. I asked general questions such as where they come from, who they live with and if they can share how they grew up.

4.2.2. Precise inclusion criteria for teenage girl participants

- Attending grade 10 to grade 12 (FET phase)
- Between the ages of 15 years to 19 years old
- Own a smartphone for more than six months.
- Used social media frequently.
- Have taken and posted a selfie before.

4.2.3. Research location

The study was conducted at Mpumelelo High School (a pseudonym) which recognises itself as a public school located in the township of Umlazi in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa. The main reason I chose to conduct research at this school was predominantly because it is in close proximity to me thus easily accessible and convenient. The school and participants were all given pseudonyms. The school is located in a semi-urban area that suffers from great socio-economic constraints, this is collaborated by the visible informal settlements on the opposing side of the school and low-income houses. Furthermore, there are other rampant societal ills in this area such as high unemployment, single-parented households, child-headed homes and crime. According to Dawood (2019), the crime statistics of South Africa illustrate how domestic violence is still a persistent issue in Umlazi Township as they were ranked in second place regarding high levels of reported domestic cases and positioned first in terms of sexual violence from the date of 1st of April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

Furthermore, many of the participants indicated that they were left behind with grandmothers, sisters, uncles, or by themselves due to various reasons such as their parents working in faraway places or having secondary family responsibilities in rural areas. Other reasons stated were illness, death and drug addiction causing families to separate. Some of the participants had alluded to how they moved from rural area settings to this school solely as a means to get a better education and opportunities that could advance their lives, these participants did not even

have family homes and were residing by themselves in rented rooms. Walker and Mathebula (2020) illustrate how students coming from low-income rural homes struggle to assimilate to tertiary contexts thus participants in this study seek to familiarise themselves with urban contexts seeking to challenge such notions. As other participants reside in surrounding areas, others mentioned how they travel using buses and taxis as they come from far-away places such as Claremont.

The Mpumelelo High School caters for 1,032 students. However, due to a lack of proper infrastructure and adequate classrooms, the school fails to accommodate all the learners which results in overcrowded classrooms. This school is regarded as a no-paying fee school which places it as a level 3 quantile school and receives governmental funding which includes the feeding scheme. However, the schooling environment still lacks many other resources such as viable sporting fields, school desks, textbooks, and computers, and there are broken windows in some of the classrooms. One of the rules adopted in school's the code of conduct clearly stipulates learners are not to carry their phones inside school premises. However, due to the ubiquity of mobile phones in modern contexts, learners would be seen taking out their phones during breaks, lunch and after school to take selfies and pictures of each other which signalled this school as suitable for the study as numerous learners were in possession of technological devices.

Below is the table comprising the school's location details:

Research site	
Country	South Africa
Province	KwaZulu-Natal
City	Durban
Suburb	Umlazi
The total number of learners at Mpumelelo High School, by race and gender.	1,032 in total 477 girls 555 boys

	Race: 100% African
Total number of teachers at Mpumelelo High School, by race and gender.	32 in total 18 Females 14 Males Race: 100% African
Socio-economic and political context	Quintile 3

Table 1: Details of research contexts.

4.3. Researching online sexualities in schooling contexts

Schooling contexts are illustrated as institutions that reinforce hierarchical dimensions. Pedagogical practices adopted by schools often perpetuate power imbalances, particularly between students and teachers. These power imbalances are restored through systematic practices promoted by schooling contexts such as the need for students to adhere to specific rules of conduct and the teachers' judgements of students' academic abilities. Furthermore, Kim and Ringrose (2018) state how students are not permitted to engage in digital technologies within classroom spaces as opposed to being welcomed as aids to learning and accumulating knowledge. This is how students' bodies materialise as self-disciplined, respectful, and obedient. Therefore, the schooling environment that places sexuality studies as taboo potentially limited participants in this study to narrate their full online sexual experiences. Although participants did put forward their sexual image-based narratives, it was found that participants were uneasy with the use of the word 'sexy.' Furthermore, other teenage girl participants who partook in the study were careful not to use illicit language such as terminology which includes 'bitch' or 'nudity'. This shows how the schooling settings guided and reshaped the research study through dominant patriarchal ideologies which reinforce heterosexuality norms that forbid women and girls from being sexually assertive (Swanepoel & Beyers, 2019).

Evidently, within such autocratic spaces students cannot fully express themselves as anything else apart from academics (Johnson, 2009). As a result, it was crucial that in this research study, I paid attention to potential power dynamics at play between the participants and the researcher.

I dethroned these power differences by primarily acknowledging them first. I followed by creating an informal space, for example, by wearing informal clothes (jeans and sneakers), creating fun creative ways to explore the research topic and giving consent to be called by my first name.

Schooling contexts categorise sexual bodily practices as opposed to the schooling academic objectives. Although with the introduction of sexuality topics in the Life Orientation (L.O.) curriculum, it is persistently found how teachers are inhibited by their own background beliefs in delivering the full content when it comes to sexuality. Bhana et al. (2019) contend that sexuality studies are still informed by adult authority where the learning and teaching of it is considered taboo and young people who ‘know too much’ may get stigmatised. Similarly, Swanepoel and Beyers (2019) argue that South African schools are driven by the societal culture which barricades young people from expressing their sexuality in visible spaces, thus producing affects that constrain sexuality research in schools (Allen et al., 2014).

4.4. Preparing for the research process

4.4.1. Approval of ethics

According to Webster et al. (2013), ethics are likened to the philosophy of ‘morality’ where the researcher has to consider the emotions, safety and consent of the participants. As such, the first step in this study research comprised receiving an ethical clearance certificate (Appendix 4). The ethical clearance certificate was obtained on the 25th of July 2023 from the Humanities Research Council of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The reference code for the certificate is as follows: HSSREC/00005639/2023. This ethical clearance was received in compliance with university rules and regulations that stipulate how to conduct research involving human subjects. It is to be noted that in addition to the clearance certificate, the Department of Basic Education and the gatekeepers of the school had been pursued and notified of the research study process. Consequently, to undertake this study a written permission letter was received from the Head of the Education Department and the date when it was received was on the 19th of April 2023 (Appendix 3). Furthermore, the Mpumelelo High School gatekeepers were requested to sign the consent letter (Appendix 2A) which described the study aims, objectives,

data collection process and participants suitable for the study. As the researcher, I further saw it as important to personally delineate to the deputy principal the contents contained by the letter. Thereafter, I answered any concerns and questions that arose pertinent to the study. The deputy principal wilfully signed the letter, granting access for the researcher to conduct the academic study.

4.4.2. Engaging with participants

After the research study had received ethical clearance from both the school and the university. I was referred to the Life Orientation (L.O.) Head of Department (HOD) by the deputy principal who deemed it suitable as L.O. is a subject familiar with gender and sexuality content. I introduced my research topic during our first meeting with the grade 10's which happened during break time in the student's classrooms as they commonly gathered there when having their meals. The following meeting took place with grade 11 during lunchtime in their respective classrooms. Lastly, the grade 12 learners were introduced to the study in the afternoon, when school hours ended. For ethical reasons, I ensured that I specified that the study was going to be underpinned by sexuality and gender content.

As I had previously noted in this section how I aimed at transparency and approachability by being informal with participants throughout the research process. Considering how students are likely to be less assertive as an embodiment of respect and obedience, I specifically highlighted how participation in this study was rooted in a voluntary nature. This was an important point to emphasise as the Life Orientation HOD had encouraged most of the students to take part in the study as he was enthusiastic about the research topic. The study's main objectives, the research process, and the requirements for participants were all verbally communicated. The assent and consent forms were presented and thoroughly explained. Additionally, the teenage girl participants were made aware of the fact that they had the right to withdraw their participation at any given moment without any negative consequences if the need came.

In terms of confidentiality and privacy, the school and teenage girl participants were assured of how their real identities would remain anonymous, and not be revealed to anyone at any cost. The parents or guardians of the participants, the school gatekeepers and the participants themselves were all ensured of how data results would remain confidential, and every participant would be substituted with a preferred pseudonym. Enabling trust and honesty is a valued asset, thus it became crucial to alert the participants how the credibility of the researcher would not be compromised for personal benefit. Participants were given surety of how during the process of research, there would be no betrayal or dishonesty. The participants were all given time and opportunity to ask questions and clarify any queries they had concerning the study.

Below is the table showing the research objectives and methods:

	Research objectives	Methodology
1	To investigate how teenage girls express their sexuality using ‘sexy’ selfies on social media.	Semi-structured individual interviews.
2	To investigate how gender shapes teenage girls’ experiences of expressing sexuality through social media platforms.	Photo-facilitated focus group discussions.

Table 2: Details of research objectives and methods

4.5. Using new feminist materialism methods to conduct online sexualities research with teenage girl participants

The formal process of data collection commenced once the participants had all completed and returned the necessary paperwork which includes consent and assent forms from both parents and participants. The use of new feminist materialism theory motivated the usage of new methods that required the study to decentre the human subject and investigate how sexualities are produced through assemblages of human and more-than-human materials. According to

Springgay (2015), research methodology underpinned by new ways should be renamed anew as a technique rather than a tool or method, as techniques are continually in the mode of reinventing themselves, and act as processual and emergent. The methodology was chosen with the research objectives in mind. The research study intended to examine how teenage girls' use of 'sexy' selfies challenges or advances their sexuality on social media platforms, furthermore, it was to understand how teenage girls' sexuality is affected by their entanglements with social media (Corple & Linabary, 2020). To investigate how teenage girls negotiate online sexuality and unpack the complexities in their sexual narratives, I employed various methods. These included semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions facilitated by photo-elicitation methods which incorporated researcher-generated photos.

The data was produced over a period of six weeks between the month of August to September 2023. Before the initial interviewing process, I had ensured to meet the participants at least once or twice including the time when the research study was introduced. I further emphasised and explained the data collection methods to the participants. I had initially requested for the participants to start with the focus group discussions. However, due to various reasons, many of them requested to commence with the semi-structured individual interviews. This further prompted me to pay attention to the ideas emanating from the participants pertaining to the research process. This was the case when it came to photo-facilitated group discussions. According to Sigstad and Garrels (2021), photo-elicitation promotes active participation and shifts power from the researcher to the participants.

4.6. Data collection methods

4.6.1. Semi-structured individual interviews

According to Cohen et al. (2006), to explore how meanings are negotiated and constructed, the interview remains an undefeated valuable method. Probing through questions provides an opportunity for individuals to thoroughly express their own thoughts and feelings using their own voice (Berg, 2006). Consequently, this research study made use of semi-structured individual interviews to gather data from participants. Studies articulate that interviews come in different forms where the structured interviews are detailed as rigid mainly for quantitative

purposes. The use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews is mostly rooted in qualitative research. Newton (2010) illustrates that semi-structured individual interviews are regarded as a method that is valuable in probing real-life perceptions, experiences and understandings into a phenomenon underpinning human subjects. Furthermore, they offer the opportunity to gather rich, in-depth information about the phenomenon.

Thirty face-to-face semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with teenage girl participants as a method to understand how these teenage girls navigate and negotiate their sexuality using ‘sexy’ selfies. To prepare for these interviews, an open-ended set of questions was planned (Appendix 1A). The questions were not planned to be asked in a consistent manner however their open-ended nature was to allow participants to divulge information with spontaneity, where they could discuss more relevant issues and the researcher could further probe those issues (Cohen et al., 2019). Similarly, Brinkmann (2014) maintains that semi-structured individual interviews are flexible and allow researchers in qualitative studies to alter their questions throughout. Moreover, open-ended questions allow participants to give more details, be creative, and provide factual, unrestricted responses. The interviews were planned to last for the duration of thirty minutes to an hour, they were held in three different locations within the school premises. The school’s boardroom, the HOD’s office and the Deputy Principal’s office were quiet spaces that allowed for privacy between the researcher and participants.

The table below shows details of semi-structured individual interviews:

Pseudonyms	Sex	Date of Interview	Age	Grade	Frequently used social media app
Zamani	Female	13/09/23	17	10	Facebook
Pearl	Female	13/09/23	16	10	Facebook, Instagram
Luyanda	Female	13/09/23	16	10	Facebook
Lethiwe	Female	12/09/23	17	10	Facebook
Rerato	Female	12/09/23	16	10	Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat

Zelwandle	Female	12/09/23	17	10	Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp
Nomonde	Female	12/09/23	18	10	Facebook, Instagram WhatsApp
Andile	Female	06/09/23	16	10	Facebook, Snapchat
Smangele	Female	05/09/23	16	10	Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram
Ayanda	Female	29/08/23	15	10	Facebook
Dali	Female	28/08/23	17	11	WhatsApp, Instagram
Popo	Female	28/08/23	17	11	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram
Thuso	Female	28/08/23	17	11	WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, TikTok
Mahle	Female	26/08/23	12	11	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok
Phume	Female	26/08/23	17	11	WhatsApp, Facebook
Summer	Female	24/08/23	18	11	WhatsApp, Instagram
Sia	Female	24/08/23	16	11	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram
Naledi	Female	23/08/23	17	11	Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok
Asorh	Female	22/08/23	17	11	TikTok, WhatsApp

Bianca	Female	22/08/23	17	11	TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook
Judy	Female	08/17/23	18	12	TikTok, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp
Mabuhle	Female	08/17/23	17	12	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram
Anezy	Female	15/08/23	19	12	TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp.
Lelo	Female	15/08/23	17	12	WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Mini	Female	07/08/23	18	12	WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook.
Andy	Female	07/08/23	18	12	Facebook, WhatsApp
Yolly	Female	07/08/23	18	12	Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat.
Rato	Female	05/09/23	18	12	TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp
Leow	Female	04/09/23	18	12	TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram.
Amy Thando	Female	04/09/23	18	12	WhatsApp, Facebook

Table 3: Details of participants in a semi-structured individual interview.

For the purposes of verification and accuracy, a voice recorder was used to record every interview taking place. Permission was requested and granted by participants, not only for voice recording but to keep a record of non-verbal expressions such as bodily movements and facial gestures. Such pieces of information are very crucial as they provide evidence of the thoughts being construed by participants at the moment. To prepare for the interviewing process, I ensured to double-check the equipment I was going to use to record, whether it was still in a good state (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). At first, it was visible how the teenage girl participants were uneasy at the sight of a voice recorder, however as time progressed during the interviews, they became more comfortable and answered questions with ease.

Prior to starting the semi-structured interviews, it was specified to all the engaging participants the background of the researcher, followed by the purpose of conducting the study. The aim was to give participants an opportunity to gain and negotiate from their individualistic perspectives and to further build rapport and trust. It is illustrated as unethical to omit information from participants as they need to fully participate with a clear understanding of the consequences and not be coerced into something not in their favour (Mark et al., 2005).

During my interviewing process, the focus was on investigating specific details that highlights how new bodily experiences could emerge and propose new insights that have not been previously explored in scholarly works. Semi-structured interviews that probe in-depth data are considered a more effective method as opposed to the quantitative route in examining the delicate experiences of human subjects. However, Deleuze (2004) states that using language is still regarded as constraining when it comes to capturing bodily sensations, expressions and emotions happening in the moment of the research process. Participants in the study collaborated with such notions as some of them stated having challenges with narrating their social media image experiences using words. As a result, I motivated them to use any other resources or means available to them to put forward their narratives. For example, one participant used a small piece of paper to narrate one of her experiences. While others used facial expressions and bodily movements. Providing evidence of how non-human materials play an active role in the research process.

4.6.2. Photo-elicitation

Photo-elicitation (Appendix 1B) refers to a data collection method used in qualitative research to solicit information from participants using photographs (Copes et al., 2018). According to Dockett et al. (2017), it serves as a method of tapping into the invisible world of the participant which the researcher could never reach with just words. Interaction between researcher and participant is enhanced through the process of photo-elicitation. It is categorised as a valuable tool in evoking rich data as pictures carry the power to stimulate memories, reactions and emotional feelings that words alone fail to bring forth (Padgett et al., 2013). The photographs provided in this study comprised four 'sexy' selfies that were underpinned by questions exploring how teenage girls navigate and negotiate their sexuality using selfies. The participants were permitted to deduct their own meanings and ideas from the images provided. Therefore, this prompted me as a researcher to realign my questions with their thoughts regarding the phenomenon.

The photo-elicitation was underpinned by researcher-generated photographs (Appendix 1B) which comprised four 'sexy' selfies in total. The first selfie represented the use of the body as an agent by looking through the meaning of posture and more-than-human materials such as make-up in sexy representations found on social media. The second selfie illustrated the ideal body shape that is accepted on social media platforms. The third selfie showed a girl wearing a bikini as a method to seek approval through 'likes' and 'comments'. The fourth selfie aimed to show how plus-sized heterosexual girls are ostracised and yellow-bone aspirations are epitomised in contrast to dark-skin tones. Overall, the researcher-generated photos were used as aids to elicit information pertaining to how young girls' sexual expressions are both capacitated and incapacitated on social media platforms.

4.6.3. Focus group discussions

Focus group discussions were another data collection method adopted in the study to extensively examine how teenage girls express their sexuality using selfies. According to Stewart (2014), a focus group can be described as a setting where a specific pre-group of people are in a specific group discussion about a prominent topic under the surveillance and guidance

of a trained group moderator (p. 687). The primary objective of a focus group discussion is “to gain a broad range of perspectives on the selected research topic over a period of 60-90 minutes, and to create an environment where participants feel comfortable enough to express their views” (Hennik et al., 2020, p. 136). What distinct the focus group discussion from the individual structuring of an interview is the ability to create a safe space for possible interactions between participants where more information can be gathered at a much quicker pace, moreover, the interaction between participants can increase possibilities for new details to emerge outside of specified questions (Hennik, 2013).

In this study, the focus group discussion was facilitated by photo-elicitations. According to Copes et al. (2018), photo-elicitations are more effective when working with another interviewing technique hence this research study chose to incorporate the photo-elicitations within the group discussions. This study made use of three focus group discussions with teenage girls from the FET phase (grades 10 to 12). Each group had a total number of ten participants from each grade. Considering I had conducted the individual interviews, a strong rapport had thus been created between the researcher and participants. The interview schedule of the focus group was dictated by the availability of participants. However, in total all thirty participants took part in the focus groups.

Focus Group 1 (Grade 10)	Focus Group 2 (Grade 11)	Focus Group 3 (Grade 12)
Zamani	Phume	Judy
Zelwandle	Summer	Mabuhle
Nomonde	Sia	Anezy
Andile	Naledi	Lelo
Smangele	Popo	Mimi
Ayanda	Thuso	Yolly
Rerato	Mahle	Rato
Lethiwe	Dali	Leow
Pearl	Naledi	Amy Thando
Luyanda	Bianca	Andy

Table 4: The details of a focus group discussion.

Prior to commencing the study, I ensured that all researcher-generated photos were in place and questions underpinning the photos were planned and appropriate. This was done to produce some structuring during the discussion and to avoid disturbances (Gibson, 2007). The school's boardroom was the location for the group discussion and a voice recorder was used to store the discussions. As I had already conducted the semi-structured individual interviews, many participants had already familiarised themselves with the study and a strong rapport had been created between the researcher and participants which made them feel at ease and comfortable within this setting. Moreover, many participants exhibited enthusiasm and were motivated about the study, as opposed to the first encounter of individual interviews. Similar to individual interviews, I explained to participants the rationale behind the research study and warranted them freedom to exit the discussion at any given moment without any consequences. Furthermore, they were not to discuss any photograph that compromised their emotional and psychological state. The duration of the group discussion ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes, depending on the time constraints and how much participants had divulged during the focus group process.

4.7. Affects within the research process

Deleuze and Guattari (1988) proposed the concept of viewing the assemblage as a 'rhizomatic machine' which is responsible for linking pre-existing entities that affectively produce a thing or something. Similarly, the research process can be categorised as a 'machine' where the affects produced through stages of research such as data collection and analysis can constitute as part of the mechanic assemblage (Fox and Alldred, 2015). The end product namely 'data' is produced through affects taking place between assemblages of human and non-human materials during the data collection process. Using the new feminist lens, this study recognises not only the human participants but also how non-human materials acted as active agents in producing effects that re-shaped capacities.

This study adopted the use of photographs during group discussions as a method to disrupt traditional measures in research processes. Art-based methods encourage individuals to think beyond normative boundaries and search for new meanings, for instance, in defining sexuality Brinkman (2014). During the one-on-one interviews, many participants had been reluctant to

share their stories, performing gestures such as slouching and folding of arms. However, during the focus group discussions, many of the participants in this study alluded to “feeling alive” when pictures were incorporated as opposed to just using words in the individual interviews. Evidently, the intra-actions between humans (participants) and non-humans (pictures) produced affects that de-territorialise teenage girls’ capacities in the research process. They exhibited enthusiasm and were very assertive when interacting with one another. Visual methods were explored in a study by Ivinson and Renold (2016) where they used pictures, filmmaking and tour walking to investigate affective capacities of young women. They further illustrated how methods based on arts motivated communication and allowed young women to express their bodily pleasure narratives, especially in a setting that categorises sexual discussions as taboo. Participants stated how photographs evoked interest in sharing their online image-based sexual experiences.

4.8. Spinning chair

The physical infrastructure where interviews were conducted acted as an important tool in shaping the research process. The individual interviews took place within the school’s boardroom which was in close proximity to the management’s offices. A passage hall to the front office was visible and connected to the school’s staffroom. The interviews were held during break time and after school. This was the most convenient setting at the time. However, I took note of how some of the participants felt uneasy in sharing their experiences and would keep looking over the staffroom’s corner, slouching on the chairs, placing their heads on the table and expressing themselves with a lazy voice. According to Foucault (1991), the infrastructure of a school is similar to that of mental institutions, prisons and hospitals. Its architecture is strategically constructed in a manner that promotes surveillance from management. Participants in this study acknowledged how being called to the boardroom meant a disciplinary hearing for them or they were only allowed when an authoritative figure had sent them.

Consequently, I searched for another possible non-threatening environment for all participants. The second location was the HOD’s office, which had a table and two spinning chairs. The spinning chair became a prominent tool within the individual interviews, many of the participants could connect to their inner child through the nature of spinning the chair, whereas

others could visualise their future. One participant alluded to how they felt like a “businesswoman” or a “principal of a school” when sitting on this chair. Considering how discourses surrounding sex topics are considered taboo in Zulu culture, the spinning chair signalled the comfortability offered by this setting which created a strong rapport and allowed for participants to share their experiences with ease.

4.9. Positionality as a black woman conducting gender and sexuality studies

According to Fox and Alldred (2015), the new feminist theory acknowledges the research as a process of becoming a finished product. There are numerous unknown, unforeseen and dynamic processes that could influence the outcomes of the study such as the social interactions between participants and the positionality of the researcher. Holmes (2014) argues that positionality acts as a reflexive process where the researcher acknowledges how their background, beliefs and understandings of society could shape or influence the study being researched. As a result, this study reflected on background experiences that shaped the researcher and potentially construed subjectivities that advantaged or disadvantaged the research process.

I am a 27-year-old woman born and bred in a small village called Ophepheni originating on the southern coast of KwaZulu-Natal. I am the third born of four children from my mother’s side and the first of my father’s two children. Like most young black people in this country, I did not grow up with fully present parents. My mother had to go look for work in the nearest urban area which resulted in my grandmother being my legal guardian. I grew up having limited knowledge of my father’s identity as he was an absent figure during most of my formative years and adult life. My grandfather had already been deceased at the time of my birth thus I witnessed my grandmother assuming the role of a matriarch in our family. She was responsible for taking care of our family home and instilling disciplinary measures. She used Christianity as one of the methods to instil respect and obedience, prayer and the bible were our daily household activities. My grandmother did not complete school; thus, she only possessed a standard four (grade 6) report card. However, she believed in the importance of education and

invested in my educational activities by always assisting with homework and ensuring I made it to school on time. This ensured my motivated spirit to complete my high school education and further my studies to the tertiary level. Growing up as the only girl in the household close to my grandmother, I observed how most of the household duties were allocated according to gender identity. The boys had to go herd the cattle and take care of the outside yard while the inside household chores, such as the cooking, cleaning and washing of dishes, rested upon myself and grandmother who were the only women in the house. Although I lived with my grandmother, I was still fortunate enough to have my mother as a present and conscious parent. When I was 16 in 2012, she bought me a mobile phone as a means to keep in contact in case of emergencies and to aid in my studies. Digital technologies had been a ubiquitous norm in our settings thus it was an advancing factor in both my social and academic life.

During the interviewing process, a high number of teenage girl participants commented on how they were subjected to experiences of online bullying and abuse pertaining to their physical appearance. These narratives took me back to my own similar negative experiences as a young girl who constantly felt pressured to conform to societal beauty standards. I reflected on my own journey from being bullied in primary school due to the size of my nose and facing similar occurrences in online contexts. Black women are persistently suffocated by magazine covers, television advertisements and social media posts that deem their physical attributes as not sexy or desirable (Adams-Bass et al., 2014). This allowed me to empathise with the participants, offering them a warmer and more relaxed environment to narrate their experiences. However, I remained objective, unbiased, calm and unprejudiced towards participants. As Berger (2015) states, the researcher should remain unbiased and sensitive to experiences shared by participants. Cohen et al. (2018) further confirms that it is important for researchers to produce a non-judgemental environment where participants are allowed an opportunity to share their own thoughts and feelings.

As a black woman coming from a historically disadvantaged background, where there are rampant socio-economic ills such as high levels of child-headed families, HIV and AIDS, and gender violence. I took an interest in displaying all kinds of narratives from young black women coming from a township environment which is still confronted by marginalisation even in today's society (Sapire, 2013). Coming from experiences sculptured by Zulu cultural norms that denied me sexual agency. I was not allowed to wear short skirts, pants or anything revealing as that was considered promiscuous in the eyes of my village. Displaying femininity and

sexuality meant that I was to remain passive by hiding my body in long clothing garments. However, as I grew into my femininity conflicted by cultural norms and my own desires, I used social media as an escape to express and learn more about sexuality. Such experiences overlapped in my research process where I cautiously engaged with participants. As a result, they were not reluctant to share their experiences pertaining to image-based sexual harassment and bullying as I had ensured to create a setting that is non-threatening and filled with compassion and empathy. Furthermore, this approach dismantled the power imbalances as they saw me as their peer more than an elder.

4.10. Data analysis

The collection of data marks as one of the crucial steps in a research process. In the beginning of my data analysis, I utilised the thematic approach. According to Cohen (2018) a thematic analysis informs the process of qualitative research. Analysing data thematically meant a robust organisation of information into categories (Braun & Clark, 2014). Data was translated from Isizulu to English and further transcribed by a chosen professional. Once transcriptions were complete, I went back to confirm the accuracy of the verbatim and further explored other bodily sensations, such as laughing, disturbing noises and other sounds that were not transcribed. Once data was collected, it was carefully analysed, categorised and coded. Considering the study is underpinned by new feminist methods it was crucial to support the thematic analysis with an analysis approach that will consider innate materials as active agents in the analysis of research. Relying on solely the thematic approach refrained from exploring the bodily sensations that emanated during interviews. Moreover, information that emanates from a qualitative study usually comes in an unstructured and bulky form (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Traditional methods underpinning a qualitative study generally favour a thematic approach in the interpretation of data results. However as noted in the beginning of this chapter how scholars interested in the ‘material turn’ have started to dismantle the doctrines of qualitative methods centred around humans (MacLure, 2013).

Adopting conventional means in the analysis of qualitative data often means ignoring the bodily sensations that originate during the data collection process, where data is solidified as unconscious, waiting to be reconfigured as significant in the interpretation performed by the researcher (Maclure & Koro-Ljungberg, 2013). As a result, Maclure (2017) argues that in new

feminist materialism engaging with data should be more critical, creative, and complex. In doing so, researchers should commit to identifying the research affect when executing interpretations, where data is said to not be stagnant and fixed but rather is in motion with us as we work and engage with it. Affectively analysing data forces researchers not to investigate what “data is,” but rather “what it can do.” It is a continuous process that “flows through and inside of research projects intra-acting and shaping future research encounters as part of the complexity of the research assemblage” (Renold & Ringrose, 2014, p.7).

In devising new feminist methodologies Karen Barad (2007) in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* introduces the concept of diffractive analysis in navigating the data analysis process. According to Haraway (1997) and Barad (2007), analysing data using the diffractive method can produce the potential to make the world a better place. The diffractive analysis enables researchers to identify patterns of differences instead of reflecting themes that are repetitive and already known. Barad (2007) further proposes the diffractive method as a strategy to pay attention to intensities produced when two different forces are joined. This illustrates that “it is a moment of plugging in, of reading-the-data-while-thinking-the-theory, of entering the assemblage, of making new connectives.” (Mazzei, 2014). Consequently, this study adopted the use of diffractive analysis to examine the affective intensities produced through entanglements, moreover, it allowed plucking concepts into coded data to re-think teenage girl’s relationality with digital practices.

The analysis of data commenced once the interviewing process was complete. Thereafter an experienced transcriber was appointed to coherently transcribe all the recordings. Following this was the process of carefully listening to the audio recordings, further noting all the bodily sensations such as laughter, pauses, silences, exclamations that were non-verbal and the movement and sounds during the data collection process. Thereafter the transcripts were thoroughly examined to confirm their accuracy. The next step involved coding the data under different themes conforming to a process called ‘open coding.’ This meant arranging and identifying reoccurring themes that emerged from participants’ responses. Using traditional methods in qualitative analysis generally means relying solely on coding themes to generate results. However, analysing data through diffractive analysis meant that I did not stop only at coding but went further to rethink by plugging new feminist-related concepts into data. For

example, one conversation from Lelo that took place within a semi-structured individual interview can show how this study dismantled traditional means of analysing data.

Lelo: I have seen on Facebook where a girl posted a picture where she was in a bikini and a bunch of men commented on that picture and they were like snarky comments, and they were like sexualised comments.

Interviewer: What type of comments, can you remember any?

Lelo: This girl was a big girl. She was chubby. So, they were saying that you don't deserve to be in a bikini, you should hide yourself, things like that. (Lelo, grade 12)

In the excerpt above Lelo illustrates how teenage girls are denied sexual agency on digital platforms particularly on the Facebook social media app because of their weight and physical appearance. Choosing to use traditional qualitative methods of analysis would require identifying the themes underpinning the gender relations and the sexist nature emanating from these narratives. Using only a thematic approach would limit the generation of new perspectives and produce what is familiar in scholarly works. However, using the diffractive analysis requires to peruse through different feminist concepts and plugging them into data. Offering new insights that do not only view the human as the sole subject in producing meaning but also pay attention to non-human materials as active agents. Some of these feminist concepts this study draws from are that of assemblages and intra-actions. Thus, analysing diffractively means applying these concepts and questioning how humans (teenage girls) and non-humans (Facebook, selfies, fat shaming, bikini) intra-act to reduce teenage girls' sexual becomings.

4.11. Trustworthiness, validity and reliability

According to Morse (2015), trustworthiness is a method that has consistently been applied in examining quality throughout the qualitative research process. The concept of trustworthiness possesses similar attributes to those catered by validity, honesty and credibility. Heale and Forbes (2013) illustrate that triangulation is responsible for eliminating any bias emanating from a research methodology that was used in conducting a study. Therefore, to achieve validity in this study a methodological triangulation was implemented which demonstrated all research

process details. Furthermore, the participants were given an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the data results interpreted by the researcher.

Photo-elicitation methods were used to provoke in-depth discussions during focus group discussions. A voice recorder tool was used to ensure that the narratives informing participant's experiences were recorded in a truthful manner and ensured the researcher's accuracy in data interpretation. Reliability is one of the most recognised concepts in increasing the trustworthiness of the research project. To abide by reliability, I dismantled the power dynamics between the researcher and the participants. This enabled a safe and comfortable environment for participants to share their personal experiences.

4.12. How new feminist materialism helps expand and support qualitative research

New feminist materialism helps expand and support qualitative research in various ways. New feminist materialism takes into consideration both the human and non-human materials. This enhances the research quality as researchers are given the possibilities to analyse data as it emerges and intra-acts within all materials (Fox and Alldred, 2014). This study uses qualitative methods that are supported by new feminist methodological frameworks. In doing so, it highlights new perspectives in doing qualitative research such as emphasising the agency of materiality, enhancing the positionality of the researcher and addressing power dynamics between participants and the researcher (Austin, 2016). This study used qualitative measures in collecting in-depth data, namely, semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions facilitated by photo elicitations. Incorporating new feminist methods within qualitative measures allowed for new insights to emerge where the contexts was evaluated and explored in terms of how it shapes the whole research purposes (Fox & Alldred, 2017). Human and non-human materials (participants, tables, table recorder, writing materials etc.) were equally considered in shaping the research experience. For example, this chapter addresses how a non-human material such as the 'spinning chair' provided comfortability for participants which in turn built a strong rapport. Moreover, the photos provided agentic possibilities in research through evoking interest in participant to engage with the topic at hand. These particular examples demonstrate the various ways new feminist materialism can enhance, expand, and enhance qualitative methods.

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4.13. Conclusion

This chapter presented the methods that were used to conduct this research. Drawing from new feminist materialism, the methods in this study were not linear and looked to acknowledge the researcher, research site and affects as part of an assemblage in shaping the research project. This study used semi-structured individual interviews and focus group discussions facilitated by photo-elicitations to engage with 30 teenage girl participants, further examining how they express their sexuality using selfies on social media. The data collection results were transcribed, and themes were identified and plucked into feminist concepts practicing what is called the diffractively analysis. I explored the concepts of trustworthiness, credibility and validity in the study by breaking down power dynamics and ensuring all protocols to store and relay data were followed. The data that was collected and diffractively analysed will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Five: Data analysis

5.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore data presenting experiences concerning how teenage girls intra-act with more-than-human materials such as social media, sexy selfies, and beauty standards to express sexuality. Data collected from 30 teenage girl participants will be analysed using the diffractive analysis where themes emerging will be plucked into new feminist materialism concepts. Social media reinforces societal gender norms that incapacitate what teenage girls' bodies can do in the navigation of sexuality. Experiences such as cyber-sexual harassment, sexual double standards, victim blaming, slut-shaming and low body image are found to be exacerbated by the production of sexualised selfies. However, teenage girls in this study seek to resist and challenge such dominant heteronormative ideals by taking autonomy of their hyperfeminine and hypersexualised online identities. Through data collected using semi-structured individual interviews and photo-facilitated focus group discussions, this chapter will foreground experiences showcasing how teenage girls challenge and are complicit in dominant discourses underpinning sexual performances. The following themes and sub-themes emerged to guide this analysis chapter:

5.2. Teenage girls' entanglements with digital technologies

5.3. Sexy subjectivities: Defining the 'sexy' in a selfie

5.4. The sexy selfie assemblage

- Teenage girls becoming powerful and sexual
- Filters and make-up in a sexy selfie assemblage

5.5. Constraining sexual capacities

- The slim-thick fit body ideals: "Boobs, big butt, tiny waist"
- Sexy selfies and sexy skin tones: "If I was a yellow bone ..."
- Sexy selfies and fat-shaming: "Hold your fat tummy in!"

5.2. Teenage girls' entanglements with digital technologies

Evidence suggests that more-than-human materials feature in young people's online sexual subjectivities (Austin, 2016). Young people use digital technologies for various activities, including expressions of self, maintaining relationships with friends, family and maintaining romantic sexual relationships. In this section, I explore how teenage girls' bodies as human entities produce sexual becomings through their entanglements with digital technologies (mobile phones, social media). Teenage girl participants described being entangled with smartphones as early as when they were only "8 years old." They spoke about having "no control" over how they interacted with their technological devices. During the course of the individual interviews, it was observed how smartphones and teenage girls' bodies were inseparable material entities. Girls were constantly looking at and touching their phones with less regard for their surroundings. Allen (2015) argues that technology use amongst young people is persistently demonised, especially by mainstream media. However, teenage girls went against this narrative by stating the prominence that mobile phones possessed in their lives. For example, teenage girl participants detailed their experiences as follows:

Interviewer: How would you describe the relationship you have with your phone?

Luyanda: Yooh! Every chance that I get, I use my phone wherever I am, my phone is always with me. Even if it is charging, I use it, it is my happy place! (Luyanda, 16, grade 10)

Dali: I am very frequent on my phone because I use my phone for like most things, whenever I need to research something that I do not understand my cellphone is there so I would say most things. I am very close to my phone because it holds a lot of information, I Google a lot of stuff. If I don't understand something I just Google it so I would say I am on my phone a lot. (Dali, 17, grade 11)

Anezy: [...] like my whole 2018 and 2019 was like a very bad experience. In 2018 I was closed, I was shattered, didn't have friends and the only thing that kept me afloat and became my friend was my phone because even in class I didn't like the group things, people were just so mean. (Anezy, 19, grade 12)

Phume: Oh god 24/7! Like I'm always on my phone unless if it's charging then you'll only it will get a break, but then always on my phone either on TikTok or either on WhatsApp it's very frequently on my phone. (Phume, 16, grade 11)

Participants shifted away from dominant discourses that narrate negative experiences regarding digital technologies. Instead, Luyanda cited the use of her phone as an “everyday” occasion, and “a happy place”. According to Giroux (2015), smartphones facilitate young people’s identities in isolation, far away from the supervision and control of their parents and adult people in their surroundings. This is collaborated by Dali, as she narrates her “close” relationship with her mobile phone and states that “it holds a lot of information”. Similarly, with Anezy, we see that digital technologies play an integral role in her life experiences. The smartphone did not remain passive or just a mere tool in her life, but we see its agentic forces as it took the role of being human and became Anezy’s “friend.” She used it as a means to escape her surroundings of “mean” people and her overall negative life experiences. Phume surpasses her phone and talks of her relationship with “TikTok” and “WhatsApp” as frequent materials in her life.

Understanding these narratives using new feminist concepts means we do not look at the phones and teenage girls’ bodies as separate entities, but instead we should note how these experiences emerge as a result of the relations between girls’ bodies and smartphones. Omitting these relations means these participants would not experience the intensities and becomings in their life stories, it would be impossible to know them as we do now. Their life experience and sexual narratives also emerge through these stated relations, thus Fox and Alldred (2013) contend that through acknowledgement of these entanglements’ sexuality withdraws from humanist notions that depict it as a reality produced only through humans. Furthermore, Haraway (2006) argues in the ‘Cyborg Manifesto’ how technology and human bodies are not a binary but emerge to produce what she calls “cyborgs” where our capacities are realised. Drawing from the assemblage theory, one can fathom how sexual experiences come to life as a consequence of relational materials. That is to say, human materials (teenage girls’ bodies) and related to non-human materials (mobile phones, sexy selfies, social media) during the production of teenage girls’ sexual capacities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Allen & Allen, 2021).

5.3. Sexy subjectivities- Defining the ‘sexy’ in a selfie

A selfie can be defined as an image one has taken of oneself by themselves at arm’s length (Karaian, 2015). Consequently, there is an assumed level of autonomy held by the creator as they decide to produce a sexy selfie through technological devices (Saltz, 2014). Academics and media outlets often criticise and vilify social media platforms as those who promote sexualised identities and ‘pornified culture’. However, what exactly is ‘sexy’ and who decides on it? Defining ‘sexy,’ particularly for heterosexual women, has been recorded by Tiidenberg (2017) as a difficult task. As a result, this section aimed to explore teenage girls’ conceptualisations of ‘hetero-sexy’ in selfies. The goal was to uncover how teenage girls view and define sexy selfies and whether that informs their choices in how they negotiate and express sexuality on social media platforms. In attempting to define the characteristics that make a sexy selfie most popular responses referred to the visibility of one’s skin, outfits that accentuate the body, showing the breasts and buttocks, and showcasing of ‘sexy’ poses. Some of the responses linked sexy selfies to nudity, contradicting descriptions were also observable when other teenage girls interpreted ‘sexy’ in selfies away from hypersexualised identities. Drawing from semi-structured individual interviews, participants in the excerpts below define what ‘sexy’ selfies are:

Interviewer: How would you define a sexy selfie?

Lethiwe: It’s where they are wearing something short which also shows boobs a bit, you see when they take pictures, they lift their legs up. on their faces, they pout, lift their eyebrows you see all of that stuff. (Lethiwe, grade 10)

Pearl: It’s a picture showing some private parts. Maybe like wearing something that is showing your boobs a bit or thighs or your back if you have big bums. (Pearl, grade 10)

Thuso: A sexy selfie I understand it to be where you’re revealing a part of your body, could be the breast or the butt, showcasing things that aren’t meant to be seen by all, or maybe also doing something with your eyes that can make people be attracted to you. (Thuso, grade 11)

Mini: The way you pose and also how others see it sexy when you tilt your head to the left or right when taking a picture of your face, others if you're taking a full body picture if you stand like this like in a way that your ass pops out more. Even if you don't have ass, it almost looks like you do, some people see that as sexy (Mini, grade 12)

These descriptions give clear indications of how participants are entangled with the idea of self-sexualisation and objectification in how they perceive sexiness. Lethiwe illustrates that where someone is “wearing something short” “showing boobs” “pouting” it is categorised as sexy. In Pearl’s definition, the language use of “private parts” as a trait of a sexy selfie tells us that she deems sexy as something that exposes the privacy of bodies. Similarly, Thuso explains how a sexy selfie is “revealing your breasts and butt” which are body parts that should “not be seen by all.” Such narrations stem from heteronormative norms that position women and girls as innocent and thus should not reveal their bodies which in turn incapacitates what their bodies can do on social media.

According to Ringrose and Renold (2013), perceptions of ‘sexy’ as nudity make it difficult for teenage girls to engage in sexy selfies and online sexual representations as nudity evokes moral panic discourses. Mini explains what she deems a sexy selfie. She defines it by including sexy poses and illustrates that the type of poses one must highlight is controlled by the type of sexy selfie, whether it is a face or body. To showcase yourself as ‘sexy’ when only showing your face, one must “tilt their head.” When you show your full body, you must ensure through how you stand that your “ass pops out more” so it can create an illusion that you have big buttocks even if you do not have one. These explanations contrast the control narrative of the selfie, as more girls define the sexy selfie, they narrate how their performances are highly gendered and curated by the social media gaze. The labour put behind creating a sexy selfie is not for the satisfaction of the self but rather the approval from online audiences, particularly the male gaze.

In contrast, some teenage girl participants had different views in how they described sexiness, it became prevalent that girls in this study did not negotiate sexuality in linear and monolithic means but rather in diverse and fluid ways. Taken from semi-structured individual interviews Mabuhle and Naledi narrate give their definitions of sexy selfies:

***Mabuhle:** From my point of view, okay so people are different right, some people like wearing makeup, some people love being natural just like me. I love my skin now and I am embracing it, so on others' point of view you need to apply makeup, put lip gloss on your lips and focus on the camera maybe. Or put a lipstick to take a sexy selfie but I do not see that selfie as a sexy selfie, because I like being natural, if you smile, you smile, so that's a sexy selfie for me. (Mabuhle, grade 12)*

***Naledi:** Sorry. My definition of sexy is probably seeing a girl or woman, a young woman in a formal classy dress with no slits on either side of the legs and probably a slit-tied-up pony and no coloured lipstick basically. Maybe just lipstick. No! Lipgloss. Sorry. Just that. And about the earrings. I prefer just knobs. I don't like going extreme. (Naledi, grade 11)*

These narratives depict paradoxical views on how girls perform their heterosexual identities on social media platforms. According to Mabuhle, a sexy selfie is characterised by a “smile” and a “natural” face. The ‘natural’ face or a just ‘smile’ is positioned as innocence and good morality for teenage girls, thus it is placed as valuable in the feminine aesthetics that cater to heteronormative norms. Similarly, Naledi argues that “a classy dress,” “no slits” and “no coloured lipstick” make up the fundamentals of a sexy selfie. Phillips (2022) illustrated that participants in her study considered “sexy” as being free and empowered in their own choices. Consequently, these narratives suggested by participants in this study give us evidence that sexy is subjective and lies with the creator of the selfie. Warfield (2014) argued that girls subscribe to gendered binary notions where they are told to practice hypersexualised identities to receive approval from the male gaze. However, they also face condemnation for not practising “too sexy” sexual identities or it would suggest sluttish behaviour (Mascheroni et al., 2015).

5.3. The sexy selfie assemblage

This theme will explore how a sexy selfie is an assemblage of humans and more than human materials. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) outline the theory of flat ontologies that tells us that in

the production of meanings, there are no hierarchies. Girls' bodies, the device and the physical settings present in the moment where selfies are taken, all play an important and equal role in producing capacities for sexual becomings. The first sub-theme emerging from the main theme is 'Teenage girls becoming powerful and sexual'. The second sub-theme will present data analysing the 'filters and make-up' as part of a sexy selfie assemblage.

5.3.1. Teenage girls becoming powerful and sexual

In an assemblage, there are all kinds of materials in the form of bodies, cultures, objects, feelings, ideas, and spaces that seek to come together in non-hierarchical forms (Boldt & Leander, 2020; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). In this section, I highlight how a 'sexy' selfie is an assemblage of human and more-than-human elements that intra-act to produce sexual expressions. Teenage girls' bodies, as material entities, intra-act with more than human materials to advance their sexuality on social media platforms. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) maintain that assemblages are rhizomatic and becoming in nature, thus they act in fluid, unpredictable and unforeseen ways in their intra-actions. According to Coleman (2011); Renold and Ivinson (2013) using the Deleuzian concept of becoming illustrates how girls' bodies become as a result of their relationality with pictures, and further explain how body experiences through these pictures can produce capacities that can both de-territorialise or territorialise their sexuality.

Teenage girl participants in this study illustrated that in the process of becoming 'sexy' using selfies, they conform to hyperfeminine actions such as the wearing of "dresses" and the application of "make-up" and "filters" to continuously re-invent themselves in unpredictable new ways to become desirable heterosexual beings. Before social media, non-human materials such as television, magazines and overall mainstream media were depicted as the main culprits in shaping teenage girls' sexual subjectivities. In contemporary studies, attention highly centralises social media as the prominent source of influence in young people's negative sexual experiences (Ringrose et al., 2013). These narratives position teenage girls as unassertive, innocent and victims in the portrayal of online sexual identities. However, when participants in this study were asked about sexy selfies they had shared on various online platforms, it was observable how they were active participants in the navigation of sexuality and sought to de-territorialise normative notions of heterosexuality. They alluded to taking and posting sexy

selfies that were affectively intensified by self-sexualisation and self-objectification which in turn produced capacities for sexual pleasure and power. I begin with Judy who was 18 and in her final year of high school at the time of the interview. She had suffered a stroke when she was only sixteen years old and struggled to face the world afterwards due to her lack of body confidence. However, she illustrates that ‘sexy’ selfies played a huge role in her healing journey because through her intra-actions with the camera, social media and sexy selfies, she could see that she was becoming what she once was. Judy details her experiences in the excerpt below from a semi-structured individual interview:

***Judy:** Okay, so I don't like taking selfies of me frequently smiling because I had a stroke when I was about 16, so my smile, sometimes it goes on the side. So I just want to face on the side then. My side view. Yes, I do not like front view of my face. I do like it, but not frequently. It's like I can get a person who knows my situation when taking pictures of my front view.*

***Interviewer:** I'm sorry about the experience of this stroke. So do you feel like maybe taking pictures and selfies after having that experience, does it motivate you to maybe break out, maybe heal?*

***Judy:** Yes it does because when I look at myself now compared to the past few years, it's like I'm a lot better now. So, I can laugh without a person noticing how I was once was. So, it makes me feel a lot better. They (selfies) make me feel like, no, I'm getting back to how I was. I'm regaining my perfect smile again.*

(Judy, 18, grade 12)

In Judy's experience, the stroke was not inert but was a material that affectively limited her capacities in performing gendered acts such as a ‘smile’ in the production of sexy selfies. Berry (2008) argues that people with disabilities whether permanent or temporary as in the case of Judy are rarely viewed as sexually attractive or desirable and thus face social, economic and romantic isolation as society places high value on physical appearances. Body positivity movements encourage self-shooters to share their bodies and put themselves out there without being conscious of the responses they will get from online audiences (Tiidenberg & Cruz, 2015). However, teenage girls' bodies are daily confronted by criticism and harsh comments when showing their bodies on social media which is hard to ignore. Judy narrates that in her case she began feeling insecure about her ‘smile’ post her health scare and would only take

selfies in a “side view” which reflects her limited capacities in relation to her body sexual experiences. Concurrently, Judy further states that taking sexy selfies also assisted her to become powerful because she could view herself through the lenses of the camera and that she was “regaining her perfect smile again”. The never-ending and fluid possibilities provided by the intra-actions within an assemblage such as her body, camera, mobile phone, social media, the side view, produced capacities that permitted body confidence. Similarly, in the following interaction, Bianca shares how sexy selfies also assisted her in regaining her sexy back after going through low self-esteem at a younger age.

***Interviewer:** Okay, so tell me how do you feel after taking a sexy selfie? Like what's the feeling that comes to you?*

***Bianca:** Yeah, it's that feeling. Like I always look at the mirror and say, "Well, now I'm sexy, I'm good, I'm good looking." Because I don't want to be, I don't want to have no low self-esteem again. Like I just want to put myself up there now.*

(Bianca, 17, grade 11)

Here, Bianca narrates how sexy selfies produced capacities for her new sexual becomings. In her experience, she notes how intra-actions with a mirror, sexy selfies and social media produce affects that enable her high self-esteem. Tiidenberg (2014) posits that taking and sharing sexy selfies can become a therapeutic act where women could be re-introduced and learn more about their bodies. In the act of taking sexy selfies, these teenage girls are actively producing and learning more about their sexual subjectivities. Bianca notes that through sexy selfie productions, she can look at herself and recognise herself as a beautiful “good looking” girl which are feelings she had deprived herself of when she was younger, she continues to say that she wants to “put herself out there now” which shows how social media acts as a space that reinforces her high stake in the heterosexual matrix. The following excerpt showcases teenage girls’ bodies as sexual material entities:

***Judy:** Okay. Most of my selfies that I post are posted on Facebook. So, I was ... It was a fun selfie. I was holding my breasts then my tongue was out. So, it made me feel cute. It made me feel like, okay, I look sexy now! (Judy, 18, grade 12)*

***Popo:** Okay, the one (sexy selfie) that I recently posted on WhatsApp I was wearing a skirt with a slit, and I held my stomach in, just like a girl and then I put my ass out.*

After posting, this other boy from school commented, 'Is this you?' And I said this is me so what's up? Then he said no, it's not you and I was just like this is me, I sent them a voice note ... then I simply went to my gallery and screenshotted it and showed him that there was more of the picture that I posted ... I showed the slit, I know that I am fresh, I have my ass out and stomach in and I took a picture. (Popo, 17, grade, 11)

Here, teenage girl participants show their entanglements with social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp that allow navigation of sexuality. In Judy's narrative the "holding of breasts" and "tongue out" are bodily sensations that resemble self-sexualised identities which are said to have negative effects on young women's emotional development. However, Judy narrates her experience as "fun" showing that her sharing a sexy selfie was reclaiming her sexy back as she cited that she felt "cute" and "sexy now". Similarly, in Amahle's experience, we see how her body posture "held stomach in" and "put ass out," and her fashion sense (skirt-slit) demonstrates how her body is an agentic material in becoming sexual and performing heterosexual sexiness. Thus, she positions herself as an active participant in shaping her sexual subjectivities. Furthermore, Amahle highlights entanglements between teenage girls' bodies and technologies through her usage of WhatsApp and digital affordances such as screenshooting, posting and voice notes. These digital affordances act as material discursive practices that when they intra-act produce sexual capacities. Similar narratives drawn from semi-structured individual interviews were shared by more teenage girl participants in the below excerpts:

Interviewer: *Have you posted a sexy selfie? And can you describe the experience?*

Naledi: *Yes. I have posted a sexy selfie, uhm ... I was wearing a black tight dress. Yes, it didn't have any sleeves, it just had straps on the shoulders and then it was not short uhh it was just above the knee at that time I had a short hair yes. (Naledi, grade 11)*

Luyanda: *Yes, I have. I was wearing a knee-length skirt and then my cropped top, nobody sent bad comments. Everybody liked it and I was happy. (Luyanda, grade 10)*

Bianca: *It was that one when I was wearing the bikini like ... the cleavage and stuff, you know, and I posted that one. And it brought a lot of compliments a lot of nice comments because, at that time, I had a nice body ... (Bianca, grade 11)*

***Pearl:** Yes, I was wearing a dress that shows my boobs and I got many likes, super exciting! (Pearl, grade 10)*

Each of the participants affirms that they had indeed shared a sexy selfie on social media platforms. In South African contexts, girls and women's negotiations of sexuality are often framed within the boundaries of pain, harassment and violence (Bhana, 2019). Notable in these responses is how the sexy selfie is mediated through affective materiality such as "likes" and "comments". Naledi and Luyanda both have posted sexy selfies, and their sexual capacities are produced through intra-actions with more-than-human materials such as a "black tight dress" "knee-length skirt" and "crop top". Luyanda further notes that "she was happy" because she did not receive any bad comments. Similarly, Bianca shares how she posted a sexy selfie where she was wearing a "bikini" which showed her "cleavage and stuff" and brought a lot of nice comments. Teenage girls' entanglements with the idea of self-sexualisation and objectification seek to challenge dominant discourses that place them as mere passive and incapable of controlling their bodies.

5.3.2. Filters and make-up in a sexy selfie assemblage

Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) concept of 'desiring machines' as 'rhizomatic' suggests that desire is not dictated by the subject rather it emerges, is produced and further materialised through how it networks with other parts in the machine. In this section, I will highlight how "filters" and "make-up" act as relational materials in a sexy selfie machine that seeks to de-territorialise normative contestations of beauty and femininity. The following excerpts give insights on how "filters" are an agentic non-human material in a sexy selfie assemblage:

***Bianca:** Like there is a friend of mine that has a body with dark spots all over, you see so she uses filters a lot to hide all those spots, yeah because she doesn't like them. If it was up to her she would remove them but then she can't because it's in her. So, they (filters) are necessary. (Bianca, 17, grade 11)*

Judy: *I'm like, I grew up having a lot of pimples, so it (selfies) made me ... the filters, the changes I got from Instagram, Snapchat, the way they gave me self-esteem like I was beautiful, I was better. So, selfies made me feel a lot like other girls. They make me feel like I do belong in the girls' category. (Judy, 18, grade 12)*

Anezy: *... I did my hair into ponytails and then I put on an eyeliner and everything, yeah, so like we normally use the Instagram filters but the tiger one it normally makes you look more beautiful, with great make-up. (Anezy, 19, grade 12)*

Smangele: *I posted a selfie recently where I was beautiful, hot and just glowing shining. I was wearing my mother's weave, which I stole because she cannot allow me to use it, put on an eyeliner then lip gloss ... I was beautiful, I had taken bath, and I was just oozing sexiness. (Smangele, 17, grade 10)*

This data reflects on how beauty standards operate as a material entity within an assemblage. Teenage girls explore the use of technological tools to enhance and modify their beauty. Filters are thus an essential material entity as they produce de-territorialising affects in how girls view and present their bodies. Bianca and Judy show how their relations to social media about self-image and beauty standards provide the capacity to belong and feel feminine in “the girls” category. In other words, technology (social media platforms and filters) and girls' bodies or material experiences intertwine to shape their sense of self. Bianca draws attention to the negative markers of the feminine body, that is, dark spots all over. Technology and filters can be used as a means of enhancing self-esteem away from “having a lot of pimples” and conforming to dominant beauty norms to “hide all those spots”. The use of filters is described as a transformative process. The act of taking and sharing selfies is linked to belonging emphasising the performative aspect of presenting oneself on social media and ascribing to dominant feminine norms around beauty. The following discussion further highlights how make-up de-territorialises normative notions of femininity:



Figure 5.1. Analysing the use of make-up and posing.

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/photos/selfie-duck-human-face-women>

Bianca: This picture when I look at it as if she is trying to attract male attention.

Group: Sexy pose, make-up ... [speaking over each other]

Dali: And the way she is rolling her eyes, and the way she is looking at the camera, she's trying to show something, I don't know what but she's trying to show something.

Interviewer: Why are you saying she is trying to attract male attention?

Popo: Because the way she is looking at the camera, the way her face is positioned, the way she's holding up her hair, it's like she's saying damn! Look at me! She's looking fine.

Asorh: It's the look.

Sia: The way she is holding up her hair it is like yeeesss!

(FDG, grade 11)

Butler (1990) proposes the heterosexual matrix as a basis for gender constructions where men and women are afforded a stake in the matrix through their binary performances. Notable in this discussion is how girls choose to modify their femininity through intra-actions with non-human materials such as make-up. In doing so they claim a stake in the heterosexual desirability and further acquire an indefinite heterosexual status. According to Bianca, this 'sexy' selfie image resembles a woman wanting "male attention". Through "rolling her eyes" gazing at the camera and "holding her hair" she wants to be seen and recognised. This response demonstrates how online spaces operate as a space for young women to navigate and negotiate new sexual expressions as they have to constantly transform their looks to receive approval from the male gaze. Drawing from the new feminist concepts we see how sexy selfies in this discussion are produced through entanglements with materials and discursive practices. Relational materials in these entanglements include teenage girls' bodies, beauty modifications, femininity discourses, social media, sexy selfie images, the male gaze, and wanting to be seen. Furthermore, the use of words such as "damn!", "look at me!", and "yeess!" do not come as passive but illustrate affective forces through exclamations thus reflecting on abstract emotions and feelings as part of an assemblage. Through the production of assemblages of sexy selfies, teenage girls seek to dethrone unequal gender power relations where boys are viewed as dominant and girls as passive to sexual desires.

5.4 Constraining sexual capacities

This theme will unpack the intensities teenage girls are confronted with in the negotiations of beauty ideals and bodily appearances. Sub-themes emerging are "boobs, big butt, tiny waist" highlighting the slim-thick fit ideal body. The next sub-theme will be sexy selfies and sexy skin tones which will highlight the affective relational materials that constrain darker skin tones. Lastly, I will explore sexy selfies and fat-shaming ideals.

5.4.1. "Boobs, big butt, tiny waist": The slim-thick fit body ideals

Beauty standards have long been associated with how a woman's body is outwardly perceived by society. From pre-teen years till the end of life, girls and women are conditioned to

continuously alter their bodies to fit within the realm of desirable femininity (Bartky, 2014). In this section, I explore how teenage girls' bodies as a material entity are constrained by body ideals and fitspiration norms in their sexual becomings on social media platforms. I used an image (Figure 5.2) depicting a woman taking a selfie in her gym clothes to elicit and provoke a discussion surrounding what is an ideal sexy body in the production of a sexy selfie. According to Madlela (2019), perfect body ideals are heavily influenced by our societal norms, our culture, and historical contexts. For example, in South Africa during apartheid, black women were never permitted to participate in beauty pageants as desirable femininity was curated by racialised norms that depicted a white woman's body as the main standard of beauty (Madlela, 2019).



Figure 5.2: Ideal sexy body on social media platform.

Source: <https://www.istockphoto.com/illustrations/gym-selfie>

Studies argue that mainstream media from magazines, billboards, and television are all responsible for conceptualising the unattainable beauty ideal for young people. Contemporary contexts now hail social media as the main avenue where women and girls are pressured to look and behave in a particular way to be deemed as sexy and desirable (Chua & Chang, 2016). Teenage girls in the following focus group discussion demonstrated how social media's preferred sexy body type and shape is the one characterised by slim-thick and fitspiration ideals. They explain how interactions with such sexy selfies bring forth surveillance of their bodies which in turn breeds body dissatisfaction. As a result, their sexual becomings are territorialised.

Interviewer: *What do you feel upon seeing such a selfie on social media?*

Bianca: *You just feel like “Oh my God I wish I would start working out.”*

Group: *Yes.*

Phume: *Her ass, yoh I wish I could be like this!*

Bianca: *Okay, if I see this picture, I just think that this is the perfect body ...*

Interviewer: *What is a perfect body on social media?*

Dali: *Boobs, thin waist, big thighs.*

Bianca: *She is thick.*

Interviewer: *Okay, so you’re saying you guys feel insecure when you see such?*

Sia: *Yes, I just feel imperfect, have you seen Ice Spice? If I could be like that but I hate working out, doing squats and stuff like she said and going to the gym.*

Interviewer: *Okay, what does Ice Spice look like?*

Bianca: *She has a big butt so when she takes pictures, she wears a mini skirt and takes poses it just looks so perfect.*

(FDG, grade 11)

Participants in this discussion above emphasised how sexy selfies found on various social media platforms had personally influenced them in how they interacted with their bodies. One participant, Bianca, explains how her entanglement with such sexy selfies evokes fitspiration ideals as she notes how upon seeing such images, she wishes she could just “start working out.” The term ‘fitspiration’ comes from assembling the two words which are ‘fitness’ and ‘inspiration.’ According to Robinson et al. (2017), a fit body ideal maintains a shift from the predominant thin bodily ideals that dominate white mainstream media. While a fit body is still relatively thin, it is also toned and contains lean muscles. The recognisable rise into such ideals is owed to movements found on social media that encourage fit body ideals through exercise and diets to attain the new beauty standard. Instagram is cited as a popular source amongst young people that perpetuates selfie images of women and girls portraying the fit ideal body (McComb & Mills, 2022a). Fitspiration ideals are depicted to carry positive influences on girls’

bodies as they promote healthy habits and benefits. However, research studies articulate that there is a certain level of guilt induced by these fitness images mostly when girls fail to meet the desired standards of fitness and diet goals perpetuated by social media hashtags (McComb & Mills, 2022b). Furthermore, it is argued that the ambition to internalise such standards may be more detrimental than the aspiration for thin ideals. This is concurred by Sia when she illustrates that she feels “imperfect” because she doesn’t portray the slim-thick fit body shape and because she doesn’t like “going to the gym” and thus fears that she will never fit within heterosexual desirable discourses. Whereas according to Dali, characteristics of a perfect body are the one with “boobs, thin waist and big butts.” These are the makings of a slim-thick body ideal where certain body parts are gendered and victimised through sexualisation and objectification by the online community.

The slim-thick body type is portrayed as the hourglass shape which has a contrast of slim and “thick.” This body type is characterised as agentic in the reinforcement of heterosexual sexy, as such girls wish to have “boobs” and a “thin waist” but at the same time also feature the “big butt” which in some cases is unattainable for most women and girls. The ideal buttock remains a significant detail in the aesthetics of feminine beauty, the big buttock but not wide is favoured by the Caucasian community. Whereas Asian women are illustrated to prefer the symmetrical small buttock (Rasio et al., 2023). In this study, teenage girls agreed that the visible volumed, voluptuous and “big butt” was a prominent feature in the ideal body. Studies argue that such narratives motivate the rise of surgery enhancements such as butt augmentation visible on social media as many celebrities and woman fail to meet the slim-thick body type and take alternative routes as means to enhance their desirability status (Serdev, 2016). This highlights how women’s bodies are constantly under construction and altered in every way possible to serve a conventional beauty standard that satisfies the male gaze.

Sia further highlights her entanglements with celebrities in how she perceives the value of her own body. She mentions the American rapper “Ice Spice” who she recognises as a sex symbol through the objectification of her “big butt” in a “mini skirt.” According to Sia, the material entities within Ice Spice’s selfie assemblage (i.e., her body, technological devices, and fashion choices, including miniskirts) embody slim-thick ideals, which affectively capacitate the rapper’s sexuality. However, a contradictory experience is produced when teenage girls

personally network with the selfie image where their heterosexual desires are constrained through comparison with the rapper's sexualised image. Sex symbols in societies were historically characterised by thin bodies as the staple of heterosexual desirability, from magazines and television content, only thin bodies were epitomised and praised (Ward, 2016). In the early 2000s, women and teenage girls suffered from eating disorders while chasing the slim body ideal. Teenage girls in this study showcase a shift in Westernised body ideals through their idolisation of a slim-thick body type. This idolisation does not come without any negative effects (Jarman, 2024). Teenage girls illustrate that social media is agentic in producing territorialising affects in their navigations of sexuality. Moreover, their entanglement with sexy selfies promotes comparison to celebrities; in doing so they diminish their body esteem. The following focus group discussion further highlights similar anxieties brought by the ideal sexy body in sexy selfies:

***Leow:** Also, Miss on social media they put a lot of pressure on us to have similar bodies to them, because they ...*

***Interviewer:** Who are these people?*

***Leow:** People that are famous or children that are used to working out, you see them posting their body and looking great then you will also wish to look like them.*

***Judy:** Let me say for me Kim Kardashian-West ...*

***Group:** Yes, but she had surgery done*

***Judy:** Yes, but what I am trying to say Miss is that she has a figure that is super small and a thin waist, she is curvy in all the right places, she has a well-shaped body and when you check the followers, likes, aah ...*

***Anezy:** Also, Faith Nketsi.*

***Judy:** Oh, yes her as well but when you look at the number of followers, then you see that they have a large number of followers and that means to also get followers you also need to look like this.*

***Andy:** Also, the memes on Facebook Miss, they usually say a lady is supposed to be shaped like this and like that, and that also discourages you, that okay seeing as I'm not like that, does it mean that I'm not attractive? (FDG, grade 12)*

In the focus group discussion excerpt above, teenage girls in grade 12 elucidate how body ideals emanating from online spaces constrain their sexual capacities. Leow reflects on the “pressure” inflicted by social media’s sexy images. Drawing from the new feminist materialist concepts, this is where Leow demonstrates how intra-actions between humans and more-than-humans produce affects that limit what their bodies can become in expressions of sexiness. Affects as described by Fox and Bale (2018) are what network the relational ontologies within an assemblage. Digital technologies as pre-existing entities do not possess the ability to reshape teenage girl’s sexual becomings on their own, it is through the intra-actions within the assemblages i.e. bodies, objects, things, slim-thick fitness ideals, sexy selfies, social media, feelings, that affects territorialising sexual becomings are produced (Marston, 2023). The exposure to sexy selfies posted by celebrities and fitness influencers intensifies what teenage girls feel and think about their bodies.

When Judy speaks of an ideal body shape, she mentions “Kim Kardashian”, while she is aware that she enhanced her body through cosmetic “surgery” she further notes how her huge “followers” and “likes” result from her ideal slim-thick body shape and that puts her at pressure to “also look like this” if she wants to be deemed sexually attractive. Participants further mention “Faith Nketsi” as an idol for a perfect body shape. This highlights their entanglements with celebrities and their role in influencing teenage girls’ sexual becomings. In the case of sexual negotiations girls are entangled with affective materials on social media such as “likes” and “followers” to gauge the approval from the male gaze regarding their sexual performances. Moreover, teenage girls exhibit the entanglements between sexy selfies on social media and unrealistic beauty standards as they feel inadequate to meet the expectations of the perfect body emulated on social media platforms. Andy describes how the entanglements between humans (bodies) and non-humans (Facebook, memes and celebrities) “discourage” her and reinforce questions about her status of desirability. According to Grogan et al. (2018), girls on social media are constantly policed and scrutinised in their physical appearances, the social media/male gaze depicts women as “must look like this or like that,” one can never be heterosexually desired until they fit within this specific body type determined by the male gaze which demonstrates how these teenage girls’ bodies are not permitted capacities in how they express their online sexualities due to shifting normative beauty standards.

5.4.2. “If I was a yellow bone ...”: Sexy selfies and sexy skin tones

In this section, I demonstrate how teenage girls’ entanglements with human and more-than-human materials affectively constrain teenage girl’s sexual capacities. Drawing from both semi-structured interviews and photo-facilitated discussions, teenage girls elucidated how “yellow bone” notions form part of a sexy selfie assemblage. Here, yellow bone is a term used to describe a fairer skin tone. Throughout the history of South Africa, a lighter skin tone has been associated with the accumulation of a higher status and physical attractiveness. According to Shao (2023), social media platforms continue to reinforce beauty standards that initially emanated from Western ideals and racialised norms. Elias and Gill (2018) highlight how women and girls solidify non-human materials such as beauty applications and filters to achieve lighter skin tones in seek of heterosexual desirability. Participants illustrated how failure to ascribe to these designated heteronormative beauty ideals saw them being confronted by harsh realities on digital platforms such as being harassed and objectified. In the following using semi-structured individual interviews, I highlight how darker skin tones constrained teenage girls’ sexual capacities:

***Luyanda:** I have seen, maybe when you send your pictures, they say you are dark, they criticise you day in day out, others are called coffee. (Luyanda, 17, grade 10)*

***Zelwandle:** She posted a selfie pouting, with red lipstick on her mouth, she is dark in complexion. They said different things to her like she is ugly, this doesn’t suit her, many negative things. I felt so bad, why discriminate another person? (Zelwandle, 16 grade 10)*

***Phume:** That's happened like twice or once. Like one person like said, "I'm too dark." And that didn't make me feel good because I'm also human, so I wouldn't like it for someone to tell me I'm too dark or like I'm ugly and stuff ... (Phume, 17 grade 11)*

***Mini:** They have also, they would say things like you’re dark skinned and stuff like that, whilst others would say I was meant to be a Nigerian and all that just because of my skin colour, but I would pay all of that no mind because I am used to it. (Mini, 19, grade 12)*

Mahle: If I was a yellow bone maybe with the perfect eyes the perfect lips and everything boys would really get it, they would really want me to give them my attention. And honestly speaking these girls who are yellow bones and whatsoever. They are just being used by these boys. And then the dark ones they just make fun of them which is not fair and it's not right because they make fun of them in class out there in social media everywhere, they can't even feel safe anymore. They just have suicidal thoughts Some of them end up killing themselves just because of how people judge them by their looks. (Mahle, 17 grade 11)

These teenage girls' experiences emphasise how views of sexual desirability are entangled with beauty ideals stemming from heteronormative beauty standards and racialised norms. Luyanda mentions how pictures of girls displaying darker skin tones on social media platforms are vilified and "criticised," going as far as calling them "coffee." This demonstrates the racial abuse teenage girls are confronted with in online societies, the use of the word 'coffee' is not inert but produces affects that intensify bodily experiences, seeking to humiliate and degrade girls who are not lighter in skin tone. According to Ringrose et al. (2019), girls with darker skin tones in white-dominated contexts are expected to put more work into achieving sexiness. Black girls are confronted with humiliating remarks such as being called not "beautiful" or "luxurious and "skanky" (Ringrose et al., 2019).

Moreover, Zelwandle mentions a girl who posted a selfie with "red lipstick" and speaks of how she was faced with harsh comments problematising the use of the lipstick colour on her darker skin shade citing it is making her "ugly" and doesn't "suit her." Her experience showcases how femininity is highly objectified and controlled through its entanglements with social media and sexy selfies, the use of non-human materials such as "red lipstick" was in pursuit to de-territorialise normative assumptions of femininity. However, the darker skin tone simultaneously incapacitated negotiations of sexuality. According to Treviños-Rodríguez and Diaz-Soloaga (2023), feminine beauty ideals are characterised by whiter skin tones, these are women and girls who are portrayed as more beautiful, neater, and purified. Therefore, it comes as no surprise how Phume illustrated that she "didn't feel too good" when they ridiculed her, profiling her as "too dark" that cast her outside of normative notions of sexual attractiveness. Mini's experience demonstrates how racialised comments become a material entity that

territorialises her sexual becomings through positioning her as a Nigerian because of her darker skin shade. In the South African context, the apartheid system legislated for identity to be curated by racial physical attributes including skin colour. Whiteness was associated with socio-economic benefits thus aspirations to attain such standards emerged (Anjari, 2023). The materiality of racialised comments that position her as a Nigerian highlight the xenophobic and racist intra-actions. It is evident how social media contexts reflect the physical spaces of South Africa where issues of skin colour, race and ethnicity intertwine to produce complex racialised dynamics.

According to Spratt (2023) amongst British women light skin privilege is synonymous to white skin privilege, where black people who are lighter skinned are afforded better social and job treatments similar to those who are white in race. Mahle reflects on how a fairer skin shade privileges women and girls in the heterosexual matrix. According to her, if she was a “yellow bone” she would be deemed as desirable by and for the male gaze as she cites “boys would really want me to give them my attention”. The term “yellow bone” produces powerful affects through its enactments with digital platforms. It carries the ability to territorialise darker-skinned teenage girls’ capacities for heterosexual desire through degradation and humiliation (Janak et al., 2023). This narrative signals how contemporary contexts are persistently subjected to racialised norms emanating from the post-apartheid era where yellow bones become the hierarchy to which femininity is judged. Moreover, Mahle further demonstrates how darker-skinned teenage girls can fall victim to “suicidal thoughts” or end up “killing themselves” as a result of judgements from the online male gaze. This highlights how girls’ sexual capacities are territorialised through their entanglements with social media platforms where these experiences can end up distressing their emotional and psychological health (Adames, 2023). Drawing from photo-facilitated focus group discussions teenage girl participants further shared some of their online experiences concerning how darker-skinned girls are sexually constrained:



Figure 5.3. Darker skin and fat constraints in sexy selfies.

Source: <https://depositphotos.com/vector/im-beautiful-sexy-african-american-fat-girl-photographed-yourself-big-woman-in-cartoon-style-fashion-147481177/>

Dali: *Some guys comment with degrading comments like if I were to find you I would've impregnated you and we would've had a lighter-skinned baby. And I would be like what does my skin colour have to do with it? That's another thing, girls that are dark-skinned, get treated less then. Sometimes when I ask some guys that I know why they aren't asking out a dark lady out that we may see or that I think is beautiful, they say she is black and I don't want her, I want someone like you. So that's the thing, dark people like to have light baby, but a baby's skin tone doesn't come with anything different for you, it is very annoying and irritating.*

Naledi: *If you were to go onto Instagram then you would see, Instagram is the leading social media, they are all about light skin girls over there.*

Bianca: *That's true.*

Dali: *If you're not a light skin girl you're not supposed to be there.*

Popo: *That's true, just like TikTok, if you were to scroll and see who gets most likes you'll find that the light-skinned girls get more likes than the dark-skinned Huns, that's how you see that there is a small portion that cares to compliment dark-skinned people, because honestly speaking there are dark skinned ladies that are just beautiful. (FDG, grade 11)*

Participants in this focus group discussion provided insights into how skin tones can affectively capacitate and incapacitate heterosexual romantic relationships. Mahle describes how through her entanglements with online comments she is deemed desirable by the male gaze because of her lighter skin tone. She further illustrates how men sexually desire her not for her being or body but for the prospects of their lineage, to have “lighter skin babies”. Such notions are supported by literature. One study by Harper and Choma (2019) articulates how women of lighter skin tones are sexually more desired by men of a higher status. Furthermore, in a study by Makobela (2019), one male participant illustrated wanting a lighter-skinned baby so they would be omitted from the psychological negative effects produced by darker skin tones. Other participants in this discussion mentioned how non-human material entities such as Instagram and TikTok produced territorialising affects for girls who have darker skin tones. Through a high number of “likes” girls of yellow bone notions are affirmed their sexual desirability while girls who are darker skinned only get a “small portion of compliments.” In the next excerpts drawn from semi-structured individual interviews, participants describe their experiences in seeking to de-territorialise notions of darker skin tones:

Anezy: I was pressurising my mom telling her that I need something to make the kiwi [dark inner thighs] disappear. I was just trying everything, watching videos on how to make it disappear, doing everything that they told me to do.

Interviewer: What did you do firstly?

Anezy: [giggling] Okay I took a lemon and turmeric and mixed it together and then apply. It didn't work and then I asked my mom to buy me Magnolia tissue oil and spirit, I tried everything, and it didn't work, I tried everything until now that I got myself something and it is working ... (Anezy, grade 12)

Naledi: My aunt wants to be a yellow bone by force! There's literally this one time but like the creams they apply just burn your skin. [......] Not that she's dark-skinned, no, she's just brown. From that to like to a straight white and my other aunt said to her “Look how white your legs are, in reality you just want to be a white person now.” ... And then apparently, there is an injection she took for her skin to be light, to get cleared up and be a little bit lighter. Apparently when you look at her, the arms and the legs, it was like she fell or something because she had bruises all over, like all over. So, like for

two weeks she had to, she had to wear long-sleeved clothes to cover up that. So I feel like most people feel pressure from being bullied due to the fact that they are not light-skinned and whatnot. (Naledi, grade 11)

According to Deleuze and Guattari (1988), existing material entities within an assemblage are not fixed. However, it is through their intra-actions with other material entities such as things, objects, and feelings that they find the possibility of becoming something else. Foucault characterises this view as technologies of self. He proposes it as where an individual is allowed freedom to re-invent and modify themselves, their thoughts and feelings in pursuit of serving self-presentations that are consistent with the individual's contemporary settings (Foucault, 1988; Lemke, 2015). This notion of fluidity and self-re-invention corresponds with Anezy and Naledi's aunt's experience. Anezy disrupts the limitations imposed by her darker inner thighs (kiwi) through her intra-actions with more-than-human materials (turmeric, lemon, Magnolia tissue oil and spirit). Whereas Naledi's aunt uses the "injection". These materials are not merely passive but produce capacities for their darker-skinned bodies to transform into a "yellow bone" notion and confirm their sexual desirability. As a result, the assemblage that attempted to confine them within the boundaries of passive sexuality is de-territorialised. However, it is notable how this transformation carries momentary empowerment in Naledi's aunt's experience, the use of the "injection" to "lighten skin" can be categorised as a bleaching practice which carries detrimental long-term effects on the health of the body such as "bruises" on skin which results in territorialising affects.

5.4.3. "Hold your fat tummy in!": Sexy selfies and fat-shaming

This section highlights how non-normative bodies are sexually constrained because of their entanglements with social media platforms. The image (Figure 5.3) used on the last sub-theme further provoked discussions surrounding fat-shaming experiences:

Amy Thando: Another lady commented that I should hold my stomach in.

Interviewer: Why do you think she said that?

Amy Thando: I don't know, but maybe it is because Miss when I finish eating, I just allow my tummy go, I don't have this thing of when I finish food, I have to hold it in and I just let my stomach be free Miss.

Group: [giggles]

Amy Thando: So, miss now I must always, okay, Miss, when I am taking a picture, I now have to always hold my stomach in all because as a girl is not supposed to have a stomach as big as mine. So, Miss the lady commented and said "Hold your fat tummy in!"

Rato: Like when you go home and after not seeing them for a while and then they have these body-shaming remarks, like "Oh, you're so fat, what do you eat?"

Lelo: Others comment a lot when you gain weight, some say you're pregnant whilst others say you are on the injection ...

Group: You're on the injection, yes ... [speaking all at once]

(FGD, grade 12)

Teenage girls in this discussion highlighted how social media acts as a vehicle in the production of fat-shaming experiences. Amy Thando discusses how these fat-shaming ideals are produced through her entanglements with non-human entities such as social media, comments and sexy selfies. Amy Thando further describes that she was subjected to verbal aggression due to her "fat stomach". She cites her intra-actions with things like "food and eating" as a constraint in her heterosexual experiences. Fat bodies of women on social media platforms are viewed as not agentic in the performances of sexiness. Fahs (2018) argued that women fear getting fat more than anything in their constructions of attractiveness as they cited fat bodies are deemed by society as "monstrous, non-functioning, frankly disgusting and smelly" (p. 257). As Butler (1990) suggests, gender is a performance of repeated actions guided by the heterosexual matrix, where these performances are consistent with contemporary societal norms. The online expectation that women or girls must always "hold their fat tummy in" reflects a gendered act committing gender binary norms that when entangled with social media platforms restricts girls from becoming sexual.

Rato, in her experience, showcases how gender binary norms are further reinforced and regulated by family, through “body-shaming remarks” and asking, “Oh you’re so fat, what do you eat?” Teenage girls’ fat bodies are further territorialised and the possibilities of what their bodies can become in the realm of heterosexuality are restricted. According to Lelo, bodies becoming fat authorise unwarranted comments from social media platforms. Comments mis-conceptualisation a fat body as ‘pregnancy’ or the “injection” indicates the negative experiences confronted by non-normative bodies through stigmatisation and dehumanisation of their fat bodies. Furthermore, the conflating of fat bodies with the “injection” (a form of birth control) displays the negative attitudes towards the use of contraceptive methods as they are deemed to perpetuate “weight gain.” This proves how fat-shaming ideals are materialised through intra-actions of bodies, sexy selfies, social media, and comments.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated experiences of how teenage girls negotiate and navigate sexuality on social media platforms using sexy selfie images. Teenage girls are constantly looking for new ways to reinvent themselves with hopes for relevance in the virtual world. As a result, there is evidence showing new forms of femininities that have emerged in digital spaces with the goal to accumulate agency that will challenge traditional norms rooted in hetero-patriarchal ideals. Modern contexts provide opportunities for girls to explore their sexuality and give endless opportunities for their body sexual becomings. Data was explored using the new feminist concepts which allowed equal analysis on both the human and non-human subject.

The first theme explored experiences concerning teenage girls’ digital entanglements with digital technologies. It was found how digital technologies acts as inseparable entities with teenage girls’ bodies, thus smartphones are agentic in teenage girls’ sexual experiences. In the second theme, teenage girl participants when defining what ‘sexy’ meant to them alluded to contrasting narratives, while the hypersexualised body showing buttocks, breasts, tilting head poses was characterised as sexy. Other girls stated that the natural face and classy look showcased a sexy selfie. Third theme highlighted how the sexy selfie is an assemblage of human and non-human materials that equally capacitate or incapacitate teenage girls sexual becomings. Sexy selfies are ‘rhizomatic’ in nature thus produce endless possibilities in

becoming sexy. In this regard, it was noted how teenage girls become sexual and powerful through intra-actions from the device, physical settings, social media, feelings, and sexy selfies. Through self-sexualisation and objectification, teenage girls aimed to take autonomy of their own bodies and dethrone normative discourses that place them as innocent and vulnerable to sexual discourses. It was further found in the following sub-theme how make-up and filters act as relational materials within a sexy assemblage that de-territorialise normative contestations of beauty. Filters and make-up were used to enhance self-esteem and allowed feminine modifications which afforded girls a heterosexual desirability status.

In negotiations and navigations of sexuality the fourth theme showcased that social media simultaneously constrains teenage girls' sexual capacities. The next sub-theme posited that girls who are yellow bones and conformed to racialised norms of beauty were afforded high stakes in the heterosexual matrix whereas darker skin tones constrained teenage girls new sexual becomings. Social media epitomises the slim-thick fit ideal where girls who do not portray the ideal body characterised by boobs, big butt and tiny waist are casted outside of feminine desirability. Furthermore, non-normative bodies are ridiculed and dehumanised through digital affordances such as comments and likes as fat bodies are deemed undesirable by the virtual world.

Chapter Six: Data analysis

6.1. Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted how teenage girls' negotiations of sexuality through sexy selfies disrupt normative notions that place them as mere passive and submissive. Additionally, it explored the constraints teenage girls are confronted with in negotiating their sexual representations. In this chapter, I seek to explore data presenting gendered harms teenage girls are confronted with when displaying their hypersexualised identities. As teenage girls seek to challenge and resist normative notions of heterosexuality, they are equally constrained by these normative binary norms that seek to scrutinise, police and dictate how they present themselves in cyberspaces. I begin by outlining sexual violence experiences confronted by teenage girls on social media. In addition, I will highlight how hetero-patriarchal norms are responsible for the perpetuation of persistent gendered violence emanating from social media. In the following, themes and sub-themes that will guide the analysis of data are outlined:

6.1.1. Sexual violence assemblages

- Boys only like your picture when half-naked: Sexualising girls' bodies
- Posted her half-naked picture wearing panties and a bra, so those who knew her, harassed her
- Teenage girls' sexting experiences

6.1.2. Hetero-patriarchal norms: Territorialising girls' bodies

- Heterosexuality and sexual double standards
- Girl respectability/ victim blaming
- Christianity and purity culture

6.2. Sexual violence assemblages

In this theme, I seek to highlight the various forms of sexual violence teenage girls are confronted with on social media. Compelling data displayed various experiences of girls' victimisation through the umbrella of image-based sexual abuse. Drawing from new feminist concepts, I explored how sexual harassment is an assemblage of bodies and technology, the male gaze, and gender power relations. The sub-themes that emanated are firstly the sexualising of girls' bodies. Next is "posted her half-naked picture wearing panties and a bra, so those who knew her, harassed her" and lastly it will be sexting experiences of teenage girls.

6.2.1 "Boys only like your picture when half-naked": Sexualising girls' bodies

According to Fox and Alldred (2015), sexuality is an assemblage of bodies, things, technologies, feelings, expressions, and abstract ideals. In this section, teenage girls reveal how sexualisation in their experiences reflects as an assemblage of their bodies, sexy selfies, social media, comments, catfishing, male gaze, and fashion. Teenage girls on social media platforms are confronted by contradictory experiences when navigating their hypersexual identities on social media. On one hand, they exhibit the desire to be perceived as sexually attractive by the online gaze, whereas on the other hand, they confront the possibility of their bodies being viewed as sex objects that are only good for the satisfaction of heterosexual men. This is what Gill (2019) calls the "double entanglement" where teenage girls are empowered and disempowered through performing sexualised identities. The following excerpts drawn from semi-individual interviews illustrate relational materials in the girls' experience of sexualisation:

Interviewer: How do you think girls wearing minimal clothing get treated by boys on social media?

Mahle: They just degrade you. They just say, "We know your inner thighs. We know how your stomach looks. We know how your vagina is structured or how it's positioned. Yes." (Mahle, 17, grade 11)

Mini: *Okay I normally see on Facebook, like you see a girl wearing a short skirt and is wearing a cropped top and they don't have a great body shape; boys are usually like why you are wearing short stuff because you know that you don't have a great body shape, your body is not fresh and it doesn't allow you to wear skimpy short outfits. That often leads children into committing suicide because they start having a low self-esteem (Mini, 18, grade 12)*

Phume: *Boys mostly love what they see so if your body is very much admiring they do comment mostly on those pictures but if you with your full clothing they'll just be like Oh, okay. That's a picture. But when you're half naked, they like that picture so much that it's mostly boys that comment on it. It's not mostly girls. (Phume, 17, grade 11)*

Naledi: *They've seen an image of you. For example, let's just make an example about boys in this school, they've seen the image of you without clothes but in a bikini. Without school uniform. so, they will be like "Oh wow! So this is how you look like without uniform," then they start praising you in such a way that you think they are being friendly only to find they want to sleep with you. (Naledi, 17, grade 11)*

Here teenage girl participants reflect on how social media is agentic in reinforcing heteronormative norms that produce unequal gendered relations. South African spaces are still largely entangled with traditional norms where the value of girls is evaluated within the scope of innocence and purity (Bhana et al., 2019). As a result, hegemonic masculinities view women who express online hypersexualised identities as “dirty” and “immoral” (Clark & Duschinsky, 2020). Hence, Mahle mentions how boys on social media will “degrade” teenage girls through their body parts. Online comments emphasising the “vagina” and “inner thighs” reflect how the bodies of teenage girls are objectified through the assemblages of male gaze and traditional binary norms. Mini reflects on the misogynistic views men express on social media that rate teenage girls’ bodies according to their “shapes” and sizes, men dictate who should be viewed as desirable and who should be restricted within heterosexual desirability. However, these views from the male gaze produce affects that can provoke “suicide” and “low self-esteem.” Similarly, Phume and Naledi demonstrate how boys treat girls as sexual objects that are only good “to sleep with”. This tells us that social media perpetuates unequal gendered relations where men treat girls’ bodies as their property with no agency. Marche (2016) confirms this

view by speaking of the “Red Pill” movement which is cited as hegemonic masculinity that promotes modern misogyny. Digital technologies are saturated with hateful and sexual comments from men against any woman who displays their bodies. In the excerpt below Dali (17) narrates her experience that territorialised her sexual capacities:

Dali: I just didn't like the way that I would post pictures for strangers to comment, so the last time I had Facebook, I posted a picture I was wearing a white top and underneath it was showing my bra. So, this whole part was showing ...

Interviewer: Which whole part, the stomach?

Dali: Yes, the stomach was out and then I just posted it, I didn't think much of it because I just happened to like the picture, but the comments that the men were making I just didn't like them. The sexual comments and I was just like, nah, I just post for fun, and I like to just admire my body and not for people to comment sexually.

Interviewer: Okay, so what type of comments were there?

Dali: “You're so sexy, oh I wish I had that”, I just felt uncomfortable so then I was just like no.

(Dali, 17, grade 11)

Dali's experience highlights the impact of sexualising comments on teenage girls' negotiations of sexuality. Through the unsolicited and unwanted comments, it is notable how the male gaze can use girls however they deem appropriate without any consideration for their individuality. Her statement further points to how the non-human (Facebook comments, sexy selfies) intra-actively produced sexual male entitlement and control of her body. Through the 'posthuman phallic touch' of sexual comments her body was reduced to just being a commodity, a 'piece of meat' materialising harassment to her body which in turn constrained her sexual capacities (Van der Tuin, 2011; Renold & Ringrose, 2018).

6.2.2. “Posted her half-naked picture wearing panties and a bra, so those who knew her, harassed her”

According to Behnke (2017), sexual harassment entails gender violence that subjects the victim to sexual behaviour without their consent. Sexual harassment that emanates from online spaces is known as cyber-sexual harassment. This section explores how harm and sexual harassment manifest through digital technologies and further intensifies how teenage girls negotiate and express their online sexuality. Mayeza and Bhana (2021) state that boys normalise saying nasty sexual comments to girls passing in physical schooling contexts which reflects on their sexual entitlement over girls’ bodies. This normalisation is found to also dominate online spaces as teenage girls highlighted how social media aims to further amplify heteronormative norms that position men and boys as dominant over women and girls. Participants described having diverse experiences with cyber-sexual harassment. For example, ‘sexy’ selfie images of half-naked bodies belonging to teenage girls were subjected to harassment and vilified comments:

Interviewer: Have you ever felt unsafe or harassed on social media, because of posting a sexy selfie or someone that you know who has been harassed because of a sexy selfie?

Dali: No, I have never been bullied for posting a picture but I have seen people get bullied for posting a picture, it is maybe when you see that, on Facebook when I used Facebook, you see a girl maybe those ones were just horrible. I also just looked and was like sick. It could be that maybe she is only wearing a panty and you can tell that she is between 13 or 14 years old, she is wearing only a panty and no bra... So, obviously the guys are going to sexualise her and now people are bashing her, no go wear something, this is inappropriate, as ugly as you’re then you go and do this, sies this is disgusting, you don’t respect yourself and all that. The way they say it is painful but what they’re saying makes a lot of sense. (Dali, 17, grade 11)

Asorh: My cousin posted her half-naked picture wearing panties and a bra, so those who knew her, harassed her, saying you do not take a picture like this and show that it’s you. Telling her that she was supposed to hide her face. (Asorh, 17, grade 11)

Nomonde: There is someone who has been harassed/ abused because she posted a half-naked pic on social media (laughing) she is in my class. She felt harassed/ abused and

nobody was on her side. We told her that she was wrong, she was not supposed to post that kind of picture on social media. (Nomonde, 16, grade 10)

In these experiences, we see how teenage girls' bodies are affectively constrained by other material entities like mobile devices, "panty," age, objects, harmful comments, Facebook, boys, and social norms in producing sexualised identities. Within these formations of multiple assemblages, the potential to become sexual was rejected by experiences of cyber-sexual harassment. When posting "half-naked" bodies, teenage girls were in pursuit of sexual desires and pleasure. However, upon their intra-actions with materialised comments and binary norms depicting that they should cover their bodies to remain respectable, their desires were constrained. Research studies highlight how boys are the primary perpetrators of cyber-sexual harassment (Arafa et al., 2018). However, it is evident in these scenarios that teenage girls were complicit in perpetuating similar traits of violence. Both Asorh and Nomonde's responses highlighted how they agreed with blaming the victim for the harassment inflicted on them. Such notions highlight the networks of victim blaming and shaming where misogynistic ideals assemble with girls. The material comments rooted in internalised misogyny reflect how girls reaffirm the heterosexual regime that brings forth surveillance and scrutiny of girls' sexual pleasures to devalue their bodies while championing men's sexual desires (Banet-Weiser & Maddocks, 2023). The following excerpts reflect digital affordances that intensify cyber-sexual harassment:

Lethiwe: Okay, so there's the girl stays near my home. She is a party animal and is taking drugs. This girl takes a picture wearing short clothes (ingubo eyincane) showing cleavage and posted the picture on Facebook, there is something called Brazzers.

Interviewer: What is Brazzers? Is it a porn site?

Lethiwe: Yes, she posted her picture on that site and there is this boy who stays near my home, he then screen-shotted that and posted it on Facebook criticising this girl, we all saw that. He said all bad things about this girl, like that this girl is taking drugs, boys are playing with her body, uvithikile (she's finished). He posted her picture and even said her name.

(Lethiwe, 16, grade 10)

Various technological functions permit social media users to engage with image-based sexual harassment. This is what Boyd (2014) terms as “technological affordances”. These affordances allow instant circulation of content to a greater number of people in less time. Ringrose et al. (2022) explore some of these ‘digital affordances’ features as sharing, forwarding, tagging, reposting, downloading, and screenshotting. This is evident in Lethiwe’s experience, the affective materials comprised of bodies, selfies, “short clothes”, “Facebook”, “screenshotting” and the “Brazzers” pornographic site. All these materials were equally agentic in producing territorialising affects on the victim’s body. The labour that went into acquiring, posting and sharing the image without consent showcases the premeditated intent carried by the perpetrator to sexually harass. Therefore, the perpetrator conformed to heteronormative constructions that depict men accumulating power and status through dominance and violence over women. He was complicit in South African framings that highlight masculinity as dangerous (Shefer et al., 2015). In the following excerpt, Popo was confronted by another form of cyber-sexual harassment:

Popo: Well, I posted, the one that I was telling you about that had around 7 hundred and something likes, well someone commented and just embarrassed me there in the comments. They said to me that I think I’m beautiful and people are sleeping with me and all that. They further went on to say I shouldn’t think that I’m not beautiful or better at their expense because I had not responded to his comment ...

Interviewer: Okay, so what do you think was the cause for them to do all of that?

Popo: They were asking me out, because also on Facebook they inboxed me and I blocked them, then he went to my other Facebook account and I still told him that what you’re doing is wrong because you’re embarrassing me there, you’re commenting on me publicly and people are just watching. Then he sent me a WhatsApp and I got to know that oh this is the person who was embarrassing me, because boys now have taken a liking to this thing of asking us out on Facebook under the pretence of being girls. They create an account with pictures of a girl and there was someone who also did the very same thing.

Popo narrates that she was sexually violated through the method of cyberstalking. According to Walsh et al. (2024), cyberstalking is another form of harassment that refers to repeated actions of online harassment usually performed by men to solicit romantic or sexual gratifications or as a means of revenge against girls. The cyber-stalker in this scenario looked to establish romantic relations with the participant but became violent when his plea comments were ignored. We see how the perpetrator reinforced dominant heteronormative norms that suggest girls must remain submissive and passive to men's sexual desires. The perpetrator was aware of the power he carried over the girl participant, as he was persistent in his actions to stalk and harass through multiple social media platforms. The material entity in the form of comments portraying harmful language, for example, "people are sleeping with you," carried territorialising affects in the essence that power was stripped away from the victim and relegated to the perpetrator through slut-shaming. Societal norms supporting hegemonic masculinities are rooted in men's sexual entitlement: they disregard women and girls and discourage punishment and discipline over men, thus creating unequal power relations (Kavishe & Naidu, 2023). Therefore, teenage girls' narratives reflect how social media functions as a material context where manifestations of cyberstalking harassment and violence are validated.

6.2.3. Teenage girls' sexting experiences

Sexting is articulated as "content that is sexually explicit communicated through digital affordances such as text messages, smartphones or social media platforms" (Ringrose et al., 2013 p. 9). Research studies argue that the sexting phenomenon is highly infiltrated by gendered norms where women are positioned as victims and men the perpetrators (Ringrose and Harvey, 2015). In this section, teenage girl participants detailed how their sexting experiences were produced through relational materials such as technologies, bodies, sexy selfies, sexual coercion ideals, and male sexual entitlement. Although there has been empirical evidence suggesting that girls are active participants in the production of sexting experiences, it is noteworthy that there are more pleasurable experiences cited by boys whereas girls are persistently met with limiting expectations (Van Ouystel et al., 2017). Teenage girls in this data elucidated to sharing sexy selfies within their heterosexual relationships. However, in doing so, they were affectively constrained in negotiating safe sexual expressions. Drawing from a

semi-structured individual interview, Summer who was 18 at the time of her interview voiced out her experience concerning sexual coercion and sexual violence facilitated through technology:

Summer: I felt bad that I sent him my picture, I regretted sending it.

Interviewer: Really?

Summer: Yes, I questioned myself on why I sent it to him.

Interviewer: Okay, why did you feel bad, is it because of his comments or was there something else?

Summer: He commented well but... [brief pause] he wanted me to send him every day and he also asked for a picture of my boobs, and that's when I began regretting why I had sent him even before because now he is asking for pictures all the time.

(Summer, 18, grade 11)

According to Ousystel et al. (2017), there is enormous pressure for teenage girls from their romantic partners to send sexualised images than their boy age mates. In their study, Lippman and Campbell (2014) explain this “pressure” as ‘coercive sexting’ or ‘commitment manipulation’ in the context of romantic relations. For both teenagers and adults, the pressure to share intimate images in intimate romantic relationships was found to be linked with another form of violence termed intimate partner violence (IPV). Summer’s experience showcases this sexual abuse, she details how she was a willing participant in the inception of her sexting experience. However, as a result of relations with other material entities such as the boy, pictures, technology, and coercive sexting ideals, affects were produced that resulted in her “regretting” the whole experience. It is noteworthy that after sharing the sexual selfie Summer was the one who was left with guilt and shame, she blamed herself for the boy asking for “boobs” and more sexual “pictures all the time.” This is recorded by Naezer and van Oosterhout (2021) as an influence from gendered sexual norms, where “boys will be boys” is a concept that gives freedom to boys to portray hypersexual identities because of their “raging hormones” whereas girls are not afforded the same narrative. Furthermore, this highlights how social media platforms as non-human entities can equally fuel hegemonic masculinities to pursue

heterosexual power through the subordination of teenage girls. In the following excerpts, teenage girl participants further illustrate their experiences emerging from sexting:

***Interviewer:** Have you ever shared a sexy selfie before or has anyone shared with you?*

***Rato:** There is a child by my homesteads that shared a sexy selfie and sent it for a boy, the boy sent it to his friends shame ... (sigh) and she became a laughing stock. So that's where I got to learn that this thing of sharing pictures has terrible after-effects. (Rato, 18, grade 12)*

***Naledi:** Not online, but I know someone who sent it (sexy selfie) to a boyfriend of theirs. And then as time went by, thing started getting bad between them, then her guy started threatening her about those pictures that if she continues to plan on breaking up with him, he's going to expose her. (Naledi, 17, grade 11)*

Here, Rato and Naledi both narrate how romantic relationships with young people perpetuate sexting experiences. According to Rato her resistance against sexting is founded on her witnessing a girl becoming “a laughingstock” due to a boy non-consensually sharing her “sexy selfie.” This statement reflects the double standards that take place within the sexting regime, girls are confronted by slut-shaming remarks and boys are hailed supreme for receiving nude pics from their girlfriends. This is further resonated by Ringrose et al. (2022), who state that teenage boys who share sexual images of girls are regarded as “cool” and are not confronted by the similar realities of slut-shaming and victim-blaming experienced by girls. Naledi shares the risky consequences of sexting, even though the sexual image in her experience was shared within a ‘consensual’ romantic relationship, the trust was immediately violated when things started “going bad” from the girl’s desire to end the relationship.

According to Henry et al. (2023), men can assert their power and further use intimate sexual images as a means to entrap women and girls in abusive relationships. Moreover, the boyfriend “threatened” to expose the sexual image which feeds into a form of image-based sexual violence termed as “revenge porn”. This is where following a break-up, a former partner, usually a man, will publicly share a sexual image belonging to their ex-partner (usually a woman) in online spaces without their knowledge or consent (McGlynn et al., 2017). The South

African legislation acknowledges this as sexual abuse as the victims can suffer from immense emotional and psychological distress such as suicidal thoughts and depression (Makgonyana, 2022). However, many young people place the blame and responsibility on the young girls and feel they deserve it for not practising caution when sharing sexual images as sexting is generally viewed to be outweighed by risks more than benefits.

According to Amundsen (2021), cyber-flashing can be categorised as another form of image-based sexual abuse. Cyber-flashing is explained as “non-consensual exposure of male genitals that operates to cause offence and/or to express a sense of male sexual or aggrieved entitlement” (p. 1470). From a semi-structured individual interview, Nomonde describes her cyber-flashing experience and how she negotiated to challenge the act:

Nomonde: He sent me his private part, so I just blocked him.

Interviewer: Where did he send it?

Nomonde: On Facebook inbox, he said I am beautiful, and he loves me things like that. He said he usually sees me, but I didn't know him. He wants me to visit him, after that he sent me his private part. I don't know whether he thought maybe I will be impressed by that. I just blocked him. (Nomonde, 16, grade 10).

In this experience, Nomonde states how she felt violated by receiving an unsolicited image of a penis which she terms as a “private part.” Digital affordances such as the “inbox” feature on the Facebook social networking site have the potential to inflict direct sexual violence on teenage girls wherever they may be. This is articulated by Renold and Ringrose (2018) as the ‘posthuman digital touch’ where they state that comments on social media can translate as a physical touch where powerful reinforcements of hetero-patriarchal norms are visible. However, it is notable how Nomonde resisted the sexual violence in the form of a dick pic through immediate “blocking”.

6.3. Hetero-patriarchal norms: Territorialising girls' bodies

Sub-themes emerging from this theme emphasise how the ascribed patriarchal norms are consistently found on social media spaces to constrain what teenage girls' bodies can do or become. Sub-themes emerging are heterosexuality and double standards. This will be followed by an exploration of girl respectability and victim-blaming. Lastly, Christianity and purity culture will be discussed.

6.3.1. Heterosexuality and sexual double standards

Heterosexuality is considered a primary source in the production of sexual double standards. It fractionates women and men according to their sexual behaviours where there are classifications that illustrate femininity as passive and masculinity as active which results in asymmetrical gender power dynamics (Sennott & Majola, 2017). Normative gendered expectations hold the belief that men are programmed through evolution to be sexually superior and active, whereas women should remain submissive and cannot be agentic in navigations of sexuality (Davis & Arnocky, 2022). Research has been recorded throughout the South African context depicting various negative experiences underpinned by sexual double standards. Teenage girls in this study highlight how their entanglements with digital technologies (social media, sexy selfies) produce affective materials in the form of sexual double standards that seek that territorialise what their bodies are or can become:

Thuso: Uh, [brief pause], boys it is a norm for them to showcase their six packs and muscles, it comes across to people as a norm and when it is done by a girl revealing her body, then the commotion begins. So, I can say that there is a difference because in the olden days we grew up to girls wearing long skirts and not being allowed to wear pants and all that, so that prejudice hasn't ended. There is still some that believe in it. (Thuso, 17, grade 11)

Andy: Oh, the boys have it better because with girls it's not better at all. Like exposing your breasts, it is just that we grew up knowing that you do not show your breasts, because also me when I hit puberty, and my breasts were developing I was told that

they are to be hidden and boys were always walking shirtless by then. (Andy, 18, grade 12)

***Lethiwe:** Girls are treated different because there are other boys who don't want their girlfriends to show their bodies to other people like posting sexy pictures. So, they feel bad when they know that there are other boys who know their girlfriends' bodies, maybe worse when they have slept with that girl. (Lethiwe, 16, grade 10)*

***Yolly:** [Clears throat], okay boys they, yoh, I don't know how to put it but boys don't normally get criticised on what they post, or their pictures but with girls it could be that no what you're wearing doesn't suit you or it suits them and all that. So, there would be that. (Yolly, 17, grade 12)*

In these excerpts above teenage girl participants demonstrate how sexual double standards are produced through the assemblages of bodies, fashion, and societal norms. For Thuso, it is a “norm” for boys to show their six-packs and “muscles.” She recollects how societal views from previous eras are still relevant in modern contexts, in her reference she notes how fashion (long skirts) was used to conceal sexual expressions for girls while boys never suffered the same judgements. Similarly, Andy highlights how societal norms are influential in perpetuating gendered norms about her body. In her experience, “puberty” signals a stage where extreme regulation of girls’ bodies begins while boys are never policed. During this stage girls are expected to cover their “breasts” while boys remain “shirtless”. According to Lethiwe girls are judged in negative ways when posting sexy selfies on social media as they are assumed to be the property of their “boyfriends”, this statement follows heteronormative norms that lock girls into prescribed traditional norms. This reflects how in heterosexual assemblages, boys are privileged with the power to control and subordinate girls’ bodies. Yolly describes different sets of rules that regulate the processing of posting pictures for both girls and boys. According to Yolly, boys are never challenged with criticism and scrutiny in their posts meanwhile girls’ online sexual expressions are under the microscopic eyes of the male gaze.

6.3.2 Female respectability and victim blaming

Female respectability in the context where the study took place is highly saturated with heteronormative norms and cultural norms. In this section, the term ‘respect’ was recorded in most conversations where participants alluded that “respect” regulates and reinforces traditional norms where their bodies should remain private and not displayed as flesh for everyone in public online spaces. Therefore, this term supplied powerful affects that intensified how teenage girls express and navigate their online sexualities:

***Interviewer:** What is your view about young girls who send sexy selfies like maybe wearing something short or a bikini on social media?*

***Zelwandle:** I can say it's bad [...] as a girl you are supposed to respect your body because you are going to get old and have children. Your children will want to do that seeing your pictures on social media, social media preserve pictures. Your child will want to do that and maybe come across people who are not right and end up being hurt. (Zelwandle, 17, grade 10)*

***Xoli:** No ways! I don't know what to say, but it's not right. Exposing yourself to many people is not right, because most of the people can inbox you just because of the way that you are dressed and then abuse you. Yes, because the way you show yourself on social media indicates that you don't respect yourself, so some people will not respect you, they will not treat you right. All in all, I can say the way you dress tells people that what kind of person are, I cannot post a decent picture where I am smartly dress, and get an inbox from someone saying nasty things, because it shows that I respect myself. So, young girls need to change, zithi ukwehlisa kancane (slow down a bit) [laughing].*

***Zamani:** for me, I say they must not do it, it's not right because some people look at your picture and bakuhalele (lust over your body). If it happens that he sees you alone at night, he can rape you.*

According to Bhana (2016), female respectability stems from gendered norms where girls are expected to sexually constrain themselves to keep themselves valuable and respectable. For Zelwandle, exposing your body on social media does not conform to values of female

respectability. She states that girls must respect their bodies for their prospects of motherhood. Hetero-patriarchal standards regulate women and girls through the normative assumption and expectation that all women carry the innate ideal of becoming mothers (Thornton, 2014). As a result, teenage girls' sexual capacities are constrained, policed and limited to only motherhood identities in their relations with social media. For both Xoli and Zamani, it is problematic to self-sexualise your body on social media platforms as it warrants men to sexualise and motivates possibilities for "rape". The responsibility is placed upon teenage girls to regulate and sexually constrain themselves to potentially eliminate any danger towards their bodies. Whereas the perpetrators which are men are refused accountability for their actions. This can encourage victims who experience any form of cyber-harassment to refrain from reporting the incidents for fear of stigmatisation and shaming which can further reinforce online predatory behaviour (Smith, 2022). In the following excerpts, it is further noted how parents become active agents in the assemblage of female respectability:

***Mabuhle:** Zulu parents believe in respect, they believe in tradition, like as a Zulu girl they raise you up knowing that this you can do, this you can't do, and all of that. As a Zulu girl child you ought to wear long dresses, skirts, you know? So, I think most Zulu parents wouldn't like their kids posting semi-naked pictures on social media. (Mabuhle, 17, grade 12)*

***Luyanda:** The one who posts wearing Reed dance attire is considered as someone who is more focused on the virginity testing and so on, but the one with a bikini is taken as someone who love boys and wants to be seen by them. (Luyanda, 16, grade 10)*

***Amy Thando:** I would get shouted at, beaten and also they would confiscate my phone because I am now posting whilst half-naked. What I can say Miss is that at home they're very traditional, they believe a lot in tradition and culture, but I don't know, because when I look at how they allow us to post in our traditional virginity testing attire that is also very revealing because it only hides this part (vagina) and our breasts only. (Amy Thando, 18, grade 12)*

These excerpts demonstrate the parental influence in shaping gendered norms underpinned by tradition. Mabuhle mentions how the Zulu parents associate posting semi-naked pictures as

taboo. She further notes that through illustrating girls to wear “long skirts dresses and skirts,” this culture reinforces binary norms that police and restrict the sexual behaviour of teenage girls even in online spaces. As teenage girls construct their online identities away from their parents, it is still prevalent how their influence and teachings go beyond the physical walls into cyber settings. Luyanda notes the double standards perpetuated by the Zulu “Reed dance attire” where girls who post wearing it are valued and respected while girls in “bikinis” are chastised, slut-shamed, and perceived as immoral. According to Rassmussen (2015), parents do not initiate sexual discourses with their daughters due to the paralysing fear that it will motivate them to pursue explicit sexual narratives that will challenge the socio-cultural norms that they ascribe to. The isiZulu tradition categorises the reed dance and virginity testing as valuable and essential in producing respectable womanhood (Bhana, 2016). With this narrative in place, we see how parents view virginity as paramount and as a means to sustain respectability for young girls. According to Amy Thando, the traditional Zulu reed dance attire is similar to the bikini as they show breasts and do not cover the vagina. However, she further notes that they are afforded different perceptions by the culture. The Zulu reed dance attire (*isigcebhezane*) characterised by a mini skirt made from beads refrains from being sexualised while the Western mini skirt is sexualised and girls who wear it are harassed in online spaces (Radebe & Van der Bank, 2016). Therefore, it is noteworthy that the bikinis and provocative fashion under Western customs produce affects that constrain teenage girls’ bodies through objectification and slut-shaming.

6.3.3. Christianity and purity culture

In this section, I highlight data presenting how purity culture emanates from Christian values where teenage girls are restricted in rigid heteronormative norms that do not give freedom for sexual exploration and pleasure. The following photo-facilitated group discussion will demonstrate the entanglements of purity culture and Christianity:



Figure 6.1: Sexy selfies in minimal clothing.

Source: <https://za.pinterest.com/pin/486107353510209374/>

Thuso: *Okay, well we believe in different things and I believe in that you shouldn't expose your body, and in this picture the lady will get comments that'll be like "wow, you're so sexy, come visit me" and all the other stuff that make boys not respect you. She will attract negative comments, and then she will feel embarrassed saying that people are disrespecting her when it is her that started this? If you had just covered up the boy wouldn't have said or done something bad to you.*

Bianca: *And that's the problem with girls they always think about what boys will say, boys this and boys that.*

Thuso: *No, in church there are certain rules and what makes them judge is because they know what the Bible says about such acts, it states that "this is the body of Christ and the Holy Spirit rests there". So, when and if you show off your body, what do you want God to say? Where will the Holy Spirit rest?*

Sia: *Shhhhh! That person will commit a sin against God because of you and yet you say you're his daughter? But you're making people sin, men and boys will obviously lust over you when you look like this, so this is wrong.*

(FDG, grade 11)

Purity culture in this discussion is a phenomenon regulated and policed by Christian values that promote girls to adhere to strict practices of sexual abstinence until they commit to heterosexual marriages (Latour, 2020). Thuso problematises provocative fashion (bikini, short clothing) and the showing of skin in the production of sexy selfies. It is evident how Thuso vilifies the showing of girls' bodies on social media using sexy selfies. Against this dominant discourse, Bianca disrupts normative notions that instruct girls to perform sexual identities catering for the male gaze. However, Thuso suggests that a girl's body is the "body of Christ" and should be kept purified as that is where the "Holy Spirit" will rest. Christian values endorse strict gender roles and performances that adhere to heterosexual compulsions. Women and girls are told to not dress provocatively as that will attract men or boys. Such notions seek to territorialise what the body can become in the expressions of sexuality. Allison (2021) concurs that purity culture is entangled with Christianity and that it perpetuates compulsory heterosexuality and restricts sexual capacities through controlling girls' bodies and the marginalisation of showing skin. Moreover, it normalises sexualisation behaviour from boys as responsibility and accountability are removed from them and placed upon teenage girls (Allison, 2021). Similarly, Sia concurs with this notion by suggesting that posting a hypersexualised selfie will make "people sin" and "boys will obviously lust over you" which eliminates accountability from boys for their sexual behaviours.

Victim blaming is the most recurring theme through most of research studies concerning purity culture. Women are told that their bodies are sinful in nature therefore they must remain covered, controlled and silenced (Cross, 2020). Purity culture rooted in Christianity is supported by strict rules of conduct. Women are instructed to be responsible for the company they keep, who they date, and how they dress, thus any suffering that they are subjected to under male dominance will primarily be their own doing (Blyth, 2021). As Thuso states how unsolicited sexual comments from boys on social media such as "you are so sexy, come visit me" will be the fault of the girl who posts 'sexy' selfies with minimal clothing. Moreover, the responsibility for sexual constraints is alleviated from men and placed upon women and girls. Hypersexualised selfies are seen as empowerment tools as they aid girls in taking back bodily autonomy (Janak et al., 2024). However, girls who abide by Christianity rules may be conflicted and suppressed in practicing bodily autonomy. This gives evidence on how purity culture to endorses scrutiny and surveillance of teenage girls' bodies thus restricting what they can become in the realm of sexuality (Bogen et al., 2022).

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter outlined how social media acts as a space where gendered risks are manifested to constrain how girls express online sexuality. As girls in the previous chapter had revealed that they express their sexuality in ways that disrupt normative notions of sexuality. This chapter found that there are prevalent dichotomies in their experiences due to the production of sexy selfies. Girls are faced with harsh realities like victimisation, regulation, and shaming according to societal rules when they express themselves as sexual beings which restricts what their bodies can become when posting on social media platforms. This chapter adopted new feminist materialism concepts to guide the analysis of data where it was illustrated how non-human materials (digital technologies, harmful language, traditional binary rules) are active agents in shaping how girls express sexuality on social media, moreover, they are inseparable. Furthermore, the Butlerian lens was utilised to explore how the heterosexual matrix regulates the sexual expression of teenage girls.

The first theme highlighted the sexual violence and harassment emanating from cyber spaces which come in various forms under the umbrella term of cyber-sexual harassment. Teenage girl participants' experiences highlighted cyber-sexual harassment such as sexualisation where girls' bodies were valued as sexual objects to satisfy the male gaze under the dominance of hegemonic masculinities. The prevalence of image-based sexual abuse was further noted as an assemblage where relational materials such as bodies, porn sites, sexy selfies, comments, likes, sharing, posting, screenshotting, male gaze, and sexual violence acted as active agents in the production of territorialising affects that restricted what girls can do with their bodies. Teenage girls' production of sexy selfies was further noted to be tangled with sexting experiences. Through the private sharing of sexualised selfies, teenage girls showcased their willingness to comply with sexting norms within the context of heterosexual romantic relations. However, in doing so, they were confronted by victimising experiences such as coercive sexting and revenge porn.

The second theme discussed hetero-patriarchal norms that proved to be dominant in online spaces and guided how teenage girls navigate and negotiate their sexuality. Under the dominant gender binary discourses of heterosexuality, sexual double standards were perpetuated by traditional binary norms. Through social media spaces, girls were vilified for presenting sexualised identities through selfies whereas boys were worshipped and hailed supreme for

exhibiting similar actions. Hypersexualised bodies under the Zulu hetero-patriarchal culture were found to be taboo and immoral. Therefore, contestations of girl respectability became an assemblage of girls' bodies, reed dance and virginity testing. Furthermore, sexy selfies were found to exacerbate discourses conforming to purity culture, where Christianity removed accountability of harassment from perpetrators and placed it on the victims.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

This dissertation has examined how digital technologies, social media and ‘sexy’ selfie images are shaping teenage girls’ sexual experiences. I worked with teenage girl participants between the ages of 15-19 in a South African high school. The research study was underpinned by the objective to investigate how teenage girls use ‘sexy’ selfies to express sexuality on social media platforms and to understand how gender shapes those particular expressions. This study further sought to propose a comprehensive understanding of gender and sexuality that engages framings of human and more-than-human materials in teenage girls’ sexual explorations. In this chapter, I will commence by providing an overview of the preceding six chapters of this dissertation. Following this, I will review the main findings that emerged from teenage girls’ interactions with digital technologies and social media in regard to the two research questions. Lastly, I will outline the research study’s significance and recommendations.

7.2. Overview of chapters

Chapter One of this dissertation provided the reader with the background of the study which comprised the historical and geographical content drawn from both local and international contexts to give insights on how teenage girls navigate and negotiate their sexuality on social media platforms. Furthermore, the rationale of the study was explored. The main objectives and critical research questions that underpinned the study were further discussed.

Chapter Two of this study examined a literature review that concentrated on teenage girls’ experiences in expressing online sexuality through sexy selfie images. Various studies emanating from global spaces and South African contexts were unpacked to understand how teenage girls interact with digital technologies to explore their sexuality. The focal point was located on the main arguments and research gaps surrounding this phenomenon. It is noteworthy that although the study was based in South Africa, more Western research studies

were used due to the noticeable dearth of South African research exploring teenage girls' sexual navigations using sexy selfie images.

In Chapter Three, I detailed multiple theoretical frameworks that were suited for this particular research study. Namely, the new feminist materialism was influenced by prominent scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Karen Barad (2007). Key concepts adopted from this theory encompassed the assemblages, becomings, affect, entanglements and intra-actions. Furthermore, the theory of Judith Butler (1990) concerned with gender performativity and the heterosexual matrix played a fundamental role in this study. Using these theories provided a great understanding not only of human subjects and heterosexuality but the innate materials, objects and abstract feelings that emerged as a result of teenage girls' digital sexual experiences.

Chapter Four detailed the research methods that were used to successfully conduct this study. A qualitative study approach was employed using semi-structured individual interviews and photo-facilitated group discussions. A total of 30 teenage girl participants who all provided parental consent were used to collect sufficient data for the study. The intended duration of individual interviews and focus group discussions was 30 to 60 minutes. Guided by the new feminist materialism this study shifted from normative constructions of the research process and looked to equally focus both on the human and non-human subjects as research emerges. As a result, the diffractive method was used to analyse data by plucking new feminist concepts into thematically coded data. Ethical issues, trustworthiness, validity, reliability, and positionality were also outlined.

Chapter Five presented data highlighting how teenage girls use 'sexy' selfies on social media to confront and challenge normative views of sexuality. Additionally, it was revealed how young femininities are constrained by heteronormative beauty ideals and racialised norms in expressing their sexuality. Yellow bone notions and slim-thick fit body ideals were cited as dominant characteristics in desirable heterosexuality. Darker skin tones and fat bodies cast teenage girls outside of heterosexual desirability which constrained teenage girls' sexual capacities.

Chapter Six highlighted the experiences of teenage girls concerning the gendered risks they are confronted with in online spaces. Through photo facilitations and semi-structured individual interviews teenage girl participants alluded to how sexy selfies brought forward male violence and sexual entitlement rooted in patriarchy. Various forms of sexual violence were found to be exacerbated by social media spaces, creating a hostile environment for teenage girls. New feminist concepts were plucked in both data analysis chapters to highlight the importance of innate objects and materials in the production of gendered meaning.

7.3. Key research questions

This dissertation investigated different ways in which 15 to 19-year-old teenage girls engaged with digital technologies to construct and produce heterosexual performances. The main aim of this study was to explore how girls use sexy selfie images to navigate and negotiate sexuality on various social media platforms. Moreover, this study aimed to examine how gender actively shapes teenage girls' expressions of sexuality on social media. In posting these 'sexy' selfies teenage girls were confronted by paradoxical experiences where they were able to challenge and confront dominant traditional binary discourses and dismantle unequal gender relations through the posting of. However, they were equally constrained by hetero-patriarchal ills and traditional binary norms that territorialised their sexual capacities.

The following research questions were used to achieve the research study's main aims:

- How do teenage girls use sexy selfies to express their sexuality on social media platforms?
- How does gender shape their experience of expressing sexuality through sexy selfies on social media platforms?

7.4. Study's main findings

7.4.1. How do teenage girls use sexy selfies to express their sexuality on social media platforms?

This study employed concepts from new feminist materialism to examine various ways and forms in which high school teenage girls construct and produce their heterosexual identities

within the social media environment. Various themes emerged to respond to this question, the first theme in chapter five demonstrated that teenage girls' bodies and digital technologies act as inseparable material entities thus conforming to what Barad (2007) details as entanglement. Teenage girls articulated how they used digital platforms and 'sexy' selfie images to learn, explore, and enhance their own sexuality. Teenage girls confronted and challenged dominant narratives that posit hypersexualised identities as problematic for young femininities. They posted and shared 'sexy' selfies on social media that were characterised by showing breasts, buttocks, wearing bikinis, and short skirts to challenge and resist the traditional binary norms that place them as innocent and non-confrontational. Moreover, they are seen creating safe spaces where they can openly converse, produce sexual explorations and sexual pleasures. These findings highlight the active role played by non-human digital tools in curating heterosexual feminine performances. Moreover, it is visible how these digital technologies (mobile phones, social media, sexy selfies, filters, make-up) were material entities that provided opportunities to affirm their heterosexual desirability. Though the intra-actions between girls' bodies and digital technologies, girls' sexual becomings were realised.

Different views were observable in how girls express sexualities. Girls articulated that they conformed to heteronormative ways of being desirable beings. Other girls suggested that the classy look of long dresses and natural faces was the 'sexy' in selfies. Through tilting head poses, pouting, raising eyebrows, wearing bikinis, dresses, slitted skirts, and ensuring that the 'butt' pops out more when taking selfie teenage girls were able to regain autonomy of their bodies thus becoming powerful in their sexuality. Using new feminist materialism this study further examined how more-than-human materials became active agents in the production of teenage girls' sexual identities. Filters and make-up became technological tools that locked teenage girls into an indefinite desirable heterosexual status. Furthermore, through filters and make-up teenage girls challenged unequal power relations emanating from online spaces. However teenage girls were equally confronted by normative beauty norms that constrained their sexual capacities. Slim-thick fit body ideals and yellow bone skin tones were requirements designated for sexy selfies. Thus, fat bodies were chastised and deemed undesirable by the online community, particularly the male gaze. This brought territorialising affects in the form of psychological and emotional distress.

7.4.2. How does gender shape their experience of expressing sexuality through sexy selfies on social media platforms?

Paradoxically, while social media was seen as a space for young femininities to positively empower and uphold themselves, it was equally found to be saturated by gendered risks that were perpetuated by men with the sole interest of policing and scrutinising teenage girls' sexual expressions. Sexualisations of teenage girls' bodies were rampant in this study as girls articulated that upon sharing self-sexualised selfies boys only saw them as valuable flesh to sleep with, possessing no other valuable use. It was further found that teenage girls were victimised through various forms of cyber-sexual harassment, these are cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse and cyber-flashing in sexting. Through technological affordances such as (comments and likes) teenage girls fell victim to the scrutiny of the male gaze. Participants in this study stated how sharing of 'sexy' selfies invited sexual violence mainly perpetuated by men. They stipulated how masculinity was reigned supreme, and femininity subordinated various social media settings like Facebook and Instagram. This is where girls were expected to be passive, allowing men to view 'sexy' selfie images as their possession. This is evidence of how digital technologies intra-act with heteronormative norms to perpetuate the patriarchal system even in online spaces. It is noteworthy that as these gendered ills were mainly perpetuated by boys and men, this study found that some of the teenage girls were complicit as they encouraged victim blaming and alleviated responsibility from men. The heteronormative norms rooted in cultural practices and religion were found to constrain teenage girls' sexual capacities as they allowed double sexual standards that scrutinised girls for showcasing hypersexualised identities while rooting for men that portrayed similar behaviours. The following findings will be further discussed following themes underpinning this study.

Theme one: Teenage girls' entanglements with digital technologies

New feminist materialism suggests that we should investigate our reality through equal consideration of human and non-human materials that produce real-life experiences and meanings (Fox & Bale, 2015). Many teenage girl participants alluded to using mobile technologies as a means to construct their own sexual identities away from the microscopic supervision of adults. Smartphones allow them the opportunity to access information with ease and to further escape negative life experiences by being lost in the digital world. Using the new

feminist lens, this study found that teenage girls' bodies and smartphones acted as inseparable material entities thus conforming to what Barad (2007) calls the process of entanglements. It is evident how smartphones were not mere passive tools in producing teenage girls' sexual experiences but carried powerful affects that reshaped teenage girls' heterosexual experiences.

Theme two: Sexy subjectivities - defining the 'sexy' in selfie

In defining the 'sexy' in selfies most popular responses referred to hypersexualised bodies and nudity as a means to attract the male gaze and confirm desirability status. Whereas other teenage girls confirmed that a natural face or classy look, no slits and no lipstick were fundamentals of looking sexy in the production of selfies. Therefore, there was an observable dichotomy in how young girls view and practice their online sexuality, where the hypersexualised body through showing of breasts and nudity was depicted as the bad girl aesthetic whereas, the natural face and classy look were to cater for the good girl aesthetic. However, in all these descriptions it is noteworthy that they equally catered for the overall system of heteronormativity where girls are policed according to whichever aesthetic that they ascribe to. The social media male gaze commands teenage girls to practice self-sexualised identities to warrant their approval however they are also warned to refrain from becoming too sexy as that will invite slut-shaming remarks (Phillips, 2022).

Theme three: The sexy selfie assemblage

The assemblage concept from Deleuze and Guattari (1988) posits that there are no hierarchies in the production of meanings. Human bodies as material entities, non-human materials, objects, feelings and abstract thoughts all play an integral and equal role in producing life experiences. Consequently, the sexy selfie is itself an assemblage of human (teenage girls' bodies) and more-than-human materials (devices, physical spaces, make-up, filters, dresses). Within these multiple assemblages, and intra-actions teenage girls are provided capacities to become sexual and powerful, which in turn dethrones traditional binary norms that allow men to subordinate girls' bodies. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme namely teenage girls becoming powerful and sexual followed by the application of filters and make-up.

Sub-theme one: Teenage girls becoming powerful and sexual

Teenage girls alluded to how the sexy selfie assemblage provided capacities for new sexual becomings and power. In becoming sexy teenage girls sought to retaliate against dominant societal and cultural ideologies that depict they must remain passive in producing their sexual experiences. This is where they took selfies that explicitly showcased their bodies in provocative fashion (bikinis, short dresses) and poses where their buttocks and breasts were visible. Girls use the social media space as a playground to explore their own sexual pleasures and further regain autonomy of their bodies something that they are denied of in offline settings. Therefore, teenage girls were active agents in shaping their own sexual subjectivities which further gave evidence of their complicity in sexualisation and objectification of their bodies.

Sub-theme two: Filters and make-up in a sexy selfie assemblage

According to teenage girls producing a sexy selfie assemblage requires innate materials such as filters and make-up. This is where it was found that the sexy selfie operates as a machine that emerges through the intra-actions of other parts of the machines (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). Girls use technological tools in the form of filtering apps and make-up to enhance their self-image and acquire an indefinite heterosexual status. In doing so, they are complicit to gender performances that seek to dethrone unequal gender power relations where girls become powerful and refuse dominance from hegemonic masculinities. Thus, teenage girls' bodies, social media technologies, make-up and beauty standards intra-act within a sexy selfie assemblage to de-territorialise normative assumptions that portray girls as innocent and subordinates of the male gaze.

Theme four: Constraining sexual capacities

Three sub-themes emerged from this theme where it was demonstrated how teenage girls are confronted by beauty ideals that constrain their sexual capacities in social media platforms. Social media platforms are continuously pressurising teenage girls to transform their bodies according to conventional trends that are accepted by the male gaze. Slim-thick fit bodies and yellow bone notions are epitomised and confirm teenage girls' heterosexual desirability, whereas darker skin tones and fat bodies encompass dehumanising comments that lock them outside of heterosexual desirability discourses.

Sub-theme one: Slim-thick fit body ideals as sexy

Social media remains a primary space where young girls are pressured to alter their bodies to fit within the normative beauty ideal. Sexy selfies that are characterised by big breasts, big buttocks, and tiny waist were found to be hailed supreme and desired particularly by men in virtual spaces. Digital affordances such as likes and comments on social media platforms were revealed to play an integral role in how the male gaze gains access to ranking and affirming women into desirability discourses according to their physical attributes. Moreover, it was found that teenage girls are dictated by sexy selfies posted by celebrities such as Kim Kardashian and Ice Spice as they portray slim-thick fit body ideals that received praise from online masculinity. Teenage girls' entanglements with these sexy selfies intensified how they feel and interact with their own bodies. These comparisons brought forth feelings of body dissatisfaction and disgust particularly if they did not have similar slim-thick body types. Therefore, celebrity culture and social media continuously influence teenage girls' perceptions of beauty standards that conform to desirable heterosexuality.

Sub-theme two: Sexy selfies and sexy skin tones

Normative beauty standards that emanate from racialised norms were found to persistently dominate technological spaces. Social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram acted as non-human material entities that seek to territorialise teenage girls' sexual becomings. It was revealed that teenage girls who are of darker skin tones are consistently humiliated and degraded by the social media gaze as they are deemed unattractive and not sexy. They are confronted by bullying, racist and xenophobic comments due to their darker skin tones. Whereas yellow bone (lighter skin) bodies are heterosexually desired for romantic relations and receive a high number of likes and positive comments as opposed to darker-skinned girls. Yellow bone notions that are rooted in racialised norms become the hierarchy to which femininity is judged and approved. As a result, psychological and emotional affects are produced, for example, suicidal thoughts and depression thus sexual capacities for darker-skinned girls are constrained. Teenage girl participants attempted various methods to lighten their skin in the quest to attain acceptance in the heterosexual desirability discourses. However, these methods further territorialised teenage girls' bodies as they carried dangerous long-term effects on their skin health.

Sub-theme three: Fat shaming online experiences

While social media can act as a space for teenage girls to empower themselves through regaining their bodily autonomy, it can simultaneously act as a constraining space for fat teen girl bodies. Teenage girl participants in this study demonstrated that fat bodies are not characterised as sexy on social media platforms thus any sexy selfie they produced would receive harsh treatment. Through social media comments, non-normative bodies are ridiculed, dehumanised and fat-shamed as they are viewed to be dirty and monstrous by the online community. Therefore, there is evidence showcasing that fat teenage girls' bodies are cast outside of desirable feminine performances.

Theme five: Sexual violence as an assemblage

This theme highlighted how social media is an environment where various forms of sexual risks are manifested. Data revealed that teenage girls were consistently victimised by men in virtual spaces through sexualisation, objectification, sexual harassment and sexting experiences. Sexual violence in online spaces is comprised of an assemblage of human bodies, sexy selfies, provocative fashion, heteronormative norms and the male gaze. Three themes emerged from this theme that demonstrated how gender shapes teenage girls' navigations of sexuality using selfies. These sub-themes were sexualising the girls' body, cyber-sexual harassment and sexting experiences.

Sub-theme one: Sexualising the girl body

Teenage girls stated that in their quest to express sexuality using sexy selfies, they were confronted by contradictory experiences. They desired to be perceived as sexually attractive by the online gaze however, the possibility to be valued as only sex objects saw them losing their sexual agency. Teenage girls who posted sexy selfies in revealing clothes and hypersexualised positions received praise from men in virtual spaces. However, it was found that this praise was rooted in heteronormative ideals where men viewed girls' half-naked bodies as their own property to own. This is where men characterised hypersexualised bodies as only objects for sex with no alternative value. Therefore, this gives evidence that social media continues to perpetuate unequal gender binary norms that exist in the physical spaces.

Sub-theme two: Online sexual harassment.

It was found that social media manifests various forms of sexual violence against teenage girls. Intra-actions of teenage girls' bodies, boys' bodies, misogynistic views, panties, sexy selfies, and social media saw teenage girls' sexual becomings territorialised. In performing desirable heterosexuality teenage girls posted half-naked bodies in their sexy selfies, however upon intra-actions with social media they suffered immense scrutiny, slut-shaming and victim-blaming from both girls and boys. Cyber-stalking was revealed as a form of sexual harassment where men hid behind catfishing methods to subordinate girls to their sexual desires which reflected the dominance of heteronormative ideals on social media that depict men as sexually entitled to girls' bodies. Furthermore, unequal gender power relations made it possible for teenage girls to experience sexual harassment as they were stripped of their autonomy by hegemonic masculinities.

Sub-theme three: Sexting experiences

This study found that teenage girls are active participants in the sharing of sexy selfies within heterosexual romantic relationships. However, because of their entanglements with social media and men's sexual entitlement, they were constrained in their sexual expressions. Negotiating and navigating their sexuality through sexy selfies in sexting ideals saw girls being confronted by image-based sexual abuse in the form of coercive sexting, revenge porn and cyber-flashing. Through digital affordances available on digital technologies such as tagging, sharing, reposting, screenshotting and the inbox feature teenage girls' bodies experienced image-based sexual abuse in a post-human digital touch that resembles a physical touch (Renold and Ringrose, 2018). The normalisation of sexting violence through images found to be rooted in dominant hetero-patriarchal norms that cite teenage girls must submit to boys' sexual desires as they are expected to be hypersexual. As a result, it was further noted that double standards are visible in the sexting regime where girls are slut-shamed, mocked and marginalised for sharing nude pics whereas boys are hailed supreme for receiving nude pics from girls.

Theme six: Hetero-patriarchal norms: Territorialising the girl body

This theme demonstrated how teenage girls' bodies are territorialised through heteronormative norms in their navigations of sexuality using sexy selfies. Sub-themes emerging comprised of

double standards that are rooted in heterosexuality. Followed by norms underpinning girl respectability and victim blaming. Lastly, how purity culture is perpetuated through Christianity.

Sub-theme one: Heterosexuality and double standards

Teenage girl participants articulated that social media platforms are primary sources of sexual double standards. Societal norms rooted in patriarchy produce unequal power dynamics between femininities and masculinities. According to Butler (1990), patriarchy informs and shapes norms that subordinate women to heterosexual performances. Thus, it is prevalent how patriarchal notions continuously shape how teenage girls construct and express their sexuality on social media platforms. Girls who post sexy selfies in hypersexualised forms are demonised and slut-shamed due to gender binary and heteropatriarchal norms. However, when boys display similar behaviour of nudity, cyberflashing and flirting on social media they are warranted praise which provides them the privilege of sexual entitlement. Concurrently, gender hierarchies and power asymmetries still remain persistent in online spaces.

Sub-theme two: Girl respectability and victim blaming

Girl respectability was found to be an assemblage of cultural norms, social media, teenage girls' bodies and parents. Teenage girls engaging with virginity testing practices and displaying their sexuality within that scope were deemed worthy of heterosexual marriage and respectability to the larger audiences. As a result, the term respect regulated how teenage girls navigate and negotiate their sexuality on social media. Cultural practices emanating from isiZulu culture state that girls and women ought to constrain themselves from sexual conduct for future prospects of marriage and motherhood (Bhana, 2016). Parents are one of the main reinforcers of such hetero-patriarchal practices in their teenage girls. As such, this study found that teenage girls who post wearing cultural garments that only hide the breasts and vagina are shielded from slut-shaming and objectification whereas girls who post selfies in Western provocative fashion (bikinis) are afforded contrasting narratives.

Sub-theme three: Christianity and purity culture

In this study, Christianity was found to be the main source underpinning purity culture, this is where teenage girls were restricted to heteronormative norms that did not permit

hypersexualised identities on social media or in any setting. Teenage girls in this study were expected to conform to rules that comply with sexual abstinence and no visibility of their skin. Failure to do so saw them being chastised and locked outside of desirable heterosexuality.

7.5. Significance of study

Throughout this study, I argued how selfie production intersects with sexuality discourses to bring forth negative experiences for teenage girls. Through an extensive literature review, I argued in Chapter Two how literature underpinning this dissertation, for example, works from Ringrose, Renold, and Bhana concerns itself with the objective of exploring sexualities that are marginalised, particularly in young women. Therefore, the significance of this study is to continue in such a nature by highlighting a whole range of teenage girls' sexual experiences emanating from social media. With the assistance of innovative methodologies, I was able to explicitly map out the connections between digital technologies and girls' heterosexual experiences. Furthermore, I reconceptualised normative notions of feminine sexuality in chapter five, where it was revealed that girls are complicit to hypersexualised identities in order to dethrone unequal power dynamics between girls and boys. Inspired by feminist scholars such as Deleuze and Guattari (1988) and Barad (2007), this study contributes to producing a different perspective that suggests going beyond conventional narratives of sexuality, where the concept of sexuality for teenage girls is a 'line of flight', an escape from the subordination of men by going against the innocent and passive feminine narrative to finding pleasure and empowerment in sexual experiences (Bhana, 2021; Bhana & Nathwani, 2022). According to Austin (2017) through creating and opening up safe spaces for sexuality to be questioned and explored, it is possible to forge a significant contribution to the academic field.

In addition to highlighting teenage girls' sexual experiences as they navigate social media. This dissertation may further be perceived as significant through exploring new theoretical frameworks. Using new feminist materialism concepts in this research made it possible to investigate both human and non-human participants as equals which is unfamiliar in the overall South African works. In Chapter Three I discussed how literature for example from Warfield (2017) involves new feminist concepts to not only investigate human subjects but to explore the innate materials that assemble with humans to produce meaning. Similarly in this study,

the finding in Chapter Five is that “make-up, dresses and filters” are active agents in sexual production for teenage girls. I highlight how innate materials previously considered futile are equal participants in producing meaning for teenage girls’ sexual experiences (Fox and Alldred, 2015).

7.6. Recommendations for future research

7.6.1. Easing rigid mobile phone policies in schooling contexts

Various schooling contexts exercise their legal right to prohibit learners from carrying mobile phones inside school premises (Kim & Ringrose, 2018). However, most learners do not comply with such rules as this study found that young girls are inseparable from their mobile phones to the extent that they break the rules and use their phones within schooling contexts which could possibly create more distractions for both teachers and learners. As a result, this study recommends that schools introduce mobile phone policies that are more relaxed and open to the modern contexts that epitomise digital technologies. Young people fail to report the sexual injustices they are confronted with in online spaces due to the fear of being disciplined for carrying phones inside the school. In modern settings that are highly dominated by social media culture and artificial intelligence, it is advantageous that schools allow learners to carry their phones in schooling contexts without any fear and set policy rules that can guide such practices. Furthermore, teachers should familiarise themselves with such technologies and teach young people responsible mobile phone etiquette, that is, guiding them on how to use phones, when to use them, how to engage safely on social media and what behaviour to conduct on social media. Opening up safe spaces for young people, in particular teenage girls to conversate about social media will in turn encourage them to voice out the negative sexual experiences they encounter when navigating online platforms. Furthermore, a curriculum that integrates cyber education content should be made possible as that will alert young people to respectful and responsible ways of engaging with one another using digital technologies. This is where teenage girls could further be taught active ways to safeguard themselves against any negative sexual experiences and injustices.

7.6.2. Parents fostering safe sexual conversations

Parents should play an active role in breaking power the dynamics they have with their children and focus more on creating a positive environment to communicate about sexual narratives. Most of the teenage girls found in this study come from patriarchally dominated backgrounds where sexual topics are considered taboo and sexual purity is considered the highest form of value. Thus, parents do not initiate sex conversations with their girl children as they hold the view that it will motivate them to engage in negative sexual practices. However, young girls place themselves under the domain of risk and danger as they experiment on their own as they are curious about sex, hence parents need to guide them through positive communication. Furthermore, parents need to foster close relationships with their teenage girls by spending more physical time with them and not leaving them at the hands of social media platforms.

7.6.3. Transforming the Comprehensive Sexual Education curriculum

Studies show that there is a persistent problematic trend in the teaching of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). While subjects like Life Orientation are intended to teach young people about various sexuality topics, teachers only focus on aspects such as HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, and abstinence thus highlighting that sexual discourses are rooted within the moralistic lens in the classroom (Shefer & Macleod 2015). This is where young girls are denied the opportunity to learn and explore sexual pleasures and desires in a positive manner as sex is plastered as problematic. Therefore, this study suggests the rethinking of CSE to accommodate positive feminine sexuality. This is where teachers should be open to destigmatising feminine sexuality by posing learner-centred methods in sexual pedagogies. They should allow girls to lead sexual topics from a place of pleasure and power as a substitute for vulnerability, victimhood and guilt (Bhana and Nathwani, 2022).

7.6.4. Training of school counsellors

Psychologists and school counsellors must be found within the school premises of each and every school setting. They must be trained and equipped to handle issues arising from sexual discourses that intersect with digital technologies. The availability of such services will see

teenage girls finding assistance with balancing their emotions and psychological complications (such as suicidal thoughts) that arise as a result of sexual violence and other forms of discrimination emanating from online spaces. Furthermore, access to school counsellors should alternate between physical and social media platforms, this will enable safe spaces for teenage girls to report and anonymously share their experiences without facing shame and stigma.

7.6.5. Non-profit governmental organisations and communities dismantling cultural norms

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and leaders in the community should play an active role in advocating for social change through addressing the gender asymmetries rooted in cultural ideologies. Through holding debates with stakeholders such as parents, teachers and government officials, they can manufacture innovative methods that will assist teenage girls to engage with digital technologies and social media in a responsible manner. Social media programmes should be implemented where leaders and NGOs negotiate responsible methods to engage on online platforms. Moreover, considering the African contexts, communities must involve solutions that are tailored to African norms underpinning sexuality. Recognising that there are some cultural norms that bring harm to young people in various ways will be a necessary step in transforming cultural norms that are more accommodating to teenage girls and boys. Moreover, churches and religious leaders could discuss critical ideas that will demolish gender inequalities and foster a safe environment for teenage girls to navigate their sexuality.

7.6.6. Training of teachers

Teachers need to be equipped with content that enlightens gendered risks confronted by teenage girls on social media platforms. Offering continuous programs that will guide teachers of all grades and schools on different pedagogical methods that will be effective in teaching content related to gender and sexuality. Furthermore, teachers should be active in guiding learners of all ages on how to navigate online platforms in safer ways.

7.7. Conclusion

This dissertation has explored how teenage girls use ‘sexy’ selfies to express their sexuality on social media platforms, moreover, it has sought to highlight how gender shapes those expressions. Drawing from a new feminist lens I highlighted how human and more-than-human materials in the form of human bodies, things, objects, selfies, beauty standards, beauty filters, social media and make-up are in an entanglement to produce teenage girls’ heterosexual experiences. This study illuminated how teenage girls share ‘sexy’ selfies with short dresses, make-up, and sexy poses on social media to confront and challenge normative notions of femininity that lock them within the ideals of sexual suffering. Furthermore, this study demonstrated how teenage girls were restricted by beauty standards that were rooted in heteronormative norms. Teenage girls who did not portray slim-thick fit ideals and yellow bone skins were objectified and cast outside of desirable heterosexuality which constrained their sexual capacities. Digital technologies volunteered platforms for teenage girls to learn, explore and empower themselves sexually. Simultaneously it was found that it constrains teenage girls’ sexual becomings through experiences of cyber-sexual harassment, victim blaming and shaming. Hegemonic masculinity, hetero-patriarchal and purity norms perpetuated by cultural, religious and societal organisations were further found to dominate online platforms and restrict what teenage girls can do with their bodies. Recommendations from this study are not linear as the assemblage is always in flux. However, there is merit for all stakeholders such as the government, teachers, parents, school counsellors, researchers, and community and religious leaders to actively engage in creating safe spaces for social justice that seek to empower young girls through transformational processes.

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Appendix 1A: Individual interview questions

1. Tell me about yourself (your childhood, hobbies)
2. Who got you your first phone?
3. When did you start social media? What app did you start with and why?
4. Which social networking site are you mostly active on now? and why?
5. How often do you post your own pictures or stories on social media platforms?
6. Estimate how many selfies you usually take before posting one and why is that?
7. How do you ensure to get many likes and comments after posting a selfie?
8. How do you usually feel after posting a selfie and it doesn't get a lot of likes or positive comments?
9. How would you describe a selfie that looks 'sexy'? (in terms of body shape and facial)
10. What are your views on teenage girls that post selfies with minimal clothing (e.g. only bikini) on social media?
11. Do you think they get treated differently by boys? How so?
12. How do you think their parents treat them?
13. Have you ever posted a selfie you considered sexy/ beautiful on social media and were there any responses? if yes how did they make you feel? And if not, why do you think so?
14. Have you shared a selfie with a friend or boyfriend and what was the motive? How did it make you feel afterwards?
15. Have you ever felt unsafe or do you know anyone who's experienced being unsafe or bullying because of the selfie posted on social media? What do you think was the cause?
16. Do boys who also post sexy selfies receive the same treatment as girls who post sexy selfies on social media? Explain.
17. How do you use social media to express your sexuality?

Appendix 1B: Photo-elicitations for focus group discussions.



Can anyone describe what is happening in the following selfie. What do the hand placement, body posture mean according to you?



What are your views on the above selfie, does she look sexy according to you and why?



Looking at the above picture. According to you does she look sexy and why? Or why not?



What are your views on teenage girls who post selfies similar to the one above?

APPENDIX 2A LETTER TO PRINCIPAL & SGB CHAIRPERSON: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN YOUR SCHOOL.

The Principal & SGB Chairperson

██████████ High School

████████████████████

████████████████

██████████



Dear ██████████

28 February 2023.

Permission to conduct a research study in the school.

I, Wendy Nhlangulela (218051683) am a Master's (Gender and Education Studies) student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is an invitation to request permission to conduct research at your school. My research topic is titled: **Sexy Selfies, Girls and the Performance of heterosexuality.**

My project aims to investigate how teenage girls express their sexuality through social media platforms using sexy selfies, furthermore, the study seeks to examine how gender and sexuality shapes girls' experiences on how they express their sexuality through social media platforms. This study will require 30 teenage girl participants between the ages of 15- 19. The interviews will be for a duration of 45 minutes to an hour at the convenience of learners either in during break/lunch time or after school. The learner's identities will remain protected, they will be kept anonymous, and learners will be given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The wellbeing of learners will be our main priority. Should learners feel discomfort of any sort, at any given time. Learners are at liberty to withdraw from the study without penalties. However, should a crime be discovered upon my findings I am compelled to report it.

I will utilize interviews, observations, photo elicitation and focus group discussions as my data collection methods. The interviews will be typed to ensure creditability. I intend to conduct this research once ethical

clearance is obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Department of Education. I will ensure that teaching and learning time is not disrupted whilst conducting this study.

Should you have any further queries concerning the nature of this study, Please contact my supervisor, Professor Deevia Bhana, on 031 260 2603/ bhanad1@ukzn.ac.za / alternatively contact the Higher Research Degrees Edgewood office. Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for your cooperation

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Signature]

Email: wendynhlangulelaa@gmail.com

[Redacted Signature]

Project Leader: Prof. Deevia Bhana

Tel: (0 [Redacted])

Email: [\[Redacted\]](#)

Principal's informed consent reply slip

I..... (Full names of PRINCIPAL/SGB CHAIRPERSON) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I grant permission to the learners participating in the research project and give permission for the school to be used as a research site.

The times and dates of the research will be at the sole discretion of the principal.

I understand that the learners and the school are at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time.

.....

Signature of Principal

.....

Date

.....

Signature of SGB Chairperson

.....

Date

APPENDIX 2B LETTER TO PARENTS/GUARDIANS: REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS WITH YOUR CHILD.



Dear Parent/Guardian

28 February 2023

Request for your consent to allow child/ guardian to participate in research.

I, Wendy Nhlangulela (218051683) am a Master's (Gender and Education Studies) student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is an invitation to request permission to conduct research at your school. My research topic is titled: **Sexy Selfies, Girls and the Performance of heterosexuality.**

My project aims to investigate how teenage girls express their sexuality through social media platforms using sexy selfies, furthermore, the study seeks to examine how gender and sexuality shapes girls' experiences on how they express their sexuality through social media platforms. This study will require 30 teenage girl participants between the ages of 15- 19. The interviews will be for a duration of 45 minutes to an hour at the convenience of learners either in during break/lunch time or after school. The learner's identities will remain protected, they will be kept anonymous, and learners will be given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The wellbeing of learners will be our main priority. Should learners feel discomfort of any sort, at any given time. Learners are at liberty to withdraw from the study without penalties. However, should a crime be discovered upon my findings I am compelled to report it.

I will utilize interviews, observations, photo elicitation and focus group discussions as my data collection methods. The interviews will be typed to ensure credibility. I intend to conduct this research once ethical clearance is obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Department of Education. I will ensure that teaching and learning time is not disrupted whilst conducting this study.

Should you have any further queries concerning the nature of this study, Please contact my supervisor,
Professor Deevia Bhana deevia.bhana@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

Wendy Nhlangulela

Cell: 0682819220

Email: wendynhlangulelaa@gmail.com

PARENT'S INFORMED CONSENT REPLY SLIP

I,The parent/guardian of,
hereby give permission to allow my child to participate in this voluntary study.

I understand that my child/ward is not compelled to participate and can withdraw at any time from this
study.

.....

.....

SIGNATURE OF PARENT/GUARDIAN

DATE

In the event of further queries concerning the nature of my study, you are most welcome to contact my
supervisor, Professor Deevia Bhana, on [REDACTED]

For further information, please contact the Higher Research Degrees Edgewood office.

Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za

APPENDIX 2C: LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS REQUESTING PERMISSION TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS



Dear Participant

03 March 2022

Request for permission to participate in a research study.

I, Wendy Nhlangulela (218051683) am a Master's (Gender and Education Studies) student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. This is an invitation to request permission to conduct research at your school. My research topic is titled: **Sexy selfies, girls and the performance of heterosexuality.**

My project aims to investigate how teenage girls express their sexuality through social media platforms using sexy selfies, furthermore, the study seeks to examine how gender and sexuality shapes girls' experiences on how they express their sexuality through social media platforms. This study will require 30 teenage girl participants between the ages of 15- 19. The interviews will be for a duration of 45 minutes to an hour at the convenience of learners either in during break/lunch time or after school. The learner's identities will remain protected, they will be kept anonymous, and learners will be given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. The wellbeing of learners will be our main priority. Should learners feel discomfort of any sort, at any given time. Learners are at liberty to withdraw from the study without penalties. However, should a crime be discovered upon my findings I am compelled to report it.

I will utilise interviews, observations, photo elicitation and focus group discussions as my data collection methods. The interviews will be typed to ensure credibility. I intend to conduct this research once ethical clearance is obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Department of Education. I will ensure that teaching and learning time is not disrupted whilst conducting this study.

Should you have any further queries concerning the nature of this study, Please contact my supervisor, Professor Deevia Bhana, on [REDACTED]

Thank you for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

[Redacted signature]

Wendy Nhlangulela

Cell: [Redacted]

Email: w [Redacted]

PARTICIPANT'S INFORMED CONSENT REPLY SLIP

I (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of this research project and I assent to my participation in the research project.

I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time should I desire.

.....

.....

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

Additional consent, where applicable:

I hereby provide assent to:	Please tick	
Audio-record my interview	YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
	NO	<input type="checkbox"/>

APPENDIX 3: DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE
EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Tel: 033 392 1051

Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za

Enquiries: Mrs B.T. Ntuli

Ref.:2/4/8/7455


Ms Wendy Hope Nhlangulela
L601 Wild Bucks Grove
UMLAZI
4066

Dear Ms Nhlangulela

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"SEXY SELFIES, GIRLS AND THE PERFORMANCE OF HETEROSEXUALITY"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from **19th April 2023 to 31st December 2025**
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Mrs Buyi Ntuli at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.


Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 19th April 2023

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX 4: UKZN ETHICAL CLEARANCE



27 July 2023

Wendy Hope Nhlangulela (218051683)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear WH Nhlangulela,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00005639/2023
Project title: Sexy selfies, girls, and the performance of heterosexuality.
Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Full Committee Reviewed Protocol

This letter serves to notify you that your response received on 25 July 2023 to our letter of 04 July 2023 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid for one year until 27 July 2023

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours faithfully



.....
Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 5: TURN IT IN REPORT

Full dissertation

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APPENDIX 6: PROOF OF EDITING CERTIFICATE

10/05/2024

To whom it may concern:

This is just a short covering letter to confirm that every chapter of Ms. Wendy Nhlangulela's dissertation, *Sexy selfies, girls and the performance of heterosexuality*, submitted as the dissertation component for the fulfilment of the requirements for the Master of Education degree in the School of Education, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, under the supervision of Professor Deevia Bhana, was doubly and thoroughly proofed and edited by me over the space of four months in the first half of 2024.

Besides merely superficial adjustments and rewordings, the work is entirely the product of the collaboration between the Master's candidate and supervisor.

Sincerely

A black rectangular redaction box covers the signature area. To the left of the box, a portion of a handwritten signature in blue ink is visible, showing a cursive 'W'.