“So When We Do Have a Say?” On Sexy Selfie Making as a Standpoint for Seen-ness

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Abstract
As photography’s technological advancement has afforded women greater self-representational opportunity and control, new discourses of concern have emerged over women who create sexy selfies. I argue that these discourses are, in part, mired in outdated notions of the heterosexual male gaze which figure sexy selfies to be a contemporary reflection of the ongoing dominance of male sexual desire over the passive and objectified female subject. Using data from a project which involved the photographic collaborations of a professional photographer (myself) and a number of sexy-selfie taking women, I propose to promote the concept of seen-ness as a counter to male-centered gaze discourses and ideals of ‘proper’ feminine/sexual presentation. Like theories on ‘listening’ to create a to-be-heard-ness, there is an ethical imperative for viewing/gazing to create a to-be-seen-ness. I will further argue that sexy selfies have brought objectification discourses to a critical juncture where relations of power between the looker and the looked-at are much less clear and in need of new frameworks for analysis.

Keywords Sexuality · Photography · Gaze · Sexy selfies · Agency · Objectification · Listening · Visibility

Introduction
Photography’s technological advancements are affording women greater self-representational opportunity and control than ever. In an arena where women have typically been subject to the directions of (often male) photographers, this would appear to present a feminist ideal. Choice and control, particularly with respect to bodily autonomy, have been central tenets of feminism after all. Yet the rise of sexy selfies has been met with a rise in new forms of moral panic,
including amongst mainstream feminism, which often conceptualizes this form of sexy imagery as ‘self-objectifying’ (Linden, 2019; Tiidenberg, 2018b) and/or a ‘fallacy of choice’ (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). It typically positions women engaged in the practice as victims of ‘raunch culture’ (Levy, 2005) who are subject primarily to the dominant, and now vernacular, ‘male gaze’. I refer to mainstream feminism here based on Allison Phipps’ (2020) definition as a ‘mostly Anglo-American public feminism’ which is ‘white and privileged’ (p. 5) and suggests that it includes:

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

Mainstream feminism maintains a long-standing focus on the power dynamic between the male viewer and the ‘looked-at’ female where the male viewer is assumed to have a power such that she internalizes his gaze and presents herself in a manner which befits his desires. Prior to the emergence of selfies, a woman was objectified by a man—and now, goes the argument, she ‘self-objectifies’ in a continuation of this dynamic (Paasonen et al., 2020). That selfies offer women choice and agency in ways that photography and visual culture has been previously unable to do has not shifted the mainstream feminist view that women’s sexy selfies are little more than new forms of female sexual subjugation to heterosexual men. Sociologist Agger (2015) demonstrates this mainstream view by suggesting that sexy selfies are ‘the male gaze gone viral’ (p. 45) while Time magazine’s Hebron (2016) offers support on this gaze-structure continuum: ‘if the male gaze didn’t exist, women would never think to themselves, “Oh, I really want to make my boobs bigger by inserting giant balloons of silicon into them”’ (para. 2).

At the heart of these views is a contemporary figuring of the male gaze as primary and perhaps even paradigmatic. Despite decades of critical contributions to theories on the gaze (in all manner of forms, including the so-called ‘female gaze’), little of this work has destabilized the popular stronghold that the concept of the male gaze has as ‘shorthand for gendered politics of vision’ (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 19), or, the sexual objectification of women. The phenomenon of sexy selfies has once again brought attention to Berger’s (1972) seemingly timeless idea that ‘Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (p. 46), but the self-directed nature of these images renders conventional frames of objectification analysis incomplete, at best. Women who take sexy selfies for public dissemination present a significant challenge to these conventions: women who make them occupy an equal state of photographed and photographer and do so in an everyday manner that marks a distinct shift in popular visual culture.

To this point, I argue that objectification discourses are at a critical juncture where sexy selfies demand to be read in new ways which conceptualise sexual
subjectivity beyond post-feminist empowerment/agency discourses and disempowerment/male gaze discourses to foreground instead the subject’s self-gaze. I propose a reframing of typical forms of engagement with sexual images of women away from a privileging of the viewer’s gaze as the primary mode of encounter, to foregrounding instead what I conceptualise as the subject’s seen-ness. This notion holds the perspective of the sexy selfie taker as paramount. It asks the audience to consider that the notion of being seen incorporates both the literal meaning of the word and its deeper suggestion of a recognition of selfhood, identity or, frankly, however it is the selfie taker intends to be seen. This centralizes the subjectivity of the selfie-taker, rather than the ‘looker’ and re-orient the dominant, typically-objectifying gaze to see through her eyes. Though some important contemporary academic work is being done on ‘listening’ and ‘voice’ to promote the standpoint of otherwise-marginalised speakers, little critical work has focused on the image as a means through which women can—and do—demand that their sexualities be seen and ‘heard’. I ground the concept of seen-ness in Joke Hermes’ important work on the notion of ‘respect’ for women, particularly where discourses of feminist ‘concern’ often hold sway. I also engage with new critical work on deep listening and its attempts to privilege the speaker as a frame through which to relate the seeing of women’s sexy selfies in a new way. Lastly, I examine my own gaze and the power dynamic between myself and participants who, despite being collaborators, are subject to a ‘legitimizing’ professional photographic lens and its concomitant aesthetic currency.

Co-creating Images with Sexy Selfie Makers

This project from which this paper is drawn set out to produce data about the ways in which women who create their own images wish to be seen and to understand how that functions in a culture which privileges, and gives power to, the so-called male gaze. At its center was a unique participatory, practice-led and co-creative research design which centered on a collaborative engagement between a professional photographer/researcher (myself) and eight amateur female photographers who create sexy selfies for Instagram. The two parties collaborated to produce new photographs of the selfie-taking participant, intended for upload to Instagram and as the basis for a ‘compare and contrast’ method of analysis of our respective sets of amateur and professional images. I encouraged participants to view the photo shoot as though they had commissioned a professional photographer and to express their ideas and desires for what they wanted the shoot to be.

Using a purposive sampling method, I approached prospective participants on Instagram who were female-presenting, living in Australia and who had Instagram accounts which were populated largely with amateur sexy selfies. My searches were informed by selecting for some visual tropes of conventionally-western, mainstream-heterosexual and hyper-feminine sexiness, such as those described by Shields Dobson (2011) and Drenten et al. (2018) and which are detailed on a web page called ‘7 ways to take a stunning sexy selfie!’ (Adriana, 2018). It is my contention that these
types of aesthetics have not been valued in image cultures with power and cultural currency and I wanted to work with and hear from women who could talk to this.

I draw on my 10 years of experience as a professional portrait photographer working in mainstream Australian media, advertising and design to partly inform this project, in a semi-autoethnographic way. My photographs have appeared in leading magazines, billboards and on book covers and I have also had work shown in various photographic prizes and fine-art exhibitions. I am interested in applying my knowledge in this field to co-create images with amateur sexy selfie producers in order for our respective aesthetic systems to be made visible and to draw comparisons between the two.

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

To be Heard, to be Looked-At, But to be Seen?

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

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

The ubiquitous smart phone-social media complex and its flagship, the selfie, have advanced critical thinking in photographic theory and visual culture and, where women’s sexy selfies are concerned, have also complicated debates on the so-called ‘male gaze’. It was Berger (1972) who first asserted that women have a quality of to-be-looked-at-ness: ‘men act and women appear … the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight’ (p. 46). It proposed a binary power imbalance between men and women such that the male gaze was thought to be inescapable, with women seeing themselves—the looked-at—through the prism of heterosexual male desire. Mulvey’s work on this in the 1970s, through her focus on cinematic pleasure, gave clear terminology to a second-wave feminism which was, amongst other things, angry at the sexual objectification of women in representational arenas. She coined the term ‘male gaze’ (1975) as a way to advance the theory that men were active, subjective viewers of women who were passive ‘objects’ of their desirous gaze.

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

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

While the respective work of Mulvey, Wilke and Wooster intersected neatly to demonstrate a key aspect of the 1970s feminist zeitgeist, their standpoints are evident today in the limitations faced by women whose sexy selfies are moored in these histories of binary, male-centered gaze structures. At the risk of conflating decades-old visual vernaculars, technologies and feminist critiques with their contemporary counterparts, the point is that then, as with now, the male gaze is the pre-eminent frame through which sexual representations of women are appraised. And yet in the decades that followed Mulvey’s seminal conceptualization of the gaze and feminist art attempted to subvert and restructure it, new critiques and visual possibilities for women have arisen. In her important work in this field, McRobbie (2009) has argued, for example, that contemporary fashion photography offers a visual space for women to subvert the dominant gaze since it is largely a realm where women look at photographs of women. Notwithstanding the valid criticisms of fashion photography as a site of problematic engagements with narrow standards of beauty, it nonetheless has the ‘power to create fantasy worlds for female viewers’ (p. 108) where models literally and routinely turn away from the gaze. McRobbie concedes, however, that this possibility creates a struggle where ‘the illusion of feminine autonomy is the means by which the underlying power of patriarchy disguises its presence’ (p. 108). And this suggestion that masculine power is inevitable and female autonomy is an ‘illusion’, informs the mainstream feminist and popular encounter with sexy selfies, even if the techno-cultural and so-called post-feminist landscape is different.

There is a panic about young women’s media and self-representational practices which is not new (see Renold & Ringrose, 2013) and it focuses acutely on sexy
representations. Though women have gained substantial control over their own sexy representations, their agency and power in this regard has had little impact on long-standing male gaze structures which continue to render their images as objects of sexual subjugation to heterosexual men. As McCann (2020) points out in critiquing anti-raunch-culture proponents Ariel Levy and Nina Power (amongst others), ‘…the logic of objectification that both Power and Levy work with centers specifically on the operation of the male gaze’ (p. 81). McCann notes also that ‘…objectification has often been rendered ahistorical and untethered from racialized and other coercive bodily regimes. This version of objectification is, at its worst, seen as the fault of individual women who cannot unyoke themselves from the male gaze, signified by how these women “do” their embodiment.’ (p. 75).

The photograph is seen as especially complicit in the kinds of objectification and gaze structures that McCann describes, for both its physical, object form and its capacity for indexicality—a recording of ‘real’ human presence (Bourne, 2014). It is at once redactive (what happened before or after the capture? Which body parts are shown and which are not?) and expansive (from one distant country to another, I can show you my desire). And yet women who center themselves in their own photographic, representational narratives are subject to discourses which construe their self-fashioned sexual images as self-objectifying and belonging somewhere outside of them (i.e. to the male gaze, to patriarchy) (Tiidenberg, 2017), even as they literally testify through the lens (Fig. 1):

Michelle captioned this image, one that she and I co-created, with: ‘Glowing because I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel loved, I feel understood.’ And yet participant/collaborator Michelle understands both the self-affirming power of her imagery and also the binds that limit the prospect of her being seen as she wishes when she laments:

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

If the condition of the dominant masculine gaze is so prevalent, is it possible for women’s sexual subjectification to find recognition? Though self-shooting is an inherently subjective practice and the practice has been taken up en-masse, the regime of sexy selfie-making has not afforded women the kind of regard that they often seek—to be seen as sexual beings on their own terms. They are, as Wilke was, subject to common public debates on objectification which see selfies as problematic ‘because they buy into heterosexual, patriarchal visions of sexuality, feminine attractiveness and availability’ (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 130). Despite this, there is a measure of destabilization of this discourse occurring through sexy selfie making and sharing. This techno-cultural moment that is the uprising of amateur photographic processes and outputs has seen women produce and distribute their own images and do so with a desire to be seen and valued. Many of them are choosing to make sexy selfies for public consumption. They are agents of their own sexual depictions. And this has made the concept of the male gaze and the ‘gendered nature of subject/object relations’ (Paasonen et al., 2020, p. 20) less secure than ever. It
Fig. 1 One of the images that Michelle and I co-created, as it appears on Instagram, with her caption below: “Glowing because I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel loved and understood.”
doesn’t remove it, but it destabilizes it such that new conditions have been created for a growing plurality of women’s bodies and sexualities to occupy public space.

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

Long-standing normative ideals of a central, heterosexual male gaze live in popular media commentaries (Tiidenberg, 2017) and yet, this research reveals that women who take sexy selfies often experience something different to this narrative. I draw attention especially to the ongoing dominance of discourses which conceptualise women’s sexy self-representations as problematically sexy for both their heteronormative ‘raunch’ aesthetic and so-called passive submission to male fantasy. Little attention is given to the consequent marginalising of women’s visual and verbal statements and these critiques do little to allow for the affective feminist potential (Shields Dobson, 2015; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015) of sexy female representation that are less mediated by men than ever before. As Koskela (2004) argues, ‘sometimes it is more radical to reveal than to hide’ (p. 199).

‘Seen-ness’ is not intended as a neat resolution to real issues of disempowerment for women, but to agitate for a decentralizing of the male gaze in order that women’s representational experiences become more visible and more valued. Little has been written on the concept of seen-ness. In the next section I present findings from my collaborations with two participants—Michelle and Mel.

**Michelle, a Case-Study**

Michelle was a participant and collaborator on this project. She regularly takes sexy selfies and uploads them on Instagram. She mostly uses the platform to explore aspects of her sexuality by sharing photographs of herself in lingerie and engaging with responses from viewers. She is clear in her desire to self-express in this way, to be respected and also to let her audience know the importance to her of these two things. She wishes to be seen in a particular way and is careful to present selfies photographed only from the neck-down. Michelle’s images invariably invite feminist discourses on sexual objectification, power, agency and photographic representation. They also offer some insight into the shifting nature of these discourses, as they adjust to large techno-cultural shifts in image making and problematise conventional readings of the sexual objectification of women. Below is a selection of Michelle’s selfies (Fig. 2).

Michelle tells me:

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

I focus on Michelle as a case-study emerging from the larger project. Of the eight participants in the study, each expressed their own standpoint for how they would like to be seen, but the journal article format prevents the full exposition of this data. The project also substantially relies on the experience and knowledge I have gained as a professional photographer. I take an at times auto-ethnographic approach as a means through which to examine the ways that visual culture both promotes and obfuscates the to-be-seen-ness of female sexy selfie takers.

Drawing on the data generated by co-creating sexy representations of young women, I argue that the concept of the male gaze that was developed in the 1970s is persistent in contemporary visual culture and vernacular language. Even if the concept is academically outdated or over-simple, it is used in mainstream feminist discourse on sexy selfies to signify the sexual objectification of women and therein the problem of these selfies for feminism (Paasonen et al., 2020; Tiidenberg, 2018a). This relatively uncritical application of the term ‘male gaze’ is limiting for feminist appraisals of sexy selfies as it both collapses together any number of nuanced arguments on objectification and limits the possibilities for sexy selfies to offer any kind of rebuttal or subversion of conventional notions of compliant femininity and sexuality—what Albury (2017) terms ‘female sexual decorum’ (p. 719). I draw attention especially to the dominance of discourses which foreground female passivity (she is looked-at, she is gazed-upon) and which consequently marginalise women’s own representational experiences.
“It’s for me”

“I’m showcasing another part of myself that I would not be able to show every day. This is not just who I want you to think I am, it’s really a part of me.”—Michelle (Fig. 3).

The above images are of participant Michelle and are two of a number that she and I produced and shot together, following a long conversation about the ways that she presents aspects of her sexual self online. Michelle’s Instagram feed, up until this photo shoot, was populated with only her selfies, each one shot strictly from the neck down, no face. On this she says:

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

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

I can be a professional, intelligent woman and also happy, comfortable and sexy at the same time. There should not be any shame in a woman claiming
her own confidence and sexuality. And doing this shoot and showing my face has helped me to further understand and accept that.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Academic work on ‘listening’ and ‘voice’ offers a productive way to think through the under-examined ideas of ‘seen-ness’ and ‘vision’. ‘Lister (2004) defines ‘voice’ as the right to participate in decision making across social, economic, cultural and political spheres’ (Tacchi, 2011, p. 655) and Tacchi (2011) suggests this definition has ‘…largely been limited to an interest in the basic act of voice, not the wider reasons for valuing voice.’ (p. 655). Not all voices get heard equally, of course. Dreher (2009), in this vein, points out that discursively privileged people have more say in the public sphere and often perpetuate hierarchies of value which amplify certain voices and make others peripheral. Researchers in this tradition have insisted that it is imperative that academics ‘listen’ to the voices of the people about whom they write. Listening is, they argue, not a simple matter of hearing, but goes beyond that to involve a serious attempt to understand what people are saying. I argue that this logic can be extended to the visual. The ‘voices’ of women who take sexy selfies are found primarily in their visual languages and these languages are often assigned less value than their representational counterparts in galleries or other conventionally refined and gate-kept spaces (Phillips, 2020). The point is, power exists where voices desire being heard and where bodies desire being seen. To communicate is one thing, to be heard and valued is another. And to be seen and valued is yet another again. Particularly in this cultural moment of photographic ubiquity and visual currency.

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

In consciously elevating the subject/photographer gaze (the selfie taker), it is possible to ‘…engage the selfie as a dominant and enlarging practice of assertion and performance of lived existence.’ (Bruš, 2017) In this vein, I propose, as Hermes (1995) does, an intervention into feminist discourses of concern, in favor of respect. Through this frame of respect, can we look at Michelle and declare that to be looked-at means she is powerless? Is it inherently a submission of power to want to be looked at? Says Michelle of the shoot we did together:
I felt incredibly empowered and liberated to do this shoot. My body is my home and I’m proud of it. This is me. Perhaps not everyday me, certainly a glammed-up version, but still me. This is me feeling comfortable in my skin, feeling beautiful and glamorous and feeling alive.

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

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

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

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

The Professional Photographer’s Gaze

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

In my 10 years as a professional portrait photographer, I have been disinclined to photograph women. Whether in a commercial context or an art one, I have resisted photographing women as it has too often felt fraught with heterosexist standards
that I feared I couldn’t replicate—or perhaps didn’t want to. I worried I wouldn’t be able to meet the desires that women had for themselves to look beautiful. I carried assumptions about gender and operated, as my industry does, in relatively binary ways. I was bothered by nagging thoughts that it is more difficult to ‘get it right’ with a woman, than with a man. And I feared that I might objectify women. Not through intent, but through the seemingly inevitable logic of the male gaze. So it has been a challenge to photograph the women in this project, all of whom have a pride and comfort in self-representations of sexiness and sexuality. Whose gaze is present in my own photography? How do I enact my own seen-ness while ensuring a platform for these women to do the same?

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

In this context, I return to Michelle’s question, “so when do we have a say?” and to the power structures in visual culture which shifts her amateur voice to the margins, while elevating the professional one. It is an insidious process where professional photographers are granted a ‘legitimising’ function. That is, there is a trust that their gaze will ‘make legitimate’ a subject who might otherwise be accorded marginal status by a dominant group. As Frailey (2019) notes, with regards to a photo of a homeless woman taken by famous photographer Andres Serrano, ‘Serrano uses the visual rhetoric of formalised portraiture that gives currency to the prominent, to recognise and elevate those without, thus seizing the language of power to portray the powerless.’ (p. 10) This is not to suggest that the project’s participants were powerless, this was far from the case. But it remains a difficult truth that my professional gaze and aesthetics accord with some measure of cultural exclusion. Indeed, ‘The nude itself may not be the point of the picture but only nominally the subject; the real subject is the photographer’s aesthetic allegiance’ (Goldberg, 2005, p. 196).

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

**Conclusion**

As a commercial photographer, asked oftentimes to reproduce gender and sexuality stereotypes for mainstream media and advertising, I have wondered whether, within systems of image-making and the broader system of masculine dominance, women’s sexual selves can be seen in ways that do not relate necessarily with male desire. And yet, while photography is complicit in some of the structures which enable male dominance, it is rapidly affording new spaces for female visionaries, many of whom are demanding to be seen in ways which do not necessarily involve men and which firmly ask for a gaze of respect. And it is an easy brushstroke, so to speak, to discuss photography’s complicity when ultimately it has been networks of privilege and power which have used photography’s tools to amplify its own voices and suppress others. As Tacchi (2011) notes, ‘voice requires recognition’ and needs to be ‘valued rather than simply facilitated’ (p. 655). As the academic call to effectively listen to those with less access to privileged spaces rises, might it also include ‘visual voices’—the aesthetic standpoints of women for whom sexy selfie-making is an important practice of sexual selfhood. Presenting oneself to be looked at can be an expression of power after all, even within limiting masculine gaze structures.

There is a call here for mainstream feminist and concomitant popular discourses to do the kind of self-critical assessment needed to alleviate the condition of seeing women through what has been a paradigmatic male gaze. It would necessitate a deconstruction, of sorts, of fears that young women are always-already passive vessels for male sexual fantasy, rather than the possibility that they could be agents of their own sexualities, even in misogynistic cultures. It would also necessitate a considered inspection of what underpins feminist claims of false consciousness when women perform their sexual selves in this way and to re-frame the common privileging of the viewer’s gaze to the author’s. In listening deeply, new knowledge can be gleaned and in seeing deeply what is being visually communicated, perhaps new sexual subjectivities can be seen, respected and valued.
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Conflict of interest The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Ethical Approval The study from which this paper emerges has been granted ethics approval by University of Technology Ethics Committee, under the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). Ethics approval number is UTS HREC REF NO. ETH18-2486.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for Publication The authors affirm that human research participants provided informed consent for publication of the images in Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4.

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