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Fun, flirtation and fear: Selfies in teenage girls digital exchange cultures

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Abstract

This paper explores teenage girls' engagement with digital images on social media. Using new feminist materialism, we foreground digital images as an assemblage of materialities (human and more-than-human) filled with affective potentials that materialise in/capacities. Drawing from interviews and focus group discussions, we show how the production and sharing of selfies through posting and sexting unlocked new 'becomings' through expressions of heterosexual desirability and pleasure but also generated fear through sexual objectification, sexual double standards and harassment. A recognition of digital images as materially embodied through which unequal gender power relations materialise is vital to addressing online sexual risk.

KEYWORDS

girls, new feminist materialism, selfies, social media, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

What can digital images do for teenage girls in South Africa? In this paper, we seek to answer this question in the context of the proliferation of online applications such as *Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram* and *WhatsApp* and the ubiquity of digital technologies in teenage girls' sexual cultures.

Institution(s) at which the work was performed: University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

We focus on the sharing and posting of digital images in the form of a selfie—a portrait of the self that is 'often taken with a camera phone' at an arm's length (Döring et al., 2016, p. 1). Selfies may be considered part of sexting when it involves sending explicit, sexual, images or videos through digital devices (Kalish, 2023).

This article examines what selfie sharing and sexting can do to expand girls' sexual repertoires. We argue that these practices provide expansive opportunities for girls to claim social status, engage in heterosexual flirting and fun while simultaneously invoking fear of reputational damage and sexual double standards. In South Africa, the context for this study, a dominant framing of girls' remains vested in sexual violence, risk and danger. This focus is understandable, given the context of HIV, the gendered disparities in infection rates, teenage pregnancy and violence perpetrated against girls (Pleaner et al., 2022). In the context of economic distress and cultural norms that reinforce male power, a focus on transactional sexual relations based on material support, age disparities in sexual relations and associated sexual health risks faced by girls, remains a dominant area of study (Stoebenau et al., 2023).

However, this paper aims to shift the focus from the exclusive public health glare on girls' sexual risk to girls' online sexual capacities expressed through selfie sharing and sexting. A focus on girls and online digital affordances is only recently emerging in the South African literature (Bhana, 2023; Janak et al., 2023). These online practices are highly gendered, structured around heteronormative 'sexy' ideals producing both pleasure and contradictions (Naezer, 2018; Phillips, 2022). Girls' expression of 'sexiness' can enhance popularity, self-worth and online validation through likes, comments and the number of online followers. This reinforces the value of sexiness and its association with normative understandings of femininity. Paradoxically, girls are under pressure to produce selfies that are not perceived as overly sexy to avoid being slut-shamed (Ringrose et al., 2013). Moreover, the production of online selfies exposes girls to sexual harassment, coercion, objectification and abuse , further complicating their experiences (Powell & Henry, 2017). When digital images are shared without consent, young women are rendered vulnerable as they negotiate, normative understandings of gender, female respectability while also being blamed and shamed for creating and distributing selfies (Ringrose et al., 2022).

In this paper, we adopt a new feminist materialist lens to analyse the material forces that shape girls' digital sharing practices. By acknowledging that all matter is 'materially embedded and embodied...relational and contingent rather than essentialist or absolute...' (Fox & Alldred, 2022, p. 3), we seek to explore the potential possibilities that material forces in the digital realm may bring in girls' engagement with selfies. This approach allows us to explore the opportunities as well as the limitations that girls encounter when engaging with selfies and sexting. Recognising how material forces in selfie sharing and exchange shape girls' sexual subjectivities, we argue can challenge the repressive norms prevalent in online sexual cultures and can provide opportunities to think about how girls may navigate digital spaces more safely.

UNLOCKING 'BECOMINGS' IN GIRLS' SELFIES THROUGH ASSEMBLAGE THINKING

A new feminist materialist is useful in understanding what more is possible of digital images when viewed as an assemblage of matter. The framework emphasises the entanglement of matter (human and more-than-human) forms that challenges dualisms and promotes a relational and dynamic understanding of materiality (Bozalek & Pease, 2020). Studies have addressed the significance of the material in social media platforms to understand how young people navigate

gender and sexual cultures in the digital realm (Naezer, 2018;Charteris & Gregory, 2020 , 2023). A new materialist framework takes a 'turn to matter' (Fox & Alldred, 2022, p. 625) to show how human experiences and everyday actions, including the creation and sharing of selfies are shaped by material forces. In line with this understanding we perceive social media as a mediated interface, shaping online self-representation (Warfield et al., 2020). Taking inspiration from this perspective, our study examines how girls portray themselves, in and through the digital realm and how more-than-human entities such as filters, editing tools and various digital interactions (statuses, stories, likes, comments) contribute to self-representation (Warfield, 2016). Additionally, we acknowledge the materiality of this process as pivotal to shaping the distributed nature of girls' experiences across online and offline spaces. We seek to explore the potentials of selfies by considering how material forces emerge to allow for what girls can do, feel or become within specific moments.

In this study, digital images such as selfies are not merely virtual representations but constitute material entities through which capacities emerge. These capacities are inseparable from the technological, social, cultural and spatial contexts in which it operates. Drawing from Haraway's (1995) notion of entanglements, we highlight the interconnectedness of human and more-than-human entities within the digital space. The digital images, treated as assemblages in the study, exemplify the entanglement of the human (girls) and more-than-human (digital images, social media platforms) entities. Within a new feminist materialist perspective, the boundaries between humans and other bodies are entangled and co-constitute each other (Bozalek & Pease, 2020).

Specifically, we position girls' engagement with selfies through sexting and posting as dynamic assemblages of bodies, things, objects, space, time and ideas that form relations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988). Assemblages constitute actions or events that are produced through 'intra-action', a process which 'signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies' that contradicts interaction which involves pre-existent bodies that simply participate with one another (Barad, 2007, p. 33). In this study, intra-action suggests that material entities (girls, selfies) in an assemblage are not separate from one another but emerge and shape each other through their interconnectedness. Matter in the assemblage is considered as having its own power, however, it is only upon its intra-action in the assemblage that this power to affect and be affected by other surrounding matter is realised (Fox & Alldred, 2022). Affects produce 'modifications of the body...whereby the active power of the said body is increased or diminished, aided or constrained' (Spinoza, 2009, p. 151). In this paper, girls' intra-action with selfies create affects that allow for what is possible for them to become. Massumi (1995) defines affect as an intensity or an impersonal force that exists before and beyond specific emotions or feelings. It is a pre-emotional and pre-cognitive force that animates life—A bodily state that is not fixed but involves dynamic transformations (Massumi,1995). Affect is considered an autonomous force with its own power that carries the capacity to shape experiences without being completely determined by individual or social factors (Ingraham, 2023).

Affects produced through intra-action may restrict a body's potential from transformation through territorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 88–89). In Deleuzian philosophy, territorialisation refers to the affective forces that constrains a body's state of being, limiting its potential for transformation. However, a body can de-territorialise itself from oppressive forces when it forms other relations, causing a new change in state known as a 'becoming' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, pp. 88–89). In the context of new feminist materialism, the concept of 'becoming' is a dynamic and process that rejects essentialist notions of identity, recognising that entities are in a constant state of transformation through their entangled interactions with the material

world (Barad, 2007). Becomings emerge through complex networks of relations with other material entities, such as technology, social media, bodies and digital images within a distinct space and time, highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence upon which becomings are formed. This relational perspective sets it apart from conventional individualistic models of change that may not consider the broader context of relationality (Bozalek & Pease, 2020).

However, the possibilities of a becoming afforded in assemblages are constantly changing as matter continues to create a variety of relations, thus, producing differential capacities along its way. In this study, the capacities for new becomings are shaped by the broader social-cultural context in which the assemblage is positioned, highlighting the significance of relationality in understanding what is possible for girls to do and become. In South Africa, girls negotiate sexual relations against the broader socio-cultural-political milieu of colonialism and apartheid. The contemporary context of race, class, gender and socio-economic inequalities is entwined to these legacies. Cultural and religious norms, the binarised categorisations of femininity and masculinity rooted in heterosexuality shapes girls' capacities. In the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, the setting for this study, femininity assembles with traditional socio-cultural norms which limit gender flexibility. Normative notions of gender idealise respectability, passivity and submissiveness to male power. In this context, hypermasculinity, aggression and heterosexual prowess carries cultural legitimacy (Pleaner et al., 2022). As a consequence, male power, while increasing under threat in the context of changing gender and economic relations, continues to shape female subordination.

When girls engage with selfies in online platforms, these norms permeate these spaces to make possible certain potentialities while also limiting them. By materialising teenage girl's selfie-taking moments and the sharing of selfies, we give attention is to the entanglement of the human and the more-than-human to explore the possibilities for girls to feel, act and become.

CONTEXT AND METHODS

The data in this paper draws from a larger research project entitled: *'Learning from the learners: growing up as girls and boys and negotiating gender and sexuality in and outside school'*. This project seeks to understand how young people experience and express gender and sexuality across social and cultural contexts. Specifically, this paper examines how a group of girls ($N = 23$) make sense of their use and experience of selfies on social media by focusing on the affective potential of digital images. The study was conducted in two high schools, referred to as Stamford High and Nkosi High (pseudonyms), situated in the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province of South Africa. The province is estimated to have a population of 11 54 million people (Statistics South Africa, 2022). While KZN reflects a diversity of racial groups (black, white, coloured, Indian) and cultural ethnicities, its demographic landscape is predominantly black and IsiZulu. Stamford High is a fee-paying school where learners are required to pay R1500 ($77.11 USD) per learner and is located in a peri-urban setting. On the other hand, Nkosi High is a non-fee-paying school situated in a semi-rural area.

The majority of learners in both schools are black South Africans from low to middle-income households. Despite the socioeconomic differences, the use of social media applications such as *Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram* were prevalent among girls in both schools. Apartheid and colonialism have effects for the racialised dynamics and socio-economic (more-than-human) conditions which also shape how girls present themselves on social media. Financial constraints for instance may limit some girls from accessing resources such as clothing, makeup or branded

items for the creation of provocative selfies. Situating girls' experiences within the broader context of this study, allows us to understand the material embodiment of digital images, acknowledging their role in shaping and negotiating power relations, gender dynamics and the broader socio-cultural context in which they unfold.

In South Africa, Life Orientation (LO) is expected to address sexuality education. However, scholars have long critiqued the provision of sexuality education through LO as it focuses on abstinence, disease and sexual danger (Bhana et al., 2019; Shefer & Macleod, 2015). The integration of the digital realm into LO has not yet been addressed in LO nor is it part of the guidelines at both schools.

The methodology adopted for the study can be seen as a 'research assemblage' (Fox & Alldred, 2023), that involve both human and more-than-human entities. The latter includes space, time, voice recorder and social media in shaping the research process. For example, the broader spatial context may have cultural, economic or social significance that impacts the study. Additionally, objects like the voice recorder serves as a tool for capturing spoken information, preserving nuances such as tone, emphasis and emotion, thus, enhancing the depth of qualitative data produced. These more-than-human entities are not passive but active participants in the research process. Their influence is dynamic and interconnected, shaping the study in ways that go beyond traditional human-centric perspectives. Data collection methods involved individual interviews and focus-group discussions (FGD). All interviews and FGD were conducted during the school interval using an unoccupied classroom. Some interviews were conducted using *WhatsApp* during the surge in Covid-19 cases and lockdown restrictions. Interviews and FGD were between 30 and 45 min and were audio-recorded with the permission of the participant.

Instead of treating interviews as isolated data points, we view them as dynamic dialogues that unfold within the fieldwork encounter. This dialogical engagement involves a continuous back-and-forth between the researcher and participant, allowing for real-time exploration of affective responses and the co-creation of meaning (Fox & Alldred, 2023). The participants served as key informants to the data making process and to the production of assemblages (Fox & Alldred, 2022). We engage in collaborative sense-making with participants, encouraging them to reflect on and interpret their own experiences. This collaborative approach allows for a more in-depth exploration of affective nuances, as participants contribute to the speculative understanding of how selfie-assemblages dynamically unfold. Broader questions such as: Do you share or receive selfies on social media? Why do you share/post selfies on social media? What comments do you receive when you share/post a selfie? were asked to stimulate further discussions that moved beyond a mere focus on individual actions and feelings to explore the dynamic interplay of the more-than-human entities that emerged in those discussions that became pivotal to shaping their experiences on social media.

While we acknowledge that interviews alone may not fully capture the complexity of selfie assemblages, our approach to conducting interviews differed from a more conventional way, in that discussions were created in the moment, depending on what the participants spoke of that could not be pre-determined or designed in an interview schedule. Interviews allowed us to explore the lived experiences of participants in ways that aligned with the relational ontology and epistemology of new feminist materialism. New feminist materialism emphasises the affective dimensions of phenomena, acknowledging the importance of emotions, experiences and embodied interactions. Interviews provide a platform for participants to express and articulate their affective responses to engaging with and exchanging digital images on social media, allowing us to explore the emotional nuances that might not be captured through other methods. Additionally, FGD provided a nuanced platform for participants to

share diverse perspectives, enabling us to capture the multifaceted nature of the selfie assemblages and the myriad ways in which they intersect with the participants' lives. All data was transcribed manually by a research assistant and transcripts were reviewed by the participants to avoid misinterpretation of their responses.

Permission to conduct the study was granted by the university (reference number-HSSREC/00003443/2021) and the Department of Basic Education in KZN. Letters of consent and assent were provided to the principal and participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, including parents or guardians of girls. Consent forms and letters of consent/assent were provided to ensure the ethical participation of all individuals involved. The use of pseudonyms ensured anonymity for both the school and participants. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any given time should they feel uncomfortable.

In South Africa, the legal framework surrounding online child sexual exploitation and abuse (OCSEA) provides comprehensive protection for young people. The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act and the Cybercrimes Act, criminalise various forms of exploitation, including the non-consensual sharing of nude and sexual images and online grooming (Republic of South Africa, 2021). When a young person discloses sexual abuse or the sharing of sexts/nude images, researchers are obligated to report such incidents to law enforcement and child protection agencies. The third author is a trained researcher noting the significance of creating a safe and non-judgmental environment for the participant to share their experiences. Participants were also made aware of relevant support services including counselling which was a critical component of the protocol and ethical clearance requirements in this study. The participants were informed that should they disclose risk, it was imperative to report such disclosures to appropriate adults, such as parents, guardians, or child protection officers. This step is taken to ensure the participant's immediate and long-term safety with follow-up measures to ensure their well-being built into the project to ensure that young people have continuous access to necessary resources and assistance. By adhering to these protocols, the study aims to protect young participants from harm, provide them with necessary support and comply with South African legal obligations regarding the reporting and handling of sexual abuse and exploitation.

An ethological approach (Fox & Alldred, 2022, 2023) to data analysis was employed to emphasise 'intra-actions' between bodies and their environments. Following this approach, we understand girls (human) and digital images (more-than-human), and digital technologies more broadly as an intra-active force. In employing a Spinozo-Deleuzian (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988) ethological approach, this study followed a three-step process. Firstly, we identified emergent assemblages through the responses of girls, acknowledging the role of social media applications, space, time, cultural norms and various objects in shaping their experiences. This approach challenges simplistic dualities that prioritise the human, recognising the interplay of material entities in the construction of meaning. Researchers delineated the assemblages involved in the creation and dissemination of digital images, considering not only the human participants but also the technological devices, emojis and the platforms themselves. This included tracing the network of entities contributing to the production and circulation of digital images. Secondly, we mapped how the arrangement of these materialities 'intra-acted,' causing movements of de/re-territorialisation within the data. Thirdly, we identified the capacities and incapacities produced within these assemblages. This exploration allowed us to discern how these images elicit emotions and what capacities or potentials they enable or restrict. This is the focus of attention in the next part of the paper.

SELFIES: SELF-CONFIDENCE, SOCIAL STATUS AND SEXUAL DESIRE

Following Coleman (2009, p. 94), 'images do not reflect or represent bodies but produce the ways in which it is possible for bodies to become'. In line with this understanding, we explore digital images as more than just an image and instead view it as flowing with affective capacities allow for girls to do, feel and become. Girls' engagement with digital images in the form of selfies is entangled in an assemblage of material entities. These include beauty filters, nudity, clothing, time, emojis, words and bodies to illustrate their intra-action with digital images. Beyond the confines of human subjectivities, we show how their becomings are also facilitated by the surrounding more-than-human reality.

In the example below, we show how selfies were used as a tool to increase self-confidence:

> ***Zondile:*** When I take out pictures it makes me feel confident about myself. When I was still in primary school, I was bullied because of my skin colour. Because of my nationality, I'm not a South African, I'm a Zimbabwean. So, they use to call me *'Shangaan'*, calling me all sort of names you can think of because I wasn't a South African. But when I got to high school I had a phone, whenever I took a picture of myself, looking at myself I felt confidence. I love who I am.

Selfies are seen as a powerful tool in providing new affordances, control and choices for young people (Naezer, 2018; Phillips, 2022). Zondile's excerpt demonstrates how selfies transformed her state of being to a becoming in two different moments of her life. The narrative is situated against the context of xenophobia in South Africa especially against African migrants and Zimbabweans in particular. In May 2008 more than 60 people were killed in xenophobic violence in South Africa (Hayem, 2013). The legacies of apartheid entrenched logics around skin colour, ethnicity, economic stress, unemployment, gender and masculinity assembled together to create heightened anxieties around migrants in the country. For Zondile, being a Zimbabwean and having dark skin in primary school subjected her to shaming using words like *'Shangaan'*. The term *'Shangaan'* refers to an ethnic group in Zimbabwe but in KwaZulu-Natal it carries territorialising affects that constrains Zondile's capacities for feeling beautiful. The term is also used in South Africa to disparage, invoke othering through foreign and alien status while creating distance from other Africans in South Africa. These racialised and xenophobic logics undergird '*Shangaan*'. Zondile's status as Zimbabwean, migrant and darker skin stood in contrast to the legacies of apartheid/colonial standards of beauty that continue to circulate. In transforming her potential, Zondile relays how digitals device like the cell phone and the practice of taking selfies provided opportunities for enhancing her status. Illustrative here availability of the more-than-human entities (cell phone, social media and selfies) in providing Zondile a space to resist the oppressive social structures and reclaim her self-confidence and gain social status. This change in capacity is reflective of the transformative affects embedded in the material and its capacities to de-territorialise dominant norms. The process of image-creation is a becoming, that is dynamic and relational. The cell phone in high school introduces a technological dimension to her becoming, and access to such technology in a low to middle-income context affords her with the capacities to de-territorialise norms of self-representation. Norms related to nationality, beauty norms associated with skin colour and appearance and belonging are de-territorialised. The tangible act of taking pictures becomes a material practice and is indicative of how the distributed nature of the self-functions across both online and offline spaces (Warfield, 2016). For Zondile, a

becoming is non-linear, moving from a challenging experience of bullying in primary school to a more empowering one in high school.

Similarly, Andiswa also shares how selfies is a vital part of her being:

> ***Andiswa:*** Selfies is who I really am. I don't know how to explain this but it's like when I take out a selfie, I can be myself. It's like hey, people notice you, they notice your beauty. And when I get a compliment, I feel so happy, I feel accepted. And it's just who I am and you know people see who I am through my selfies and through my, what can I say, my statuses and all of this they actually see who I really am and it makes me feel good. Because I am able to, to put myself out there and you know, so when people understand you and they see that and they understand you it really makes me feel good.

Andiswa's investment in selfies enabled her to expand her potentials and sense of well-being. MacIsaac et al. (2018, p. 822) emphasise the significance of 'becoming known' in the context of self-presentation on social media among young people and how social networks are significant spaces in materialising self-worth. The production of selfies plugged into social media statuses and comments to co-constitutively create potential and capacity. Andiswa refers to *'statuses'* which allows the user to share information about themselves through text or images where viewers are able to comment. These statuses and comments assembled together with selfies to create self-worth. The digital affordance provided through *'statuses'* allowed Andiswa to receive compliments, thereby intensifying her self-worth. The act of taking selfies suggests a visual assemblage where beauty is not merely a physical attribute but also a distributed nature of the self that is curated and visually represented (Warfield et al., 2020). Beauty here is not just a static attribute but a dynamic and performative process enacted in the digital space. The beauty assemblage extends to the digital realm, where the combination of visual entities (selfies) and textual entities (statuses) creates a performative aspect of beauty. The act of taking a selfie becomes a moment of self-discovery and self-affirmation, contributing to an ongoing process of becoming. Beauty, as portrayed through selfies, is not only an individual experience but also a social one. Acceptance and recognition from others become integral components of this beauty assemblage. The positive responses and compliments she receives on her selfies play a crucial role in her becoming. This act of self-presentation challenges societal norms that dictate how beauty should be defined and perceived.

Yet, Jezreel indicates that the sharing of selfies may also invite negative comments:

> ***Jezreel:*** People always talk you know, they say I'm wearing too revealing clothes. And they even call me names. There was this one time where I was called a *bitch* for showing my ass, not my full ass but a part of it and called a *bitch* by a person I did not know on *Facebook*. So yeah, I do get judged for it by some people but a lot of other people...they have good vibes they give me good comments. And like they say *'sexy and beautiful body'*. So, it's not always the judging people, I also get good comments. But those who judge me, I don't really care about them as long as I have my friends and those followers and those people that gives me good comments and likes and follows me...if it makes you happy if you want to post it then do it, you shouldn't worry what other people think and say about you as long as you happy about doing it.

The affects produced in Jezreel's selfies on *Facebook* created spaces for sexual objectification (*bitch*) and slut-shaming where her bodily representation was interpreted as sexually

promiscuous and deviant (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017; Ringrose et al., 2013). While the effects associated with derogatory words sought to position Jezreel as a sexual commodity, she does not allow these affects to define her self-worth. As with Zondile's case earlier, Jezreel too de-territorialises the assemblage by strategically choosing to change her focus from those who devalued her images and directed her attention to those who appreciate her posts as indicated through digital affordances such as *'comments'*, *'likes'* and followers. By Jezreel actively choosing to prioritise the positive feedback and support she receives, rather than internalising the negative comments and objectification that seek to reduce her self-worth, she is able to use this opportunity as a transformative. Jezreel's becoming involves a shift and a de-territorialisation of norms related to modesty and beauty standards. Jezreel's choice of revealing clothing challenges contextual norms of modesty and culturally appropriate dress (Shefer et al., 2017). The online space affords Jezreel the capacity to shape body positivity and challenge conventional dressing. Her becoming reflects the navigation of the complexities of online visibility while asserting her right to self-expression.

Deka shares how creating selfies through *Snapchat* changed her self-confidence:

> ***Deka:*** Like as I said in the beginning, you see in reality, before *Snapchat* was ever created, we always had a low self-esteem about ourselves, like you see somebody looking better in reality, and then you know, like, and how we look and our shape and our size, you know, like we tend to get a bit like, insecure. And then here comes *Snapchat* where we look better, feel better. And when we post like you know, we're also on the same level as the others. And especially when you post on *Instagram* or any other platforms, you get these good comments and that makes you feel even better about yourself.

The social media application, *Snapchat* is commonly known for its variety of face filters that provide 'digital adornment' to the user through the application of virtual makeup, accessories, skin lightening and the enhancement of facial features (Barker, 2020, p. 207). For Deka, the desire to produce the perfect selfie was connected popularity and self-esteem. *Snapchat*, embedded with potential affects created possibilities to improve pictures by enhancing facial attributes. The use of *Snapchat* filters to digitally modify and disguise facial insecurities is demonstrative of the technologically mediated and more-than-human capacities to increase Deka's self-worth.

Recent South African research highlights how black girls on social media engaged in digital modifications to negotiate sexy representations of themselves against a racialised heterosexual feminine aesthetic (Janak et al., 2023). This version of femininity is mediated by celebrity and media cultures that enhanced girls' heterosexual capacity to act, feel and become desirable. While the need to appear heterosexually desirable carried effects of self-worth, these modifications are often aligned with dominant heterosexual norms of beauty, creating a cycle of infinite negotiation and re-territorialisation for young girls seeking to conform to these ideals. This was also evident in a Singaporean study with girls' engagement in self-presentation (Chua & Chang, 2016). In this study, selfies on *Instagram* were edited in order to align with heterosexual ideals of beauty which not only increased popularity among peers but also reinforces the notion of edited beauty as the norm. In other words, as Coleman (2009) noted, images do not represent bodies, but what is possible to become. Akin to the Singaporean study, the digital modifications are aspirations to become something more than is currently knowable but is aligned with dominant heterosexual norms and perfectability. For Deka, a new becoming in the context of *Snapchat* and *Instagram* involves a de-territorialisation of traditional norms tied to physical appearances in the real world.

The use of filters on *Snapchat* and *Instagram* de-territorialises and challenges traditional beauty standards of size and shape, allowing for an enhanced self-image.

Apart from self-representation and self-esteem, Julia alerts us as to other potentials of selfies in relation to heterosexual relationship dynamics:

> ***Julia:*** If I send him a picture, he would say I'm looking hot in that and he would say that he wished that his hands went up my body...his hands down there and you know one thing led to the next and then he says, *'imagine us kissing right now, imagine us making love right now'*. And you know, its things like that and it would really get us close to each other. I send him not a fully nude picture, but a sexy picture of maybe topless, which is my bra. And he will take a topless picture, and we will just you know, like want each other. We also send each other emojis (digital icons), like if he sends me a winking eye while we flirting it's like a turn on (sexually aroused) like, like I want him now (laughs)...it just changes the whole mood...It's really fun for us. We enjoy it...I flirt with him because we love each other. You want to make each other happy and I want to make him happy and to know that, you know. Sometimes I feel pressured to be the perfect girl for him. I want to be perfect for him, satisfy him because he is a man. And when I flirt, I know that he will stick with me and I know he is happy.

Julia's example of sharing sexy selfies through sexting highlights the complex interplay between the more-than-human (images, social media, bra, emojis) and human (bodies, imagination). These bodies intra-act to experience sexual arousal and excitement. Significant here is the production of digital intimacy without the physical presence of tangible bodies. Julia was able to experience moments of intimacy with her partner through 'sexting', a process that involves the exchange of sexually explicit content such as texts, videos and images online (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021, p. 79). The exchange of sexy selfies during sexting generated affects that facilitated imaginative sexual thoughts, sexual excitement, thus intensifying the sexual experience for both Julia and her partner. Of significance here is the presence of non-human entities, such as emojis and bras in shaping and enhancing the experience of sexual becomings. These material entities are vibrant and carry their own meanings, which, when assembled with Julia and her partner's exchange of digital images, intensify conversations and create an atmosphere of intimacy. Julia's reliance on the exchange of sexy selfies through sexting to maintain her relationship highlights the significance of these practices in contemporary relationships. The use of digital communication tools for flirting and sharing sensual imagery contributes to a novel way of fostering intimacy. The incorporation of emojis as a form of symbolic communication represents a new mode of expression, allowing Julia and her partner to convey emotions and desires in a playful manner. The exchange of sensual pictures and flirtatious conversations de-territorialises traditional norms around how intimacy is expressed within a romantic relationship, particularly for females. Julia's desire to be the 'perfect girl' and satisfy her partner while navigating traditional gender roles de-territorialises norms related to societal expectations within a heterosexual relationship. Also visible in her statement is the need to satisfy her boyfriend, emphasising her active investment in the perpetuation of male sexual entitlement and expectations, even in online spaces. This is suggestive of how normative notions of gender and sexuality permeate the assemblage to shape Julia's actions online.

SELFIE SHARING, RISK AND THE TERRITORIALISATION OF NEW BECOMINGS

Assemblages are fleeting and affects produced in girls' engagement with digital images are never fixed but in constant flux with other matter it may come across with, producing new capacities that are contingent upon the arrangement of its relations. While the sharing of selfies was filled with potentials to open new possibilities for self-expression, social status, self-confidence and sexual pleasure for girls as demonstrated in the previous section, the contingent nature of affects associated with selfies can be altered at any moment where girls' self-representation can simultaneously bring about risk. In this section, we demonstrate the potential harm and risk associated with girls' engagement with digital images that territorialise their capacities for becoming. We explore how the affects generated by girls' engagement with digital images, particularly through the act of sharing nude selfies with boyfriends for private consumption on social media produced affects that limited their potential for new becomings. Girls discussed how the posting of selfies on social media platforms subjected them to sexual objectification and harassment in ways that re-produced gender inequalities.

Tebogo recalls when she was once harassed for sexy selfies online:

> ***Tebogo:*** Okay, so I had an experience on *Instagram*. He asked me to send pictures, a sexy picture so I told him *'no'* and then he got angry and I was like you know what I don't want to talk to a person like that so I blocked him.

According to Ringrose and Harvey (2015), the ability of men to access sexually explicit female images is key to a macho heterosexual masculinity. In this case, Tebogo's refusal in complying to a male stranger's requests for sexy pictures challenges male sexual entitlement. Of importance here are the ways in which patriarchal norms permeate online spaces, expanding and creating new avenues for the reinforcement of male power. Tebogo's resistance produced affects that triggered aggressive behaviour suggesting how female non-compliance can produce violent affects. However, Tebogo breaks away from the territorialising violent affects that sought to constrain her by blocking the perpetrator on *Instagram*, effectively preventing him from further harassing her. The act of *'blocking'* is demonstrative of the technical capabilities (more-than-human) that digital platforms offer, allowing users like Tebogo to selectively communicate and re-claim control of her online space. Instead of viewing Tebogo's blocking as a singular action we identify the more-than-human entities that contribute to the blocking event. The assemblage involves interconnected bodies, including Tebogo, the *Instagram* platform, the requestor and the blocking feature. For example, Tebogo's blocking action can be seen as a form of technologically mediated entity within the assemblage. The blocking feature provides her with the capacity to control and manage her online interactions, asserting her digital boundaries. *Instagram*, as a more-than-human entity, plays a role in shaping Tebogo's capacity. The blocking feature, as a technological affordance, permits users to exert control over their online experience. *Instagram's* features, including blocking, become agential in the digital space, shaping how users navigate and respond to online interactions. The affordances and constraints of the digital platform play a role in shaping assemblage dynamics. Tebogo's blocking can be examined ethically within the assemblage, considering the power dynamics and the protection of personal well-being.

In the next example, we see the ephemeral effects of girls' nude selfies in boyfriend relations:

> ***Jezreel:*** Actually, I remember a few years ago, there was a girl [Celine] who sent a nude picture to her boyfriend from another school. And now they're not in school anymore but she ended up leaving him for another boy. She cheated on him and then she left him and she had another boyfriend. And this guy was like really broken. And after the breakup, I think because he was so heartbroken. He actually sent it [nude picture] to all her friends and from there, you know, it just went viral, it just went out of control and everyone saw this nude picture and they were shocked about it. They were calling her so many names, because everyone knew of her—which she was like a decent Christian girl. And then they see this nude so you know, this girl was really damaged and she had to go for counselling.

While Celine shared nude selfies to her boyfriend consensually, we begin to see its momentary affects, as nude selfies re-configure its relations from being a tool for sexual pleasure to a tool for revenge in the event of a breakup. The sharing of nude selfies from private to online public spaces illustrates how the potentiality of nude selfies lies within the order of its relations. In this case, the sharing of Celine's nudes by her ex-boyfriend is a form of online gender violence, involving the distribution of sexuality explicit images without consent (Maddocks, 2022). The study by Hall and Hearn (2019) highlights how some men accounted for the distribution of sexually explicit images of women as tied to feelings of emasculation, the loss of male power and control over women and how they resorted to revenge porn as a means to reclaim their control over women. We see how Celine's affair challenged her ex-boyfriend's masculinity. While the non-consensual distribution of nudes carried effects of reputational damage for Celine, Powell and Henry (2017) note that such acts may carry reputational rewards for the perpetrator. Young men's distribution of non-consensual images of females is reflective of their ability to have accessed such images that were essential to the performance of masculinity. Ringrose and Harvey (2015) argue that the emergence of social media platforms combined with the sharing of nude images increased potential for revenge porn and gender inequalities. For Celine the effects associated with the distribution of nude selfies is further complicated by religious norms which demarcate female sexual passivity and premarital sexual activity as shameful. In such contexts, the prevalence of conservative norms triggers 'victim-blaming' where girls like Christine are seen as irresponsible for sending such images to boys (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021).

Christine shares how her friend was humiliated for sharing nude selfies to her boyfriend:

> ***Christine:*** So, she sends nudes to her boyfriend and like we weren't close at that time and she did that. So, she was like a bossy child. So, then she sends these pictures to him and stuff and the first thing he did was he took those pictures she sent of herself and forwarded it to all the boys from my class...she sent those pictures because she was like madly in love with him. He forwarded those pictures, he showed those pictures to the people around him, like his group of friends that was with him...they went out and they broke up but she still loves him. The whole school knew. Learners started calling her names, they should be like, they should call her *'aunty boobies'* and be like she so dirty to send nudes and stuff like that but she didn't realise he will do that. But from my point of view, it's so stupid to send nudes to a boy because you'll never know what they can do to get revenge.

Christine's example of her friend draws on image based sexual abuse where the non-consensual distribution of nude selfies produces detrimental effects for the person depicted. In this case, Christine's friend sent nude selfies to her boyfriend, possibly out of love or trust for private viewing, but those images were later shared without her consent among his male peers.

This non-consensual distribution of the images represents a betrayal of trust and a violation of personal boundaries for Christine's friend. Ringrose et al. (2022, pp. 251–252) highlight how practices of homosocial masculinity contribute to the exchange and sharing of girls' sexually explicit images which is used as 'social currency' to increase status within the peer group. While the performance of homosocial masculinity carried effects of reputational rewards for the ex/boyfriend, it simultaneously embodied reputational risk for Christine's friend who's served as a channel through which such masculinity was materialised (Ringrose & Harvey, 2015). The use of derogatory words like *'aunty boobies'* and '*dirty'* indicates the presence of slut-shaming discourses, which served to humiliate Christine's friend. Christine's perspective on the sharing of nude selfies as *'stupid'* reflects her capacity to distance herself from potential harm, while indirectly positioning her friend within the 'victim-blaming' realm, indicative that it was her fault for the abuse she experienced.

In a similar vein, Thuli believes that girls should not engage in the sharing of nude selfies for cultural reasons:

> ***Thuli:*** I think it's unacceptable because like when you post pictures like that, I mean you supposed to take pride in your body. They say that your body is God's temple. So, you shouldn't be exposing it for everyone. You know, it's private and it shouldn't be just out there. So, I don't think parents and society accept it for that reason. Maybe it's because you know, the roots. It's like, with my religion in the Bible, it says the men and woman you know, the man is the head of the household and all of that. So, I think it's just you know your beliefs and that's how it is. Like for girls, they are meant to carry like certain standards. Boys don't really care but for girls you know, they always get judged for everything.

Thuli's statement highlights the complex intersection of nude selfies, religious norms, cultural notions of femininity and discourses of morality and how each shape her understanding of what girls should/should not do online. Thuli's perspective exemplifies how girls' digital bodies become subject to scrutiny and control particularly within Christian ideologies that prioritise female chastity and respectability. In such contexts, girls' involvement in the sharing of nude selfies is positioned as shameful and presents reputational risk (Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2021). In contexts marked by socio-cultural-religious norms, the discourse of victim-blaming is magnified for girls who share nudes. Thuli's perspective serves as an illustration of how the policing of girls' digital bodies is not disconnected from socio-cultural-religious expectations, but rather connect to produce constraints in their possibility to know and become more.

Jezreel shares how girls' selfies were subject to scrutiny from viewers when posted on social media:

> ***Jezreel:*** If a girl posted pictures, you know, they [boys] always pick on everything they say, *'oh, she's too thin, she's too fat, her hair is too bushy or this and that, not too fair, you too dark'*. But when boys post pictures they don't get too many comments hey. They always want to dig the girl you know talk about the girls all the time.

Jezreel's response highlights the ways selfies and self-presentation on social media subject girls to heightened scrutiny. Evident here is how girls' selfies are subjected to the politics of 'looking' which is constitutive of an 'affective capacity' that may enable or constrain an individual's ability to be seen as sexually desirable (Ringrose & Coleman, 2013, p. 125). Girls negotiate selfies against the performative pressures of 'looking' against celebrity and media

culture where female bodily shape, size and skin colour mediate an idealised heterosexual feminine aesthetic. An increased focus on girls' bodies in comparison to boys as reflected in Jezreel's statement is illustrative of the affective politics of 'looking' which amplifies the sexual double standard. An increased surveillance of girls' bodies through selfies not only reduces their capacities for becoming sexually desirable but increases their vulnerability to sexual risk (Handyside & Ringrose, 2017).

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have explored teenage girls' digital exchange cultures through selfies and sexting as a more-than-human assemblage. We began by examining the affects that modulate girls' sexting experiences and selfie production illustrating the ways in which texts and images intra-acted with girls' sense of confidence, social status and sexual desire. While selfies/sexting offer avenues for self-expression and intimacy, they also carry risks of harassment, sexual objectification and sexual abuse. This is particularly evident when images are shared without consent or in breach of socio-cultural, religious and gendered norms, constraining girls' potential for self-expression and subjecting them to heightened scrutiny and risk. Affective inequalities that produce male sexual entitlements occur through the normalisation of the socio-material relations (Charteris & Gregory, 2024).

Emphasising the importance of contextual understanding of girls' experiences with selfies and sexting, we argue for a focus on relational dynamics, the intra-active forces and affective flows through which they are produced. These insights in South Africa bring attention to the dynamism of all matter through which sexting and selfie cultures materialise both potential for new possibilities for girls' sexual expression as well as the ongoing environment that reinforces girls' subordination through slut-shaming and revenge porn. We argue that the materialisation of gendered inequalities and girls' online risk should be acknowledged and challenged. Thus far in South Africa with very few exceptions (Bhana, 2023; Janak et al., 2023), a focus on teenage girls, sexualities and digitalisation remains silenced. Attention to the constriction of girls' sexual expression through and with selfies and sexting is necessary.

A new feminist materialist framework suggests that the responsibility for addressing girls' online experience is always embedded in socio-material arrangements. As such we are cautious about offering solutions based on some idealised notions of progress. Instead, listening to girls about their experiences is vital. More empirical work is required especially in South Africa and the Global South to illustrate the contextual realities and the everyday gendered patterns that affect and are affected by the digital realm. Renold provides opportunities for radical change for young people through 'AGENDA: A Young People's Guide to Making Positive Relationships Matter' (Renold, 2019). This resource whilst based in the UK, was co-created by and with young people to address gender inequalities and violence connecting policy and practice in ways that take heed of the socio-materiality of everyday life, emerging possibilities for change and the vibrancy of matter. AGENDA is not based on what is but rather 'what if' which is a methodology that is flexible, uncertain and always changing. Instead of familiar adult top-down approaches, AGENDA is based on enhancing young people's own interests, their perspectives of others and the opening up of new ideas and possibilities. The challenge lies in working with girls in South Africa paying careful attention to the localities and potentials through collaboration and dialogue which is part of the greater challenge to re-imagine gender just online practices.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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